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The Novels of Robert P. Tristram Coffin

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Robert P. Tristram Coffin was a poet who turned frequently to prose; indeed, there was almost no area of prose he did not attempt — biographies, an autobiography, collected lectures, essays, history, criticism, short stories, and novels. This report shall confine itself to the last-mentioned, for (poetry naturally excluded) the novels offered Coffin his greatest challenge.

Coffin's three novels were all written within the seven-year period from 1935 to 1941, when some of his best work as a poet was being done. The first novel, Red Sky in the Morning, was published just a year before the author won the 1936 Pulitzer Prize for poetry; the second, John Dawn, in that year of national recognition; and the third, Thomas-Thomas-Ancil-Thomas, five years later. Only brief synopses of the last two books will be necessary; however, as I intend to discuss Red Sky in the Morning at some length, a more detailed summary of the plot should prove helpful.

This first novel tells the story of Will Prince, the youngest member of an old Maine sea-faring family whose men used to sail around the Horn, but whose descendants now sell clams and lobsters to the summer people. Will's Uncle Frank still maintains, marginally, the old family home; but, as the story begins, Will's father has already taken Will, an older son, David, and Mrs. Prince, to a shack on a barren coastal island named Whaleboat.

Will's is an unhappy, uneasy childhood. He can neither relate as he feels he should to his devoted mother, nor can he fill the place in his dour father's life that seems the special property of David. But for the affection between Mr. Prince and David, there is no joy in the household. The two men regard Will as a weak sister; and Mr. Prince has spells of jealousy, during which he says things to his wife which suggests to Will "the slime an eel left in your hands when you tried to hold him fast." Will senses his mother's need for love in an intolerable
situation, but when she attempts to be affectionate, he feels only a vague affront to his manhood and cannot respond.

After David dies of diphtheria, Mrs. Prince refuses to return to the way of life that killed him, and Will, hoping to take David's place, is rejected too. Thus begins a second stage in Will's life—a life to be lived in Uncle Frank's home, among people, and in an old house full of memories of better days. Will is pleased to be with his uncle; pleased to roam the house, take up school again, work with his nets and lobster-traps, and save money for a future education. But Whaleboat and his father's animal existence there are never out of his mind.

Eventually, a cousin, Rupert Prince—adventurer, world traveler, and successful novelist—visits the family home. Though Will is instinctively repelled by the man's egotism and grossness, he notes that his mother is charmed and excited by the newcomer. For a while, Will swallows his revulsion and enjoys seeing his mother vital and happy, but as the relationship grows he remembers his father's old accusations. Will visits Whaleboat to beg his father to come home, only to be rejected again and to have David thrown in his face as the "manly" son.

Will is now convinced he must act for his father. Almost unconsciously, he weaves a huge net. With this under his coat, he goads Rupert into proving he is no fair-weather sailor by taking his sloop out in a storm. On the open sea, Will tries to sink the craft. When an enraged Rupert attacks him, Will twists the net around his cousin's legs, and they both slip into the water to drown. Their bodies are discovered weeks later, and the net still around Rupert is enough to convince Mr. Prince that his son made the ultimate sacrifice for him. Will is buried beside David, and this time his father turns from the dory that should take him back to Whaleboat and slowly walks into the family home.

Although this first novel is not without flaws, it is, to my taste, the most successful of the three. And paradoxically, its weaknesses and its strengths often overlap.

For example, in Red Sky (and to a lesser extent this could be said of the other novels) Coffin tends to make paragraphs primarily out of a series of short, staccato sentences:
It was a long way to the boiling spring his father wanted the water from for David. The island was full of springs. But just that one would do for David, and no other. One of the white hen's chickens, David was. That was the way Will's mother often spoke of her older son. Anything he wanted was all right. She often said the sun rose and set by that boy, to hear his father tell. Will knew his father thought more of David than he did of him. David took after his father more in looks. That may have been part of the reason why.

Such passages as the above are presumably designed to suggest the fragmentary thought processes of a young boy. But the entire story is, so to speak, filtered through the mind of this boy; thus scenic and personal descriptions appear in the same style, as do revelations about characters and reactions to events. The "primer-style" can become obtrusive.

