

DIXIE LIMITED

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

DR. JOSEPH MILLICHAP HAS BEEN FASCINATED WITH TRAINS SINCE HE WAS A SMALL CHILD. NOW HE IS COMBINING THAT PERSONAL INTEREST WITH HIS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIZATION IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE.

According to Dr. Millichap, his new book *Dixie Limited*, published earlier this year by the University Press of Kentucky, presents “a reading of the complex, often ambivalent relation and resonance among technology, culture, and literature as represented by railroads in selected writers and works of the Southern Renaissance.”

“This book combines my personal and professional interest in railroads,” Dr. Millichap, an English professor at Western Kentucky University, explained. “When I was a little kid, my grandfather would take me down to the railroad stations and railroad yards. He had friends who worked there. From that time forward, I have always been fascinated by trains.”

On the professional side, Dr. Millichap specializes in American literature, particularly Southern literature and the Southern Renaissance, described as the period from the 1920s to recent decades. Having published four other books and more than 50 articles, Dr. Millichap felt he had completed what “was expected” of him and decided it was time to have fun doing what he wanted to do.

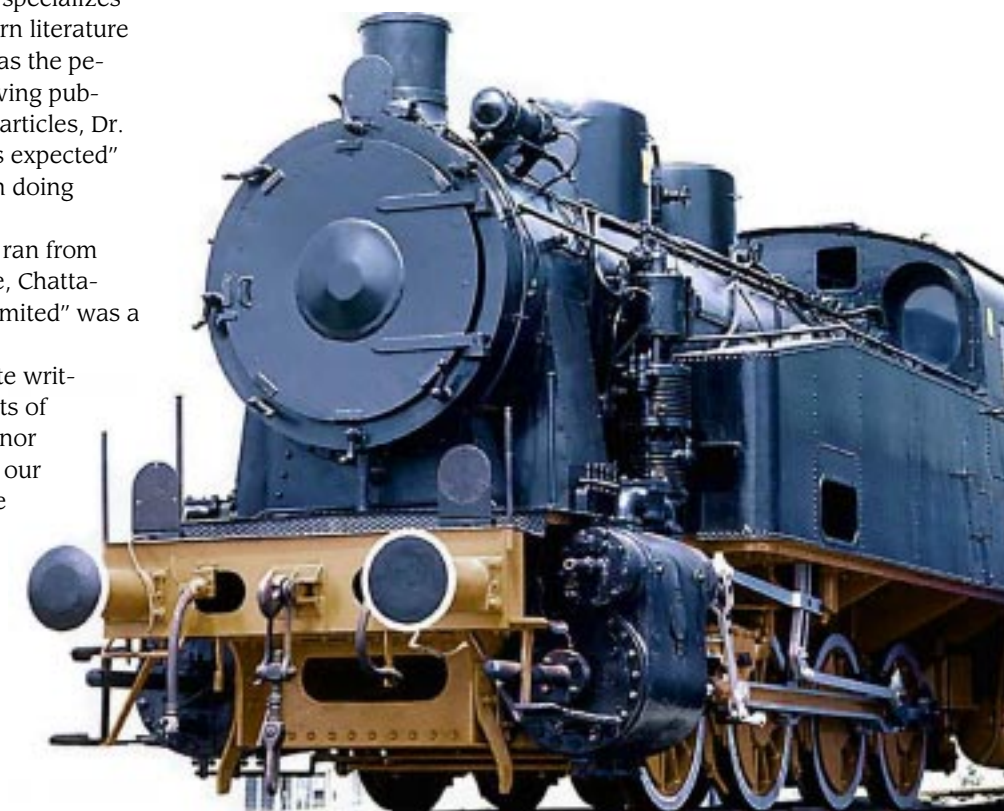
The Dixie Limited was a real train that ran from St. Louis to Florida, with stops in Nashville, Chattanooga and Atlanta. Dr. Millichap says a “limited” was a fast train that made fewer stops.

He gleaned the book’s title from a quote written by Flannery O’Connor in “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction.” O’Connor wrote, “The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon

stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.”

In his introduction, Dr. Millichap writes: “O’Connor’s complicated metaphor resonates beyond her immediate situation to suggest the complex meanings inherent in the relation of Southern railroads, Southern culture, and Southern literature. At the most universal level, Flannery O’Connor’s heroic metaphor projects the plight of the apprentice writer who must simultaneously emulate and escape the accomplished master.”

“The railroad is a kind of symbol that brings folks together,” Dr. Millichap expanded. “It is a complex symbol and image, as a kind of technology that interfaced with everyday life and changed it in the South. The railroad and its tracks are symbolic of those technological changes, because once they are made, they become like tracks that are laid down and must be followed. You are determined



