

RISING IN THE WEST:
THE TRUE STORY OF AN "OKIE" FAMILY FROM THE
GREAT DEPRESSION THROUGH THE REAGAN YEARS

Dan Morgan

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reviewed by CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck portrayed the Oklahomans displaced in the 1930s as radicalized victims of capitalism who would transform California politics—which they were not. In the 1980s, Republicans saw them as forming part of the backbone of a supply-side revolution—which they did not. More recently, their devout religiosity has led some on the left to view them as reactionaries willing to turn back the clock on such issues as racial integration—which they are not.

Washington Post reporter Dan Morgan—who developed a lifelong obsession with the Okies after his own reading of Steinbeck's novel, even spending a college summer picking fruit with them—sets out in *Rising in the West* to discern their motives and measure their impact. He chronicles four generations of one of the most successful Okie families, the Tathams, who left Sallisaw, Oklahoma—hometown of "Pretty Boy" Floyd and starting point for Steinbeck's Joad family—in 1934. (To a much lesser extent, he covers a smaller family, the Tacketts.)

Oca Tatham had been drifting from tent cities to migrant farms to welfare hotels, getting in trouble with women and running afoul of the law, until he married and was "saved." In 1934, he loaded his truck with fifteen others, including his wife and two children and his parents, and set off for California. After several mishaps—including the overturning of his truck—Oca wound up in Delano, just north of the Okie capital of Bakersfield and just south of Fresno, which would be the family's base by the end of the century. Over the years, Oca would take advan-

tage of his horse trader's instincts and lucrative real estate deals to turn himself into a multi-millionaire. His son Bill would multiply Oca's fortune several times by operating nursing homes, leasing firms, and professional sports teams. Ultimately, their plutocratic triumphs led them to a big-time involvement in Republican politics. Morgan tells the story in painstaking detail: while hardly typical in either their ambitions or their fortunes, the Tathams experienced virtually all of Okie migrant life in microcosm.

For Morgan, the Okie migration is an immigrant story, and the consequences of the culture of the old country for California were profound. The Okies grew the tobacco they smoked. They gave their children odd nonce names like Brenee and Caprice. They brought with them a cornball sense of humor and an earnest sentimentality that manifested itself not only in Woody Guthrie songs but also in popular California radio shows like "Dog Talk." Importantly, as Morgan notes, they never stayed in any one place long enough to become part of the power structure; in turn, "their suspicions of higher authority meant that they created a patchwork of minimalist authority everywhere they went."

At dead-center of Okies'—at least the Tathams'—cultural life was their religious faith. Drake's Prairie, the broad sweep of foothill farmland around Sallisaw, was known as the "prayin'-est place in all Oklahoma." Through "brush-armor" revivals, populist religion entered the warp of Oklahoma culture, and the various Pentecostal sects quickly proved not only the most controversial but also the most durable. Pentecostalism modeled itself on Luke's description of the

days following the Resurrection, and sought "spiritual gifts" that were evidence of "Baptism in the Holy Spirit"—including prophecy and speaking in tongues. The latter became the trademark of Pentecostalism and almost immediately earned its adherents the opprobrium among Christians that it would later suffer among the public at large. Baptists in particular saw this enthusiasm as leaving ample room for spiritual fraud and "cheap grace." Thus, Pentecostalism became a fringe religion before most Americans had even heard of it.

Influenced by African worship and Wesleyan Methodism, the modern Pentecostal movement was launched by the black Texan William Seymour at the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906. (It's an irony worthy of a Richard Rodriguez essay that the religion the Okies "brought" to Southern California was in fact launched there.) Morgan asserts that Pentecostalism, not jazz, was the first major black influence on the white middle class. But Pentecostalism became widespread in California at about the same time as radio, and soon took on many of the "Middle American" trappings by which we recognize it now as the Assemblies of God: televangelists, broadcast faith healings, modern churches in the middle of gigantic parking lots, and Christian spin-offs, from vacation resorts to dating services.

The Okies were beset with slanders and misunderstandings from the first, and it was religion that led to most of them. Even today, the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the source of most of the Okie stereotypes, and almost all of them are false. Steinbeck distrusted Pentecostalism, and portrayed it as something smarter Okies considered fanatic and risible, not as the strongest common bond uniting the various Okie subcultures which it so clearly was. "Evidently," Morgan writes, "Pentecostal and other fervent religion was seen by social reformers as standing in the way of molding Okies into a more progressive force in California politics."

Steinbeck had a political axe to grind, portraying the Joads as having been "dusted" off their land by a combination of fluke weather and rapacious bankers. (In fact, of the slightly more than 100,000 Okies who came annually to California in the mid-1930s, only 2-3 percent came from the six panhandle counties of the state's Dust Bowl.) The Joads get involved

in radical labor politics as soon as they arrive in California, but Morgan shows that Okies, particularly those from the "Tri-State" area around Sallisaw, were a "fluid proletariat" not only disinclined to stage strikes but renowned for breaking them.

