

Ricks, (David) Peirson ^[1]

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by Richard Walser, 1994

21 Aug. 1908–21 Apr. 1950

(David) Peirson Ricks, writer, was born in Mayodan, the oldest of four children of David Absalom and Jessie Peirson Whitaker Ricks, both from [Halifax County](#) ^[2]. Absalom Whitaker, Margaret Montgomery (Mrs. J. Hill Clay), and David Burton were his younger brothers and sister. When he was twelve, the family moved to [Winston-Salem](#) ^[3], where he attended public school. In 1925 he worked his way across the Atlantic to Glasgow, and during 1926–27 he attended [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[4], contributing to the literary magazine and providing cartoons for the humor publication. He dropped out of college to write a novel, but it went poorly. Off and on for more than five years, he worked in a Winston-Salem cotton mill, concurrently trying his hand at writing in various genres. At one juncture he quit the job to attend the [Yale University](#) ^[5] School of Fine Arts on a scholarship, and at another to undergo surgery to correct a serious condition. A satire, *Bye-Bye Britches* (1936), was published by a vanity press with his own illustrations, but later the book embarrassed him and he attempted to round up all copies and destroy them. For four years (1936–40) he was a copywriter for a Philadelphia advertising firm, then for two more years he worked in New York in a similar capacity.

After returning to Winston-Salem and being five times rejected by the army, he was briefly employed by a technical school and then by the Office of Strategic Services in Washington, D.C. As a proofreader for the [Winston-Salem Journal](#) ^[6], and as an employee of several local advertising agencies, Ricks was restive. Of some fifty short stories—alternating between formula pieces for the "slicks" and more personally satisfying stories for the nonpaying little magazines—about twenty appeared in [Collier's](#) ^[7], *Today's Woman*, *Southwest Review*, *Story*, [Quarterly Review of Literature](#) ^[8], and others. His novel [The Hunter's Horn](#) ^[9] came from Scribner's in 1947. Its central character is a seventeen-year-old boy snared in the social and economic confusion of eastern North Carolina before the turn of the century, and through him the novelist opposes the Puritan ethic of work and struggle with the survival of pagan hedonism from the Old South. The book was cordially reviewed, but its failure to sell plunged Ricks into despondency. Though he was in debt and was living with his parents, he began extensive research on a historical novel about the War of the Regulators under the working title "Eye of Darkness." His voluminous notes and cross-references became an insufferable burden, and once in a drunken malaise he seized the half-completed pages of the manuscript and "flung" them "into the air like large squares of confetti." Two months later he committed suicide.

His friend Frank Borden Hanes, over two decades after his death, wrote a moving account of Peirson Ricks and his luckless endeavors to establish himself as a writer of serious fiction. A member of the [Episcopal](#) ^[10] church, Ricks was buried in Salem Cemetery.

References:

Frank Borden Hanes, "Looking for Peirson Ricks," *North Carolina Historical Review* 51 (Spring 1974).

North Carolina Authors (1952).

Harry R. Warfel, *American Novelists of Today* (1951).

Additional Resources:

Peirson Ricks Papers, 1925-1952 (collection no. 03989). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/r/Ricks.Peirson.html> ^[11] (accessed June 25, 2013).

Looking for Peirson Ricks by Frank Borden Hanes. UNC Libraries Catalog:<http://search.lib.unc.edu/search?R=UNCb2151164> ^[12]

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