

ANALYSIS

Aleck Maury, Sportsman (1934)



Caroline Gordon
(1895-1981)

"It is, in a way, not bad: it is probably the best chance I'll ever have of a popular sale for the book has a sort of Cinderella motif, the man who manages to have sport all his life in spite of poverty, family troubles and everything. The man is my father, of course."

Gordon (1934)
quoted by Ann Waldron

Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 135

"I have tried to take care of the conflict that would inevitably arise out of his marriage by making Maury evince his peculiar talent for making his life into a satisfactory pattern. Mary [later Molly] is a high-spirited woman--and no woman likes to have her husband devote himself wholly to angling. Maury circumvents her not by conflict or argument but by having for her the sort of passionate devotion that would appease any woman. Similarly for his relationship with his children. He is a good father."

Gordon (1934)
Letter to Editor Maxwell Perkins, undated

"This novel in autobiographical form might be labeled an action story, but only on the most superficial consideration. Actually it is a novel of character, and an exceptionally good one, with portraiture of the same high level of excellence' as in *Penhally*."

Anonymous
"Portrait of Sportsman"
New York Times Book Review (2 December 1934) 7
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan
Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide
Robert E. Golden and Mary C. Sullivan (G. K. Hall 1977) 207

"A man portrayed by a woman as a man would see him and as men are.' The novel is 'a man's book by a woman.' 'A sporting novel is one thing, a novel of outdoor sport is another, and a novel which is the biography of a sportsman is yet another': Gordon's is the latter. There is integral unity in this 'chronicle of 70 years of a man's human and spiritual existence.' This is 'a good book at any time for a man to whom sport and the life of the outdoors call'."

Anonymous
Review of *Alec Maury, Sportsman*
Springfield (Mass.) Republican (16 December 1934) 7
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 207

"Aleck is 'Early American, just sufficiently adapted to the nineteenth century to earn a fair wage in a routine occupation.' The novel is 'serene, unpretentious, but accomplished'."

Isabel Paterson
Review of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*
New York Herald Tribune Books (4 November 1934) 6
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 208

"This 'autobiographical novel' is 'entirely lacking in nature sentimentality'."

Anonymous
Review of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*
Booklist 31 (January 1934) 167
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 208

"The novel is 'more than a technical achievement to be admired for the manner in which it makes use of a thousand details pertaining to the angler's art.' It is, 'more interestingly, an account of one man's wise and quiet way of life,' though Gordon does not insist on Aleck's 'secret' about how to live with dignity, serenity, and form: namely, with moderation--not the spleen, petulance or passions 'which flap in the pages of many a contemporary Georgia or Mississippi fable.' This is 'one of the most distinguished and beautiful novels to come out of the South in recent years, and as a document supporting the Southern Idea--if it is that at all--it is worth tons of polemic literature, agrarian, libertarian, unreconstructivist, or what not'."

Anonymous
Review of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*
Nation (9 January 1934) 55
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 208-09

"*Aleck Maury* 'is the history of a passion. But it is on no small sentimental scale.' Rather it is 'a prose *Aeneid*' written with economy and constraint so that a reader is aware only at the end that Aleck is a 'hero.' Further explores the epic parallels. 'In his own way [Aleck] loves a complete life that no dilettante of field and stream and no professional sportsman ever knows.' The novel is a 'difficult technical feat.' About the events of the society represented in this novel there is 'the magnitude of a great wake' at which this society 'foregathered to bid farewell to itself.' 'After sociological and propaganda novels, here is a purer type of fiction'."

Andrew Lytle
"The Passion of Alex [*sic*] Maury"
New Republic (2 January 1934) 227-28
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 209

"Gordon's talent...may be termed *intensive* rather than *extensive*.' The *extensive* talent 'works by accumulating illustration' and 'primarily depends for its success on the degree of structural sense the writer possesses and the degree to which the writer is committed to a single vigorous leading conception by which situations can be defined.' An *intensive* talent is 'exhaustively aware of the immediate richness and implications of the single scene.' Whereas 'the *extensive* treatment triumphs in its logic, its exposition,' the *intensive* treatment 'triumphs in its poetry, that is, in its sudden and illuminating perception, which can re-order a body of experience.' The special power of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* 'inheres in the development of

this treatment.' His passion for fishing 'dominates his life and sustains him.' It is 'the constant, rich, and abiding factor' in his chronicle.

"The real force of the novel derives from something other than the overt objective ['a simple chronicle']: there is the sense of a full and intense emotional life, which is never insisted upon, rarely stated, but implied, somehow, on almost every page. The birth of the first child, the drowning of the son, and the death of the wife are scenes unsurpassed in contemporary fiction for discipline of execution or fullness of effect.' Gordon's fiction is never 'personal in a bad sense, that is, mannered and trademarked.' The success of *Aleck Maury*, *Sportsman* 'is that it is not Caroline Gordon's novel, but, after all, the autobiography of Aleck Maury'."

Robert Penn Warren
"The Fiction of Caroline Gordon"
Southwest Review 20 (January 1934) 5-10
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 209-10

"Magnificent... It reads as if a gentleman of the old south who knows not only Latin and Greek but English, had sat down and written his memories in the first words and phrases that came handily, and the kind that came handily would naturally have this sure, slightly formal and balanced rhythm. It's fine masculine prose, and why shouldn't it be, you writing with the sound of your father's voice, all the voices of your fore-fathers, in your ears."

Katherine Anne Porter
Letter to Gordon (undated 1935)

"The finest novel of sports and fishermen in American literature."

Sister Mariella
Review of *The Forest of the South*
Commonweal (26 October 1945) 50-51

"By 1934 Miss Gordon was involved in the matrix of the Aleck Maury stories. In the novel, *Aleck Maury*, *Sportsman*, and in the shorter stories...she found a way to present the past ironically through exploiting its rich secret life in the mind of the central figure. 'Old Red,' one of the best short stories Miss Gordon (or, for that matter, any contemporary Southerner) has written, is a useful place to look into the more mature habits of her art... The plot is Time; and it is a plot with which Aleck Maury will have to truck.... The unstated equation between Aleck Maury and Old Red, the elusive fox of his hunting days, raises the memories of the old sportsman to a symbolic plane where his own evasion of those who would run him down as ruthlessly as any animal quarry takes on a heroic gallantry. But it is a gallantry tinged with pathos because we know it is time who is the real antagonist.

In this story the past, as sensed through the mellow texture of Maury's sensibility (he is the kind of individualist only the old South or other societies resembling it could afford to produce), has a double function, as if cause and effect were inseparable, with protagonist and antagonist locked in a beautiful but deadly embrace. *Aleck Maury*, *Sportsman* is the extension of this atmosphere into the magical evocation of a self-contained universe of reference as one feels in Turgenev's *Memoirs of a Sportsman* to which it bears no little resemblance. The made-upness of the world of sport, like the made-upness of 'the self-contained forms of poetry,' to which Miss Gordon compares the fiction she admires, is the perfect objective correlative for the kind of society old Alec stands for, and for the formal classical interests which, in the modes of rhetoric and poetry, complement in his inner life that ardent pursuit of the thing-in-itself which his fishing represents."

Vivienne Koch
"The Conservatism of Caroline Gordon"
Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South
eds. Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs
(Johns Hopkins 1953, 1966) 328-29

"Her father, James Morris Gordon, arrived in [Kentucky] in the 1880's as a tutor... From his love of the classics and his passion for sport, Miss Gordon was to derive her complete knowledge of these two facets

of southern culture. Recollections of her father form the animating source of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*. Like Aleck Maury, James Gordon conducted a boys' school--in Clarksville, Tennessee--which emphasized the classics, history, and mathematics; and for some years Miss Gordon attended this school...

