

# The Writing of Andersonville

MAC KINLAY KANTOR

Nearly thirty years ago The University of Iowa Libraries received, as a gift from Iowa author MacKinlay Kantor, the original manuscript of Kantor's Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Andersonville*. The "manuscript" of this Civil War novel, which concerns the notorious Confederate prison camp for Union soldiers in southern Georgia, consists of a series of author's notes, several successive drafts or revisions, a final manuscript, and proof pages as well as an international file of press clippings. At the request of the library director Mr. Kantor subsequently prepared the following account of the writing of *Andersonville*, which is published here with the permission of the author's son, Tim Kantor.

*Editor*

This discussion of the writing of *Andersonville* should serve as an adequate explanatory outline for full understanding of the manuscript—its appearance and condition.

I started writing the novel on December 16, 1953, and finished it on May 25, 1955. The first few pages (beginning with the scene where Ira Claffey walks through the woods away from his plantation) were written on my old L. C. Smith typewriter, for sentimental reasons. This is a machine rebuilt from two other old L. C. Smiths—the one used by my mother throughout her editing of the *Webster City Daily News* (1921-1925) and another (second-hand) one which I bought during those years for my own use. Later, as the typewriters began to show wear and tear despite frequent overhauls, the two were built into one machine. I wrote my first novels on this typewriter, up through and including *Long Remember*, and on several of the books did all of the typing myself, complete through all drafts. I had been reluctant to part with this relic, and knowing that I was starting *Andersonville* on that day of December 16, 1953, I took the old apparatus with me in the car instead of a more modern portable. After the first day or two the veteran machine was consigned respectfully to a shelf. It has now been placed on extended loan with Mr. Stanley Windhorn, a Sarasota columnist of this date, although the stipulation is that it can be reclaimed for historical purposes later if desired.

During early stages of the writing of the novel, I followed a plan pursued especially abroad when writing *God and My Country*, *The Work*

of *St. Francis*, and the preliminary presentation of *In Russet Mantle Clad* (then titled *The Maples Were My Gods*). The pattern of work has been described several times elsewhere: a small folding chair to fit in the car as a table; a typewriter; a briefcase containing notes and writing materials; a box of reference books; a food-and-wine basket—and eventual solitude and freedom from interference.

During the period from December 16, 1953, up to our departure for Europe, late in March 1954, I managed to write only 47,000 words on *Andersonville*. I followed the same plan of work in Europe, writing daily wherever we happened to be. Even on shipboard I managed to get a good day's work done by rising each morning at earliest dawn and taking up my station in a smoking room or lounge. There I kept my work materials in a locker, made available by a cooperative steward, and was able ordinarily to do my daily stint before people started coming into the lounge, perhaps at nine o'clock. In all hotels where we stopped I had a table in our room or suite—if weather or other circumstances precluded my going out in the car, as when we were in London or Madrid. Normally, however, I worked in the car along roads and in lonely woodlands of Britain, France, and especially Spain, where we spent most of that year.

During the autumnal trip from France to England, Denmark, and West Germany, the typewriter was carried along. By the time I returned to the United States in October, I had a total of 175,000 words accomplished.

I kept a carbon of the first draft, or at least began keeping such a copy as soon as we went abroad. This was necessary because I had to send the first draft back to the United States in order for my then secretary, Phyllis Gossling, to convert it into second draft. Since extensive pencil corrections and alterations had been made in the text, I feared to lose the work thus gained, in case of disaster to a mail-carrying aircraft. Laboriously all corrective notes were copied on the carbon and retained by me as insurance. If I remember accurately, Phyllis kept the second draft here in the United States until my return. I think that very little if any of the second draft was sent back to me in Europe.

The second draft, of which a carbon also was retained, was subject to most of the final revision. Practically all of this was done at my home in Sarasota; although I carried various segments of manuscript along with me during business and research trips in the United States which ensued, in order to accomplish a desired quota of daily work on the novel. Some of these concentrated seances of revision required almost as much creative endeavor as working at the first draft.

Phyllis joined me in Florida soon after our return, in the autumn of 1954, and was able to be with me most of the time until the book was

completed. The manner of work varied according to pressure and other conditions. Sometimes I went out and worked in the car by my lonesome (plus Lobo), while she was busily typing on another draft and another sequence. Other times I dictated, live. Weather permitting, much of this work was done on the south porch, now part of my library suite. In inclement weather we worked often in the living room when no one else was around. During the few periods when I had the flu or something like that, I dictated from my bed.

