HUEY LONG AT HIS CENTENARY

By HAROLD B. McSWEEN

Within five years of his death at age 42, on Sept. 10, 1935, while seeking the presidency and overseeing Louisiana's government from the U.S. Senate, with whom he shared a mutual disdain, Huey Long suffered a posthumous infirmity. The political faction bearing his name, championed by his younger brother Earl, lost the statehouse in Baton Rouge 12 years after Huey had won it from an entrenched oligarchy. Odds indicated that Longism in Louisiana politics might have perished, too.

Earl Long, who had succeeded to the governorship in 1939 from the office of lieutenant governor when the governor resigned, lost the gubernatorial election to a reform candidate in 1940. In 1944 the Long faction's ticket, which included Earl as a candidate for lieutenant governor again, ran a poor second. By 1948, after eight years at sea, Huey's survivors seemed moribund in the wake of his choppy memory.

Huey's reputation as a populist had taken a hit at the hands of a novelist. The character Willie Stark in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) had been inspired by Huey, Warren acknowledged, while he was observing Long across town as a member of the English faculty at Louisiana State University. Stark, the demagogic governor of an unnamed provincial state, is neither developed as a complex primary protagonist nor created in Huey's personal image. Readers of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, however, gained a jaded and caricatural impression of Huey from the pen of Warren.

This notion of Huey in the popular mind followed two years after the scholarly mind had gained access to an

authoritative summary of Huey's accomplishments and failures. The first supplement to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, a multivolume work published by the American Council of Learned Societies, appeared in 1944. It contains a two-page biographical essay on Huey Pierce Long (Aug. 30, 1893—Sept. 10, 1935), written by David M. Potter, that recognizes Huey for progressive initiatives in education, highway construction, other state services, and in the rapid growth of Louisiana State University. It also alludes to political antics that were controversial. This precis remains to this day the most balanced account of a career that resists assessment. Huey showed such an impulsive, pugnacious, and erratic facade that he invited reproach and obscured a dedication to human uplift that stimulated a cultural influence beyond Louisiana. Neither Potter nor subsequent authors have focused on a national aspect of Huey's efforts other than that in political economics.

As it happened, the political demise of the Long political party in Louisiana had been exaggerated. Perhaps Huey had left a mark too large to have been rubbed out. When elected governor in 1928, ten years after winning a seat on the state's public service commission as a populist with a strident call to subject utilities and carriers—and entities not theretofore considered utilities—to closer regulation, Huey became the first executive in the half-century since Reconstruction's end to contest within a backward state the grip of a regressive clique on a compliant legislature. He was the first candidate for governor of that era not to call up the Confederate South and not to make race a campaign issue.

A longtime Long-family revival began in 1948 when Earl Long, who had been given up as a political corpse, was elected governor for a four-year term. By the time Earl was eligible to run for governor again in 1956 he was chosen in the first primary, tantamount to election. In the meanwhile Huey's son Russell had been elected to the U.S. Senate in 1948 to begin a 38-year tenure. George Long, Huey and Earl's next-older brother, went to Congress in 1952. Two

younger Long cousins and the widow of one held the same congressional seat from 1963 through 1986. A 75-year Long-family political presence had begun when Huey and Earl's eldest brother Julius was elected district attorney of the Long's home judicial district in 1912. It lasted until Russell Long retired from the Senate in 1987. One or more members of the immediate family, including Mrs. Huey Long, who succeeded to Huey's Senate seat for a year, held a Louisiana political office from 1913 until 1987 without a lapse except during the reform years, 1940-1948, and a few months following Huey's death.

The return of the Long faction's fortunes came in 1948 when the Huey Long family ended a feud with Earl Long and the Longs conducted a family reunion at election time to enable Earl to regain the statehouse and, months later, Russell to win a Senate seat. Whether reform administrations had faltered or Huey's ghost had begun to beguile voters is unclear, but it is certain that the Long's resurgence placed Huey alone in the pediment of Louisiana's modern pantheon of statecraft. Ever since 1948 Huey's statue above his grave has come out at night again in a radiance beamed from the spire of the capitol that he erected to replace an antebellum Gothic landmark along the Mississippi that Mark Twain would satirize when passing by on a sternwheeler.

