

## MARGARET MITCHELL 1900-1949

### Author's Chronology

Born Margaret Munnerlyn Mitchell on November 8, 1900, in Atlanta, Georgia, to Eugene Muse Mitchell, an attorney and president of the Atlanta Historical Society, and Maybelle Stephens Mitchell, a founder of the women's suffrage movement in Georgia; 1914-1918 attends local schools, notably Washington Seminary; 1918-1919 attends Smith College; has brief love affair with Lieutenant Clifford West Henry, who is killed in France shortly before the armistice in 1918; 1919 returns to Atlanta after the death of her mother to oversee the family home; 1922 marries Berrien Kinnard Upshaw; works briefly as a feature reporter for the *Atlanta Journal*; 1924 divorces Upshaw; 1925 marries John Marsh, a public relations manager; 1926 leaves her newspaper job to begin work on a Civil War novel; 1930 finishes a first draft; 1935 contacts a publisher; 1936 publishes *Gone With the Wind*; 1937 wins Pulitzer Prize for fiction; 1939 movie version appears; 1940 film wins ten Academy Awards including Best Picture; 1949 dies August 16, after being struck by a drunken driver, and is buried in Oakland Cemetery, in Atlanta.

### Author's Bibliography

*Gone With the Wind*, 1936 (novel).

### Overview of Biographical Sources

Despite her considerable success and popularity, Margaret Mitchell remained a private person who closely guarded the details of her personal life. She requested that most of her papers and letters be destroyed after her death and that access to the remaining materials be severely limited. The reasons for her reticence were two: she firmly believed that *Gone With the Wind* should stand or fall on its own merits or lack of them, and she wished to protect other persons involved in the complicated relationships of her private life which are dramatized in her novel.

The popular image of Mitchell was that of a southern matron who turned to writing as her contemporaries might cultivate bridge, golf, or gardening. Although descended from old Georgian families and raised in comfortable circumstances, the future author was no simple southern belle. Her mother's feminist leanings clashed with her father's conservatism, and young Mitchell became a somewhat willful, rebellious tomboy. She was given to flights of imaginative fancy and a series of serious, debilitating accidents and illnesses. After the death of her first loved in World War II and of her mother in the influenza epidemic, Mitchell became a flapper. She lived the wild times of the Jazz Age and wrote about them in nonfiction. Her first marriage was a disaster, climaxed by spousal rape and a scandalous divorce. Her second marriage mirrored her dependent, yet sometimes stressful, relationships with her father and brother. The writer's social, psychological, and sexual ambiguity found expression in her greatest creation, Scarlett O'Hara, while people she encountered provided models for the other characters in *Gone With the Wind*.

Mitchell's own conflict of identities, the close relation of her life and work, and her reticence about both make her biography a daunting task. The first published biography, *Margaret Mitchell of Atlanta: The Author of Gone With the Wind* (1965) by literary biographer Finis Farr, still remains useful. It is limited by a brief cultural background, and a lack of documentation and critical conclusions. Popular biographer Anne Edwards came to write about Mitchell by way of a biography of Vivian Leigh, the screen incarnation of Scarlett O'Hara. Her *Road to Tara: The Life of Margaret Mitchell* (1983) is better written than Farr's earlier effort and contains better documentation, but it seems fragmented and inconclusive. Two more recent books do a much better job of relating the writer and her work. Elizabeth Hanson's *Margaret Mitchell* (1991) provides a thorough biography of Mitchell to lend perspective to *Gone With the Wind*. Darden Asbury Pyron has written what will become the definitive biography in *Southern Daughter: The Life of Margaret Mitchell* (1991). These books may initiate a serious reconsideration of Mitchell's place in the canon of American literature.

