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Robert Ruark Remembered

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THE LIFE OF ROBERT RUARK — NORTH CAROLINA'S UNSUNG LITERARY LEGEND

When it comes to producing novelists and journalists, North Carolina has always treasured its own. But you would walk for many miles in the august hallways of our great universities before you would hear anyone mention the name of the man who, for 20 years between 1945 and 1965, was the best-known writer the state — and UNC — had ever produced: Robert Chester Ruark

Ruark was born in Wilmington in 1915 and graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1935. He became famous first as a newspaperman, then as a feature writer for slick magazines and finally as a best-selling novelist. His *Something of Value* about the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya netted \$1 million (in 1955 dollars), and the movie starred Rock Hudson and Sidney Poitier.

Ruark was himself a celebrity. He drank at Toots Shor's in New York, parked a Rolls Royce outside his London flat and lived in a villa on the Costa Brava in Spain. His column, syndicated in 180 newspapers, offered news and opinion on everything from shooting elephants to African politics to women's fashion. Even Frank Sinatra became a target. Ruark used his poison pen to write scathingly of a photo showing Old Blue Eyes with mob boss Lucky Luciano. In 1947, *Life* magazine called Ruark "the most talked about reporter in the country."

Ruark's Tar Heel Roots

Wilmington was Ruark's birthplace, but Southport, NC, was really home. It was there he learned to hunt and fish with his maternal grandfather, Captain Hawley Adkins — better known to the millions who read Ruark's columns in *Field & Stream* as "the Old Man."

With his family impoverished by the Depression, Ruark cut his childhood short, leaving for UNC in 1931 at age 16. In order to pay for his education, he was, in his own words, "a boy bootlegger and boarding-house hustler." After graduating



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in 1935, he worked as a reporter in North Carolina for the *Hamlet News Messenger* and later the *Sanford Herald*. Over the next few years, Ruark signed on as an accountant with the Works Progress Administration, enlisted in the Merchant Marine as an ordinary seaman, and worked in Washington, DC, at *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Star* before settling down at the *Washington Daily News*.

In 1951 he made the first of many trips on safari in Africa. These led to the non-fiction book *Horn of the Hunter* and his blockbuster novel about the Mau Mau uprising, *Something of Value*. The novel was so controversial that Ruark was banned from Kenya by both the British and the native Kenyan governments. The author shrugged off the criticism. "This is not a pretty book," he wrote, "nor was it written

by Bill Morris

for the pre-bedtime amusement of small children.”

Ruark’s contributions to the literature of big game hunting — along with his fondness for Spain and bullfighting — inevitably led to comparisons with Ernest Hemingway. In time he became known as “the poor man’s Hemingway.” Ruark claimed that this nickname never bothered him, but it is difficult for even a casual reader to believe that his outsized ego wasn’t bruised. A close reading of three pieces he wrote from Africa immediately after Hemingway’s suicide in 1961 reveals that Ruark badly needed to consider himself in the same league as Papa.

A Shot of Ruark, On the Rocks

History has ruled otherwise. In fact, history has been downright brutal to this native North Carolinian who was good enough, and famous enough, to at least draw the comparison with Hemingway.

For example, Ruark has inexplicably never been inducted into the UNC-administered NC Journalism Hall of Fame. Noted journalist and editor Jim Casada calls this “a shameful oversight of the first mag-

A ROBERT RUARK BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Grenadine Etching* (1947)
- I Didn't Know It Was Loaded* (1948)
- One for the Road* (1950)
- Women* (1950)
- Use Enough Gun* (1952)
- Horn of the Hunter* (1953)
- Something of Value* (1955)
- The Old Man and the Boy* (1957)
- Poor No More* (1959)
- The Old Man's Boy Grows Older* (1961)
- Uhuru* (1962)
- The Honey Badger* (1962)

nitude. How they can ignore old Bobby Ruark, a shining literary star if ever Chapel Hill produced one, is beyond me.”

But there are rumblings in the jungle — rumblings that a Ruark revival may be at hand. One man doing some of that rumbling is Jim Cheatham, who, along with Catherine Berryhill Williams, founded the Robert Ruark Society of Chapel Hill.

His business card says “James Theodore Cheatham IV,” which was no doubt a name to reckon with when he was an attorney in Pitt County. Now he’s just plain Jim, retired