Since 1948, Huey's reputation has been acquiring a patina not unlike that noticed also on a bronze likeness in Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol. Warren himself found occasion to salute Huey when he recalled the genesis of his novel in an essay entitled "*All the King's Men*: The Matrix of Experience" that appeared in the Winter 1964, issue of the *Yale Review*. Warren begins his paper:

> When I am asked how much *All the King's Men* owes to the actual politics of Louisiana in the '30's, I can only be sure that if I had never gone to live in Louisiana and Huey had not existed, the novel would never have been written.... In the summer of 1934 I was offered a job—a

> much-needed job—as Assistant Professor at the Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. It was "Huey Long's university" . . . .

Warren relates how governmental neglect in Louisiana had incubated Huey and how Huey had inspired Willie Stark's creation. He also recalls LSU classrooms:

> Among the students there sometimes appeared, too, that awkward boy from the depth of the "Cajun" country or from some scrabble-farm in North Louisiana, with burning ambition and frightening energy and a thirst for learning; and his presence there, you reminded yourself, with whatever complication of irony seemed necessary at the moment, was due to Huey, and to Huey alone. For the "better element" had done next to nothing in fifty years to get the boy out of the grim despair of his ignorance.

By 1964 Earl Long had died after having himself enhanced through his own brand of wiliness, which featured an invective of ridicule and entertaining wit, what Huey had begun through the force of ruthless energy, cunning genius, deep-seated ideology. Although by then the Longs' political identity was reposited in Senator Russell Long and in a congressional seat held in alternation by Long cousins, Huey's legend was lengthening—and so was Earl's. Huey was beginning to be remembered by journalists who had known him in the Senate when, after in 1933 falling-out with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom he had helped nominate and elect after the two had served common years as governors of their respective states, he began seeking the presidency himself.

Arthur Krock, who had headed the Washington bureau of the *New York Times* when Huey was the most despised among senators but the most colorful and gallery-pleasing Senate orator, wrote of Huey in his *Memoirs: Sixty Years on the Firing Line* (1968). Krock suggests a seminal national influence:

> I believe that in the short but stormy era of his political ascendency, before an assassin's bullet ended it in September, 1935, Long established himself as the first important architect on a nationwide scale of what Lyndon B. Johnson programmed thirty years later as "the Great Society."

Krock is recalling a time when Will Rogers, the Oklahoma-born cowboy performer and folk philosopher commented about Huey in his newspaper column in 1935. Prompted by Huey's national advocacy of Share Our Wealth, an evangelical economic nostrum predicated on confiscation of inordinate incomes and estates, FDR himself made an ideological veer to the left. Rogers wrote: "I would sure liked to have seen Huey's face when he was woke up in the middle of the night by the President, who said 'Lay over, Huey, I want to get in bed with you.'"

The first biography of Huey in a quarter-century, the first by a scholar, appeared the year following Krock's memoirs: *Huey Long* (1969) by T. Harry Williams, an Illinois native who held a chaired professorship of history at LSU. Like Warren's novel, it became a best seller, too. It won the Pulitzer Prize in biography and the National Book Award in history and biography. What was it about Huey, dead 34 years, that enabled an academician's 900-page biography of a forgotten senator to gain such popular and scholarly acclaim?