### Evaluation of Selected Biographies

Edwards, Anne. *Road to Tara: The Life of Margaret Mitchell*. New Haven, CT: Ticknor & Fields, 1983. A more popular work in intention and style than Farr's, this biographical effort proves both readable and in some ways

more insightful. This volume benefits from Harwell's edition of the *Gone With the Wind* correspondence as well as the opening of other Mitchell papers, and includes fuller documentation. Edwards's book also profits from later critics of the novel who took it more seriously as a cultural and literary text. She provides regional and historical background, critical insight into the novel, and information on the life and loves of the author. However, Edwards's work often falls into elliptical fragments which fail to cohere in a conclusive portrait of the woman as writer or the writer as woman, and it is weakened by lapses into a popular journalistic style. (A, G)

Farr, Finis. *Margaret Mitchell of Atlanta: The Author of Gone With the Wind*. New York: William Morrow, 1965. This was the first full-length biography and is still useful for the general student of her work. The account of Mitchell's life is generally accurate and readable, and seems thoroughly grounded in the Mitchell papers. The lack of scholarly apparatus, however, limits its definitiveness. More importantly, Farr offers little cultural or psychological analysis connecting the author and her work. The biography seems more competent than insightful, although Farr at least assumed Mitchell's importance as a writer. (A, G)

Hanson, Elizabeth I. *Margaret Mitchell*. Boston: Twayne, 1991. Intended primarily as critical introductions, Hanson's recent study provides an insightful analysis of Mitchell's life in relation to her great work. Hanson devotes a chapter each to Mitchell's childhood and family background, her young adulthood and first marriage, her second marriage and journalistic career, her writing *Gone with the Wind*, her relationship to southern literature and to writers Eudora Welty and William Faulkner, and her relationship to the film version of the novel. (A, G)

Harwell, Richard. *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind Letters, 1936-1949*. New York: Macmillan, 1976. Although the letters Harwell gathers document the thirteen years after the publication of *Gone With the Wind*, they provide insight into the conception, writing, editing, and publishing of the novel. Mitchell allowed these letters to survive because they deal with the more public side of her life and work. They also provide a basis for a consideration of more private issues. Harwell's edition is scholarly, and his insights about the cross-identification of Mitchell, Scarlett, and their mutual hometown of Atlanta, possibly began the novel's recent critical evaluation as an important text. (A, G)

Pyron, Darden Asbury. *Southern Daughter: The Life of Margaret Mitchell*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. This is certainly the definitive biography. Over five hundred pages, packed with details from archives and interviews, and supplemented with photographs, this account covers her birth to her death. Pyron depicts Mitchell as shy yet bold, insecure but tough, private but flirty. Pyron also includes a substantial analysis of both the book and film of *Gone with the Wind*. This absorbing biography is both readable and scholarly. (A, G)

### Autobiographical Sources

Mitchell wrote no autobiography, although her letters and papers offer many autobiographical insights. The best available source of letters is Richard Harwell's edition of her *Gone With the Wind* correspondence. More recent critics have come to view her novel as a fictionalized biography of her family and friends and a fictionalized autobiography in the character of her heroine, Scarlett O'Hara.

### Overview of Critical Sources

The critical history of *Gone With the Wind*, which is to say of Mitchell the author, proves contradictory, as might be expected from the writer's conflicted biography. The reaction of reviewers in the popular media and of general readers was quite positive in 1936, for no one would deny that the novel is a great "read." Even the initial response of the literary community seemed laudatory. Comparisons were made with the great novelists and novels of the nineteenth century—Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karinina*, and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. In terms of memorable characters, sweeping action, colorful settings, and grand themes the novel was a success. At the same time, qualifying statements about style, sentiment, racism, and melodrama raised legitimate questions about the book's literary value.

The novel's status as cultural artifact surpassed its identity as a literary text. It became so popular that it was impossible to judge it simply as a work of fiction. The immense popularity of the film version only complicated the situation. Book and film were conflated into an American (and later international) phenomenon. Thus criticism was arrested at the levels of appreciation, often at the extremes of love or hate, and evaluation in terms of praise or scorn. On the popular level the novel was lauded; in the literary world it was defamed. In literary criticism *Gone*

*With the Wind* became the negative touchstone for the praise of writers such as William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, or Eudora Welty, who were heroes and heroines of both the Southern Renaissance and the New Criticism.