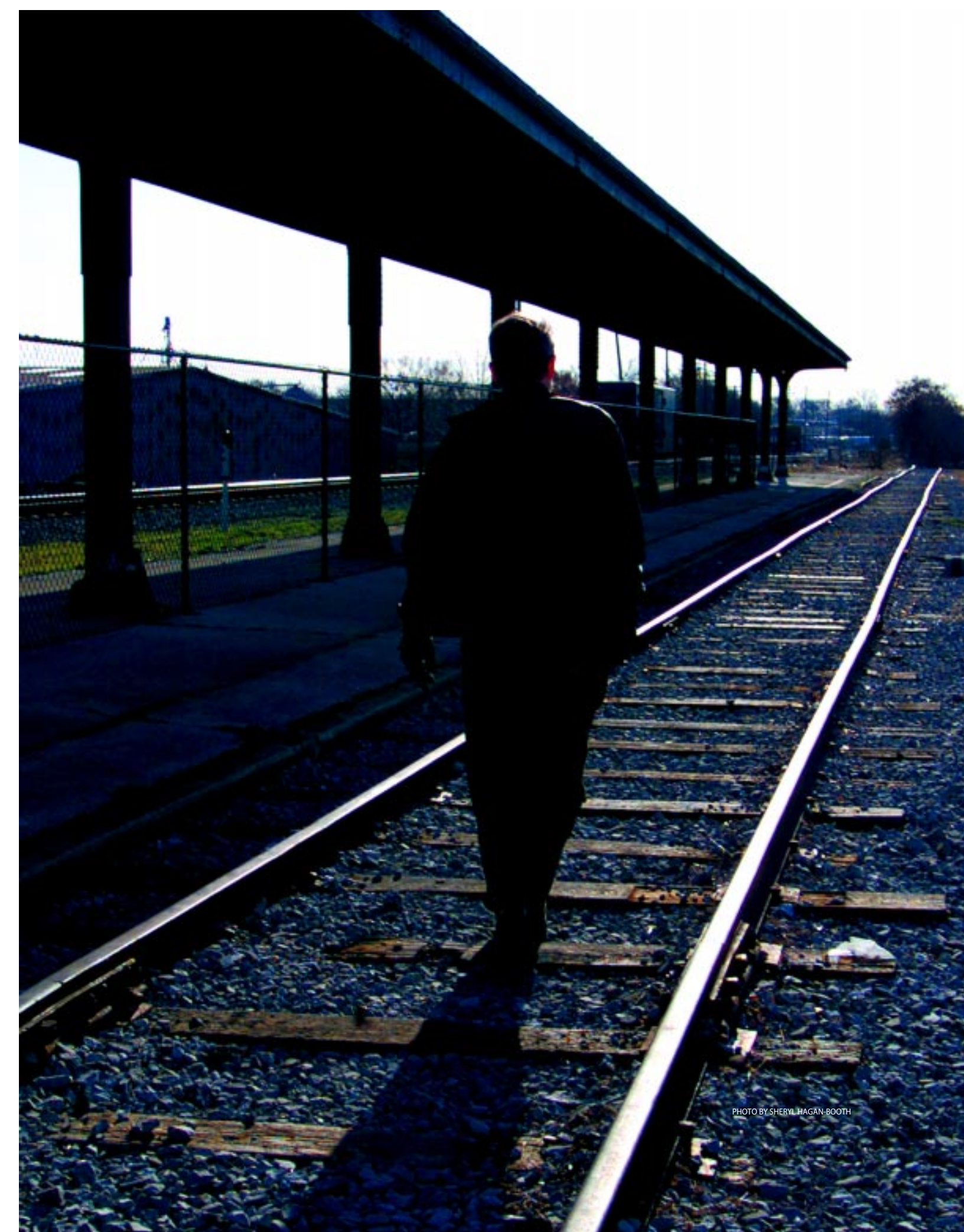


PHOTO BY SHERYL HAGAN-BOOTH

by this technological history. Culture is determined by it.”

In addition to Faulkner, the book includes readings from the works of Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Ralph Ellison, and Dave Smith. “My first draft of the book included railroads in American literature in general,” Dr. Millichap said. “The initial readers recommended that it be broken into two parts.”

This first book focuses on the Southern Renaissance, and the other half of the material will be presented in a companion piece, *20th Century Limited*, which is anticipated for release within the next year. The “20th Century Limited” was another real train that ran from New York to Chicago. It represents the symbol of modern America in general, focusing on authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edith Wharton, and Toni Morrison.

Dixie Limited encompasses readings about railroads, trains, and tracks as images and symbols in Southern literature. “The finest writings on this movement are dealing with the ambivalence of the situation,” he said. “It is a positive situation in that it brings about change. The negative focus relates to machinery entering the garden, factories replacing the farms, and subdivisions growing where the country used to be.

At the same time, Dr. Millichap acknowledges there is a responsibility to contemplate the critical position on the Southern Renaissance. “The Southern Renaissance has long been recognized as a critical concept,” he explained. “There was a real birth of Southern literature during this period.”

However, a number of scholars have created interest in questioning the idea of the Southern Renaissance, insisting it was made up to fit scholarly needs of that time and place. “In my book I am reacting against that reaction, insisting that the railroad is a good metaphor for saying that there is a South, there was a Southern Renaissance, and these writers were great ones.”



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The Dixie Limited became an image of Faulkner, and Dr. Millichap says people who question the Southern Renaissance ultimately question Faulkner. “He was a powerful historical force, but he was limited,” Dr. Millichap said. “His texts are problematic and powerful. They did establish

the Southern Renaissance and folks ran on those tracks or away from them until the end of the Southern Renaissance. It represents modernism coming to the American South.”

He writes, “It becomes appropriate as we enter the 21st century that we recall how much the 20th-century South was shaped by railroads built in the 19th century, as well as how much our future will be determined by the technological and cultural tracks laid down both before and after us.”

Charles Reagan Wilson, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, calls the book “an ambitious study, which ranges across issues of traditional and modern culture, the relationships of African Americans and white writers in the South, and post-southernism. [Millichap] effectively portrays the ambivalent and conflicted relationships of technology and literature.”

Millichap earned his doctorate in English from Notre Dame University, and he later taught at the universities of North Carolina-Greensboro, Montana, and Tulsa. His research interests in American and Southern culture, literature, and film are reflected in publications including four

books, a monograph, and more than 50 articles and essays in addition to *Dixie Limited*.

He is an avid model railroader and enjoys traveling by train when he can, though he admits to the irony of the inconvenience of the long timeframe involved in rail travel. Dr. Millichap’s longest train journey of a day and a half took him through the west, through the Twin Cities and Montana to Seattle.