Taken individually, many paragraphs are crisp and suggestive:

The September day was bright as polished silver. High white clouds were flying. But they never got in the way of the sun. The sun poured down on everything and lit the whole of Menhaden up. Houses stood out and glistened like squares of rock candy. Everything was like metal in the clear afternoon light. A puddle in the road was burning like a sheet of melted gold. The seagulls were going over like great snowflakes. Whiter than snowflakes. Whiter than snow.

Here the observant poet is clearly in command of the novelist, and one would not want it otherwise. The staccato effect is still apparent, but what New Englander has not seen just such an Autumn day and wished for the words to describe it?

It must be admitted, too, that Coffin's essentially poetic techniques applied to the novelist's purposes did not always produce happy results such as the lines quoted above. Here, for example, is Coffin's description of a mounting storm:

The cold day was leaning up hard on Will's left side. As Will came up a mound of frozen spindrift, the whole dark ocean lifted up along the black ledges. A crack of white ran all the way along the island and burst into a row of blossoms like giant lilies. They hung in the air and caught the whole dim shine of coming day. Then they subsided very slowly, all at once, and Will heard thunder across the sky, and the whole granite island trembled under him. He was in a hurry. But he set the jug down carefully and stood there as still as a stone. He waited for the next swell to break. It was a long time coming. It was very quiet. The whole sky was growing unspeakably bright right along the rim of the ocean.
I was tempted to use italics to stress the point here, but even without their help, the reader will notice the repetition of the word “whole”: “the whole dark ocean . . . the whole dim shine . . . the whole granite island . . . the whole sky.” This could hardly be accidental; if a skilled poet did not deliberately put it there, he would unquestionably have noticed the repetition in his proofreading. Coffin must have wanted to stress the intensity of his young hero’s awareness of physical nature, and he did so. However, he also, thereby, stressed the technique of the description more than the emotional experience of the storm.

There are overlapping weaknesses and strengths, too, in Coffin’s creation of characters. The five major characters—David need not be considered; he is an issue more than a person—do not always have the depth of flesh-and-blood creatures. They come close to being stock characters. Mr. Prince is a hard-bitten lobsterman who can love only the son made in his own image. Will is the sensitive, hence rejected, son. Mrs. Prince is the frustrated woman who has been used to better things; Uncle Frank, the always understanding, somewhat ineffectual nice guy; and cousin Rupert, the boastful adventurer and womanizer.

We know who and what all these people are, but they remain, to a degree, peripheral—like the figures in an epic who exist essentially to act upon and react to the hero. And though Will’s character is often sharply delineated, even here—again as with the epic characterization—we are not permitted to know everything. Will’s feelings about David and his father are obvious and understandable, but his attitude towards his mother is properly a corollary of his attitude towards his father—and we should know about it if Will is to be more than “the rejected son.” However, we must settle for Will’s own confusion about his mother, or draw our own commonplace psychological implications.

But this cannot be the last word on Coffin’s art of characterization. His strength lies, again, in the individual scenes. No reader of Red Sky in the Morning will easily forget Will watching his father hold the dying David up to the sun, and almost envying his brother’s ability to inspire a God-like look in his
father; or could fail to be moved by the scene of an unloved son afraid to touch a pair of his father’s trousers because that would seem almost as personal as touching the man himself.

Regrettably, however, such scenes are not enough. Though the analogy may be forced, we do not accept a series of "dramatic monologues" as a cohesive drama; and, similarly, individual scenes in a novel, no matter what their separate force, have got to yield totality of meaning. Flashes of intuition, or feeling, or understanding will not really affect us if we do not, ultimately, identify fully with the people involved in the story. And there’s the rub. One is aware that a given page has presented, say, a sensitive and accurate portrait of a “frustrated woman,” but she is not often enough a particular frustrated woman, Mrs. Prince.

A 1935 reviewer — also reaching for an analogy — put it well, I feel, when he suggested that Red Sky “presents single emotions keenly, but with no more analysis than in a lyric.” Another reference to the poet!

