



Cotton Tenants: Three Families

James Agee

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A re-discovered masterpiece of reporting by a literary icon and a celebrated photographer

In 1941, James Agee and Walker Evans published *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a 400-page prose symphony about three tenant farming families in Hale County, Alabama, at the height of the Great Depression. The book shattered journalistic and literary conventions. Critic Lionel Trilling called it the “most realistic and most important moral effort of our American generation.”

The origins of Agee and Evans’s famous collaboration date back to an assignment for *Fortune* magazine, which sent them to Alabama in the summer of 1936 to report a story that was never published. Some have assumed that *Fortune*’s editors shelved the story because of the unconventional style that marked *Famous Men*, and for years the original report was presumed lost.

But fifty years after Agee’s death, a trove of his manuscripts turned out to include a typescript labeled “Cotton Tenants.” Once examined, the pages made it clear that Agee had in fact written a masterly, 30,000-word report for *Fortune*.

Published here for the first time, and accompanied by thirty of Walker Evans’s historic photos, *Cotton Tenants* is an eloquent report of three families struggling through desperate times. Indeed, Agee’s dispatch remains relevant as one of the most honest explorations of poverty in America ever attempted and as a foundational document of long-form reporting. As the novelist Adam Haslett writes in an introduction, it is “a poet’s brief for the prosecution of economic and social injustice.”

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