This critical neglect continued well into the 1960s when reconsiderations of American culture and society elicited new readings of classic texts. Mitchell and her single novel were seen as important symbols of American cultural forces, if nothing else. Finis Farr's biography in 1965 sparked a reevaluation simply by his assumption of her importance as a writer. Other analyses followed, many in schools of feminist criticism, which asserted the work's literary quality. The novel's critical neglect was explained in terms of the largely male critical establishment, and Mitchell became the subject of articles and dissertations in the 1970s. In the 1980s the half-century anniversaries of both novel and film provided new perspectives for critical focus in a number of important works.

With the emergence of new critical approaches during the next decade, *Gone With the Wind* and Mitchell might well become the focus of critical debate over the nature and function of literature. Certainly it remains eminently readable and powerful, appealing to both a general and intellectual readership. The novel dramatizes a central event in American cultural history, with an epic sweep and a romantic intensity. Character, event, setting—all the elements of traditional fiction—are found here, as are the complexity, ambiguity, and intertextuality which the contemporary critic values.

### Evaluation of Selected Criticism

Hanson, Elizabeth I. *Margaret Mitchell*. Boston: Twayne, 1991. Although Hanson's Twayne volume is valuable as a short biography, its critical insights are considerable. In particular, Hanson skillfully connects Mitchell's fiction with southern history and literature. Her chapter on the novel's place in the pantheon of southern literary modernism provides a long overdue reevaluation of *Gone With the Wind*. (A, G)

Harrison, Elizabeth J. *Female Pastoral: Women Writers Re-Visioning the American South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Harrison argues that pastoral literature traditionally idealizes the rural world, and that American pastoral literature canonizes the settlement and conquest of "virgin" frontiers. In the South, both before and after the Civil War, males have dominated this pastoral tradition with women portrayed not only as embodiments of the land's condition but as passive sexual victims. Harrison then proceeds to demonstrate how six twentieth-century women novelists—Ellen Glasgow, Margaret Mitchell, Willa Cather, Harriette Arnow, Alice Walker, and Sherley Williams—have created their own pastoral tradition that depicts women bonding with the land and achieving autonomy. Harrison argues that success for women depends upon an invocation of land, not owned as property (as in the traditional pastoral) but as an empowering life source. (A, G)

Harwell, Richard. *Gone With the Wind as Book and Film*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1982. An excellent collection of existing materials, in both a topical and chronological framework, along with a solid introductory essay and a full biography. (A, G)

Pyron, Darden Asbury. *Recasting: Gone With the Wind in American Culture*. Miami: University Presses of Florida, 1983. Pyron gathers the most important earlier criticism, which consists of short essays and articles in literary journals and quarterlies, and provides a valuable biographical essay. The contents are organized by topic and include both positive and negative reactions to the novel over the last five decades. (A, G)

Taylor, Helen. *Scarlett's Women: Gone With the Wind and Its Female Fans*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989. A feminist interpretation of the novel through reader-response analysis, this study proves interesting even though, in the end, it is unconvincing. Taylor's discussion could have been better grounded in both the biography of the author and analysis of the novel. (A)

### Other Sources

Bridges, Herb. *Gone With the Wind: The Definitive Illustrated History of the Book, the Movie, and the Legend*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989. Although hardly definitive in its discussion of the novel, this beautifully illustrated text gives a good sense of how the movie version made *Gone With the Wind* an international phenomenon. (A, G)

Ripley, Alexandra. *Scarlett*. New York: Warner, 1991. Billed as the "sequel to *Gone With the Wind*," this novel supposedly begins where the 1939 story ends, with Scarlett vowing to reclaim Brett. *Scarlett* was commissioned by

the trustees of Mitchell's estate in order to reserve the copyright on Mitchell's characters, and the initial critical response to the sequel was negative or mixed. (G)

#### **Selected Dictionaries and Encyclopedias**

*Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Novelists, 1910-1945, vol. 9, part 2.* Edited by James J. Martine. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. A competent short introduction by an academic critic of Mitchell.

*Fifty Southern Writers After 1900: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook.* Edited by Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987. A solid, short introduction stressing biography, major themes, and critical bibliography.

*Popular World Fiction: 1900-Present, vol. 3.* Edited by Walton Beacham and Suzanne Niemeyer. Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1987. An interesting approach to Mitchell as a successful writer of popular fiction; also includes a brief discussion of the movie adaptation.

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