No easy answer can be confected about Huey, but the book's popularity is explained as a fascinating read. The achievement benefited from the cooperation of Mrs. Huey Long and Senator Russell Long. They enabled Williams, a devotee of oral history's methodology, to recover testimony of Huey's surviving kinsmen and confederates who remembered much that had been languishing beyond the public record. Williams also drew on recollections of Huey's living foes and neutral observers. Two hundred ninety-five depositions give the work a damning balance of remarkable insider political detail woven by a sympathetic author. Williams sees Huey not as a demagogue or dictator, which was how most

contemporary journalists had depicted him during a time of Fascist dictators in Europe, but as a dynamic mass leader of incomparable ingeniousness and cheek. Williams adheres to the great-man theory of history in suggesting that Louisiana's oligarchy could not have been deposed had not Huey appeared to do it. He convinces in that, and he gained for Huey favorable recognition of a kind denied him during a short and tragic life. Williams also documents Huey's uncommon ability and stamina that enabled him to telescope so much within a short calendar. Williams, however, seems not to have visualized a national cultural influence that Huey facilitated through making LSU his hobby. Williams also sidesteps Huey's well-known connection with Frank Costello. It brought to greater New Orleans slot machines that Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia had banished from New York, a festering alliance that would infect Louisiana governance for decades to come.

Williams' *Huey Long* renders more useful three earlier works by scholars who consider Huey and Louisiana politics. V. O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949) places Huey in context with regressive oligarchies and progressive populists in Southern states. The other two, the work of another political scientist, *Huey Long's Louisiana: State Politics, 1920-1952* (1956) by Allen P. Sindler, and that of a sociologist, *Political Tendencies in Louisiana, 1912-1952* (1957) by Percy H. Howard, analyze Louisiana's political and sociological past and Huey's ascendancy. They, however, did not play a part in Huey's resurrection in myth. Being works of political science and sociology, they focused through these disciplines' loupes on measurables, election patterns shown with maps and graphics, and foundations of political ecology. In turn, though, they render Williams' masterwork more comprehensible.

The best review of Williams' biography as literature was written by Robert B. Heilman, an English scholar who overlapped the tenures of Warren and Williams on the LSU faculty. Entitled "Williams on Long" (1970), it is collected in

Heilman's *The Southern Connection* (1991). Here Heilman has done more than any author to try to get at Huey himself. Heilman recognizes Williams' quantity of evidence and overwhelming research in a fluent forward-moving tale that includes prolonged episodes, thematic currents, essential backgrounding, overall chronology. Heilman regrets that Williams makes an abrupt stop with Huey's death instead of providing a reflective closure for inviting a reader's final tribute. An earlier mediating chapter might have been misplaced. He notes also that Williams does not address a profound problem of Huey the benefactor who excites fear as much as reverence, that Williams does not provide a theoretical critique of Huey as pragmatist who seemed to win battles but not a projected war.

Heilman sees a dilemma in Huey's own complexity and diversity: if on the operational side Huey is viewed a Machiavellian, such as in Shakespeare Richard III's passion to humiliate victims, Huey's gamesomeness suggests the picaresque hero, salesman, con man, charmer with gall, charismatic rogue. As a crusader, Heilman observes, Huey is the hero of melodrama who takes on his enemies, but the melodramatic situation offers either compromise or tragedy. Warren saw tragedy in Willie Stark. Heilman finds that Williams is reluctant to see Huey as tragic. Although Heilman's task was not to locate the center behind such centrifugal outpourings of personality that he observes, as it was Williams', Heilman points to a direction to be taken by a biographer who might be willing to try.

A review of Williams' *Huey Long* as political history was written by Cecil Morgan, a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives who opposed Huey. Entitled "On Huey and T. Harry Williams" (1971), it appeared in the *Tulane Law Review*. Morgan makes his case against both Huey and Williams from the vantage of a participant and provides an understanding of one who knew Huey as a partisan opponent. He sizes up Huey, his dictatorship, his accomplishments, and the price paid for them. Morgan finds that *Huey*

Long distorts history to present Huey in the most favorable light. He contends that the Long regime caused Louisiana lasting damage in excess of lasting accomplishments. Morgan does not acknowledge, as does Sindler, that the same resistance by conservatives to Governor John M. Parker, 1920-1924, collided with Huey upon his inauguration in 1928.

