

William March (William Edward Campbell)

William March (1893-1954) was a decorated combat veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps in the First World War, a successful businessman, and an influential author of numerous novels and short stories. His literary work draws primarily on two sources: his childhood and youth in Alabama and his war experiences in France. Four of March's six novels are set in Alabama, as are most of his short stories. March's Alabama-based works are commonly referred to as the "Pearl County" or "Reedyville" series, after the fictional Alabama locales in which many of them are set.

March was born William Edward Campbell on September 18, 1893, in Mobile, Mobile County. March was the second of 11 children born to John Leonard Campbell, an orphaned son of a Confederate soldier and itinerant worker in the lumber towns of south Alabama and the Florida panhandle, and Susan March Campbell, daughter of a well-to-do Mobile family. The Campbells, however, were poor, so William left school at the age of 14 to work in the office of a lumber mill in Lockhart, Covington County. At the age of 16, he moved to Mobile, where he took a job in a law office to earn money for school. He spent a year obtaining his high school diploma at Valparaiso University in Indiana and then studied law for a year at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County. He moved to New York City in 1916 and settled in Brooklyn, taking a job as a clerk with a New York law firm.

With World War I raging in Europe, March enlisted as a private in the U.S. Marine Corps in June 1917, and his service would become the defining experience of his life. March went through boot camp at Parris Island in South Carolina and shipped out from Philadelphia on the same transport ship as Marine officers and future literary figures John W. Thomason and Laurence Stallings. Arriving in France in February 1918, March was assigned to the Marine Brigade in the Army's Second Division and took part in several notable actions. He was wounded for the first time at the Battle of Belleau Wood in June and spent part of that summer in the hospital recovering. He returned to duty in time to participate in the Aisne-Marne Offensive in July and participated in the Battle of Saint-Mihiel in September. Promoted in rapid succession to corporal and then to sergeant, March received the French *Croix de Guerre* and the Distinguished Service Cross and Navy Cross—the United States' second-highest decorations for bravery in combat—for his actions in the assault on Blanc Mont Ridge, a key German stronghold east of Reims, in October 1918. He left a front-line dressing station (a type of medical facility) to recover wounded men under fire and, despite being wounded himself, aided in repelling a German counterattack. Although March recovered physically from his wounds, the psychological trauma of hand-to-hand combat would plague him for the rest of his life.

After occupation duty in Germany and a brief period of study at the University of Toulouse in France, March was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in August 1919. He returned to Mobile and began working for the recently established Waterman Steamship Corporation. March proved to be an astute businessman and a canny investor, working his way up from freight agent to vice president and holding assignments in Mobile, Memphis, New York City, Hamburg, and London. He also read widely in

psychology and began writing seriously in the late 1920s as a diversion and a form of self-therapy, as he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder caused by his war experiences. March's first published short story, "The Holly Wreath," appeared in the October 1929 issue of the literary magazine *Forum* under the pen name "William March," the name he published under thereafter and by which he is known today. March's first novel, *Company K*, was published in 1933, while he was living in New York. The novel dealt with March's experiences in World War I and is recognized today as a classic of its type. March's second novel, *Come in at the Door*, was published in early 1934, at the end of March's business assignment in Hamburg, Germany. The novel was the first of a series of novels and short-story collections set in fictional Alabama towns and based on his experiences there. Alabama also figured prominently in the short story collection *The Little Wife and Other Stories* (1935) and the novel *The Tallons* (1936), both of which were published while he was on assignment with Waterman in London. In London, March underwent psychoanalysis with Dr. Edward Glover in the hope of finding relief from memories of his impoverished upbringing and his war experiences.

