

past six years when you are an old man.”

In printing this unpublished document, which he perceptively describes as, for all its mixed tonalities, “a love-letter by other means,” Foster allows Annie Horniman, of all people, to locate the philosophical source of the ruthlessness and hauteur that, while alienating many peers and rivals, expedited the emergence of a Nietzschean noble spirit from the mists of the Celtic Twilight. Yeats’s further devel-

opment into the 20th century’s most powerful poet writing in English was still ahead in the watershed year 1914, this splendid volume’s terminus. But with *The Apprentice Mage* as “preparation,” one can hardly wait for Foster’s fleshing out of the life that did most brilliantly “happen.”

> PATRICK J. KEANE is professor of English at Le Moyne College and the author, most recently, of *Coleridge’s Submerged Politics* (1994).

## *Come Hell & High Water*

*RISING TIDE:*

*The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927  
and How It Changed America.*

By John M. Barry. Simon & Schuster. 524 pp. \$27.50

by Bertram Wyatt-Brown

With the Russian bear no longer threatening, Americans have become preoccupied with the forces of nature. Blizzards, wildfires, and mudslides dominate the headlines; twisters and volcanoes fill the cineplexes. Moreover, political debate rages about how we should treat pristine environments—as friends to be protected or enemies to be controlled. Under such circumstances, a history of the Great Flood of 1927 could hardly be more timely. The struggle to control the Mississippi River bears enough marks of hubris and human frailty to be America’s equivalent of the Tower of Babel.

Barry, a journalist and author of *The Transformed Cell* (1992), demonstrates how the best of intentions can lead to calamity. Power, greed, noble vision, and personal sacrifice are all part of the human epic he presents. Yet he also shows how the great midcontinental river presides over human destinies; in his telling, the statistics of water dynamics are as engaging as the idiosyncrasies of engineers, politicians, and flood relief workers. The Mississippi River moves, Barry writes, “in layers and whorls, like an uncoiling rope made up of discrete fibers, each one following an indepen-

dent and unpredictable path.” Whirlpools 800 feet long and 200 feet across gulp down flotsam, trees, houses. In high flood, the current can race as fast as 18 miles an hour, and a crevasse, a wall of water up to 100 feet high, can roll across open ground at 30 miles per hour.

In movies about natural catastrophes, the special effects often overshadow the human drama. But not here: Barry shapes his account around the vigorous and controversial personalities who, beginning in the 1850s, cut their own channels of influence in the struggle to rule river policy. First introduced is General Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, a neurotic but politically adept West Pointer who took over the Army Corps of Engineers after Appomattox. Humphreys denounced fresh approaches to water management, such as jetties (designed to wash away sandbars) and man-made outlets (to drain off flood waters), in favor of the techniques recommended by outdated West Point engineering textbooks: levees (raising the riverbanks) and dredging (deepening the riverbed). By perpetuating these hoary remedies, Humphreys fixed the agency in a surrealistic time warp.

If Humphreys is the villain of the

piece, then the hero is James Eads, a Saint Louis capitalist and engineer who argued for jetties and cut-offs on the grounds that it was better to guide the overflow than to try to contain it. The rivals' most serious encounter concerned a formidable sandbar that hindered shipping at the river's mouth. Eads won a federal contract to build jetties that would wash away the blockage. At one point, Humphreys's interference forced abandonment of the project. But by 1875, Eads and his crew had overcome the obstructions of both the river and the Corps of Engineers. The jetties Eads built enabled the Mississippi to scour a channel that within a few years increased shipping sevenfold and inaugurated a new era in the economic his-

Mississippi River Commission. The levees mounted ever higher, and the Corps dammed off one tributary after another. Ignoring the nascent science of water management, the aptly named General Lansing Beach, chief of engineers in 1922, pontificated that a proposed "hydraulics laboratory would have no value whatever in solving flood control." In April 1922, the river rose dangerously in its restricted bed, and New Orleans was spared disaster only because, 12 miles below the city, at Polydras, a levee was demolished by a wall of water the height of an 11-story building. If men would not make room for the overflow, then nature would.

The climax of the book is, of course, the Great Flood itself. Here Barry reveals a mixture of all-too-human motives, including those stemming from race and class, in two key places: the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and New Orleans. The unceasing rains of early 1927 conjured images of Noah, but instead of an ark, the local authorities ordered more levees. Blacks were assigned the backbreaking toil of filling, hauling, and piling sandbags and, exhausted



*Greenville, Mississippi, 1927*

tory of New Orleans.