Aleck Maury, Sportsman (1934) is Miss Gordon's only novel with a first-person narrator; and like *Penhally* it consists of a number of episodes arranged in linear time sequence. The elderly Maury recalls the main incidents of a life outwardly uneventful but for him rich with significance. Despite all pressures, especially the need to win worldly success and the demands of family upon him, Aleck Maury has had the strength of purpose to make his avocation--hunting and fishing--his vocation. Always he proceeds according to well-worked-out rituals and reads a sacramental significance into his ventures. His single-mindedness is epic in quality. Maury is a Ulysses figure, always seeking the new and untried, or an Aeneas figure, remaining constant to his aims through many wanderings.

Reviewing his life since he was a boy, Maury realizes that he has brought all his resources of skill, caution, and patience to bear upon the chase and that he has succeeded as few men ever have. He has been as devoted to the techniques of sport as any true artist must be to the techniques of his calling. As a man of imagination himself, he pays tribute in 'Old Red' to this quality in a friend of his by noting how rare it is: 'He's a man of imagination. There ain't many in this world.' His total involvement in his pursuits generates interest in the details of sporting lore that fill the novel and a nostalgic atmosphere as he recalls his ventures.

The quest is both inspiring and sad. Whereas Maury attempts the impossible, the attempt gives him dignity. He knows that time will slip away and age overtake him before he has gone far in his explorations of nature. For a sportsman, as Maury says, 'no day is ever long enough' and no effort is too great to make in the pursuit of his pleasures. In the sequences laid in Gloversville the tone is idyllic. The landscape induces an elation in Maury similar, he conjectures, to that known by the pioneers as they first came upon this country. The pool at West Fork sums up not only the joy he feels in nature but also his satisfaction with her, since the pool is all that a fisherman could ever hope to find.

The idyllic tone makes for a book in which the element of human conflict is muted. Except for his involvement with Molly, his wife, Maury's relationships with other people count for little. But he always regards his wife and children with the affection of a large-souled man, and he remains friendly with his associates unless they try to interfere with his vocation. Miss Gordon does exhibit much delicacy and subtlety in depicting Maury's life with Molly. In this instance, he is moved by the fate of someone external to himself. After his son drowns by accident, Maury divines that Molly thinks herself betrayed because he appears less grief-stricken than she does, and he is disturbed by this suggestion of division between them. If Maury's life is a personal search for the truth, the sincerity of his quest mitigates any hint of egotism in it. His dedication to some aspects of antebellum culture proves, moreover, that he is sensitive to ranges of value often disregarded in post-Civil War America.

The mood of the book is elegiac. The 'fatality tinged with sadness' which surrounds the death of Maury's Uncle James and the resignation implicit in the quoted last lines of *Oedipus Tyrannus* suffuse Maury's whole saga. Although he maintains that with 'the halcyon days' at Gloverville and West Fork stream the melancholy of his childhood disappears forever, his very zest for life accentuates for him its evanescence. There are tragic aspects to Maury's career as well as rich fulfillments. The restless seeker learns that all aspiration is limited by the very nature of the human situation. The brutal aspects of nature are, upon occasion, disconcerting: see the quail that kill in his uncle's barn by tearing out each other's jugular veins. Some parts of life seem gratuitously senseless to Maury.

The drowning of his son and the unlooked-for death of Molly are clouds on his existence almost impossible to dispel. Not only Dick's death but his birth had led to sober meditation instead of great joy: 'I had never realized before with what reluctance a human soul faces this world.' The autumnal sadness of age confers upon the pageantry of life as Maury has known it the bittersweet consistency of tone so prevalent in the book. The sustaining of this double-edged view of life as both exhilarating and poignant is the final measure of Miss Gordon's artistry in this novel."

Frederick P. W. McDowell

Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 17-19

"When topicality and innovation seem to be everything, 'such a masterpiece as Caroline Gordon's *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*...still exists.' No one who has read it can forget 'the superb craftsmanship, the profound character drawing, the poetry in the novel finally achieves in the meaningful relationship of all its elements'."

Peter Taylor
"Comments on Neglected Books of the Past Twenty-Five Years"
American Scholar 39:345 (1970)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 284-85

"Aleck Maury, the hero of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934), more nearly resembles the typical modern hero than any of Miss Gordon's other protagonists. Maury, a rebel of sorts, is a teacher and a husband and father; but his deepest interest is in hunting and fishing. Therefore, much of his life is spent eluding the responsibilities that would keep him from pursuing his pleasure. His greatest triumphs appear to be his successes in escaping from the classroom and from the stratagems of his family, as these attempt to make him spend his hours in ways that he finds uncongenial. Aleck Maury's revolt, however, must be read against the backdrop of *Penhally* and in light of both Maury's character and of the special tone of the novel. Paradoxically, we are not to take his revolt too seriously; but, in another, deeper sense, we are to take it very seriously, indeed.

Aleck Maury, Sportsman is an novel in the form of what purports to be a memoir told by the principal character, Alexander Gordon Morris Maury. Maury begins his story with an account of his early life in the Green Springs neighborhood of Louisa County, Virginia, and then shifts to his experiences in Kentucky as a tutor in the Fayerlee family. There Maury marries Molly Fayerlee, the oldest of his pupils, and begins a long and somewhat erratic career as a teacher of the Classics. He teaches first in a private country school; then in a seminary in Gloversville, Tennessee; and then moves on to a small college in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. After his wife's death, Maury retires to a farm in Tennessee and breeds fish. After two years of retirement, he leaves the farm to go to Florida to fish. When the fishing disappoints him, he returns to Tennessee to make his home with his daughter and son-in-law. When Maury quickly discovers that these young people are determined to live in a place that is uncongenial to him, he escapes to a resort, Caney Fork, where life--particularly the fishing--will be much more enjoyable.

On the face of it, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*, is a loose, episodic book held together by the chronological march of events and by the narrative voice of Aleck Maury as he recalls what are for him the significant events from his past. Coon hunts, fox hunts, a trip to the West Coast, and a good many hunting and fishing experiences are recounted with meticulous attention to detail, particularly to the details of fishing. We can see why this book has attracted a special, nonliterary audience of hunters and fishermen; indeed, it would be possible to read it as simply a collection of authentic anecdotes about sport. This episodic quality of the narrative is deceptive, for the events of Maury's life have been carefully arranged to emphasize certain qualities in Maury and to give his story a dramatic structure.

The first-person point of view, as Miss Gordon has asserted, is the most barbarous of all points of view in fiction; for it imposes on the writer the necessity of justifying the narrator's presence in the story while at the same time making him a convincing and reliable authority. Moreover, if the narrator tells a story in which he himself is involved, the question of his authority is always open to question. Many writers, of course, have taken advantage of what might be regarded as the potential for unreliability implicit in the first-person point of view. Miss Gordon herself has explained this quality in a fine short story, 'Her Quaint Honor.' But in *Aleck Maury* she has managed to make Maury a reliable narrator and, at the same time, to capitalize on his limitations.

Maury's reliability is established at the beginning of the novel. He has a precise and vivid memory of the important things that have happened to him--that is to say, things concerned with sport. He remembers exactly how a certain gun felt in his hand, how a particular dog behaved, exactly which technique in the art of fishing he learned on a particular stream, and the color and the conditions for fishing certain rivers at

certain times of the year. However, Maury fails to remember details about his family; or, if he does remember, he reports them in a half-abstracted, bemused way. When he describes the stratagems he must employ to allow himself time to hunt or fish, he does so with perfect candor--in the belief that his reader will understand his feeling and his motives exactly. For example, he tells how, when he was teaching school for the Fayerlees, he arranged to hold his classes in the morning so that he could have the afternoons free for fishing. Also, he tells us quite frankly that he left his teaching job at a seminary in Gloversville in order to take one in a college in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, simply to be near the Black River, a stream that he had long wanted to fish.

