

Larry Lockridge's Response to Ernest Lockridge's
A Skeleton Key to the Suicide of My Father, Ross Lockridge, Jr.,
Author of *Raintree County* (2011)

One unanticipated consequence of my biography *Shade of the Raintree: The Life and Death of Ross Lockridge, Jr.* (Viking, 1994) was that, more than book tours and signings within the literary community, I was recognized as a “suicide survivor” by suicide organizations and asked to speak at many conferences over a two-year period. (A “suicide survivor” is someone who has suffered the loss of a loved one through suicide.) To my surprise, I received a suicide prevention award and was featured in *People* magazine. In 1998 I did receive a *literary* award, the MidAmerica Award, given by the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.

We don't think of Woolf, Hemingway, or even Hart Crane as literary suicides first and foremost—they are remembered more for their work than for the manner of their departure. But Ross Lockridge, Jr., despite his assault on Mount Parnassus, still tends to be remembered mostly as a young literary suicide.

Growing up in the wake of his death, I didn't regard myself as a severely challenged suicide survivor but as the offspring of a gifted writer who died young. Still, in the forensic spirit of my biography, I attempted to account for this early death at the peak of acclaim. Based on my sample group of one, I proposed a “convergence theory” of suicide as keynoter of the 28th annual Convention of the American Association of Suicidologists in May, 1995. I was making explicit what is implicit in the biography's narrative. Edwin Shneidman, who coined the very term “suicidology,” was impressed enough to request a blurb for his 1996 study, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford UP). Not meant to apply to all cases, the theory in brief is that suicide can be the unfortunate consequence of a convergence of factors, not a single underlying cause or crushing event. In the case of Ross Lockridge, Jr., there were three: a *personality vulnerability* tied in with his great ambition, which entailed linkages among creativity, grandiosity, and paranoia; a *biological/genetic predisposition*, evidenced in the mental illness of his double-second cousin Mary Jane Ward, author of *The Snake Pit* (Random House, 1946) and in other family members; and *cultural forces* related to the phenomenon of success in America and to authorship in particular. The result of the convergence, narrated in the final three chapters of *Shade of the Raintree*,

was a sudden onset of major depression—the only one he suffered in his largely upbeat life and for which he was unprepared. William Lowe Bryan, President of Indiana University, put it best: after great effort, “there's an exhaustion of whatever it is that is the mother of emotion, so that the ordinary impulses of youth, of joy and satisfaction, are dead for a time” (*Shade*, p. 451). In a delusional state of mind, Ross Lockridge, Jr. died of depression ending in suicide. Suicide seemed the only possible release from pain, at least for him at the time, if not for his survivors. “The answer you seek is in an envelope,” read the fortune cookie I mention in the first chapter, but no such envelope with a single simple explanation turned up—and it still has not.

Reviewers of the biography were generally enthusiastic but said little about its forensic dimension, sometimes even calling it “a tribute,” not my intent.

Like any biographer I anticipated the emergence of any new information on my subject with both hope and dread. What if that envelope containing the “answer” turned up? What if the letter my father wrote to an Armenian friend shortly before his death were found somewhere and suggested causes or motives that had eluded me? What if the “secret” Elsie Shockley Lockridge told her homecare nurse late in life emerged to upend my apple carts? When in 1995

my brother Ernest accidentally discovered some fifty documents—mostly letters to our father—that had fallen at random beneath the bottom drawer of his otherwise emptied filing cabinet, I held my breath, as would any biographer. What if a document emerged to contradict the biography in a serious way?

But there were no major revelations. Some telegrams from Lockridge to his wife sent from New York during the negotiations with MGM in late June 1947 offer refinements in the timing of this intense moment. A letter from Nanette Kutner to my parents of January 28, 1948 shows that this journalist's visit to Bloomington took place in late January instead of early February. More important, a letter from Marion Monaco scuttled Larry Wylie's passing suggestion to me in an interview that Lockridge may have visited her in early 1947 while revising his novel in the offices of Houghton Mifflin or in New York and then Boston again during the MGM negotiations—there had been a "lost day," Wylie said. For a number of reasons I decided this was a false lead that did not belong in the biography. Monaco's letter, dated July 28, 1947, confirmed that it indeed was, for she did not even know that Houghton Mifflin would be the publisher and was surprised, like everybody else, by his winning the MGM award. She wrote to congratulate him.

