PICKING OLD BONES

a review by Robin Hemley

Jeremy B. Jones. *Cipher: Decoding My Ancestor's Scandalous Secret Diaries.* Blair, 2025.

Cipher opens with the words, "In 1859, a forgettable man died," and the rest of this fascinating book quietly disproves that claim. On the contrary, the life of this man, William Thomas Prestwood, haunts his great-great-great-great-grandson, Jeremy B. Jones, for all 280 pages of this book, and presumably beyond. The irony here is that William Prestwood undoubtedly wanted to be forgotten, but a series of remarkable coincidences, unless one prefers to think of it as kismet, landed his secret diaries in the hands of Jones over a hundred and fifty years later. Prestwood went to great pains to code his diary entries into undecipherable (he assumed) symbols. How could he have known or imagined that his future descendant would go to equally great pains to not only understand Prestwood's words, but to speculate on the larger implications of this "forgettable" man's life, both historically and personally?

In 1975, a young man walking along the sidewalk in Wadesboro, NC, stumbled upon an abandoned house in the process of being demolished. All its remaining contents had been placed on the sidewalk, much of it in trash bags, but something caught his eye. There, amid the detritus of a widow's life and the needles and trash left by squatters after her death, he noticed a bundle of twenty-eight palm-sized notebooks stitched together with sewing thread. The markings inside made no sense to him. Still, they looked old and maybe valuable, so he claimed them as his own. For several years, he tried to interest historical societies and others in his find, but no one thought much of the notebooks until a state archivist in Raleigh said he'd show them to a friend, a retired cryptologist. The cryptologist, Nathaniel Browder, was immediately interested. He bought the notebooks from the young man who had found them for thirty-five dollars and spent the next six years decoding and recording the notebooks for posterity. In 1984, he self-published a run of seventy-five copies of the diaries and shortly thereafter passed away.

No one in Jones's family ever spoke to him about the diaries until he ran across a 1979 article about them and asked his grandmother if she was aware of them. Yes, she was aware, but to her they were no big deal. For Jones, however, they represented a tectonic shift in how he thought about his ancestors and their legacies, the land in North Carolina on which they had lived (and continue to live) for generations, his own relationship to the many historical wrongs in which his ancestor was implicated, and the world his young sons have inherited.

William Prestwood was not a man of many words, at least not on paper. His diaries, spanning more than fifty years from the early 1800s to the eve of the Civil War, are tersely written and often mundane in what they report. His early obsessions are what one might expect of a young man: he's mostly interested in young women, one in particular who vexes him and with whom he has a push-and-pull courtship, as well as other women he simply wants to bed. There's a lot of belt-notching around his conquests. And perhaps this is one of the reasons he began his diary and why he decided to write in code (though this is my inference, not Jones's). Like many young men, he has a fraught relationship with his father, in his case a Revolutionary War veteran from whom he seeks distance.

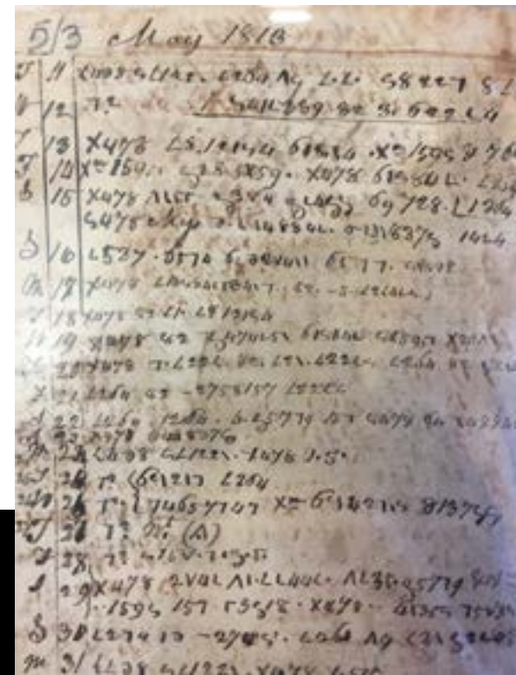
It's not simply this one man's growing pains that are being recorded in these diaries, but very much the adolescence and growing pains of the young nation in which he lives. And where these pains and troubles intertwine is where Jones must reassess the legacy of a family he thought he already knew.

Jones grew up believing that his people had been too poor to have anything to do with the slave trade that was still very much a part of the fabric of America during Prestwood's life. Many of Jones's relatives had even fought on the Union side of the war. But to his great dismay, he discovers that Prestwood enslaved a young woman named Binah, who bore several children, undoubtedly his. Not only did Prestwood enslave and rape this woman, but he apparently sold her children off, except perhaps for a son whom he favored and possibly helped escape the South to freedom.

The problem is that Jones doesn't know for certain. Because of Prestwood's terseness and the absence of crucial records, he doesn't know and will never know. There are a lot of gaps, but Jones writes impressively into them, turning speculation into a narrative engine, conducting research outside of the diaries, some of it involving DNA, contacting Binah's descendants, and speculating. He even writes several letters to his long-dead ancestor, questioning his life and what it means for the lives of Jones and his sons.

If only such a man were forgettable, but the life of Prestwood weighs heavily on Jones as he sorts through the evidence that paints a picture of a man who seemed to have occasional misgivings about the oppressive system he was a part of but who benefitted from it nonetheless. Prestwood, a schoolteacher, surveyor, and militia man, even participates, though half-heartedly, in the forced removal of the Cherokee from their lands in Western North Carolina, part of the shameful Trail of Tears.

Jones is fascinated and haunted by these legacies, not only in his own sense of responsibility to live a life in contrast to those historical wrongs, but in his genetic connection to Prestwood. DNA plays a large role in the book, not only as a means of investigating the past but in acknowledging the many people who have lived before him who in a way still live inside him. The book is not about atonement per se, and Jones doesn't spend it in handwringing, which would quickly become tedious. The book is more about acknowledgment, and that restraint is part of its power. That's what makes it such an ultimately satisfying, if troubling and quietly haunting, read. ■



OPPOSITE **The first two pages of Prestwood's original diary and** RIGHT **an 1813 excerpt from it; courtesy of Nathanial C. Browder Collection of Cryptography Manuals and William Thomas Prestwood Diaries, MC 00098, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, NC**

ROBIN HEMLEY has published sixteen books of fiction and nonfiction and has received numerous awards, including most recently, a 2026 Gold Medal in the Essay category from the Independent Publishers Book Awards for *How to Change History, a Salvage Project* (University of Nebraska Press, 2025). He is the Founder of the international nonfiction conference, NonfictioNOW; the former director of the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa; and the co-founder and president of Authorsatlarge.com. His Substack is "Turning Life into Fiction."

JEREMY B. JONES was born and raised in the North Carolina mountains. His first book, *Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland* (John F. Blair, Publisher, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015), was named the Appalachian Book of the Year by the Tennessee Mountain Heritage Literary Festival and was awarded gold in the 2015 Independent Publisher Book Awards in memoir. His essays appear in *Oxford American*, *Garden & Gun*, and *The Bitter Southerner*, among others, and he is an Associate Professor of English Studies at Western Carolina University.