March returned to the United States in 1937, retired from the Waterman Steamship Corporation (his investments and company stock gave him a steady income), and settled in New York City. There, he produced two collections of short stories and a novel. The collections *Some Like Them Short* (1939) and *Trial Balance: The Collected Short Stories of William March* (1945) consolidated his reputation as a short-story writer and put him in the company of such masters of the genre as O. Henry and John O'Hara. His fourth novel, *The Looking-Glass* (1943), explored society and life in the fictional Alabama town called "Reedyville", which March had also used as a setting for many of his short stories and his novel, *Come in at the Door*. *The Looking-Glass* contains a number of recurring characters from earlier novels and short stories and represents the final installment in the "Reedyville" series. In it, March provided a comprehensive view of life across the social spectrum in a small Alabama town at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, concluding with a reunion of "Reedyville" natives in New York City in the early 1940s. *The Looking-Glass* is generally considered to be March's best Alabama-based work and, indeed, his best novel. His biographer, Roy S. Simmonds, called the novel March's "most accomplished full-length work."

Despite his literary success, March struggled with psychological problems and a lack of inspiration during this period, which caused him to become increasingly reclusive. By 1947, his mental and physical health had deteriorated to the point where friends intervened and convinced him to leave New York and move back to his native Mobile. He spent several years recuperating on the Gulf Coast but also traveled back and forth to New York City to make arrangements for a permanent move South. He befriended New York art dealer Klaus Perls, who helped March amass an important collection of modern art, including works by Chaim Soutine and Amedeo Modigliani, that was auctioned off after his death.

In 1949, March rented an apartment on Conti Street in Mobile and began work on his last novel, *The Bad Seed*. He also began visiting New Orleans in the late 1940s and moved

there at the end of 1950. He became a fixture in the French Quarter and published his fifth novel, *October Island*, in 1952. His final novel, *The Bad Seed*, was published in April 1954. March continued to write after its release, but his health was becoming increasingly fragile. He died in his sleep at his home in New Orleans on May 15, 1954, from a massive heart attack. When his body was discovered the next day, his typewriter contained a sheet of paper with the start of a new novel, "Poor Pilgrim, Poor Stranger." March was buried in Greenwood Cemetery in Tuscaloosa.

March did not live to see the success and popularity enjoyed by his last novel. A theatrical adaptation of *The Bad Seed* by Maxwell Anderson ran on Broadway and in London, and a film version was released by Warner Brothers in 1956 (with a sanitized ending, presumably as a concession to popular attitudes at that time). A final collection—*99 Fables*—was published six years after his death by the University of Alabama Press.

March's critical reputation has grown since his death, and his talent as a writer and storyteller continues to receive recognition. Although March was a native southerner, he appears to have been a conflicted one. He left Alabama at the earliest opportunity and lived for almost 20 years in Europe and in New York City, and his novels and short stories portray his native region as a place rich in natural beauty but rife with cruelty, hypocrisy, and rigid class- and race-based divisions, all of which play a large role in *The Looking-Glass*. Some contemporary critics argued as result that March did not fit the prevailing model of a southern writer. March drew heavily on his Alabama years for inspiration, however, and also impressed others as being distinctly southern in his affect and manner. March's legacy is his significant body of work, as well as his fascinating personal story as a war hero, businessman, writer, art collector, and native Alabamian.

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Works by William March

Company K (1933)
Come In at the Door (1934)
The Little Wife and Other Stories (1935)
Some Like Them Short (short-story collection, 1939)
The Tallons (1936)
The Looking-Glass (1943)
Trial Balance: The Collected Short Stories of William March (1945)
October Island (1952)
The Bad Seed (1954)
99 Fables (short-story collection, 1960)

Additional Resources

Cooke, Alistair. *A William March Omnibus*. New York: Rinehart, 1956.

Going, William T. *Essays on Alabama Literature*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1975.

Going, William T. "William March: Regional Perspective and Beyond," *Papers on Language and Literature* 13 (1977): 430-443.

Simmonds, Roy S. *The Two Worlds of William March*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984

Simmonds, Roy S. *William March: An Annotated Checklist*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988.

Trehub, Aaron. "William March and Eugene B. Sledge: Mobilians, Marines, and Writers," *The Alabama Review*, Vol. 66, no. 1 (January 2013): 30-66.

William March Campbell Papers, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

William March Vertical File, The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama, Mobile, Alabama.