

# Thomas Wolfe's "Old Catawba"

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THOMAS WOLFE'S FICTIONAL NAME for his native state of North Carolina is "Old Catawba." Though he employs two different names for his home town of Asheville, "Altamont" in the Gant cycle and "Libya Hill" in the Webber cycle, he was consistent in the state name; in his fiction he refers to South Carolina by its own name, but in the sharp distinction he maintains between the two states, North Carolina is always superior and is always "Old Catawba." The name "Catawba" obviously held a strong appeal for him.

Wolfe had a great interest in words, especially for their sonorous qualities, and he was fascinated by Indian names. In his Whitmanesque catalogues in the rhapsodic section, "The Names of the Nation,"<sup>1</sup> he calls the roll of Indian tribes in an ear-filling passage.<sup>2</sup> And in the same section when he extols "the names of the mighty rivers," the majority he lists, of course, bear Indian names.<sup>3</sup> In his pseudohistorical sketch, "The Men of Old Catawba,"<sup>4</sup> Wolfe relates the name to an Indian tribe which was, ironically, principally a South Carolina tribe, though it did reside in both states:

The name "Catawba" is, of course, an Indian name: it is the name of a tribe that is now almost extinct but which at one time flourished in considerable strength and numbers. The chief seat of the tribe was in South Carolina, and there is at the present time a reservation in York County of that State where the remnant is gathered together.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Modern Monthly*, VIII (December, 1934), 598-605, and later included in *Of Time and the River* (New York, 1935), pp. 861-870.

<sup>2</sup> *Of Time and the River*, p. 867.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 868.

<sup>4</sup> First published as two articles: "Polyphemus," *North American Review*, CCXL (June, 1935), 20-26; and "Old Catawba," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XI (April, 1935), 228-238. These two articles were later combined and published as "The Men of Old Catawba" in *From Death to Morning* (New York, 1935), pp. 185-204.

<sup>5</sup> *From Death to Morning*, p. 186.

In this information Wolfe is correct and indicates some research, which he did at times for his writing, though this specimen does sound suspiciously like an encyclopedia article on the subject.

Catawba is derived from the Choctaw word *Katápa*, which means "separated" and was applied in the sense that the Catawbas were "separated from other Siouan tribes."<sup>6</sup> The Catawbas were the principal tribe of the Eastern Sioux and were hereditary enemies of the Iroquois. The Catawbas, who had been a powerful tribe of perhaps five or six thousand in early colonial times, numbered only a few hundred when settled on their reservation in South Carolina. In the summer of 1962, then a tribe of 662 members, the Catawbas sold or divided most of their reservation, reducing it from 4,018 acres to 639 acres on which only 30 families remain; and the Bureau of Indian Affairs subsequently closed its office in Rock Hill, S.C.<sup>7</sup>

Catawba is alliterative with Carolina, a device Wolfe often uses in his fictional nomenclature. Furthermore, he engages in historical fantasy to claim the name for North Carolina: "The way in which the State of Catawba got its name rests entirely on misconception: the tribe that the early explorers encountered were not Catawbas, they belonged probably to a group that is now wholly extinct."<sup>8</sup> With this neat bit of imagination Wolfe deftly dissociates the name Catawba from the *South* Carolina tribe. The name "Catawba," however, is quite prevalent in North Carolina.<sup>9</sup> There are in Western North Carolina, for example, a town, a county, a college, and a river named Catawba,<sup>10</sup> and Wolfe was familiar with all four. The name was well known to him apart from its tribal connotation, and it was probably the river (which Wolfe crossed twice on each trip to Chapel Hill) that impressed the name upon him.

<sup>6</sup> *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles*, ed. Mitford M. Matthews (Chicago, 1951), 1. 282.

<sup>7</sup> *Lakeland* [Florida] *Ledger*, November 14, 1962.

<sup>8</sup> *From Death to Morning*, p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> Not only was the word "Catawba" widely used in North Carolina, but it was spelled in various ways: Cataba, Catawbo, Cutawba, Catauber, and Catoba. Norman E. Eliason, *Tarheel Talk: An Historical Study of the English Language in North Carolina to 1860* (Chapel Hill, 1956), p. 308.

<sup>10</sup> The town of Catawba is in Catawba County, whose county seat is Newton though its chief city is Hickory. Catawba College (established 1851) is now located in Salisbury. The Catawba River turns south just west of Charlotte and flows into South Carolina where it becomes the Wateree.

The Catawba River, which rises fifteen miles east of Asheville and plunges down the divide in the most spectacular cascade in North Carolina, had achieved fame long before Wolfe's birth. In 1801 a grape was found growing on its banks which later became known as the Catawba grape, and from which Catawba wine is made. It was the wine, which bears a resemblance to certain sparkling French and Rhenish wines, that caused the name Catawba to be well known prior to Wolfe's use of it. The fact that it was highly prized is illustrated when Melville has the "stranger" on the *Fidèle* exclaim rapturously, "As I live, a vine, a Catawba vine shall be planted on my grave!"<sup>11</sup> Longfellow also popularized Catawba wine with extravagant praise.<sup>12</sup> But the name has come to mean to the modern reader Wolfe's term for North Carolina.

Wolfe made other uses of Catawba, it is true. At one point he calls Biltmore House, the huge Vanderbilt chateau near Asheville, "Catawba House."<sup>13</sup> And his enthusiasm for the word led him to rechristen the French Broad, the river on which Asheville is situated, the "Catawba Broad."<sup>14</sup> But primarily it is his constant name for North Carolina. To Catawba he added the adjective "old," following the custom of North Carolinians in referring to their state as the "Old North State." To Thomas Wolfe Old Catawba "perfectly describes the State; it has the same strong, rugged, and homely quality that the earth has."<sup>15</sup> Thus the name of the Eastern Sioux is permanently fixed in contemporary fiction because of a Tarheel's devotion to his native state, his facile pen, and his fondness for a euphonic name.

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<sup>11</sup> Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Elizabeth S. Foster (New York, 1954), p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> Longfellow's poem "Catawba Wine" was written in 1854 "on the receipt of a gift of Catawba wine from the vineyards of Nicholas Longworth on the Ohio River." See *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston, 1922), pp. 196-197. This poem (which fulfills the wildest dream of a Madison Avenue advertising man) served to popularize widely the wine it extols.

<sup>13</sup> *Of Time and the River*, p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> *The Hills Beyond* (New York, 1941), p. 285.

<sup>15</sup> *From Death to Morning*, p. 186.