

*Burton Rascoe*

# BEFORE I FORGET



MCMXXXVII

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## *Reflections on Aim and Intention*

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BY BURTON RASCOE

THE EXCUSE for anyone's writing an autobiography is in Dr Samuel Johnson's pronouncement that [every man has at least one great book in him if he should tell the truth about himself.] The man's station in life matters not at all, according to the good Doctor. He may be humble, undistinguished, lacking in glamor or conspicuous ability; he may have never strayed beyond the confines of his own village, fought no battles, witnessed no great events. But if he should know the truth about himself and have the courage and the words to tell it, then will he produce a masterpiece which all will acclaim, for he will have told a universal truth about the life of man, and he will have awakened the emotion of recognition in the breast of every man; for the truth about any man is in a large measure the truth about every man.

I do not flatter myself that I have written an autobiography such as Dr Johnson had in mind. My aim is modest. [Although I have long taken heed of Socrates' injunction, "Know thyself," I confess I have not yet attained full knowledge of myself.] I know some aspects of myself; I can be truthful and reasonably accurate about phases of my life, because my memory is good and I have no vanity which would prompt me to make myself out otherwise than I have been, no false pride which would conceal my ignorance or the faults of my temperament, the facts of my origin or the facts of

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my experience; but it is quite possible that some will see the truth about myself better from the record I have attempted than I myself have divined.

The record, such as it is, is there. Let him who can, and will, pronounce judgment upon me, interpret my character, teach me about myself. My modest aim is so to reveal myself, so to set down my impressions of the visible and tangible world, so to state my reactions to a given experience at a given moment, that you will find something of yourself, if only to reflect with satisfaction how different you are from me.

The truth about oneself is one of the most difficult things to get at and, even if you know the truth, it is very difficult to express it; for no matter how clever you are, how articulate, how easily the right words spring into your consciousness, those words often have a disconcerting way, once they are written down, of being not at all adequate to what you know and feel and want to express. They may omit no factual detail, each separate sentence may be an exact truth; and yet the sum of these truths may be untrue; they may add up to an essentially false impression; they may be comment upon the experience rather than a true reflection of the emotion engendered by the experience when it occurred.

I know how true this is, because there is one episode in *Before I Forget* which I have been trying for nearly three years, off and on, to get right in the telling. As it stands, the episode is related in less than five hundred words. It is so brief that most readers probably will not notice it; but anyone who has an instinct for these matters will sense that there is something wrong in the telling there, that it may have truth in it but that it isn't true. I feel this. I know this. But I don't know how to make it true; for I have tried, perhaps half a hundred times and in half a hundred ways. The results, after all these trials, have not conveyed what the experience meant to me at the time it occurred; it has sounded ridiculous, but there was nothing ridiculous about the experience when it occurred. On the contrary, it was beautiful, elevating, saddening and painful. It was anguishing and bewildering.

Elsewhere I have tried to tell and (I think) have more or less succeeded in telling the pertinent and cogent truths about the world I found myself in and my response to contacts with the people

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and events of that world in boyhood, adolescence and young manhood, as a lad in a peaceful and leisured Kentucky village, as a boy and youth in the newly pioneered, bustling, progressive and rapidly changing Oklahoma Territory, and as a student, newspaperman and literary journalist in Chicago during one of the most spectacular of Chicago's recurrent outbursts of cultural activity.

This book, as I conceive it, is in a way the story of the Education of One Man, emotionally and intellectually, who has, confessedly, a vast deal yet to learn and has only begun to scratch the surface of real knowledge. It is the story of a process of education through study and self-instruction, but more so by struggle and experience, by fruitful contacts with people and by the contemplation of men and events.

I have tried to deal with each phase of my past as the contemporary experience seemed to me then and not as I think of it now. For instance, the boy I once was, so feverishly eager and aspiring, so full of illusions and energy, is so remote from me now that I have had to be extremely careful not to make the stupid and cruel adult mistake of laughing at that youth's coltish bewilderments and entanglements, his great seriousness and unflagging belief in an exciting, high destiny.

I have tried not to betray that boy by writing of him in the light of what I now think and feel instead of as he saw and felt; of picturing him as I think he should have been, or as I would like him to have been, instead of as he was. Fortunately he has helped me; for he contracted the diary-keeping habit early from reading Ralph Waldo Emerson, his first heady stimulant toward finding in books some key to the door of knowledge, because Emerson kept a journal. I have been able to draw from this diary and, by referring to it, correct any distorted image or any romanticized memory of the boy. There were times when he seems to me self-righteous and a prig, self-centered and selfish, vain, impatient with the conduct of others; but he was also eager and easily moved emotionally, friendly, independent, industrious, fascinated by the spectacle of life and by the promise of life. There was a long period after he had passed his youth, had married and had entered upon a career of sorts, when he was so fascinated by the spectacle of life, so intense upon the promise of life, that he scarcely took time to think of

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himself at all, but was absorbed in contemplation of the personalities and the work of those around him.

This, then, is a remembrance of things past, a reconstruction of childhood and youth, a record of things seen, impressions gained, people known, admired and liked, windmills tilted against with fury, phantom enemies challenged with sanguine intrepidity, real enemies created and staunch friends made. And it is a history, also, of an almost frantic avoidance of a philosophy, out of an experience and belief that one can have a philosophy about an action only when it is too late to be of any good and that life is an adventure so unpredictable that to espouse an intransigent system of thought and belief is either to confuse one's life with unsupportable conflicts and contradictions or so to delude oneself as to give the appearance of hypocrisy. This does not prevent me from having convictions passionately held and fought for, the necessary prejudices of sentient but fallible humankind. Nor does it prevent me from pursuing the dream, perhaps grotesquely and fanatically.

BURTON RASCOE.

*New York City*

*March 31, 1937.*

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PART I

*Souvenirs of Childhood*





## CHAPTER I

### *Out of the South*

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A Vehement Lack of Pride in Family. My Father's Kin.  
Grandfather and Grandmother Rascoe. My Father a "Bound"  
Boy. Grim-visaged Grandfather Burton.

THE SURNAME, IT APPEARS, is not Rascoe. At least it was not that originally. I don't know this of my own research or knowledge or from anything I ever heard from any of my kinsfolk. I have it only on the word of an amateur genealogist, Mr Harvey Dann, who once wrote me that we have a common ancestor. To prove this he supplied me with a very brief, inconsecutive and not altogether convincing genealogical chart, which is the only one I ever possessed.

In fact, until this moment I have never looked at this chart with close attention. In revolt against a circumstance in my boyhood which I found foolish, unsocial and inconsistent, I cultivated a vehement lack of pride in family. Born a Southerner, I have encountered too many professional Southerners who cultivate all the worst traits of Southern manner and point of view and take offensive pride in their peculiarity; born a Kentuckian, I have encountered too many professional Kentuckians who might give residents of other states the notion that Kentucky is exclusively populated by feeble-minded and distasteful persons; and born of a union of family of property and a family of none, I came to loathe the artificial distinctions which made my mother's people and my father's people hostile to one another when they should have been friendly. I have counted it (perhaps too readily) against those I