Debates in Congress about how to resolve California's "Okie Problem" centered on two strategies that were equally anti-free market: Democrats favored increasing relief; Republicans favored relief cuts and actual "repatriation." The congressional studies were the most comprehensive done on poverty until the Johnson administration, and it's fortunate that they were shelved by World War II. Those who worry about an American farm policy set by Hollywood actresses testifying before Congress will find an instructive early parallel here—the entire debate was driven by Steinbeck's non-existent Oklahoma. Specifically, the idea on which both poles of the argument rested—that the Okie migration had been driven by drought—was simply not true.

But neither was the competing Okie myth that arose after World War II: that the group had pulled itself up by its own bootstraps. Willy-nilly, the Okies were the beneficiaries, Morgan writes, "of the greatest infrastructure program ever undertaken by the federal government and probably by any government in the history of the world." Federal water projects—starting with the Central Valley Project of 1933—have made California's Central Valley as pork-glutted and government-dependent as any micro-economy in the country, but that was just the beginning. And the Tathams—ironically, considering the role they were to play as bedrock members of the Reagan coalition in the 1980s—took part in every boondoggle and government works project the state pushed their way. They arrived in California when it was still offering the most liberal social payments of any state in the country, and Oca immediately went on the dole. Oca's father Walter Tatham supported Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California platform in 1934. All the Tathams benefited from the defense buildup that has made California the prime destination of federal largesse for the last half-century. Oca owned a transport truck, which gained him not only a draft deferment but also the most lucrative contract of his life to that point—

transporting water to and from the Hanford nuclear site in Oregon, where the Nagasaki bomb was being built.

With a big stake once the war ended, Oca began to profit handsomely from real estate investments. He entered the fledgling nursing home business just before the rash of government legislation—the Public Assistance Medical Care Program (1957), Medical Assistance for the Aged (1960), and Medicaid (1966), to name just the federal programs—that would turn nursing home operators into millionaires at virtually zero risk.

It was at this point that the Tathams crossed the important line between merely taking advantage of laws in place, and trying to influence politics. They ponied up for campaign contributions to House Ways and Means chairman Wilbur Mills after he secured passage of a bill benefiting nursing-home operators. Once Oca's son Bill and grandson Billy began trying to muscle their World Football League franchise, the Memphis Grizzlies, into the NFL in the late seventies, Bill befriended Tony Coelho. Bill and Billy contributed to Al Gore when his interest in an NFL franchise for Memphis dovetailed with theirs; and they courted both Arizona senators—McCain and DeConcini—when they were trying to put an expansion team in Phoenix. Young Billy even supported the daffy "Ev" Mecham during his term as Arizona governor.

For a nursing home magnate with powerful Washington connections to become a Reaganite, i.e. to take part in what most perceived as a small-government revolution, seems to be gall worthy of Ross Perot—peeling millions out of taxpayer contributions and then complaining that the federal government is profligate. And the Tathams don't fit the conservative profile in terms of traditional family values, either—much as the media has cast that most visible Pentecostal Pat Robertson as the point man for that tendency in the Republican party. The nursing home business, of course, is one of those callings—along with divorce law, day care, and the abortion industry—that have as their very *raison d'être* the weakening of familial bonds. And while no one would doubt that the Tatham family is strong and value-soaked, those values are hardly traditional. Oca got remarried seven months

after his wife Ruby's death. He is a rich man who put none of his children through college; during one five-year period in the 1940s, he sent his children to eleven different schools in four states. Young Billy's hobby in his twenties was selling—in bulk, without a license—Ingram MAC-10s, the machine pistols designed for, and used almost exclusively by, cocaine dealers. (And this after his little brother has accidentally shot a playmate dead with a target rifle.) The family is riddled with social problems, from the fact that most of Oca's grandchildren's marriages ended in divorce to Ruby's brother's conviction for molesting his thirteen children.

This is not to say that the Tathams are thoroughly hypocritical, or do not recognize their problems as problems. For all their larger-than-life frailties, Morgan is fond of these people, whom he portrays as moderns, not reactionaries. "The same individuals," Morgan writes, "who spoke in tongues, experienced healing, read the signs in a deer crossing a cornfield, and saw flames shooting down from heaven, could jury-rig a truck, fix a motor, and repair a wagon with baling wire." Importantly, they are not—as it has been fashionable to caricature conservative Republicans—casting "coded" votes for a return to an "earlier America," by which liberal commentators most often mean segregation. Aside from the deep black roots of their own church, which repudiated the Ku Klux Klan as "un-Christian and un-American" in 1925—when the Klan was not to be trifled with—Tathams of all generations have not merely tolerated or even befriended blacks: they have *gravitated* to them. Tathams describe their reception in California by saying, "It was sort of like how the colored people felt . . ."