Nothing has ever come to light to suggest that Lockridge ever compromised his marriage vows. I undertook the biography with the conviction, announced to my larger family, that I would follow the evidence wherever it took me. Had I uncovered evidence of an extramarital affair, I would have postponed publication until after my mother's death by cancer, increasingly imminent as I wrote. She died on August 8, 1994, four months after publication of *Shade*. There would have been no reason to speak to a dying wife of an infidelity—but I would certainly thereafter have written of it to

my readership, whether it had anything to do with the suicide or not.

There was another story I eventually dismissed as a false lead—a frequent experience in any biographical undertaking, but this one was weightier. This was my brother Ernest's theory that our father had been the victim of childhood sexual abuse by his father, which ultimately occasioned the suicide. I kept this theory in mind as I went about my research, turning up no evidence for it but instead a substantial amount of counterevidence, described below. Even so, on December 6, 1991, I wrote to Ernest, "I'm leaning toward including the thing about Grandpa—for two reasons, minimally. First, there are so many people who have heard about it [from Ernest himself] that it might surface anyway, and certainly you'd be within your rights to speak or write about it at some time. I don't wish my book to recapitulate in any way one of the things I talk about—family coverup—and I don't relish the idea that at some point it would be made clear that I'd omitted part of the story" (Lilly Library papers; Box 15; my copy, includes note on subsequent phone call).

He received my letter the following day and telephoned me. He implored me not to speak of his theory for which, he agreed, there was absolutely no evidence. He said he probably loved his long deceased grandfather and vowed he would take his dark conjecture to the grave. With misgivings as to whether he would keep the vow, I agreed not to bring it up in my biography. This was *not*, I felt, a compromise of my commitment to full disclosure because I had already come to regard his theory as a false lead, for the many reasons I discuss below.

There was another consideration that made me less reluctant to agree to Ernest's urgent request. Even to have broached the possibility of sexual abuse would have hijacked discussion of the biography, as the complex of contributing factors, the *convergence*, would have been pushed aside in favor of this simpler and sensational but also

by the 1990s more conventional claim. Had I felt there was any plausibility in Ernest's claim, I would have been duty-bound to discuss it. But because it lacked plausibility, I did not wish to give readers the option of a narrative with a single villain in a familiar story of sexual criminality.

As a child I had known Ross Lockridge, Senior in the late forties and early fifties before his death in 1952 as someone who needed a nitroglycerin pill to finish climbing the staircase of the First Methodist Church. He was slowly dying of congestive heart disease. He was storyteller to me, my sister Jeanne, my brother Ernest, and our cousin Kay Lockridge, closer to Ernest's age. Storytelling was part of a bedtime ritual described in *Shade* where we could choose between his frontier tales and Elsie Lockridge's Tommy and Zippy stories. Neither Jeanne nor I nor Kay, who would go on to be a journalist and outspoken feminist, remembers anything of a sexual nature in this ritual, in itself not decisive, since Ernest can say he was singled out. If we chose a story by our grandfather, we would share the small sunroom for the night, where we slept in a cot and our grandfather slept in his own small bed.

Ernest first spoke of his theory of sexual abuse at a family reunion in Bloomington in August 1979, late into a beer-drinking fest in the backyard when our mother had already turned in. Ernest began talking of what he regarded as family secrets. First among them was his conviction that our mother had had an affair with Ross Senior shortly following the death of Ross Junior. What was the evidence? we asked, flabbergasted. One day, as a boy of nine, he had witnessed what he described as a passionate kiss of the two upon Ross Senior's departure from our house on Stull Avenue in Bloomington. My other siblings and I assumed this was Ernest engaged as usual in hyperbole for the sake of a good story. The probability of Vernice Baker Lockridge having an affair with Ross Lockridge, Senior was

as slim as Mother Teresa having one with Mahatma Gandhi.