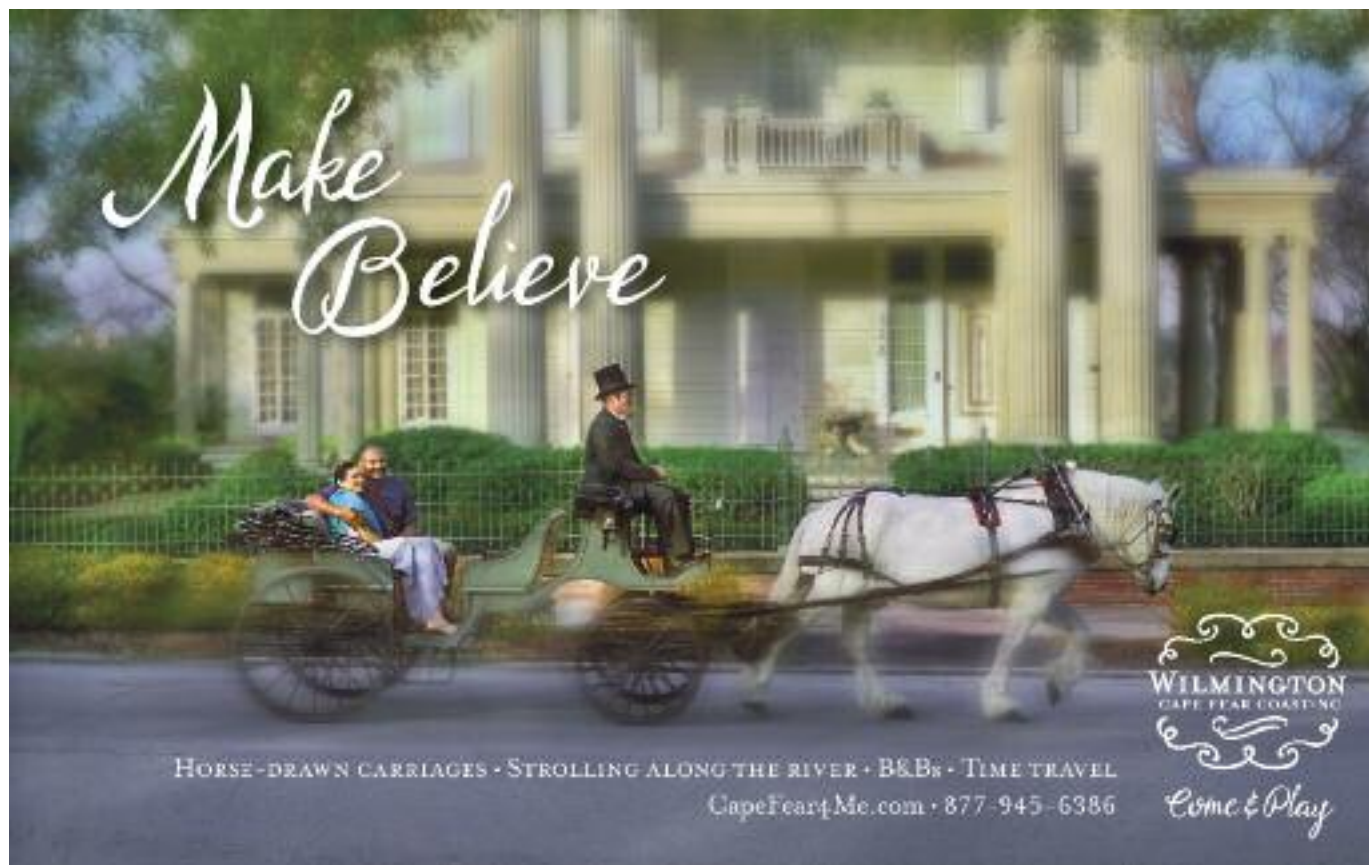
and living in Chapel Hill’s Meadowmont community.

“I’ve been a fan of Ruark for a long time,” he said. Cheatham and The Robert Ruark Society organized an exhibition at the Chapel Hill Museum and successfully lobbied the state legislature to pass a decree honoring Ruark. Most significantly, the Society sponsors an essay contest for UNC journalism majors, awarding a respectable \$1000 prize.

For Cheatham, honoring Ruark is personal because he met the writer in Chapel Hill in 1957. That’s the year Ruark decided to make a triumphant return to his alma mater. In an expensive stunt that tells you something important about his inner workings, Ruark had his Rolls Royce shipped from Europe to New York. After making the rounds there, he then drove south, stopping in Chapel Hill on his way to visit Wilmington and Southport.

“I decided to carpetbag a bit,” is how Ruark recalled it in an essay. “Invade the Southern briar patches whence I had hitchhiked so many years ago.”

Suitably impressed, his old Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity threw a party for the re-



turning hero, and Cheatham was there. They never saw one another again, but he remembers Ruark as fun-loving and generous. Generous because the journalist-rock star left behind an eccentric gift, the perfect leave-behind for a group of drink-loving frat boys. He bought them an ice machine.

Eight Memorable Days in Spain

Ruark then headed east toward Wilmington. Later, Ruark wrote, “The Rolls and I swept triumphantly into the seaboard town in which I was unable to get a job even as a copy boy on the local paper, and my triumphs rode ahead of me like a police escort.”

There, in another chance meeting, he had a few drinks with George Saffo, setting in motion a long chain of unlikely events that would lead to the publication last year of a Ruark biography that had been missing for nearly 40 years.

Saffo takes a great deal of pride in his friendship with Ruark, and like Cheatham, he was eager to tell me what he knew about the famous man.

I met Saffo at Spanky’s on Franklin Street. He is a distinguished-looking gent, still impressively youthful in his middle 80s. (After our meeting, he was heading off for his annual two-month vacation in Greece.)