As a consequence of Maury's candor, of his occasional amusement at himself, his pleasure in outwitting his wife Molly, who is somewhat ambitious for his worldly success, and of her serious and meticulous attention to the minutiae of hunting and fishing lore, there is gradually built up a lightly ironic tone. We see beyond Maury to the author who is amused and, at the same time, censorious in a mock-serious way. The lightly ironic tone is maintained throughout almost two thirds of the novel; then, suddenly, the tone becomes somber, even melancholy. Maury's wife dies, and Maury is suddenly forced to confront the most serious crisis of his life.

All along, when Molly was alive, he thought of her, half-humorously, as allied with those forces bent on keeping him from his beloved sport. Molly seemed the chief 'enemy'--the voice of duty, of reason, and of conscience. With Molly dead, then, liberation should follow. Maury should feel himself free at last to live his life as he wishes. But Molly's death has a very different effect: Maury is dejected. Molly's death has brought the hero face to face with the real enemy: fear. When she was alive, Molly had always laughed at Maury's vague, unfounded fears and had called him the biggest coward in the world. At her death, Maury discovers what he has always been afraid of: that his elation, his delight in sport, would go from him.

The novel does not end with this discovery, for *Aleck Maury* is not a tragedy. Maury recovers his delight and is able to escape the oppressive benevolence of his daughter Sally, who shows alarming signs of taking up the battle to subjugate him. The last thirty or so pages of the novel which deal with Maury's recovery are among the most amusing in the book; together, they constitute a sustained comic irony. After Maury is forced to retire from the college at Poplar Bluff, he decides to go somewhere to live out the remainder of his life quietly. For two years he lives on the farm of an old friend in Tennessee and breeds fish in an artificial lake. He becomes a part of the family and is even able to think calmly about his own death--a subject he has never had much relish for. A brief excursion on the Cumberland River, however, brings Maury back to his old love, fishing. He sees Colonel Wyndam, a figure from his young manhood, now ninety years old but still able to climb down to the water every day to fish for channel cat and buffalo.

The encounter with Colonel Wyndam is the turning point of the novel, for it marks the beginning of Maury's recovery. The meeting makes him realize that a man 'who had reached the age of ninety has achieved something: he was free from the fear of approaching old age. It was already here. One might return then, in a sense, to the timelessness of childhood. Every day would be a gift from the gods and it would be a man's plain duty to enjoy it.' Enjoyment for Aleck Maury, however, is not easily won; for he is a man with high standards. He abandons fish breeding and goes to Florida, where he has been given to understand there is a remarkably fine freshwater lake. The beautiful lake, however...is snarled with eel grass. It is, Maury discovers, an impossible place to fish. This discovery is 'one of the bitterest moments of [his] life.'

At this moment, disillusioned with Florida and anxious to return to his own part of the country, Maury receives a letter from his daughter Sally. She and her new scholar husband are returning from Europe, and they want him to make his home with them in Tennessee where they will look for a suitable place in the country. Maury joins them in East Tennessee, and the search begins on the Elk River. Maury has in mind the ideal house on the ideal stream--everything conveniently arranged for fishing. But the house Sally and Steve are attracted to, Maury finds unsuitable. To Steve, the house (the Potter house, it is called) is a fine specimen of the 'enclosed dog run.' To Sally, it has 'marvelous' lines and a marvelous mantel. To Maury, it is an old ramshackle affair badly in need of repair on a river that 'looks as if it would be muddy for about half of every year.' When Maury points this out, the search continues, with Steve driving the car furiously through the mountains and Sally casting long glances back in the direction of the Potter house.

At a filling station in the mountains, when they stop briefly for gas, Maury discovers Caney Fork, a stream in which, a native tells him, 'You can catch most any fish you want.' Sally, however, is not impressed with Caney Fork. She is more concerned with the book Steve is writing on Free Trade... Maury sees that he is about to be trapped. It will take all of those months to repair the [Potter house] so they can live in it. Moreover, it is five hundred feet down to a river that is muddy half of every year. Maury gets up from the stool and goes outside the restaurant, leaving Sally and Steve still lost in talk. He sees a bus bearing a sign: Caney Fork. He pays the driver five dollars to get his suitcases out of Steve's car and into the bus...

The lightly ironic tone and the comic resolution of the novel are exactly suited to the story Miss Gordon is telling. They permit her to do justice to two possible views that may be taken of Aleck Maury's story and, at the same time, allow her to suggest which is the right one. The tone and the conclusion acknowledge in a sense that, from the standpoint of the workaday world, there is something frivolous and irresponsible about Maury's passion for sport; but the events of the novel themselves show us that, from a more elevated point of view, there is something admirable, even heroic, about Maury. He triumphs over forces that many men would have succumbed to. He manages to free himself from female domination and from the work-obsessed world's conception of living.

Aleck Maury's value is not just that he struggles heroically to live his own life. It is the quality of the life itself that is to be admired, the life of an educated man who, unlike other members of his society, has managed to keep alive within him a joyful response to the natural world. Maury's response to the out-of-doors, of course, is not a passive romantic exultation in the presence of majestic nature, nor is there anything transcendental in his love of field and stream. Though he is occasionally aware of how preoccupied other men are with getting and spending, he is always surprised by that discovery. Nature is something that he responds to almost unconsciously. His conscious attention is fixed on the details of his hunting and fishing; but, in the act of 'wetting a line' or covering a field, he is experiencing the kind of simple pleasure that, in its literal reality, is unanalyzable joy.

Maury's pleasure in sport unites him with the simpler, more primitive characters in the book--who are, for the most part, ignorant, uneducated men who share this obsession. Maury, however, is more than an ordinary fishing enthusiast: he is an artist, not a romantic artist, to be sure, but the kind of artist Miss Gordon herself might be expected to admire. He is passionately devoted to discovering the techniques of fishing and hunting that will make him a master of these arts. Indeed, for him, the pleasure of a sport comes as much from the mastering as from the exercise of the craft, though ideally the two are joined.

The meaning of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* goes even deeper. In his passionate response to nature and in his devotion to his craft and to the ritual of fishing, Maury also embodies qualities and attitudes that are traditionally associated with religious devotion. He is a life-long novice, we might say, to the mysteries of nature. Fishing and hunting are his rituals, his means of participating in those mysteries. Though the hunting and fishing are real enough, it is not the fish or the bird that Maury wants. It is the act itself that is valued--the act which, when well performed, combines self-discipline, talent, art, knowledge, and self-abnegation. As a reward for the successful mastery of these, then, comes pleasure as well--not the pleasure of an escape from more important duties into idleness, as the rest of the world imagines--but the kind of pleasure known only to the happy few: the pleasure of performing well an act in which all of the faculties are brought under control and directed toward a higher end.

Andrew Lytle reads *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* largely in regional terms. Lytle suggests that Maury's 'dislocation,' as he calls it, is caused by the economic and political ruin of the South after the Civil War. Certainly, the Southern background from which Maury has come is important in explaining Maury's origins. The South of pre-'Penhally' days is gone and, along with it, the integrated social order against which Maury might have been measured. Maury, however, lives in the modern world; and it is against it--a money-oriented one--that Maury must be seen.

Aleck Maury, then, is not a Southern cultural hero dislocated by the ruin of his native region. He is a man isolated from other men because of an extraordinary responsiveness to the natural pleasures of sport. As Maury observes, most men spend their days at uncongenial occupations and regard life as something to

be exchanged for success in politics, or intellectual pursuits rather than as something to be enjoyed in its fullest measure. Miss Gordon's book should not be read as a glorification of mere hedonism, nor simply as calling into question the need or value of the serious preoccupations that Aleck Maury rejects. We should read it, in other words, in the same spirit that we read Thoreau's *Walden*: as the picture of one man's life which may in its implications have universal applicability.