His credibility already undercut, Ernest went on to say that Ross Senior had groped him during bedtime rituals, through his pajamas, as he later told me. At the time in the backyard in 1979, we thought this was more likely, as with the story of the affair, some vestigial memory blown out of proportion over the decades. It was difficult for the rest of us to reconceive our aged, sad, and wheezy grandfather as a sexual predator. Ernest himself had often spoken with admiration of Ross Senior. Upon the appearance of *Ross and Tom*, a thinly researched, best-selling dual biography of our father and Thomas Heggen, Ernest wrote author John Leggett a letter (April 8, 1974), never sent, that seconded our mother's strong objections to the portrayal of Ross Senior. Ernest wished Leggett had not found it necessary to downgrade Ross Senior, who should have been permitted to speak more directly to the reader (Lilly Library papers; Box 3). Thereafter, when the two of us were engaged in editing a selection of letters (never published) that our father wrote as a teenager from Europe in 1933-34, in good measure to undermine Leggett's portrait of Ross Junior as a naive Hoosier bumpkin, Ernest spoke to me briefly about the possibility of one or the other of us writing a biography of our *grandfather*, not our father. It did not occur to me until late in 1988 to write a biography of our *father* that might, as I hoped, be more deeply researched and trusted than *Ross and Tom*.

My other siblings and I could hardly have been conspiring to deny the truth, for this was not the grandfather we knew or the grandfather Ernest had previously spoken of. Ours is a culture in which we are predisposed to believe those who speak out as victims of child sexual abuse. The burden of disproof is on the accused, and there is often justice in this, but Ross Senior is not here to explain or defend himself.

In 2011 Ernest Lockridge self-published *Skeleton Key to the Suicide of*

my Father, Ross Lockridge, Jr., Author of Raintree County, which takes the form of an unhappy 170-page scrapbook with commentary. He likens Ross Senior to the infamous Count Cenci of Percy Shelley's tragic drama, *The Cenci*, in which the Count celebrates at a dinner party the recent deaths of two of his sons and then incestuously rapes his daughter, Beatrice, who retaliates with patricide. Is this our grandfather, "Mr. Indiana," the celebrated Hoosier historian? my younger siblings and I asked, again flabbergasted. In one section Ernest narrates an early dialogue with our aunt Lillian Lockridge and grandmother Elsie Lockridge—dialogue he first wrote in the context of an unpublished novel of 1997 and reiterates verbatim here. He recounts a moment when Lillian, accompanied by Elsie, questioned him about what had happened with his grandfather during sleepovers directly following the suicide of Ross Junior, when Ernest was nine. In response to Lillian's graphic questions, Ernest replied emphatically no to any suggestion of oral or anal sex but not to gropings. Our mother was kept in the dark as to what was being said in the interview and wondered whether Ernest might have done something punishable. According to Ernest, she told Lillian and Elsie at the time that she had "always had only the highest regard for Ernest's grandfather."

I cannot say whether this episode did or did not happen as Ernest recounts it. And to this day I do not know for sure whether the abuse happened as described. Ernest is emphatic that it happened. If it did, I am sorry for the injustice and his distress.

Assuming totally inappropriate behavior by our grandfather toward my brother, the question remains as to whether childhood sexual abuse of Ross Junior by Ross Senior is the skeleton key to the suicide, as Ernest insists, based on extrapolation of his recollections of his own experience with Ross Senior. Here, I am certain the answer is no.

It is not the total lack of direct evidence that I'd emphasize; it is all the

counterevidence. I'll outline it here. Cumulatively, it makes a strong case for exculpation of Ross Senior as sexual predator of Ross Junior.

