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Reading Southern History: Essays on Interpreters and Interpretations

Glenn Feldman, editor
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“The South is a special place. Even now, after the turn of a new century and the dawn of a new millennium, the South is ever present in matters of American politics, American culture, and American life,” writes the editor in his introduction to this collection of seventeen essays. Feldman, author of Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949, which was nominated for the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book Award in 1999, includes a variety of historical viewpoints.

Feldman reaches out across the territory, opening his scholarly arms to different schools of Southern history: the regionalism of Chapel Hill, the Agrarians of Vanderbilt, the individualism of W.J. Cash and V.O. Key, and more.

In one essay, Junius P. Rodriguez, editor of The Chronology of World Slavery, explores the romantic views of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, who described life and labor in the antebellum South in glowing terms: his planters as benevolent caretakers, slaves as the “white man’s burden.” In another, Ted Ownby, editor of Interaction of Black and White Cultures in the Antebellum South, examines Southern religious history from the viewpoint of Samuel S. Hill, who wrote that “most Southerners had written in a mode that was more poetic than analytical.”

Perhaps the most vivid historical reading comes from John Herbert Roper’s essay, “C.Vann Woodward, Southern Historian.” Woodward has been praised as the most profound of all modern-day Southern historians. Roper writes that even Woodward’s surname “describes the warder of the king’s woods and suggests an aristocratic status,” bestowing upon him a calling to the history of his region. It was Woodward, Roper points out, who emphasized five major themes in Southern history: slavery and the Civil War, the postbellum era, the 1880s, the New South, and the Jim Crow years. Roper equates Woodward’s arrival in Chapel Hill in 1934 as the beginning of the new time of Southern historians, asserting that his “dignified confrontation and committed detachment” brought full growth to “his magnificent irrelevance.”

Jean H. Baker, biographer of “The Stevensons of Illinois” and Mary Todd Lincoln, quotes David Herbert Donald’s New York Times op-ed piece “The Southernization of America,” printed in 1976, after Jimmy Carter was elected President. “[A] century after the Civil War and Reconstruction, the United States has finally decided to rejoin the South.” Audacious arguments like this set Reading Southern History apart from other collections. Baker calls Donald’s argument “exceptional.” The same is true for this entire book, a collection of thinkers writing about our finest historians at work on the subject they found rewarding: the American South.
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