Coffin’s second novel is his least effective, primarily, I would insist, because he tried to make it a novel of action and of generations of characters, and to do so in the too limited space of 300-plus pages, not nearly room enough for a “saga.”

John Dawn, the titular hero of the tale, is born on New Year’s Day of 1800. He is the son of Captain James Dawn of Merrymeeting, Maine, who, as he toasts both the new century and his new son, promises his comrades the story of a battered pewter cup inscribed “J. Dawn.” Suddenly — and one must be alert to catch the shift in time — we find ourselves back in 1751 at the birth of Captain James, the son of Jacob Dawn. The Dawn chronicles have begun. Jacob is killed by marauding Indians, and his wife and children, young James excepted, are burned in their home; James, after fathering John Dawn, is killed in a sea-battle with a British man-o’-war; and John himself, though he lives to a good age, dies after an accident sustained as he watches the launching of his last ship — a sailing ship built despite the new age of steam. Before his story is told, however, John Dawn must bury two sons; the elder, Joel, murdered by cutthroats in a California gold town, and the younger, Robert, killed on a Civil War battleground.
When old John dies, therefore, it is the end of the family line, and the end of an era.

*John Dawn* is the kind of story Kenneth Roberts or C. S. Forester might have chosen to write. The former would have attempted to breathe life into the pages of American history; the latter would have given his attention to the ships and men on the high seas. Both would have specialized in scenes of action. Coffin does not; indeed he seems ill at ease with historical novel heroics and violence. In *John Dawn* the scenes of action and violence are especially creaky:

The iron missiles had made kindling of the port rail and ploughed up the deck into tall splinters. A man was lying in the midst of them, flat on his face on the deck. His bowels showed below his jacket and glittered evilly in the light of the high moon. Another man had been hit hard, and he was crawling along the deck with his hands alone, for his legs were no use to him. All five of the *Margaretta'*s guns were barking now. The men worked them as fast as they could.

There are literally dozens of similar passages. Guns belch smoke; limbs are torn off; wood splinters tear at eyes and faces; and guts are spilled. But there is no smell of sweat and powder, no stink of death, no sense of fear and agony — just statements that they are there.

From time to time, too, the characters are larger than life:

Fearing Upjohn was sitting on a water bucket with the white bones of his right leg sticking out through his trouser leg, where his knee should have been. He was holding a man up in his arms. John saw that it was Davy Snow. Davy's face was all chalk. His coat was dabbed with blood. He was hurt all over. John bent down to him.

"Wonderful," Davy was saying as he mopped the blood out of his gray hair and eyebrows, "wonderful fight Johndy! Wouldn't have missed this for Timbuktu! Miriam'll be glad to — to hear what a — a — nice fight we had. Your Daddy will tell — will tell — her what —"

He slumped forward in Fearing's arms.

"Davy's gone," Fearing Upjohn whispered fiercely, "gone dead on us. What your father'll ever do without Davy I don't know."

"You are hurt, too, Fearing," said John.

"Oh, a scratch — a scratch or two."

One is impelled to ask why Coffin, in his second novel, attempted an uncongenial genre. I think the answer must be that he considered the historical background and the battles on land and sea not vital to his main purpose, which was to assert
the value of the continuity of the family — of fathers and sons — and the equal value of the standards of strong and fearless men.

These values are, indeed, implicit in *Red Sky in the Morning* in the relationship of Mr. Prince and David, in the yearnings of Will, and in his foolish but selfless sacrifice of his life for his father’s honor. In *John Dawn* the assertions are explicit. Each Dawn male is aware — almost unnaturally aware of his past and of his destiny. The pewter cup is passed from Jacob to James to John to Joel, and it goes into the grave with Robert only when the line of Dawn is ended. Each Dawn male knows he must sire sons, the first always to be given a name beginning with the letter “J” so that he may properly inherit the cup. And captains James and John — the father and son who dominate the novel — are warned of the coming or the presence of death by a vision of a phantom ship, the *Harpswell*, a ship which finally sails off, after John dies, “like a flake of fire... burning hot like a candle flame set on the edge of the sea.”