*I'll begin with the only direct portrait of Ross Senior by Ross Junior, found in his one-act play, *The Inheritors*, described on pp. 145-49 in *Shade* and based on what Ross Jr. calls a "bit of realism." In this play Ross Senior comes off not as a predator of any stripe but as a powerless and pathetic wimp within the domestic circle of his wife Elsie and two domineering siblings, Marie and Earl Lockridge, who are splitting up the spoils of the old Brenton Webster Lockridge estate in Peru, Miami County. The play ends with Ross Senior having taken nothing of the household valuables but a few books and photographs. He finally finds a photograph of his mother—his siblings "must have overlooked it." He speaks "slow and a little sheepishly" of how his mother "always thought I had great promise because of my university record. (He laughs at the contemplation of his own accomplishments.) But I guess I wasn't much of a satisfaction to Mamma." The son-playwright lends a wincing sympathy to his passive and defeated father here.

*Ernest thinks Ross Senior sexually abused his two other sons, Robert Bruce and Vivian Shockley, with devastating consequences. Evidence of this, apart from Robert Bruce's thinking he could swim when he couldn't and drowning at an early age, and Vivian Shockley becoming an alcoholic in his twenties, is a photograph of Ross Senior ripped into four pieces by Shockley following the deaths of Elsie Lockridge and Lillian. But Shockley ripped apart dozens and dozens of family photographs, including those of his mother, sister, and brothers, and ditched other portions of the family archive. He was unfortunately no saver and was simply cleaning out the house according to his own lights.

When John Leggett published *Ross and Tom*, Shockley Lockridge objected only to the portrayal of Ross

Senior, not to that of Ross Junior. In a letter to Leggett of June 17, 1974, he objected to Leggett's speculation that Ross Junior felt extreme guilt for having "demolished" his father in writing a better book than he ever had. Ross Senior, according to Leggett, had been deeply hurt by his son's success and Ross Junior sensed this, feeling a deep guilt. (Few reviewers were convinced by Leggett's simplistic Freudian explanation of the suicide.) Shockley writes of Ross Senior that he "had entered his seventies. He was in failing health, and I am sure that he entertained no further ambitions for himself. He took the keenest enjoyment—in fact gloried—in Ross' achievements. We all did . . . My father was a naive and trustful man. I can recall how hurt and shocked he was when an imagined friend let him down (as in a state textbook adoption.) He was an exceptionally good speaker . . ." Shockley goes on for three paragraphs defending Ross Senior from Leggett's portrayal of someone schooled in "ballyhoo": "I don't recall any extravagant advertising blurbs or capers employed to promote attendance at his well-known 'site recitals' of Indiana history." He objects to Leggett's description of Ross Senior as having the "faintly spurious air of medicine man," observes that he received an honorary doctorate, and that he "simply loved Indiana history and Indian lore ever since his boyhood on the Lockridge farm in Miami County, near PawPaw . . . Note that in 1922 he was a founder and the first president of the Fort Wayne Historical Society."

This would be an improbable tribute if this same "naive and trustful man" had sexually abused Vivian Shockley in his youth. Only in his closing paragraph does Shockley say something substantial concerning Ross Junior: "We knew that Ross was ill and depressed; we did not realize how deep was the depression. I think he felt that he had lost the divine touch, the ability to create—that he was at the end of his rope and could make no further useful contribution—that he might become a

burden to the family. In the arcane confusion of a sick mind flashed a noble impulse: to subdue this final indignity to himself and his loved ones by taking arms 'against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them' (Lilly Library papers, Box 3).

*Ernest portrays Elsie Lockridge as aware along with her daughter Lillian that her husband was a sexual predator. Certainly Elsie had a higher opinion of her father John Wesley Shockley than of her Indiana historian husband. But in 1957, three years before her own death, she wrote a fourteen-page essay, "Hoosier with a Mission," never published and not written for any apparent purpose, that describes Ross Senior's attempts to bring Indiana history to life through public storytelling "on the spot" where historical events had happened or where enduring words were spoken. Her essay is all praise: "the common people of Indiana loved his stories. School children loved them; their parents and teachers loved them; hard-headed business men loved them." She asks the question, "What aroused in Ross Lockridge such passionate, voluntary dedication to this humble, yet exacting, type of service to the history of his state?" Her answer is largely the influence of his mother, Charlotta Wray, who grew up in hardship in Virginia and was determined that her own children would not suffer similar hardships. "Ross Lockridge was truly his mother's child. He had her quick, active intelligence, her courageous, independent, and confident spirit, her indefatigable perseverance. He had, as well, her ready and exuberant laugh." And so on. It is difficult to believe that she would have gone out of her way to praise in highest terms a spouse she had known to be a sexual predator, let alone responsible for the deaths of two of her children.

