

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF WILLIAM PIERCE

The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds

An Up-Close Portrait of White Nationalist William Pierce

Robert S. Griffin

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Reviewed by Theodore J. O'Keefe

The *Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds* is an uncommon book about a contemporary American racist. Rather than merely scan the dossiers of the Anti-Defamation League or the Southern Poverty Law Center before interviewing his subject, author Robert Griffin took the trouble to immerse himself in the literature by and about the late William Pierce, one of the most radical voices on the racial right in the three and a half decades before his death last July. Thus Griffin knew the right questions to ask about Pierce's ideas and his singular career path from physics professor to colleague of American Nazi Party founder George Lincoln Rockwell, and finally leader, spokesman, and chief propagandist of the National Alliance.

While troubled by his subject's fixation on violence, Griffin, a professor of education at the University of Vermont, is clearly sympathetic to many of Pierce's concerns about the direction of white America and the West, and his long sessions with Pierce, at the National Alliance headquarters in a remote area of West Virginia, were amicable as well as productive. Nonetheless *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds* ably and objectively describes Pierce's strengths as a thinker and his shortcomings as a leader.

Through the marathon interviews that make up the greater part of his book, Griffin has allowed Pierce his own voice. And what a voice! William Pierce's impressive ability to speak conversationally in fully thoughtout, well-organized paragraphs for hours (here, pages) on end, which this reviewer observed first hand as a member of the National Alliance in the late 1970s, was still very much intact when Griffin interviewed him in 1998. The result is several hundred pages of informed, intelligent, and thoughtful (if

freewheeling) commentary on the most taboo topics of our time: race, racial differences, the Jewish question, and the imperative (in Pierce's view) not merely of racial survival, but of evolution to something higher.

The book's interviews are structured so that they yield Pierce's oral autobiography, centered largely on his intellectual and spiritual awakening to the importance of the race issue (including chapters on such influences as Adolf Hitler, George Bernard Shaw, Revilo Oliver, and Savitri Devi) and on his subsequent efforts to act on his convictions. Under Griffin's questioning, Pierce describes his growth from a bright, curious, and not consciously ideological Southern youth (many of the details of his early education and upbringing parallel those described by sociobiologist E.O. Wilson in his autobiography *Naturalist*) to an academic and scientist increasingly concerned, in the early 1960s, at the implications of the movement for black integration.

One merit of *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds* is the recognition it conveys that Pierce's radicalism grew out of the American right's timidity and confusion in the face of the threats to white America that erupted in the 1960s. While there were plenty of groups willing to countenance private remonstrations about the racial and Jewish problems, Pierce would settle for nothing less than addressing these matters publicly. That, and his admiring reading of *Mein Kampf*, led to his leap, after a brief membership in the John Birch Society, to the editorship, under the aegis of Rockwell, of *National Socialist World*, a journal more than a cut above other neo-Nazi publications.

After Rockwell's assassination by a disgruntled follower, Pierce struck out on his own as the chief of the radical National Alliance, which he directed from 1970 until his death. As Griffin recognizes, Pierce's influence came through his ability to formulate ideology and to write propaganda rather than from his skills at personal motivation or organizing. He was a pioneer among American racist commentators in writing about race and related issues on a level informed by contemporary scientific findings (Pierce was quick to grasp the implications of sociobiology when it emerged in the 1970s). His knack for penetrating to the heart of racial issues impacting whites and the uncompromising rigor of his analysis have been unmatched by his contemporaries. His *Who Rules America?*, documenting the Jewish preponderance in the mass media, and his serialized racial history of the European whites (*Who We Are*) are classics of informed and intelligent advocacy; like all Pierce's writings, they are free of the religious and reactionary impedimenta that have hobbled numerous other racist spokesmen.

On the other hand, much of William Pierce's writing over the years was vitiated by his compulsion to threaten, promise, justify, and seemingly advocate violence against perceived racial enemies. His periodical *Attack!* and its successor, *National Vanguard*, as well as his two novels, *The Turner Diaries* and *Hunter*, fairly roil with threats and general exhortations to mayhem and

massacre. That tone is somewhat muted in the interviews in this book: Pierce discusses the method and motives of his writings rather superficially, and the Griffin prefers not to press him directly over his violent prose.

There have been several consequences for the National Alliance of Pierce's purple prose. Many prospects stayed away, or once recruited, soon defected. Pierce's penchant for explosive language also made the Alliance that much more attractive to infiltrators from different sectors of our government's spy and police apparatus. Pierce speaks of visits from the Secret Service, and it would appear that the Alliance was watched by the FBI and by U.S. army intelligence as well. Finally, a few drawn to the Alliance by Pierce's writings, in particular the Grand Guignols conjured up in *The Turner Diaries* and *Hunter*, acted on them in ways that have done nothing to advance white prospects in America. The fantasies of white guerrilla terror in *The Turner Diaries* served the late Robert Mathews and his followers as a model in the early 1980s, and Timothy McVeigh found inspiration in the *Diaries* before blowing up the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. Perhaps the best thing that can be said of *Hunter* is that the recent serial sniper killings were evidently not inspired by its plot, in which the protagonist busies himself with shooting down interracial couples from ambush in the Washington area.

To be sure, Pierce's bark was infinitely worse than his bite (luckily for Jews, blacks, white race traitors, and other targets of his ire), but his tone had the effect of reducing the National Alliance's membership to a handful of the violence-prone and a rather larger faction willing to take Pierce's bluster as a mark of earnestness, but not seriousness. As Griffin notes, the National Alliance "hard core" (some fifty organizers from around the country gathered at headquarters for a conference) does not seem about to rise up in arms, something just as true of the great majority of members since the Alliance's inception some thirty-three years ago—and, of course, of William Pierce.

Griffin portrays Pierce as a rather lonely man, and sees the National Alliance as little more than a rostrum for Pierce as analyst and commentator. Whether the National Alliance and Pierce's Cosmotheist Community (despite its unfortunate name, an effort to implement a philosophy of evolutionary pantheism) survive their leader and founder is uncertain, in Griffin's accounting, although he has praise for the evidently able and dedicated staff that runs the Alliance's flourishing bookselling and music operations.

Is William Pierce worthy of the Norse inscription which lends this valuable and informative book its title? Author Griffin seems to think so, and one suspects that most fair-minded readers of *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds* will regard with some generosity of spirit William Pierce's mistakes in a long and lonely career defending and championing our kind.