A valuable study of Huey and Father Charles Coughlin of Michigan, *Voices of Protest* (1982), was written by Alan Brinkley, an historian. It provides insight into Huey's national diversion in opposing FDR at a time when in 1935 the New Deal was floundering and not succeeding in countering the Great Depression, so reluctant had FDR been to welsh on a pledge to balance the budget. Next appeared a close examination of the alleged assassination of Huey, *Requiem for a Kingfish: the Strange and Unexplained Death of Huey Long* (1986), by Ed Reed, an independent scholar and publicist. Reed also provides a valuable supplement to *Huey Long* by reporting what Williams omits in respect to Huey's affiliation with organized crime. He further offers a chronology of the events that caused terror in Baton Rouge just before Huey's death, a ghoulish time that calls up visions of Hitlerian Berlin.

A recent biography, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey Long* (1991) comes from a scholar of Louisiana history. William Ivy Hair studied at LSU when Williams taught there. In shaping a hostile characterization of Huey, Hair traces racial unrest that permeated Louisiana during Huey's time and before, and he explores curious roles that Governor Parker assigned himself not only while governor but before and after. Hair provides a corrective to Williams' thrust from the view of two decades later, viewing Huey in a harsher light—he depicts Huey as having more selfish ambition than a sense of mission. This raises a question of how that equation might be approached in peeling away layers of behavior to get at a man's center. In showing Huey's darker side Hair does not see much of Huey's creative side. His prose does not convey an author's zest in replotting

a story of adventure, absurdity, and pathos. Like Reed, Hair documents the portside proximity in Louisiana of Frank Costello during Huey's watch.

In a comprehensive bibliographical essay Hair mentions the other biographies that Huey generated and Huey's own two books. Three hurried biographies appeared while he was alive. One followed in 1938, another in 1945: none of them scholarly or of the quality achieved by Williams, Reed, and Hair. Huey wrote *Every Man a King: The Autobiography of Huey P. Long* (1933) and *My First Days in the White House* (1935). Hair notes also works that include segments about Huey, such as *The Politics of Upheaval* (1960), by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and in an introductory acknowledgment discloses that two other professors of history, authors of political biographies, are writing books about Huey.

What explains a persisting scholarly fascination in the short life of a senator from a neglected province in the lower South six decades after his death? Does some information appear to be incorrect or missing? Have interpretations gone awry? Does the complexity of Huey himself challenge? For one thing, scholars are reexamining the ideological persuasions and identifications of public men, including dictators, who lived during Huey's time.

An example is an essay entitled "American History: The Terminological Problem" by John Lukacs that appeared in the Winter, 1992 issue of the *American Scholar*. Lukacs sees Huey as both a populist and a national socialist in contrast to both Hitler and Stalin, whom he views not as Nazi or Communist but as extreme nationalists. Socialist is a term that contrasts with labels pinned on Huey by contemporary observers and with a classification applied or implied by Williams, Brinkley, Reed, and Hair. As the social sciences change so does the evaluation of icons and ogres in political history, particularly a hybrid such as Huey, who, upstaging a new president, issued a radical economic message to a beleaguered nation after local constituents had embraced what they knew of it as a preference to traditional neglect.

One legacy that Huey has left to scholars is that of appraising his role as the father of the modern Louisiana State University, which he stroked as if he had been coddling a newborn pet elephant. During the last seven years of his life, during fiscal stringency in all other American states, Huey force-fed LSU with increasing appropriations while other universities were retrenching. Warren, Williams, Heilman, and Hair credit Huey for his patronage of LSU. Does Huey deserve any recognition for cultural movements that flowed from an educational abberation on a large new campus?