*Rather than actively rebelling against his father with behavior typical of victims of sexual abuse, Ross Junior agreed to serve as amanuensis to books dictated by his father. The work his father asked him to do felt more and

more onerous over the years, but Ross Junior was, according to his best friend Malcolm Correll, happy to get a good wage. Fifty cents an hour was handsome indeed for those days, and Correll says he improbably enjoyed the public speaking his father inflicted on him—he enjoyed the discipline of it, the challenge, sometimes seeking out speaking engagements on his own. He knew his father was not a first-rate intellect—his literary sensibilities didn't reach beyond James Fenimore Cooper, he told Mary Jane Ward. Ross Junior's expressed attitude, however, was not of scorn or contempt but of gentle satire, as in the letter to Vernice Baker (*Shade*, pp. 161-62), where he describes his father's maniacal behavior at the wheel. I was surprised when Correll told me that Ross Junior never spoke disparagingly of his father. We might remember that his best single poem, "Kenapocomoco," was an assignment given by his father to preface his own unpublished novel *Black Snake and White Rose*. Patriarchal assignments didn't always result in resentful hack work, though sometimes they did, as in *The Harrisons*, an exercise in hagiography,. He never went through a period of overt filial revolt, but he needed to cease working on his father's projects—he had one of his own—and was firm about it (*Shade*, 246-47).

*Herbert Hendin, M.D., psychiatrist and CEO of Suicide Prevention International, read my book closely in manuscript and gave me a lengthy consultation on January 26, 1993, with a follow-up call the next day (notes on the interview, Lilly Library papers, Box 3). Though he believed Ross Junior exhibited a psychopathology related to narcissism and to his relationship with his parents, he dismissed out of hand even the possibility of early childhood sexual abuse, given what he termed Ross Junior's early well-developed socialization. Victims of sexual abuse give early evidence of a sociopathological acting-out. To the contrary, this was the boy everyone at Finley elementary school liked, the

junior high school student whom teachers thought happy, the Boy Scout setting out on a hike determined to do three good deeds, the teenager always trying to "help out." Hendin said this degree of sociability is blatantly incompatible with victims of childhood sexual abuse. Early on they tend visibly to act out their victimhood through precocious displays of sexuality, depressed withdrawal, and aggression. Because he in no way conformed to classic patterns of sexual abuse, it is extremely unlikely that Ross Junior was a victim.

I'd add that all the early photographs (see, e.g., *Shade*, the "two Rosses") image an apparently happy, well-adjusted boy. (This does not rule out that an emotional vulnerability with respect to his parents was already in the making, as Hendin observed.) A good example of his general state of good cheer and willingness to help out is the three-week historical site tour he took with his father in 1932 as a college credit-bearing course—he was not required to enroll—where by all direct accounts he was visibly cheerful as he drove the truck and set up the privy. Ross Junior developed many close male and female friendships during his brief life. He had a gift for friendship, just as he became a family man, welcoming four children in rapid succession.

*Though looking closely, I found nothing in Ross Junior's writings—whether in shorthand accounts of dreams or marginalia to passages of Freud concerning childhood sexuality—that suggests a sensitivity to issues of childhood sexual abuse, let alone a direct indictment of his father.

*He thought of his father not as a predator but as a prude; he was concerned what his father would think of the "cusswords" in *Raintree County*. At first his father was indeed jolted by them when they appeared in a *Life* magazine excerpt of September 8, 1947, but he soon came around and became one of *Raintree County*'s biggest fans, comparing it to "myriad-minded Shakespeare."