Indeed, Aleck Maury is one of a special breed of literary heroes who very early became passionately devoted to a life of sport, a passion--it might be said--that cuts across regional, natural, and racial barriers. Among this small but impressive band, all of whom share to some extent a passion for sport and love of the natural world might be mentioned Isaac Walton of *The Compleat Angler*, William Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, Ivan Turgenev of *The Sportsman's Notebook*, Thoreau of *Walden*, the Mark Twain of *Huckleberry Finn* and of 'Old Times on the Mississippi,' the solitary fisherman of Yeats' poem, 'The Fisherman,' and, more recently, Hemingway's Nick Adams of 'Big Two-Hearted River.'

Aleck Maury, Sportsman is technically different from the kind of novel Caroline Gordon usually writes; for it is, in the first place, a novel primarily of character. Her heroes do not typically stand apart from the action and live in the reader's memory after the book has been closed. Instead, they sink back into the design of the book and, in retrospect, become part of the dramatic action. We cannot generally recall Miss Gordon's protagonists without at the same time thinking of all the entangling alliances that make them up--the other characters, the houses, the landscapes, even the gestures--and of the important changes that take place between the beginning and the end of the novel. We see them in the flux and flow of time or in the dim web of circumstance; and, for this reason, it is difficult, if not actually impossible, to talk about her protagonists as we can about the characters of William Faulkner.

Aleck Maury, however, has a life and a reality that seems quite independent of either time or circumstance. Indeed, the effectiveness of this novel and the success of Miss Gordon's portrayal of Aleck Maury depend in large part on his ability to thwart both time and circumstance and to remain a free spirit. After putting the book down, we see him still, somewhat bigger than life-sized, loaded down with his rods and fishing gear, and headed for Caney Fork and a life of perpetual sport. It is not surprising that *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* has proved to be Caroline Gordon's most popular novel.

There are doubtless a number of reasons why Caroline Gordon has been so successful in the creation of Aleck Maury. One explanation may be that he is based on her father whom she admired very much and whom she knew in a way she could not know possible prototypes for the male protagonists of her other novels. Another less obvious but more likely explanation is that there is both more and less of Miss Gordon herself in this novel. Actually, there is little autobiography, much less than in some of her other novels. Sarah and Stephen Lewis [*The Strange Children*] are, clearly, inspired by Caroline and Allen Tate; but they are oversimplifications and exaggerations of the author and her husband.

It is in the creation of Maury that Caroline Gordon has put a great deal of herself. She is not a fisherman nor a hunter, though she has learned a great deal about both; but, like Maury...a disciplined, devoted artist who takes the same delight in perfecting her technique as Maury did his; and her dedication has been just as devout. She writes, ultimately, for the same reason that Maury fished--for the sheer delight of it, not that there isn't also some pain and disappointment. She might have said of Maury, as Flaubert did of his Bovary, 'Aleck Maury, *c'est moi*.'

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 33-41

"It is not so much a novel as a fictional diary. Little of major importance occurs in the course of the narrative--certainly there is no crisis--and beyond the fact that we are being told about some days in the life of a particular narrator, there is nothing that can be called a consecutive plot. For all this the book has none of the apparent randomness of stream-of-consciousness fiction, the positive delight in the arbitrary and spontaneous that we tend to associate with the diary form; and this is because every detail of his experience that Maury chooses to tell us about is acted out in obedience to his code.... The ceremonies he adopts as a huntsman, the ritual he follows as a fisherman, are both metaphors of conduct... Everything is ritualized,

every event seems to have the weight of previous occasions behind it, from the most solemn, such as prayers before dinner...to the most commonplace and mundane.... This is, I think, one of the more attractive consequences of Gordon's idea of ceremony: that it leads her to give an additional value, a certain stateliness to everything--even the most ordinary things--her characters do or say."

Richard Gray
The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South
(Johns Hopkins 1977) 154-55

"Aleck Maury, like the sportsman Cousin Edmund in *None Shall Look Back*, has no time except for hunting and fishing. Though Cousin Edmund does not regard himself as 'a solitary,' Aleck Maury realizes that his life of sport cuts him off from society. Obsessed by 'the old, desperate desire for time, more time,' Maury decides not to waste his treasured hours on people and chooses continually to pursue what for him is nearly a religious experience--the 'peculiar' and 'almost transfiguring excitement' of the chase.

Identifying *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* 'as almost the prototype of the novel-of-experience, William Van O'Connor places Caroline Gordon in a line of twentieth-century writers, beginning with Henry James, who treat extensively the innocent's confrontation with the reality of experience. Caroline Gordon, O'Connor writes, 'is able to cast a cold eye on excesses, to compare expectation with event, theory with experience, and especially to show us Time as antagonist.' Although critics have not developed the role of time in the other early novels, many have analyzed Aleck Maury's obsession with time. The relationship of his roles as sportsman and as narrator have not, however, been adequately discussed.

Caroline Gordon has noted that her original, preferred title for the novel was 'The Life and Passion of Aleck Maury,' and surely--as Lucy in *None Shall Look Back* realizes of Cousin Edmund--Maury's commitment to sport is anything but frivolous. For Maury, deeply concerned with the passage of time, knows he cannot delay or stop his movement towards death. Nonetheless, he is determined to make the most of his life, devoting himself to a *carpe diem* philosophy with all the seriousness of an epic hero. However, Maury's persistent defiance of time does take him outside the community: he is an irresponsible husband and father; and he is a scholar not because of any strong ideals of education but because reading the classics gives him pleasure and teaching allows him to make an adequate living. Maury, finally, is faulted for his selfishness and his unfeeling detachment from the people around him.

Yet Aleck Maury is also, as Frederick McDowell recognizes, 'a man of imagination.' And Gordon seems to have a special affection for this character based as he is on her own father, for of all the protagonists in her early novels, only Aleck Maury is allowed to tell his own story and in that telling to dramatize the major conflicts in his life. Although Maury reveals his own limitations when, to borrow William Stuckey's example, he forgets details about his family life or reports them in a 'half-abstracted, bemused way,' he is on the whole a reliable and entertaining narrator. Despite his failings, he does distinguish himself by his efforts to be a man both of action and of imagination. And so, he differs significantly and admirably from the Harry Morrrows who would turn education into an industry or the Stephens who make learning a dry intellectual exercise.

Perceived by many critics as a modern Ulysses or Aeneas, Aleck Maury strives to follow a code of honor in spite of the society disintegrating about him. He has special knowledge that enables him to make his life meaningful. Jane Gibson Brown, for instance, who calls Maury a 'twentieth-century hunter, a contemporary counterpart of Orion Outlaw,' remarks that Maury 'is saved from Orion's aimlessness by a classical education which reminds him all too painfully of what has been lost.' Aleck, then, is like 'other heroes of twentieth-century fiction in that he finds a private code to give his life meaning in a society dominated by industrial 'robber-barons.' While the professor does not depend on his classical education to give meaning to his life, his foundation in the history and literature of another age does provide him with a perspective that an uneducated, often un-contemplating man like Rion Outlaw cannot have. Through imagination, Maury appreciates the mysteries of the natural world and the magnificence of human history, that tradition of ideas and values preserved in what Rion might disdainfully term 'book-learning.' In addition to his imaginative capacity, Maury differs from Rion and from his twentieth-century contemporaries in his knowledge of time. Instead of ignoring the fact of human mortality, he defines his life in a noble stance against death.

Comparing *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* to *Penhally*, William Van O'Connor recognizes that both novels 'deal with trying to stay the hand of time.' The stature of the man of action in *Penhally* declines as the ideals for which the hero fights become increasingly untenable. Yet, unlike the sentimental Emily Kinloe or Chance Llewellyn who violently protests his disinheritance, Aleck Maury does not fight against the decay of southern culture. He has never been content with the values society thrusts on him: his quarrel with time is a more personal one.