There is implicit, also, in *John Dawn* a theme which will become all-important in the last novel and one which is so basic in the poetry: that relationships of men are the ones that matter in the scheme of things, and that fathers live in sons in a special way that transcends the facts of genetics. Whether writing of men of the sea or of the soil, Coffin makes his characters aware of their heritage and convinced that they contain more in their wills and bodies than just themselves. As Captain John Dawn dies in the arms of his beloved natural brother, his whole life runs before his eyes, but just before he dies:

Someone opened a door on a room full of babies. A door. A door. And it swayed back and forth. The wind outside whistled through a thousand ropes on a mast. The royal yard swayed back and forth across the sky, like a cradle rocking. And babies in it. A single albatross flying lonely across the sea in the sun. And it swayed, like a cradle. Like a cradle rocking babies. Babies that were sons. Babies that were men. Babies. Rocking. Sons. Sons.

In *Thomas-Thomas-Ancil-Thomas*, Coffin seems so preoccupied with the theme of ancestral influence that it appears not only in the story but in the very dedication: “To my son, Robert, and to my sons in him.”
Objection has been raised to the stress on ancestral influence because it seems to suggest that the man who acts as one controlled by three generations of males before him is not sufficiently responsible for his own deeds and valor. This, as far as I am concerned constitutes a moral not an aesthetic criticism. Believe in the idea or not—like it or not—we must ask if the author successfully brings it off. I cannot, for one, accept this “premise,” but I can applaud the attempt—often successful—to work with a very complex four-dimensional approach.

It would be inaccurate to say, though it is literally true, that the hero of this last novel is the final Thomas of the title, for that Thomas Coombs is as much his father Ancil, his grandfather Thomas, and his great-grandfather Thomas, as he is himself. The Dawn men were, as has been pointed out, well aware of the stock they came from—but Thomas Coombs is the stock he came from, from the age of seven until his death.

In the opening chapter we are introduced to what I have called the four-dimensional approach, and it operates throughout the book. It is a daring and dangerous approach. Certainly Coffin must have known, as he employed it, that he was running two major risks: that the continual stress on four-characters-in-one might keep his readers from identifying with any of the four; and that the leaps from generation to generation might seem merely a series of arbitrary mechanical shifts—might give a kind of “meanwhile, thirty years ago” effect. Coffin was not always successful in minimizing the first risk, but I think he did avoid the second.

Often, he leaps generations by letting the last Thomas dream a special dream—a dream of “timelessness,” and of children tumbling along in a great wind. Thomas dreams throughout the novel, but he comprehends the mystery of the dream only when, in the final pages, the dream wind becomes a literal wind that tears him from the top of his barn and tosses him to his death as his sons watch:

The strong man floated away into the midst of a dream he had always dreamt. And in the fine head the dream was all there was left of life, and that for the time it takes a mayfly to die. The man saw clearly. The man knew. But as in a dream and darkly. He knew how it was with him. For the little time it takes an airy spark to burn out. He knew he was going away from his barn and his farm and
his wife forever. He was going away from all wives and all taking in marriage. He was going away. He was going away from his sons. For his sons at last were in a safe place and would not come after him this time rolling on the wind nor fly higher and higher with him as he flew over a dwindling world and into a place where there was no father love, no love of hunger, nor any eating. No love, no bodies, no hands, no head, no eyes, nor any warm secrets of a man few eyes see and the few trusted ones feel and know.

The dream sequence is an obvious device — like the pewter cup and the phantom ship of John Dawn — but it is a much more sophisticated and integral one.

Occasionally, Coffin insists upon the timelessness of his story by duplicating plot action: the father and the friend who are rivals in love and buddies in war play their parts again in their sons, who are rivals in love and buddies in war. Here the author is least convincing, not so much because the parallels are so apparent, but because there is simply not enough difference in fist-fights over girls, generations apart, or between rescues on the battlefield, Civil War and World War I versions, to maintain interest.

Usually, however, Coffin shows us the influence of — really the oneness of — the generations by leading us so gently from the past to the present, or the reverse, that we make the time shifts before we know we have done so.

