

Holman, Clarence Hugh ^[1]



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by Lewis Leary, 1988

24 Feb. 1914–13 Oct. 1981

Clarence Hugh Holman, educator and writer, was born in Cross Anchor, S.C., the son of David Marion and Jessie Pearl Davis Holman. He received his early schooling in Gaffney and Clinton, S.C., before entering Presbyterian College, from which he was graduated magna cum laude with a B.S. degree in chemistry in 1936. From 1936 to 1939 he was director of public relations for the college, and from 1939 to 1941 director of its radio programs, receiving meanwhile an A.B. degree in English cum laude in 1939. In 1939, he studied radio programming at New York University. From 1939 to 1942 he was on the faculty of Presbyterian College, and in 1945 became its academic dean after serving as state publicity director for the Council for National Defense (1942–44) and as academic coordinator and instructor in physics for the U.S. Army Air Force (1943–45). As an avocation during these busy years, he—admittedly "a life-long and devoted reader of detective stories"—published a series of popular mystery novels: *Death like Thunder*^[2] (1942), *Trout in the Milk*^[3] (1946), *Up This Crooked Way*^[4] (1946), *Another Man's Poison*^[5] (1947), and, as "Clarence Hunt," *Small Town Corpse*^[6] (1951).

But Holman was at heart an educator. In 1946, he entered [The University of North Carolina](#)^[7] as a graduate student and instructor in English, receiving his doctorate in 1949 with a dissertation on "William Gilmore Simms's Theory and Practice of Historical Fiction"; the same year he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. From this time, his rise in the university was rapid. Within a decade he was appointed assistant professor (1949), associate professor (1951), professor (1956), and Kenan Professor (1959). In 1954 he served as an assistant dean and from 1955 to 1957 as acting dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. From 1957 to 1962 he was chairman of the Department of English, also serving as a member (1957–73) and chairman (1961–73) of the Board of Governors of the University Press and as chairman (1959–62) of the Division of Humanities. From 1963 to 1966 he was dean of the graduate school, from 1966 to 1968 provost, and from 1972 to 1978 a special assistant to the chancellor, organizing and compiling a self-study survey of the university at Chapel Hill.

Holman was the recipient of a Simon Guggenheim Fellowship (1967), the Thomas Jefferson Award (1975), an award for excellence in writing from Winthrop College (1976), and the Oliver Max Gardner Award (1977). He was awarded a Litt.D. by Presbyterian College in 1963, and a L.H.D. for "dedicated classroom teaching" by Clemson University in 1968. In 1975 he became a member of the board of trustees of the Triangle Universities Center for Advanced Study, and in 1976 was named chairman of its executive committee. In the latter year he also became a member of the board of trustees, a member of the executive committee, and vice-president of the [National Humanities Center](#)^[8] in the [Research Triangle Park](#)^[9], and in 1980 he was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Holman was a deacon of the First Presbyterian Church in Clinton and an elder of the Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church in Durham.

Known beyond his university for capacities as an administrator, Holman was chairman of the American Literature Section of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (1953–54); chairman of the bibliographical committee (1957–61), member of the executive committee (1964–65), program chairman (1966, 1979), and chairman (1970) of the American Literature Section, and a member of the executive committee of the Twentieth-Century American Literature Group (1978–81) of the Modern Language Association of America; president of the Southeastern American Studies Association (1958–59); consultant in English to the U.S. Air Force Academy (1962); and president of the Virginia-North Carolina College English Association (1962–63). In 1957–60, he was on the editorial board of *College English*; in 1967, an advisory editor of the *Encyclopedia Americana*; in 1968, a founding editor (with Louis D. Rubin, Jr.) of the [Southern Literary Journal](#)^[10]; and, from 1970, a member of the editorial boards of *Essays on Literature* and *Resources for American Literary Study*, and an adviser on American literature for the *Encyclopedia of World Literature*.

Holman's principal concern and greatest skill was teaching. In the classroom he was rigorous and demanding, but also sympathetic, a friendly leader, and an experienced guide. Students who flocked to his lectures remember him as blunt, firm, and intense, but at the same time witty, lighthearted, and pleasingly informal. To them, he was a storehouse of knowledge and a fount of wisdom, both commodities freely shared. As one of his colleagues put it, "he will be best remembered for an exceptional presence, a sense of justice and proportion matched only by his wisdom, ... a man of grace for whom knowledge seemed to come so easily that he parted with it gladly." On resigning from his administrative duties, Holman remarked, "I am returning to the work I have always considered my primary responsibility, teaching and research." He knew that these two went hand in hand, that what best fed teaching was a lively mind, constantly renewing itself through study.

As an inquiring scholar, Holman had as his major interest prose fiction, particularly fiction of the South, a subject on which he earned an international reputation for authoritative critical judgments. The author, coauthor, or editor of twenty-six

books and some seventy professional articles, he is perhaps most remembered for *A Handbook to Literature*, with W. F. Thrall and Addison Hibbard (2nd ed., rev. and enl., 1960; 3rd ed., 1972; 4th ed., 1980); *Thomas Wolfe* (1960), which has been translated into six languages; *The Thomas Wolfe Reader* (1962); *Three Modes of Southern Fiction* (1966); *The Letters of Thomas Wolfe*, with Sue Fields Ross (1968); *Southern Fiction: Renaissance and Beyond*, with Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Walter Sullivan (1969); *Southern Writing, 1585–1920*, with Richard Beale Davis and Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (1970); *Thomas Wolfe and the Glass of Time*, with Richard S. Kennedy and Richard Walser (1971); *The Roots of Southern Writing* (1972); *The Loneliness at the Core: Studies in Thomas Wolfe* (1975), winner of the Mayflower Society Award; *Southern Literary Study: Promise and Possibilities*, with Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (1975); *The Immoderate Past: The Southern Writer and History* (1977); and *Windows on the World: Essays on American Social Fiction* (1979).

In his last published essay, "American Literature: The State of the Art" (1980), Holman defined the kind of literary scholarship to which he had dedicated his life: "It sees and prizes the utility of accurate fact and data. It operates on the simple—perhaps naive—doctrine that all literary work is about something other than itself or the making of itself. Although its adherents embrace from time to time a variety of often conflicting critical stances, the tradition itself is critically eclectic. It seems to have a relatively simple—although by no means simplistic—view of reality and history, and it tends to subject literature to the customary American pragmatic tests."

On 1 Sept. 1938, Holman married Verna Virginia McCleod of Ocala, Fla. They were the parents of two children: Margaret McCleod Stroud (b. 1949) and David Marion (b. 1951). Holman was buried in the Chapel Hill Memorial Cemetery.

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