*Ross Junior sent Ernest to stay with his grandparents in Bloomington from mid-January, 1947 to April 1, 1947, while he was spending time in the east working on final drafts of his novel and Ernest was not taking well to Manistee, Michigan's weather. Our mother, Jeanne, and I stayed in Manistee, along with our maternal grandmother, Lillie Baker. During this period Ernest enrolled in Elm Heights elementary school in Bloomington (grade 3A) and was taught recitation by his grandfather. Only four people were in the large Lockridge house on High Street—Ross Senior, Elsie, Ernest, and occasionally Lillian. Other arrangements could have been made. I subsequently stayed with the Mumbys, our mother's sister and her husband, within easy walking distance of Elm Heights.

Had Ross Junior known Ross Senior from his own experience to be a pederast, would he have put his own son in harm's way for this extended period of time? The answer is so emphatically *no* that one might ask whether any other counterevidence is needed. I doubt Ernest would be willing to indict his father for knowingly endangering him, but on his own terms one wonders how he could not bring such an indictment.

The same question arises when our parents placed Ernest and Jeanne in the High Street house during their trip to Hollywood in November, 1947. (Still a toddler, Ross III stayed with Baker relatives in Martinsville, I stayed with the Mumbys.) Ross Junior also took time out from the pressures of success to go on two camping trips to Miami County with his father and Ernest (I was along for one of them) in the summers of 1946 and 1947. There had been an earlier camping excursion on the Eel River with Ross Senior and Ernest in the summer of 1942. Ross Junior had no problem bedding down in a tent with his father again, twice with Ernest, once with Ernest and me. He had fond memories of camping on the Eel River (the Kenapocomoco) with his father as a boy, and these later camping trips were reenactments. The Eel River is the

prototype of the Shawmucky in *Raintree County*, identified with the life force itself.

*Ross Junior never sexually abused his own children, a common transgenerational pattern in victims of childhood sexual abuse. And though Shockley Lockridge was a depressed person and alcoholic during the years he helped raise a family with his spouse Mary Kay, he never sexually abused his two daughters, Kay and Anne, according to Kay Lockridge.

*He also had a healthy sex life with his wife until the depression set in in October, 1947. The letters he sent from Boston in early 1947 are as flirtatious as ever, and it was then that he embedded the naked body of his wife, for which she had posed, into the landscape of Raintree County, a geoglyph that scandalized the clergy when it appeared on the novel's book jacket. The two had not decided against having more children. As is well known, victims of early childhood abuse characteristically have great impairments in their own adult sex lives.

*The letters that Ross Junior wrote his father at the nadir of his mental health in Hollywood in late 1947 (*Shade*, pp. 382-83) strike most readers as moving, respectful, and affectionate—by far the warmest words he ever sent his father. This exchange exhibits neither guilt on Ross Senior's part nor resentment on Ross Junior's. Is it likely that this exchange could have taken place during the very period that early child sexual abuse was at last destroying Ross Junior's sanity?

*None of Ross Junior's close friends ever heard a word concerning any sexual deviancy in Ross Senior, never a hint of scandal. Ross Junior shared intimate sexual details routinely with Malcolm Correll and Curtis Lamorey. He never mentioned sexual abuse by his father—in itself not decisive, yes, since victims of sexual abuse frequently remain silent, but still worth noting. Nor did he ever say anything concerning his father's sexual deviancy to his wife, Vernice Baker

Lockridge, who worked on some of Ross Senior's archives after his death and arranged for their donation to the New Harmony Workingmen's Institute. She never lost respect for Ross Senior who, in Ernest's view, indirectly killed her husband.

*In February 1946, Ross Junior named his third son after his father. It was a significant tribute, given that he himself had never relished his own derivative name. How likely is it that he would pass along the name of his sexual predator to his own son? He needed to insist on the "Junior" with his publishers since Ross Senior was better known in Indiana than he himself could ever hope to be. To lay claim to "Ross Lockridge" would imply that his father didn't exist, and he didn't wish to injure his father's pride.