The structure of the novel, which calls attention to the theme of time, also focuses on Aleck's artistic and imaginative powers. As William Stuckey observes, the 'loose, episodic' quality of the book is 'deceptive, for the events of Maury's life have been carefully arranged to emphasize certain qualities in Maury and to give his story a dramatic structure.' Though *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* is a first-person narrative, it is not mere character study, which Caroline Gordon disdains. In a letter to William Stuckey, she explains Ford Madox Ford's response to one of her early stories: 'When he read it...he said merely, 'Humph, that's ver' nice.' 'I realized later,' she says, 'what was the matter with it. It was not a story. Nothing happened. Like many first efforts it was simply *about* a character.' Certainly Maury's reminiscences are more than nostalgic description. The drama of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* is in his gradual realization that his ideals of the hunt are too limited.

Except for those few occasions when his wife's health worries him, Maury does not think of others but spends as much time as possible either hunting or fishing or at least planning an excursion. During his youth, hunting initiated Aleck into the world of men, but as he grows older and especially after his leg begins to fail him, Maury turns increasingly to fishing, a pursuit that usually takes him out alone. By himself he enjoys the natural world and his sport more. Indeed, the pleasure of contemplating nature and the ability to hunt down and lure game are related, since both pastimes demand disinterested observation and creative thinking, skills that Maury developed in his classical training. Early in his life when Aleck moves in the his uncle's family at Grassdale, he discovers that 'Life at Grassdale--masculine life--was centered about sport.' So keen are the young boys on sport that they go raving when there is nothing else to do. Yet concomitant with the growing sense of male identity is Maury's appreciation of the secret pleasures available through hunting. In Maury's account of his first hunt, the private spiritual aspects of the experience are more important than the initiatory purposes: 'I think that life, the life of adventure that is compacted equally of peril and deep, secret excitement, began for me in that cabin [the cabin of Rafe who first took Aleck hunting] when I was about eight years old.'

As Aleck Maury ages, he prefers to hunt alone: 'I used to love fox hunting but looking back on it I see that it was for me at any rate a boy's callow love, founded on excitement and the sense of rivalry. The hullabaloo, the shouting, the looking back to see if So and So is following you over that fence--that is all very well when the blood runs freely through the veins and excitement is the breath of the nostrils. But as I have grown older I have learned to take my pleasure more subtly. I like better now to hunt alone.' Maury's age makes him slow down, of course, but his motives for hunting and fishing alone are more complicated. When Burn Lorenz accuses Aleck of fishing by himself so that nobody can steal his methods, Aleck admits that Burn is right in part. Because he has spent years experimenting, Maury wants to keep his knowledge to himself. That pursuit of knowledge, finally, is a private avocation that compels him to shun company.

Maury's efforts to learn the habits of his prey approach a contemplative, even aesthetic enjoyment. When, for example, the young Aleck discovers a recipe for sucker bait, his excitement resembles the thrill he felt in translating a passage from the *Aeneid* that his father could not decipher. Appropriately he copies the recipe on the flyleaf of his first copy of the *Aeneid*. From his uncle James, Maury learns early that sport is the pursuit of secret knowledge. After his uncle discovers that quail cannot be raised in a confined place (because the cocks will fight each other to death), he remarks to the boy that 'a man--a sporting man he meant, of course--might observe every day of his life and still have something to learn.' Strongly affected by his uncle's words, Maury tells how he 'was fired with a sudden, fierce desire' to know the 'secret life' of the animals around him: 'To this day that desire has never left me. I never walk through the woods or stand beside a body of water without experiencing something of that old excitement.' Truly, that joy in contemplating the secret life never leaves Maury, and throughout the course of the novel, he is continually observing nature--describing the spawning of bass, for example, or explaining the habits of quail.

His imaginative impulses lead Maury outside of the self to seek an experience that Stuckey compares to both religious devotion and art: 'Maury, however, is more than an ordinary fishing enthusiast: he is an artist, not a romantic artist, to be sure, but the kind of artist Miss Gordon herself might be expected to admire. He is passionately devoted to discovering the techniques of fishing and hunting that will make him a master of these arts. Indeed, for him, the pleasure of a sport comes as much from the mastering as from the exercise of the craft, though ideally the two are joined.' His curiosity and close observation bring Maury close to understanding the natural world, but nature's secrets seem part of a larger inscrutable reality so that ultimately, Maury's disinterested sportsmanship allows him to participate in greater mysteries. Properly humble, Maury admits that his skill in hunting depends, to a large extent, on luck; he prides himself only on his perseverance, not on superior knowledge or ability. 'I had known from the first that it [finding the transfiguring excitement in the chase] was all luck; I had gone about seeking it, with, as it were, the averted eyes of a savage praying to his god. But I had brought all my resources to bear on the chase. I had used skill and caution--nobody but myself knew what patience I had always expended on my careful preparations for my sport--and I had succeeded as few men, I told myself now with some arrogance, had ever succeeded.'

Maury's appreciation of the sacred quality of knowledge is close to the Thomist views summarized by the philosopher Jacques Maritain, later a friend of the Tates and an influence on Caroline Gordon's work. Even at this early date, her affinity with Maritain's Thomism is evident. Maury seeks a 'transfiguring' knowledge and effaces himself in the search as would any sincere catechumen. 'To know is to *become*; to become the non-I,' writes Maritain. Maury's curiosity and his desire to master seemingly insoluble problems are lifelong traits, remaining with him even when he appears to have given up fishing. After he retires from teaching and temporarily quits fishing, he turns his energies to fish breeding and invents ingenious devices for feeding and controlling the stock.

His need and urge for sport return and motivate him to quest again for the choicest fishing spots. Maury, however, does not sustain a similar enthusiasm for and commitment to classical study. Certainly he enjoys reading the classics and seems to turn to them, at least obliquely, for comfort--the class is reading the final chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannus* the day after Molly's funeral--but his attitude towards classical study is a practical one: 'Poor Molly had always wished that I would take more interest in my work but I could not do it even for her. My feelings were, perhaps, reprehensible but they were practical. Very soon in my career I realized that Latin and Greek were dead languages in more ways than one. I myself had loved them in my youth and I would instruct young men in them as long as any young men could be found who desired instruction but it was becoming more apparent all the time that fewer and fewer young men desired instruction.'

Compared to Harry Morrow, the assistant at the seminary in Oakland, Aleck is much less ambitious. Years later, it is Morrow who offers Maury a job at his school, Rodman, in Popular Bluff, Missouri. Yet Aleck Maury does not look on Harry's position as a significant advance. In fact, when Molly begins to speculate how Harry has changed over the years, Aleck compares the development of Harry's character to that of a pollywog--completely predictable. Harry's ambition is his most consistent characteristic. He is a friend to Aleck as long as it is convenient. After Lawson Selby, the railroad tycoon, endows the school with money for a new classics department and 'an up and coming' classics scholar, Harry--always the businessman--asks the professor to retire.

Maury also exercises more imagination and independent thinking than his son-in-law Stephen, Sally's 'scholar,' as he patronizingly terms him. This conflict between the sportsman and the intellectual, which Frederick Hoffman calls one of Caroline Gordon's most interesting concerns, reveals itself in this early novel in the sharp contrast between the vital Aleck Maury and his somewhat stuffy son-in-law. Steve is like *Penhally's* Douglas Parrish in that, as he categorizes and intellectualizes, he robs the life from the objects and phenomena he perceives. When, for instance, Steve comments on the dogrun in the Potter place, which he and his wife are considering renovating, Maury recalls a dogrun he knew as a child, and his memory is much more vivid than Steven's book-knowledge....