Pentecostal politics is, after all, minority politics. Pentecostals and other Republican fundamentalists are perennially underempowered, for their own party cannot afford to embrace them: As the controversies over last summer's delegate selection at the Republican convention make plain, the Pentecostals are a problem for Republicans much as the black left is a problem for the Democrats: they scare the rest of America to death.

Part of this is the willful stupidity of people who cannot tell a charismatic from an evangelical and cannot distinguish

Jerry Falwell from David Duke. And the "tolerant" objection raised against Okie religion is the same one that foes of immigration often level at newcomers: they have so little historical experience with democratic institutions that they have not yet learned to adjust their political goals to constitutional realities. Specifically, since most Pentecostals do not at any level believe in the separation of religion and politics, they cannot assuage liberal fears that they do not believe in the separation of church and state. Along typical minority-politics lines, the media leads the wider public to feel Okies are arguing for special treatment when they feel they're arguing for basic rights.

These Christians are viscerally terrified of government, even if they do see it as a source of economic advancement. Their anti-Communism is really an opposition not so much to an economic system or even to authoritarianism per se as to the religious persecution that always accompanies Communism. Their opposition to federal efforts to end segregation stem primarily from a fear that at some point the federal government will act to dilute the religious—not racial—composition of their own communities. If we give religion its rightful place in the Tathams' political worldview, their voting patterns become more logical: they are part of a conservatism directed more against the Warren Court than against the New Deal.

These are important distinctions for anyone seeking to understand how the huge Reaganite coalition has been reduced to a rump of people more or less like the Tathams. If the book is a bit too long and discursive, if Morgan is occasionally too patient with hokey anecdotes, it is only because he has important sociological work to do here: detailing the position of a major group inside the tribal pluralism that is becoming the *modus vivendi* of California society. Morgan's book does for the Okie migration west what Nicholas Lemann did for the more important Mississippi migration north in *The Promised Land* (1991)—it draws not just comparisons but identities. And just as Lemann showed us that much of the northern underclass is merely Delta sharecropper society bricked in, Morgan gives us a vivid portrait of Midwestern hardscrabble farm society aired out. □

PILGRIM IN THE RUINS: A LIFE OF WALKER PERCY

Jay Tolson

Simon & Schuster/544 pages/\$27.50

reviewed by JOHN R. DUNLAP

In a 1983 lecture on Herman Melville, Walker Percy remarked that *Moby Dick* "was a consequence, not merely of great gifts, but also of great good luck"—the luck of a novelist "breaking into the freedom of his art," as happened to Melville when a whaling yarn somehow evolved into "a narrative that unfolds not merely itself but oneself and others' selves." Percy, too, knew the feeling: on many occasions in his life, he enjoyed luck of a variety so decisive that it's hard to come away from Jay Tolson's *Pilgrim in the Ruins* without a sense that Walker Percy's life was charmed.

Consider how Percy's first published novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), took the 1962 National Book Award. The usual procedure for deciding the award begins with publishers' recommendations, but Percy's publisher, the disagreeable Alfred Knopf, felt no enthusiasm for *The Moviegoer* and was annoyed by its poor sales. As it happened, however, A.J. Liebling had just finished writing a book on Louisiana politics, and his interest was piqued by a review mentioning the New Orleans setting of this first novel by an unknown Southern writer. Liebling bought a copy of *The Moviegoer*, which so enthralled him that he recommended it to his wife, Jean Stafford, one of the judges on the NBA fiction panel. Stafford arranged for the other two judges to receive copies of Percy's novel along with the ten other novels nominated that year. When the judges met in March 1962, their choice was unanimous.

Percy also had the good fortune of superb editors—sympathetic craftsmen

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like Stanley Kauffmann at Knopf and Robert Giroux at Farrar, Straus. There was, too, the regular correspondence with his lifelong friend Shelby Foote, a major source for Tolson. And there was Percy's apprenticeship under the formidable Caroline Gordon, a close reader who guided Percy through his unpublished *The Charterhouse*. When the novel was rejected by Scribner's in 1953, Gordon's blunt reaction kept Percy's spirits up: "They just don't get it." And the rejection started a chain of circumstances that brought Percy into contact with Elizabeth Otis, whose literary agency served him well for the rest of his career.

Percy was almost 46 when he accepted the National Book Award for *The Moviegoer*, acquiring instant fame and a generous new print run. It is in paperback to this day, and none of his six published novels has gone out of print. But if the serendipity of his rise is something of a legend in American publishing, this and other instances of Percy's good fortune came to him the hard way.

He was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1916, the first of three sons, to LeRoy Pratt Percy and Martha Susan Phinizy. They were not a happy family. Both parents were of the Southern aristocracy, freighted with the artful strategies of *noblesse oblige*, the father's family going back through several generations of stoic achievers given to bouts of melancholy. The year after Percy's birth, his paternal grandfather committed suicide; twelve years later, when Percy was 13, the father took his own life in a grisly repetition of the grandfather's self-inflicted gunshot wound.