*One of the last business items Ross Junior tended to before his death was to increase the amount of his donation to the IU Foundation earmarked to his father's Hoosier Historical Institutes. There is no evidence that he did this in response to his father's importunities. Ross Senior spoke proudly of the donation after his son's death.

*One of the last conversations he had with his mother (*Shade*, p. 424) took place in his small bedroom, the sunroom, on the second floor of the house on High Street, Bloomington, where my siblings and I listened to Ross Senior's tales and where Ernest remembers gropings. Elsie said to a reporter after her son's death that he spoke of how happy he had been in this very room. "I wish I could go back to childhood," he said (Lilly Library papers, Box 14).

*The decision to move back to Bloomington, forsaking both Boston and the Hollywood pipe dream, is a homing gesture that proved unfortunate but that seems unlikely had Ross Junior regarded his father as a sexual predator whose influence on him had been baleful.

*I tried to inveigle the "secret" to which Elsie's homecare nurse was privy concerning the suicide of Ross Junior.

Though she would not tell me directly what the secret was, she agreed to say what it was *not*, upon my questioning. I asked if Ross Junior was having an affair. "No." I asked if he had in fact been murdered. "No." I asked if he had been the victim of childhood sexual abuse by his father. "No." The only question where she expressed some hesitation was whether Ross Junior had dropped a strong hint to his mother the final afternoon of March 6 as to what he had in mind to do—to this, a *hesitant* no. This remains the best single explanation of what the secret was that Ruth Carter took to her grave. If true, Elsie would have had considerable guilt in the matter, confessing it to her homecare nurse alone.

*There is implicit counterevidence in *Raintree County* itself—for two reasons. Ross Senior leaves his mark everywhere in this historical novel. Although Ross Junior developed a much darker view of American history, he made use of the "historic site recital" format and recycled much of the same lore that fascinated his father—from heroes and Indians to the idea of the historical site itself, the memorials that history has left of itself and that need to be remembered and *recited*. The novel's encyclopedic scope echoes in a more resonate key his father's encyclopedic approach to the State of Indiana, where he was known as "Mr. Indiana."

Even more notable is the erotic component of the novel that alarmed the clergy and decent folk in 1948. Sex is life's vitality in this novel—it is treated in a largely celebratory manner, whether John Shawnessy and Susanna Drake having sex under the raintree or the bull mating with a heifer in the novel's central section. Sex is also implicated in the Fall, and one pays for one's pleasure throughout *Raintree County*, where the Professor argues sex's negative economy and Shawnessy its powerful procreative energy. Sex isn't presented as perverse, with the possible exception of the evangelist Reverend Jarvey and his seductive dandelion wine, but Jarvey, a

dark, comedic, and prescient characterization, in no way resembles Ross Senior. Sex is predatory in Ross Junior's early epic poem *The Dream of the Flesh of Iron* (1939-41), but it never takes the form of homosexual pederasty —rather, as with Jarvey, it involves sexual predation of vulnerable females.

All such counterevidence can be reconstituted as evidence if one subscribes to a psychology of denial that finds in manifest behavior a compensation for neurotic drives kept hidden from oneself. The homing of Ross Junior to Bloomington, so read, would represent the action of the abused son still under the sway of his father as a loadstar, drawing him back to the primal scene of abuse in a fatal melodrama. But when counterevidence becomes

“evidence” through this kind of thinking, there is no room for debate. We would need some piece of direct evidence to settle the matter. As of this writing, no such evidence has emerged. We also need to guard against an implicit false syllogism that takes this form: “Victims of childhood sexual abuse often end by taking their own lives; Ross Lockridge, Jr. took his own life; therefore, Ross Lockridge, Jr. was a victim of childhood sexual abuse.”

I stand by my account of Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s life as narrated in *Shade of the Raintree* and altogether reject my brother Ernest's conviction that sexual abuse is the “skeleton key” to the tragedy.

Larry Lockridge, New York City, 2014

Copyright © Larry Lockridge, 2014



www.raintreecounty.com/shadetre.html