Both daughter and son-in-law are stereotyped intellectuals (good-humored caricatures of Gordon herself and Tate), but at least Steven appreciates the stream at Caney Fork that Maury sees as promising. Although he wishes that they could take off a few days to fish, Steven will not, however, make the time for sport. He

feels 'pressed for time' because they need to find a house. In contrast, Maury advises that they leave the stream because 'You can't do any good, fishing, unless your mind's settled.' Steve's is the response of a dilettante. 'I'm seventy years old... These words mark the professor's unhappy awareness of another important difference between himself and his son-in-law--Steven is only twenty-eight. Immediately following this exclamation, Maury slips away from Sally and Steve, who are so busy planning to restore the old Potter place that they forget Maury's needs. Calculating how long repairs would take, Sally has said to her father, 'It wouldn't kill you to go without fishing three months, would it?'

Since Maury tells his own story, his consciousness of time becomes all the more striking, for he decides what times in his life have been most significant and creates out of these events an artist's pattern. Ironically, Maury's narrative more strongly defies time than his actual efforts. Art preserves the past, making it immediate to its readers; moreover, Maury's story will last as long as there are people willing to hear the tale. A criticism of his own efforts to outrun time, the narrative records the impossibility of defeating the natural movement towards death and suggests the need for more enduring structures. Although the creative process does not supply final answers, it provides the matrix and method for the quest. A distinction Maritain makes between the speculative reason of the philosopher or scientist and 'poetic knowledge' is useful here in explaining Maury's eventual failure as an artist.

Most often Maury knows through observation and conceptualizing, not through poetic intuition, which Maritain defines as the knowledge of the artist 'who, in order to reveal to himself his most secret being in a work that he produces, is given in his creative intuition or emotion, through the impact he receives from reality in the unconscious life of the spirit and the depths of subjectivity, a non-conceptual knowledge of the things of the world and their secrets.' Only on a few occasions does Maury experience a timelessness that reveals the inadequacy of his ideals of sport. The fall that Molly is expecting their first child and, many years later, after Molly's death, Maury's anxiety and grief force him to question the feasibility and worthiness of his race against time.

While he and Molly are waiting for the baby, he is unable to fish or hunt; in fact, he seems to lose his identity so overwhelming are his emotions: 'There are times in every man's life when he does not seem to be living, when every faculty is held in suspension while he waits for events to shape themselves. It was like that with me, those last few weeks. I could not follow any of my usual pursuits. I could not even think with my own mind. I could only wait and wish it were over.' Much later in his life, after Molly has told him that she must have an operation, he feels again that 'it was as if time had stopped.' Waiting at the train station for Sally and his mother-in-law Mrs. Fayerlee, Maury experiences that 'feeling of timelessness,' in which the present seems to exist apart from time's continuum. He recalls how the doctor's voice, asking him to bring Molly to the hospital, had reiterated 'now': 'Not the following day as had been planned, or even this evening... But now... Now, I said to myself and tried to think what this present that I was living through was...'

The same day that Sally and Mrs. Fayerlee arrive, Molly dies. Instead of speaking of his emotions, Maury records without elaboration how the time passed, giving the date of Molly's burial and telling when the family departed for their separate homes. The following Monday, he returns to school to teach the chorus from *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Even as the students translate, the professor seems unaware of the significance of death. The student who mistakes...(death) for...(mortal) should make Maury realize that his wife's death is a reminder of his own. The timelessness that he feels in these anxious waiting times prefigures the eternity of death.

Too numb to feel his loss when Molly dies and incapable of contemplating his own death, Maury seems paralyzed and abstains for several months from his greatest pleasures, hunting and fishing. Even two years after his wife's death, he can only force himself to go down to the river. The 'transfiguring excitement' that the hunt had always guaranteed him is no longer enough: 'These last few weeks out on the blue river when I had found myself over and over wondering dully why I was there, why I should be doing this particular thing had been the first time in all my life it [sport] had ever failed me.'

Eventually he conquers his despair and comes to enjoy sport again, but Maury never finds values to provide meaning where sport has failed him. The 'real grandeur of soul' that Aleck ascribes to his aunt Vic

is not his own. He has discipline and commitment--qualities that were hers as well--but not her religious belief or her unselfish love for others: 'She was a truly religious woman and spent a great deal of time in prayer. She must have got up early in the morning to attend to her private devotions for she kept busy all morning with household affairs and our lessons were sandwiched in between the giving out of provisions, the doctoring of sick negroes and a thousand and one duties.' In contrast, masculine life at Grassdale was, by definition, a life of sport, not of service to others and to God. As a boy Aleck learned to regard the spiritual life as the woman's concern and to view the man's role as the assertion of self against whatever forces bind the human spirit, including the strictures of religious training. Aleck and his cousin, therefore, are constantly devising ways to circumvent the studies and religious devotions Aunt Vic sets for them.

In certain of the short stories, Caroline Gordon develops this theme more particularly: Maury is repeatedly withstanding women who try to keep him from his sport and to bind him with social conventions and obligations. In the novel itself, the society that teaches its young boys to aspire to be men of action does not really encourage any allegiance to a spiritual reality. Maury is unusual in coming as close as he does to perceiving forces greater than the self, but the near religious devotion he exercises in sport does not meet all his spiritual needs. Like Rion Outlaw, Maury faces the death of his wife and recognizes that his ideals as a man of action are inadequate. He cannot, however, honestly comfort himself with religion as could his aunt Vic. The short story 'The Presence,' written many years after *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*, dramatizes his final appreciation of his aunt's faith."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 73-83

"Nowhere is Gordon's sympathy with a hero's struggles for order stronger than in her masterwork, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934). In following the exploits of this active southern sportsman--Maury is based on her father--Gordon is on one level singing the praises of this grand old man. She acknowledges that his rejection of the modern world and his attraction instead to the ritual of the hunt has given him significance and purpose which most people never find. And yet, in the novel's dark undercurrent, Gordon also acknowledges the ultimate futility of Maury's exploits. She makes it clear that the forces of life will eventually catch up with Maury and destroy him.

Aleck Maury is a sportsman of the first order, an excellent fly fisherman and bird hunter. He devotes so much time and energy to sport because he sees the order and community of his childhood (he was born just after the Civil War) progressively giving way to the fast-changing times. When he leaves home as a young man, he realizes that the idyllic plantation life of his youth, fostered by strong ties of guardianship and extended family, is in the process of passing forever. 'After a certain period of my life I never went back to Virginia or exchanged letters with any of my connections there,' he says at one point. 'Some men foster these ties all their lives. For me it has always been too painful.' But Maury carries with him the skills and lore of the hunt which he learned as a child, and he turns to these in trying as an adult to give his life purpose and stability.

Maury sees modern society, fast making inroads into southern life, as brutal and savage; to escape it he takes to the woods whenever he can get away from his duties as a classics teacher. By following the strict codes and rituals of the hunt, Maury achieves a private communion with the natural world. His life is full and purposeful. When he is an old man, a friend asks him to go to a health lecture to help 'kill the time'; Maury bristles in rebuke: 'I stood there too astounded even to answer.... I was annoyed to reflect that anybody could think I, Alexander Maury, could need to kill time!' Few other of Gordon's characters achieve such dignity.

But Maury's life in communion with the natural world is ultimately doomed. As he himself discovers, his escapes to the woods can never constitute complete victories over the world about him--the ravages of time cannot be stopped, and Maury grows old, his body enfeebled. Accompanying his growth into old age is an almost terrifying awareness of death and decay. Because the rituals of the hunt provide him with no framework of belief, he is unable to see death as anything but the end; as a result, fear and despair drive him into spells of listlessness.

But Maury cannot remain morose for long; his love for the hunt pulls him back again and again to life and zest. In the joyous last scene of the novel, Maury, now a hobbling old man, is lighting out once more for the river. Like his forebear, Huck Finn, Maury makes good his escape from the snares of civilization, here his daughter and son-in-law (figures clearly based on Gordon and Allen Tate), who want him to move in with them. Though Maury knows that death will finally catch up with him, he is happy to be still on the run, to fish as many streams and rivers as possible before his time is up.