He started by telling me about a four-hour drinking bout he had with the writer in Wilmington. That came about because Ruark’s mother, Lottie, was a regular customer at the Saffo family business, a restaurant on Front Street.

“So, it’s fall of 1957 and I know Bobby Ruark is in town,” Saffo told me. “And then his mother happens to come up to the cash register while I’m working.

“‘Miss Lottie,’ I told her, ‘there is nobody in the world I’d rather meet than your son.’”

She borrowed the phone, then told Saffo to go to the Carolinian Hotel the next day at 2 o’clock.

“I was fresh out of the service and thought I could do some drinking. The funny thing was, he was drunk when he answered the door, and I was sober. Then we drank and talked for four hours. At the end of that he was sober, and I was drunk.”

During their conversation, Saffo told Ruark that he and his wife would be tak-

ing an ocean liner to Greece the following summer.

“He told me to stop by and visit him in Spain.”

And that, as they say, was the start of a beautiful friendship.

Saffo describes Ruark’s villa as picture perfect in every way. Each room contained a trophy from one of the writer’s many safaris. To go upstairs you had to pass between two enormous elephant tusks.

The days in Palamós were filled with swims in the Mediterranean, rides in the Rolls, drinks and conversation.

“Bobby treated me like a long-lost brother,” Saffo said. “He just couldn’t do enough for us. And he told me things that I would never repeat.”

One Ruark anecdote Saffo doesn’t mind repeating is something that happened during their first drunken afternoon in Wilmington.

“Bobby always carried around this mail bag when he traveled; it was like a part of him. We were in the hotel room there at the Carolinian, and the bag was lying open and I could see a bottle of liquor, cigarettes and

a book.”

Emboldened by drink, he reached in and pulled out the book. Expecting literature, he found a prime example of ’50s pulp fiction, lurid bodice-ripping cover and all.

Ruark looked at him, sniffed and said, “I read the classics when I was 10.”

Stirring up A Ruark Revival

After the visit in Spain, Saffo never saw his hero again. But he never forgot him.

“Bobby did a lot for me,” he said. “He woke me up. He got me reading. He got me to hate being dumb.”

Now the retired Wilmington restaurateur has more than repaid whatever he owed his hero. With the publication last November of *Ruark Remembered* by Sporting Classics, Ruark now has a definitive biography written, as the subtitle says, “by the man who knew him best.”

That man was Alan Ritchie, who was Ruark’s private secretary for the last 12 years of the writer’s life. After Ruark’s death in 1965, Ritchie began work on the biography, which grew to nearly 800 pages. The manuscript was never published, and



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when Ritchie himself passed away in 1982, his account of Ruark's life disappeared into the mist.

Now fast-forward to 2003. Saffo and Southport gallery owners Steve and Judy Bliss were working to establish a Robert Ruark Museum. They made contact with a woman in Spain who was a friend to both Ruark and Ritchie. In what Saffo calls "an unbelievable story," they learned about the existence of the biography manuscript.

divorced Virginia, his wife of 24 years. The couple had no children. Despite having earned, in Saffo's estimation, at least \$8 million, the writer died broke.

His papers were donated to UNC and are housed in the Southern Historical Collection. The Ruark papers include 12,000 items and occupy 54 linear feet of shelf space in Wilson Library.

Because of the author's shabby treatment by the Journalism Hall of Fame, both



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"As soon as we saw it we made an offer." Ritchie died without any heirs, so securing the rights was not too difficult — nor was finding someone to edit the overly long manuscript. The job was offered to outdoors writer and editor Jim Casada, who had put together *The Lost Classics of Robert Ruark* for Safari Press back in 1995. (For anyone new to Ruark, this volume makes a great introduction.)

Casada performed admirably cutting the manuscript. The book is very readable at 265 pages and includes photographs of the writer at work and on safari.

The book is also troubling in its up-close portrayal of a precocious, supremely talented and prolific writer who quite determinedly drank himself to death at 49. Ritchie doesn't blink as he tackles the tough stuff, describing in some detail how Ruark suffered from "breakdowns" that would put him in the hospital. The doctors told him to quit or die, and he chose the latter.

Two years before his death, Ruark had

Cheatham and Saffo see a bit of cruel irony there. The slight would seem a bit of a mystery, when that esteemed body has 116 members — including *four* representatives of Raleigh's famous Daniels family, which until recently owned *The News & Observer*.

Casada wonders if there is "some kind of an agenda" at work. Saffo is clearly bothered by the unfairness of it all.

"Maybe he wasn't the greatest writer UNC ever had," he said, clearly not believing that. "But he was sure their most colorful journalism graduate ever."

A spokesman for the UNC School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Kyle York, responded to *Metro's* questions by e-mail, writing that "Robert Ruark has indeed been nominated for the NC Journalism Hall of Fame, and he is a strong candidate under active consideration."

For signed, inscribed copies of either the deluxe or trade editions of *Ruark Remembered*, go to www.jimcasadaoutdoors.com. **MM**