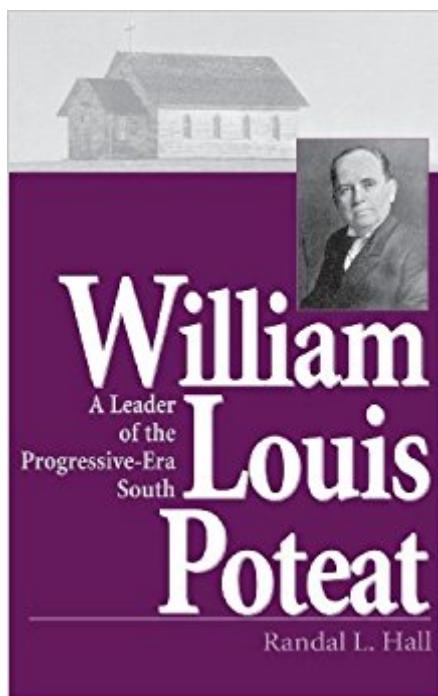


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# William Louis Poteat: A Leader Of The Progressive-Era South (Religion In The South)



## Synopsis

William Louis Poteat (1856-1938), the son of a conservative Baptist slaveholder, became one of the most outspoken southern liberals during his lifetime. He was a rarity in the South for openly teaching evolution beginning in the 1880s, and during his tenure as president of Wake Forest College (1905-1927) his advocacy of social Christianity stood in stark contrast to the zeal for practical training that swept through the New South's state universities. Exceptionally frank in his support of evolution, Poteat believed it represented God at work in nature. Despite repeated attacks in the early 1920s, Poteat stood his ground on this issue while a number of other professors at southern colleges were dismissed for teaching evolution. One of the few Baptists who stressed the social duties of Christians, Poteat led numerous campaigns during the Progressive era for reform on such issues as public education, child labor, race relations, and care of the mentally ill. His convictions were grounded in a respect for high culture and learning, a belief in the need for leadership, and a deep-seated faith in God. Poteat also embodied the struggle with the intellectual compromises that tortured contemporary social critics in the South. Though he took a liberal position on numerous issues, he was a staunch advocate for prohibition and became a strong supporter of eugenics, a position he adopted after following his beliefs in a natural hierarchy and absolute moral order to their ultimate conclusion. Randal Hall's revisionist biography presents a nuanced portrait of Poteat, shedding new light on southern intellectual life, religious development, higher education, and politics in the region during his lifetime.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In a well-written and well-researched work, Hall chronicles the life of an important transitional figure in the South's intellectual history."  
•Choice"Hall's portrait of Poteat represents a complex image that concurrently broadens our understanding of southern progressivism and yet also makes it more difficult to define exactly who the progressives were."  
•Filson History Quarterly"Hall's revisionist portrait of Poteat successfully restores a complex dimension to this oft-neglected southern thinker."  
•Georgia Historical Quarterly"Although Randal Hall's book is primarily a biography of Poteat and secondarily a history of Wake Forest as it evolved from a tiny Baptist school into a major college, it is also a study of the split personalities of Southern Progressives."  
•Isis"Answers the need for a major study of an important but neglected southern leader. . . . Rests on an elegant research base, and it is written in a vigorous and pithy prose that lends itself to the author's nuanced treatment."  
•Journal of American History"A fine book on a worthy subject written by a talented young historian."  
•Journal of Church and State"This is simply first-rate work. . . . A masterful book."  
•Journal of Southern History"An important and well-researched contribution to the history of Southern Baptists and southern culture."  
•Journal of Theology"An excellent biography of a difficult subject. . . . Deepens one's appreciation of the complexity of early-twentieth-century progressivism and the challenges posed and faced by southern liberals in that era."  
•North Carolina Historical Quarterly"Brings a fresh demythologizing perspective to the figure of William Louis Poteat (1856-1938), a devout Baptist and longtime professor of natural sciences at Wake Forest College."  
•Religious Studies Review"In this thoroughly researched, elegantly written, and imaginatively conceived book, we have a biography that is worthy of the man. This work will take its place among the leading studies of southern intellectual life, religious development, higher education, and politics in the region during the first third of the twentieth century."  
•William A. Link"A splendid story of an authentic North Carolina hero. . . . The force and clarity of his advocacy during tumultuous times made him a powerful figure in shaping public policy that continues today."  
•William Friday"The image of William Louis Poteat presented in this volume is much more detailed than has been available. Poteat was a complex man in a changing era and played a significant role in the evolution of North Carolina, the South, and Wake Forest University into their present status."  
•Winston-Salem Journal

Randal L. Hall is managing editor of the *Journal of Southern History* and adjunct associate professor

of history at Rice University. He is the author or editor of several books, including Lum and Abner: Rural America and the Golden Age of Radio. He is also the coeditor of Seeing Jefferson Anew: In His Time and Ours and Thomas Dixon Jr. and the Birth of Modern America.

A fine work, yet lest one forget, Wake Forest during and after the reign of the elder Poteat (the younger, Hubert, was a verifiable genius) Wake Forest, then strictly a Baptist school, was among the most conservative of Southern colleges and remained so until Big Tobacco moved it to Winston-Salem in the mid-fifties. If Poteat were alive today and teaching, his view of evolution would be gravely challenged by the Creationists. There is a story of how the Baptists came each year to their annual convention hoping to throw Poteat out on his ear, whereupon the Wake president would fling off into a hellfire-and-brimstone sermon that left the Baptists shivering with embarrassment. This is the best work available about Poteat and the "real" Wake Forest. For anyone wishing to know more about the Progressive era in the post-Civil War South this work is a good place to begin. .

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