With this exuberant ending, Gordon affirms her respect and admiration for her father's life, while at the same time acknowledging its shortcomings. Though she knew that she could never completely reject modern life, as Maury had done, nonetheless she felt very deeply for a man whose life resounded with such feeling and purpose. The contrast between the passionate Maury and the rather stiff and pedantic versions of herself and Tate underscores her feelings, and suggests that Gordon knew that in many ways her life would never be as full as her father's.

Adding to the intensity of Gordon's feelings is her awareness that the necessity for Maury to reject his society to attain purpose in life reflects the loss of order and community in southern--and also in modern--society. [The critic] Louise Cowan has observed that Maury's story illustrates that 'the vital Southern love of the land and its conviction of the need for guardianship has declined in him to a self-indulgent passion for hunting and fishing; its communality has become a solitary quest for what must be a secret life of joy; its public figures have dwindled to private "characters".' Maury's intense zest for life appears even more joyous against this dark background of defeat and decay.

In several short stories from this period, Gordon explores Maury's increasing enfeeblement and his fast-approaching appointment with death. They represent some of Gordon's best work; the tension between her love for her hero and her knowledge of his loss of powers and his ultimate death gives the stories depth and great power. Two of these stories are especially relevant here: 'The Last Day in the Field' (1935) and 'One More Time' (1953)."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 81-83

"Fifty-five years after it was published, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* has passionate devotees. Literary critics admire the language. Sportsmen marvel at the precision of detail about fishing. Local historians are impressed with the accuracy of geographical and biographical information in the book. The Meriwethers become the Fayerlees, and Clarksville becomes Gloverville. Mr. Gordon is portrayed accurately as schoolmaster and fisherman, but one whole aspect of his life is ignored--his preaching. It is perhaps the most popular of Caroline's novels, and certainly the easiest to read, the least tragic, the least violent. In it Caroline Gordon's gift for writing about the natural world unfurls with splendor, and the Southern woods and streams and ponds are set before us as they have never been before or since. She easily captures, in Aleck Maury's voice, the sound of Southern conversation of an earlier time, the sonorous phrases, the grandiloquent tone of her father and Cousin John Ferguson.

Everything Caroline said and wrote about the book at the time she was writing it testifies that she thought it was a happy book, 'a fairy tale,' about a man who gets what he wants. Most people see it today, however, as the story of a desperate man who spent his time fishing to avoid paying the emotional price that relationships with people would demand."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 135-36

"In 'Tom Rivers,' Caroline treats the conflict between freedom-loving males and the demands of the family, characterized as female, which she would develop at length in her next published novel, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*.... As she later wrote, 'If I was to work at all I had to work through somebody else's mind as my own had been rendered unendurable to me.' [due to her husband's infidelity] She chose her father's mind, the masculine point of view she had handled so successfully in 'Old Red.' Thus *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* was conceived; her most sunny and approachable book would emerge from her period of

anguish.... Her father had all the charm of his literary avatar, Aleck Maury. In some ways a latter-day Huck Finn, he bewitches the reader with his ingenious ways of avoiding society's demands to pursue his true love, sport. 'I want every day to be a pleasure to me' is Aleck Maury's most characteristic remark, and Caroline Gordon...borrowed it from her father....

Most of Caroline's remaining novels contain women tormented by the knowledge of their husband's adultery.... The fantasy that transfixed Caroline's imagination interlocks almost too neatly with that of Allen [Tate]. Her fiction is filled with women who are abandoned when their men heed the siren call of another obsession. In her Civil War fiction, it is the summons to battle. In her novel and tales about Aleck Maury, based on her father's recollections, it is the lure of sport. In her later fiction, the siren is indeed a siren, and the issue of adultery is openly addressed. This drama of betrayal and abandonment may stem from her father's evasions of her mother through sport, but it may simply be Caroline's view of the woman's role in a man's world: secondary, and easily shunted aside."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 28, 61-62, 112, 121

"The 'autobiography' of Aleck Maury was Caroline's best work yet.... Caroline...left out...her father's experience as a preacher. The omission simplified the story line and actually enabled Caroline to cut the book down to eight chapters... Molly Fayerlee did not take up religion; she was overwhelmed by grief at the accidental drowning of her favorite child, Dick.... Caroline created a sympathetic portrait of Molly...a fine scholar.... In fact, Caroline laced the entire book with gentle understanding of all characters, their needs, failures, and motivations. Aleck did not look down on his in-laws as J. M. Gordon habitually did... In her portrait of Aleck and the Fayerlees, Caroline for the first time reconciled the antagonisms between the Meriwethers and the Gordon perspectives. Perhaps Caroline's compassion stemmed from her own recent hurt. After Allen had betrayed her, she may have realized for the first time something of the disappointment her mother had endured in marriage. But for whatever reason, Caroline wrote with understanding and appreciation of both her mother and her father's actions and points of view....

The novel...was suitably laced with classical allusions, and Caroline would later joke that she should have called the book *Portrait of the Artist as an Angler*.... Aleck's pursuit of sport was noble and heroic; it was also foolish and selfish.... He usually refused to share what he had learned.... Aleck was a lonely child amidst of a large, motherless family. His first home was a gloomy, barren place because 'no woman's hand had tended Oakleigh' since Aleck's mother's death....

Aleck went to Grassdale to study under Aunt Vic, and she would emerge in Aleck's memories as a truly noble woman. Aleck's father called Vic the 'best Greek scholar I ever knew, woman or no woman.' Aleck remembered that she was both motherly and stern, able to balance her household duties with tutoring and missionary zeal. She was 'an ardent Catholic and regarded everybody, white and black, within driving distance of Grassdale as within her cure of souls'... Other women made less powerful impressions in the novel but continued to suggest that Aleck's ideals, however noble, might be enlarged or modified. Molly Fayerlee was the antithesis of Aleck in many ways, conducting her life always according to 'a high sense of duty.' At times that sense of duty annoyed Aleck, yet Molly could be counted on to put their life into perspective.... Although he often chafed against his wife's ambition for him, Aleck was devastated when she died and even lost all interest in fishing....

At the end of the novel, when Sally invited her father to come to live with her and her husband, she tried to be solicitous of Aleck's desire to spend the rest of his life fishing... Soon he managed to escape from his daughter and son-in-law. Caroline described Aleck's final getaway with gentle, comic tones of victory: the old man once again outwitted the young and foolish.... The time would come when Aleck would need help, but he made no effort to prepare for such a day, to cultivate his relationship with his daughter or other friends. For Aleck, the present day was enough to worry about.

For all his foolishness, Aleck was a hero, a valiant soul--and lucky, as he would be the first to admit. Caroline wrote lovingly about his determination and vision, yet she did not hesitate to point out his faults and failings.... He had always seemed stronger than adversity. He would not be crushed by defeat or family

responsibilities; he was always free to pursue his own dreams. When Caroline adopted his voice as her own, she could imagine her own life in those terms. But...her portrait of Aleck Maury included gentle criticism of the self-centered artist as sportsman. In the end it echoed her conclusion in her earlier portrait of the artist, 'At the Top of the Glass Mountain': an artist needed the nourishment and support of family ties.

After re-reading the novel, [Ford Madox] Ford decided the book had the 'quality of Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*,' adding, 'and you couldn't have greater praise from me!' He thought the book was 'a poem rather than a novel'.... John Crowe Ransom...called the book 'the straightest, cleanest, most accurate and firmest piece of writing I've seen in a long time. [Donald] Davidson said *Alec Maury* was a 'glorious book, a complete success...in every way.' 'Not in years have I read a piece of fiction that so satisfied, held, and touched me,' he told her. 'If you will keep on writing such books, you will not only be the greatest writer of fiction yet produced in the South--you will restore the Confederacy'....