This ability could only be demonstrated by extensive quotation, which considerations of space forbid, so discussion of one example will have to serve. In the opening pages of Thomas-Thomas-Ancil-Thomas, the last Thomas, age seven, is awakened at sunset by his mother and told that he has napped the afternoon away and missed his dinner. She has, however, saved him a generous portion of his favorite dish. As the boy eats hungrily, he looks out of the window and thinks lovingly of his father who explains that world to him and tells him “the best things to know, and they were always right.”

The next paragraph briefly describes a freckle-faced, yellow-haired boy; the paragraph after that tells of the wonderful day he had making a trip with his father. Both paragraphs seem to refer to Thomas — but, no, we are already back a generation. If we read carefully, we realize that the boy who slept the afternoon away cannot be the boy who made a day-long
trip. Yet, there is no one sentence we can point to and say that the time shift occurred there.

As we read on, the clues pile up. The boy, we learn, likes his father's name, Thomas, and he hopes so to name his own son one day — and the sequence of names in the title reminds us that the father of the first seven-year-old boy we met should be Ancil. Shortly, the boy is actually called Ancil. A bare description of this time shift cannot suggest the smoothness of the transition from present to past, but perusal of just the few pages involved would, I am sure, convince most readers that a very difficult narrative trick has not only been performed, but has been made to appear effortless — the ultimate goal of professionalism.

To sum up, then, the novels of Robert P. Tristram Coffin are — usually for both good and ill — novels whose technical aspects strongly suggest the hand of a man who was a poet before he was anything else. They were written by one who was at his best when he could bring his essentially poetic observation to typical Maine scenes — to a dory being rowed through the sleet of a storm, to the map-covered walls of an old sea-captain's harbor home, to mayflowers on a farmer's untilled field, to the delights of an open-air celebration following the successful launching of a new sailing ship. They were written by one who did not sustain characterization, but who captured heightened emotions briefly, and often with great perception and understanding.

The novels were written, too, by a man who seemed sure of his message, though he must have realized many would not share his views. It seems safe enough to suggest that most women would not look with unqualified approval on a scheme of things wherein they exist largely to produce strong sons for strong men who will then regard the sons as their special property. And certainly many men — even men who share Coffin's conviction of the importance of sons — will not accept his insistence on the forces of tradition and genetics as forgers of character.

But I think that very few readers will quarrel with the repeated attempts in the novels to suggest a permanence in the relationship of men and nature that is fundamentally comfort-
ing, that is something to draw on. Coffin worked hardest to suggest this permanence in *John Dawn* and *Thomas-Thomas-Ancil-Thomas*, but he was most effective in doing so where he seemed to try the least. *Red Sky in the Morning* has no elaborate machinery; it does not go beyond the lives of the two generations who live together in it; it certainly depends on no involved use of time sequence. We are never told directly the date of the story, and so we begin it assuming it takes place in our own time: then we gradually note that only a sailboat seems available where an emergency situation would seem to call for the speed of a power launch; or we note that a character plans to arrive in town on “the stage.” In brief, the first novel, *Red Sky in the Morning*, suggests — pervasively yet unobtrusively — the timelessness, sameness, and the cyclic quality of life which the author tried to recapture in his later novels.

THE ESSAYS OF
ROBERT PETER TRISTRAM COFFIN

By F. CELAND WITHAM

*A thrush singing in the woods* . . . . It was the first bird I had ever really heard sing. It was the last marvel in a long chain of marvels. The first violets, like pieces of the sky, the first anemones, like drops of snow left over into April. I had had my first trip out past all houses, out of sight of all windows and doors. I was too tired to take in anything more. Then, when the shadow of the earth was climbing up the eastern sky, the bird sang among the distant trees. Three broken little songs rising higher and higher until they faltered and failed. All at once I knew what it was to be alone and among things so lovely that they made your heart ache. For you could never tell how beautiful they were even though you were to live a thousand years and have all the best words on the end of your tongue. My father thought it was weariness that made me burst suddenly into tears. But it was the thrush I have to thank for that.¹

From the more than 130 collected essays of Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, it would be possible to select literally scores of examples that would illustrate his sharpness of observation