Humphreys may have lost that particular battle, but he won the war. Long after his retirement, the general's "levees-only policy" persisted—fueled by congressional parsimony and federal indifference to what should have been a national responsibility rather than an ill-considered state and local one. Why this occurred, Barry does not make entirely clear—though he does note that powerful economic interests were at stake in transforming the vast flood plain of the Mississippi into dry land that "would hum with money, and culture, and industry."

**T**he experimental spirit of the Progressive Era did not penetrate the Corps of Engineers-dominated

by the work, were driven by white overseers wielding guns and whips, as in slavery days. On April 21, the crucial levee at Mound's Landing, north of Greenville, Mississippi, collapsed. "The roar of the crevasse," writes Barry, "carried up and down the river for miles, carried inland for miles. It roared like some great wild beast proclaiming its dominance. Men more miles away felt the levee vibrate under their feet and feared for their own lives." Perhaps 100 black workers were swept away, but only two deaths were reported. Hundreds of others, most of them black, were engulfed as the water "poured out 468,000 second-feet onto the Delta, triple the volume of a flooding Colorado, more than double a flooding Niagara Falls, more

than the entire upper Mississippi ever carried, including in [the flood of] 1993.”

To be sure, there were examples of self-sacrifice and interracial collaboration. Barry describes the heroic efforts of Delta boatmen, white and black, to rescue families—often watching helplessly as torrents and blustery winds separated them from helpless victims. Yet in Greenville, former United States senator LeRoy Percy and his bachelor son Will, heads of a family that had long ruled the district, responded in a way that inadvertently increased racial tensions. Earlier in the decade, the Percys had fought the Ku Klux Klan, earning the hostility of poor whites. Now they alienated poor blacks by permitting only whites to flee the besieged town. According to Barry, the Percys and other cotton planters feared that the black labor force, once gone, would not return.

**D**ownriver in New Orleans, the city’s bankers—not municipal or state officials—prompted the dynamiting of a levee near the site of the Polydras break of 1922. This, they reasoned, would not only save the city but restore confidence in city bonds. Had the bankers waited one more day, water levels would have declined because of levee breaks elsewhere. But the demolition was carried out, and the parishes of Saint Bernard and Plaquemines were washed away to no purpose. Before the event, the city fathers had pledged to reimburse all those who lost their property, only to renege afterward in a particularly underhanded way. Populist resentment at this treachery led to Huey Long’s stridently sought electoral victories over the moneyed class at the close of the 1920s.

Although Barry’s narrative is unusually gripping, he can wax long-winded, as in the passage detailing LeRoy Percy’s difficulties with imported Italian laborers in 1907. The historian might wish for more analysis tying the story to national trends—though to be fair, the overall structure of the book leads neatly to its closing discussion of the larger impact of the catastrophe.

The flood flushed away a number of old policies and ideas. First was the notion that private charity could handle crises of regional or national scope. Presidential hopeful Herbert Hoover, who took charge of flood relief, insisted that the Red Cross and corporate loans to the enterprising poor were adequate vehicles for dealing with the calamity. As it turned out, the loan amounts were pathetically small and the program inadequate, while the lessons learned from flood relief work would eventually prove useful to New Dealers. The second transformation wrought by the flood was a shift in race relations. Robert Moton, heir to Booker T. Washington’s political mantle (especially among Republicans), wrote that “the flood had washed away the old account.” The party of Lincoln began to lose control of northern black voters after 1927, and, just as LeRoy Percy had feared, southern black laborers began to leave the Delta.

With regard to the Old Man, as the river was called, the disaster forced the federal government to adopt a new strategy whereby the Mississippi was to be accommodated rather than mastered. Led by Percy, a phalanx of bankers, corporation lawyers, and landholders steered a landmark river control bill through Congress. When President Calvin Coolidge overcame his conservative scruples and signed it, the legislation had implications far beyond flood control. Barry writes, “This precedent reflected a major shift in what Americans considered the proper role and obligations of the national government.”

Barry provides a rich panorama of personalities who fought the river each in his own way. Yet he never loses sight of his prime protagonist: the Mississippi River itself. Song and folklore may label it Old Man, but sometimes it boils and churns in youthful, muscular anger. Whatever its fickle moods, Barry has captured the great river as though it were a living thing, conscious of its shaping role in American history.

> BERTRAM WYATT-BROWN is the Richard E. Milbauer Professor of History at the University of Florida and the author of *The House of Percy*.