The World Publishing Company started to put the book into type early in April 1955, if memory serves. (It might have been sooner.) I still had a great deal of work to do and was at an almost unbearable point of tension. The final eight weeks constituted undoubtedly the toughest period in the whole enterprise. Final editing of the finished third draft had to be completed in coordination with the efforts of copy editors at World; then the first proofs started to come in; these had to be read with care, and corrected before the book could be pagged. Also we examined all foundry proofs.

This work, ordinarily demanding a concentration of full-time energy by the author, needs to be done concurrently with the completion of the book, which ran to an estimated 350,000 words.

Often in the same 24-hour period I would be dictating whole sequences, live, to Phyllis and also writing extensively on my typewriter, either at home or out in the car. It was impossible to think of bringing in another secretary, because she would have been so unfamiliar with the body of material that she would have been valueless. I cannot overemphasize the importance of the assistance rendered by Phyllis Gossling during this period. Usually she had to transcribe her notes all evening, after typing or taking dictation all day. In the meantime, I was reading proofs which I would be unable to read during the day.

Often I have been asked if I could detect a retarding or a facility, when one method or the other was used in getting the story down. Both Phyllis and I agreed that it was almost impossible to tell the first draft, transcribed from dictation, from the first draft written directly by myself on the typewriter. I would say, "Did I dictate that scene from Meriwether Kinsman's boyhood, or write it on the typewriter?" and she would have to examine her notes thoroughly in order to be certain.

I wrote 27,000 words in the last five days, nearly 10,000 words being accomplished the final day. Usually it has been that way with me: when I saw the end in sight I could find strength which I didn't know that I still possessed. My publishers were on the phone with me, most especially Donald Friede, several times each day—listening, checking, advising, holding my spiritual hands, and mopping my spiritual brow, as it were.



A selection of novels by MacKinlay Kantor. On the bottom row, from left to right, are editions of *Andersonville* published in Italy, Spain, and Yugoslavia. From the Iowa Authors Collection, The University of Iowa Libraries.

Few of my novels have been written in complete chronology, and this was a shining example of no chronology existing except in the author's mind. I could discern where these things belonged, but no one else might have done so. The long sequence about Coral Tebbs and Nazareth Stricker, for instance (the scene which formed the basis for the *Reader's Digest* excerpt), was written in the summer of 1954. The Eric Torrosian sequence was, I think, the second sequence I wrote following the initial Claffey episode, or perhaps the third. The Judah Hansom episode was written in Spain at least ten months before I finished the book. The final scene of *Andersonville* was written five or six weeks before the book's completion.

The three very last scenes to be written, all on the final day, along with other stuff, were (a) the scene where Zoral defiles the well, and the cavalrymen come to the Widow Tebbs's cottage; (b) the unexpected appearance of the Tebbs family at the Claffey wedding; and (c) Ira's homecoming and his greeting by Lucy following her love affair with Harrell Elkins.

The very last paragraph to be written in the book was the one which appears on page 638 of the novel printed in the regular American edition—that paragraph beginning, "They did in fact do this . . . ." The last sentence to be written was the last sentence of this paragraph; thus, the last word to be written in the book was "Andersonville."

(Also I think that a small fragment of the Meriwether Kinsman episode was written on this final day. I know that there were tag ends of about six different scenes which came to completion in the final couple of days.)

According to Donald Friede, it was a little after four o'clock on the twenty-fifth of May 1955, when I put through my call to him in New York. This came within minutes after I finished the last bit, which was dictated to Phyllis on the south porch. We yelled for Irene; there was a certain amount of kissing; I think the women shed some tears; then we hastily poured out drinks, and I called Donald.

We telephoned friends who had been waiting around with bated breath, and they started appearing at the house within a couple of hours. It was a real *Andersonville* party. A lot of the folks had been preparing gifts, apparently having more confidence in my being sane when the thing was done than I did. I remember that Dick and Patty Martin brought a stockade composed of upright cigars carefully laced together. I wish I could remember all the presents, but many of them were apropos. Permanently surviving are three items in silver or chromium plate—a tray for Irene, designating her as a survivor of *Andersonville*; a desk-lighter for me, with the circumstance and date engraved (these two items were given by the Glendinnings who had the final engraving made late that

same afternoon); and a silver tray given by me to Phyllis, with an inscription identifying her as a prisoner who escaped from *Andersonville*.