When Huey became governor, LSU was understaffed and underbuilt: an Italian Renaissance village on a former sugar plantation large enough to have accommodated Renaissance Padua. With a few more than 1500 full-time students and a faculty of 168 members, it ranked 89th in enrollment among American universities and held a "C" rating from the Association of State Universities. Never had it awarded a doctorate. By the time of Huey's death LSU's enrollment was approaching 6,000, its faculty 400, including that of a new medical school that he inaugurated as if overnight. LSU's graduate school under Charles W. Pipkin, late a professor of political science at the University of Illinois and a Rhodes Scholar, had begun an ambitious doctoral regimen. The LSU Press had appeared. Its "C" rating, notwithstanding Huey's occasional indiscretions in impinging on academic freedom and in censoring the student newspaper, had improved to "A." LSU had become the 13th largest American university, the ninth largest state university.

Already amalgamated as the state's university and its A & M college, LSU under Huey's hand-picked president, who held a doctorate from Columbia University in educational administration, seemed a model in proliferating courses of study within a boundless curriculum. Heilman, who arrived at LSU from Harvard University the week before Huey was shot, remembers an influential intellectual and literary flowering during extraordinary times. The university operated a sugar school that attracted students from throughout the

Caribbean. It engaged in agricultural research related to all the state's crops. It had begun initiatives in petroleum geology and engineering, aeronautical engineering (in addition to existing staple engineering curricula), speech, music, voice, theater, the dance, other fine arts. Its music department produced grand opera accompanied by its own symphony orchestra under directors of international acclaim. If LSU was losing a few eminent scholars to more prestigious universities, it was attracting outstanding young academicians in law, political science, sociology, economics, mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy, botany, biology, classical and modern languages (including medeival literature) philosophy, psychology, education, history, English. If LSU did not compare with the University of Michigan, LSU enthusiasts would have supposed that Michigan's problem was Michigan State. If Harvard had become renown for offering electives, so would LSU.

It was at LSU that the Southern Historical Association was founded in 1934 and began publishing its *Journal of Southern History*. The first issue of the *Southern Review* appeared the summer before Huey's death. Warren was one its founding editors. Another was Cleanth Brooks, who, like Warren, had done his undergraduate work in the English department of Vanderbilt University under John Crowe Ransom before matriculating to Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. Brooks had signed on at LSU in 1933 a year ahead of Warren.

At LSU Brooks and Warren coauthored *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943), popular textbooks used in many colleges and universities for two or more generations and in some until this day. A new analytical method of teaching literature, as distinguished from surveying literature, had been propagated from LSU long before Brooks and Warren achieved distinguished careers at Yale University. LSU held the vibrant end of the Nashville—Baton Rouge literary axis of the New Criticism after Ransom left Vanderbilt in 1937, but, in contrast to Huey's New South advocacy, held to an Old South literary persuasion under the

influence of the Nashville Agrarians and their disciples—at least among some members of LSU's large English department.

Huey did not live to know what all he might have made possible by diverting inordinate appropriations to expand LSU beyond any dean's aspirations. In retrospect, a burgeoning LSU of the depression years seems one of a strong man's signal achievements, whether from ambition, madness, yen. Nor did Huey live to see during FDR's second term the New Deal's open-handed contributions to LSU's physical facilities following a sudden rapprochement between FDR and Huey's political heirs before the fall of 1936. So many things happened so fast at LSU once Huey turned on the spigot that it would challenge any scholar to try to determine how much credit Huey should receive for what. A sudden efflorescence from so much talent, none of which is identified with Huey, is credited as it should be to those scholars who created it. An encomium in academia handed down in controversy has not been assayed. Prospectors have concentrated on ore from other lodes easier to mine and to which Huey holds clear title.

From this remove can best be visualized the rustic Huey Long who began a public career at age 25 by attacking privilege and the frenetic presidential aspirant of national radio oratory who, 17 years later, ran out of time on a Baton Rouge Sunday night at the legislature. Huey's diverse complexity and accomplishment have challenged inquiry not accorded many governors who became only senators. Perhaps Huey, alive in the spheres of evolving social sciences, belongs next to William Jennings Bryan as America's provincial enigma of the 20th century. Will we see another generation's perceptive benediction? Indictments and memorials having been read, Huey Long awaits a complete probate and inventory down to the last teaspoon and hiccup.