Katherine Anne's [Porter] description of the novel as 'fine masculine prose' must have meant a great deal to Caroline. It echoed the assessment Caroline had made years earlier of George Eliot's talent: Eliot had claimed for herself the 'privileges which had been monopolized by men up to that time' and had succeeded in making others believe that a man had actually written her first published work. In the writing of *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*, Caroline did the same.... One man wanted to know if Caroline was really a woman. If she was, he said, he wanted to know how a woman 'could write such a book'.... If the demands of sustaining a credible male narrator's voice were not enough of a challenge, the intricacies of all the hunting and fishing lore would surely baffle most women."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 142-46, 151-53

"Maury's 'sonorous voice' captivates the reader as it captivated the daughter in 'Old Red,' and Gordon works to purify Maury's character and sanction his quest.... From the opening chapter, where Rafe Hill teaches the young Maury how to manipulate his sister so that the two can spend the night hunting, Gordon follows the traditional pattern of the adventurous male in a mostly comic struggle to elude the demands of a restrictive, feminine society.... We learn a great deal about virgin streams and Maury's successful capture of the large and strong female bass. What is not overtly described is Maury's equally successful angling for Molly....

Molly bitterly berates Maury for being more anxious about his dog than his son, Dick.... Maury strives to communicate to the reader what he cannot tell Molly: 'It was as if my apparent recovery from the bereavement--and to her distraught mind I must have appeared perfectly recovered--had put a barrier between us.' Unable to accept her husband's distant ways, Molly increasingly becomes the woman who haunts so many of Gordon's works: restrained, withdrawn, silent, and embittered, keenly feeling and unable to recover from what she understands as her husband's betrayal....

Although Molly dies without Maury by her side and without a rekindling of their old passion, the reader is assured of Maury's love for his wife. Gordon's readers have been taught to understand his need to displace his most profound feelings and to interpret his joys and grief through his descriptions of the landscape. Thus, we understand that Maury's bereavement over the death of his son, over the failure of his marriage, and over Molly's eventual death is reflected in the titles of the next three chapters, 'Dead Water,' 'Black River,' and 'More Dead Water.' It is in this second part of the book where Gordon most poignantly describes the melancholy and the lifelessness that Maury feels."

Anne M. Boyle
Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson U 2002) 111-114

Aleck Maury, Sportsman is (1) Gordon's most popular novel, especially with sportsmen, the simplest of her novels, the easiest to read and, much to the disgrace of critics, her only recognized classic. It is also significant (2) as a contribution to the world literature of sport, fishing in particular, alongside such classics as *The Compleat Angler* by Sir Isaac Walton, *A Sportsman's Sketches* by Turgenev, and "Big Two-Hearted

River" by Hemingway; (3) as a compelling "autobiographical" narrative of spiritual retreat from society into Nature, alongside *The Pioneers* by Cooper, *Moby-Dick* by Melville, *Walden* by Thoreau, *Huckleberry Finn* by Twain, "Tom Outland's Story" by Cather, *The Bear* by Faulkner, and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway; (4) as arguably the best novel ever written by a woman from a man's point of view; (5) as proof along with *None Shall Look Back* that Gordon transcends gender more extensively and successfully than any other American novelist; and (6) as evidence of the extreme diversity and versatility of her novels in genre, form, style, and perspective.

The controversy among critics of this novel is: How much should Aleck Maury be criticized for being Aleck Maury and choosing to live his life as he does? One of the best critics, Freistat, agrees with Gordon as more clearly expressed in her short stories about Aleck, that in the largest context his ideals are indeed too limited and "inadequate," particularly in lacking a consciously religious dimension. His love of Nature is authentic and deep but not spiritual in the manner of Thoreau. His hunting and fishing are more predatory and his perceptions more practical than transcendental, though as critics have pointed out, his temperament, mentality, discipline and self-denial make him comparable to an artist and even to a religious devotee. With respect to his limited participation in family life, Freistat seems too harsh in calling Aleck selfish and irresponsible, given the gently comic tone and ending of the novel and his wisdom in choosing to live out his life as a boarder at the Hillside Inn rather than confined with his daughter and her husband, especially since the narrative is from his own point of view. Surely he has a right to choose how to live out his own life. The reductive critic Brinkmeyer regards Aleck's whole life as ultimately "futile" simply because he will die in the end. By that atheist logic all human lives are futile. Ann Waldron thinks his aging and realization of death make him a "desperate man," whereas his narrative demonstrates patience, adaptation and acceptance of the natural order--attributes of a wise fisherman.

Feminists advocate that women become independent of men *all the time*, yet they resent any man who wishes to be independent of women most of the time. Jonza calls Aleck "foolish and selfish." Boyle goes so far as to claim that Aleck hates women: She alleges that Gordon's "Aleck Maury fiction does, to use Louise Cowan's unambiguous phrase, present "active misogyny." (92) His actions and language suggest that he is a "self-absorbed misogynist." (106) Boyle refers to "Maury's misogynistic voice" (97) and asserts that "his misogyny" is "conspicuous." (115) Yet there is no hint that the affable Aleck hates anyone, whereas the Feminist smear "misogynist" is hate speech. Boyle is so uneducated a hater and so careless a writer that she frequently contradicts herself, even in successive sentences: Aleck is said to be "very concerned about the lives of others," then in the next sentence he is said to be "Unable to love or to care for others..." (112) He hates women yet "the reader is assured of Maury's love for his wife." (114)

Contrary to the Feminist accusation that he hates women: Aleck agrees with his father that his Aunt Vic is the "best scholar I ever knew, woman or no woman." He says Aunt Vic was "always charitable.... Dear Aunt Vic! I feel a glow of pride even now when I reflect on her unfailing, her admirable sternness. It was on a scale with all her other virtues. I loved her and admired her then but it is only now after the lapse of many years that I realize what real grandeur of soul she had." "I suspect that Aunt Vic in adversity was a better manager than Uncle James had been even in his prosperous days." Likewise he clearly appreciates his attentive mother-in-law Mrs. Fayerlee: "My heart warmed towards the kind, motherly woman." "We were expecting a baby in November, and as the time approached I did not like to be away from Molly." "Molly sat up in bed, groaning and throwing her arms wide. I ran back to her and put my arms about her and tried to get her to lay her head on my shoulder, but she pushed me aside..." "I used to go in several times a day and hang over the crib watching him." "I know when I am licked. I got up and went outdoors. After all a child, a boy, up to the age of twelve or thirteen is inevitably in the hands of women and, I decided, might as well be left there."

"In our room Molly was lying face downwards on the bed, one arm flung across Dick's body. I knelt down beside her and put my arms around her but she did not seem to know that I was there." "I took her hand and told her that she must come now and get some rest. She did not look at me or speak and after a little I realized that she would not move. I got some blankets, for the nights grew cool toward morning now, and we stayed there together beside the bed until it was day." "Sometimes I would be roused in the night by her wild sobbing... I would have to sit beside her and tend her as if she were a child... I grew to feel that she did not want me with her and I sat those fall afternoons in my study in the other wing of the house." "That

nameless anxiety that always beset me if I did not know where Molly was came over me." "I could never be easy coming in unless I exchanged a greeting with her or at least knew where she was or what she was doing." "Molly was dead." "I wondered whether it was grief that had dulled my faculties.... It was two years now. I ought to be getting over it." "For the first time in my life I was free.... Only, I thought with sudden panic, there wasn't anything now that I wanted to do...." I would read, or write the brief letter which duty compelled me once a week to send my daughter."

Contrary to the charge that he selfishly abandoned family ties, Aleck maintains them according to his own measure. In the end, his revived love of fishing and his choice of where to live is an heroic triumph over grief, aging, melancholy, loneliness, and the anticipation of death.

Michael Hollister (2019)