Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans

A SOUTHERN ENIGMA

ESSAYS ON THE U.S. SOUTH

Fred Hobson

PUV

A SOUTHERN ENIGMA:
ESSAYS ON THE U.S. SOUTH

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans

Directora
Carme Manuel

A SOUTHERN ENIGMA
ESSAYS ON THE U.S. SOUTH

Fred Hobson

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans

Universitat de València

A Southern Enigma: Essays on the U.S. South

1ª edición de 2008

ISBN: 978-84-370-8563-0

Imagen de la portada: Archivo personal de Fred Hobson
Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

Publicacions de la Universitat de València
http://puv.uv.es
publicacions@uv.es

For Jack and Annabel

Contents

Preface

The American South is full of paradoxes—a land, by turns, the most hospitable of places and the least hospitable, with a people the most innocent but also the guiltiest of crimes against humanity. One historian has written that the South is a repository of all the virtues and vices of the rest of the United States, except in the South those virtues and vices are writ large, are carried to extremes not seen elsewhere. That may be less true now than it once was—the era of racial segregation and lynchings and other racial violence is, for the most part, behind us—but the South is still the home of a fundamentalist religion and reactionary politics that often seems to defy reason.

The essays that follow are one man's impression of various aspects of life, past and present, in Dixie, and the essays cover much of the spectrum—race, politics, religion, literature, and other cultural manifestations. Some of the essays are biographical: I am particularly attracted to figures such as H.L. Mencken, Gerald W. Johnson, James McBride Dabbs, and Louis Rubin, social and cultural critics who have done a particularly good job of exploring the mind of the South, as well as to creative writers such as Richard Ford and Mary Mebane who have explored still other Souths. I conclude with two personal essays—two explorations of the lives of two of my family members, one my great-grandmother, the other my great-aunt, whose own stories reveal much about the South in their own particular times and places.

Fred Hobson

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
February 2008

PART I

THE SAVAGE SOUTH

The Savage South: An Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and Presumed Demise of an Image

Some forty years ago, in an essay entitled "The Benighted South: Origins of a Modern Image," George B. Tindall discussed the growth in the 1920s of the "neo-abolitionist" image of a backward, violent South. In the twenties, as he demonstrated, the South put its ills and prejudices on display for the nation to observe in lynching bees and Ku Klux Klan activity, hookworm and pellagra and child labor, the Scopes evolution trial of 1925, the anti-Catholic demagoguery of the Al Smith presidential campaign of 1928, and the Gastonia textile violence of 1929—and northern journalists and sociologists flocked south with both messianic mission and devilish glee to tell the rest of the nation about the horrors of life below the Potomac and Ohio. Southern journalists also got into the act, with the result that five crusading editors won Pulitzer prizes between 1923 and 1929. Tindall's essay was a venture into southern mythology—which, as he announced in another essay published the same year, was a "new frontier in southern history." That frontier had had its early explorers—Francis P. Gaines and, somewhat later, C. Vann Woodward among others—but in the early 1960s it was still largely open territory. Now it is pretty well settled: William R. Taylor and David Bertelson joined Tindall in the 1960s as early homesteaders, and since that time Paul Gaston, Anne Firor Scott, Michael O'Brien, Richard King, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, and other historians have taken up residence. So have numerous southern literary scholars, sociologists, and journalists.

I would like to return, however, to Tindall's insightful essay on the benighted South, for it seems to me that one might view the subject of southern benightedness somewhat differently now than one could in the mid-1960s. When he wrote in 1964 of a benighted South, Tindall was still, to some extent, an inhabitant of that

South. The 1960s was *another* neoabolitionist decade, with journalists again rushing south—and television cameras, too, this time—to document southern crimes against progress and humanity. The year Tindall published his essay, 1964, was a particularly violent year—the year of Mississippi's Freedom Summer, of three civil rights murders in Neshoba County, of demonstrations, burnings, and bombings across the Deep South.

Now, however, one considers southern benightedness, at least as a prevailing myth, largely as a historical phenomenon. The South has presumably come up from savagery (I say presumably because, as I will later demonstrate, not altogether, particularly in its politics) and one views the southern past from the vantage point of something approaching equality to the rest of the nation, if not self-proclaimed superiority in many areas. The South emerged from the dangerous days of the 1960s better than it entered, and thereafter fell almost immediately into a frenzy of self-congratulations. It now looks disdainfully on the old and decaying cities of the once-superior North—now dismissed as the Rust Belt, the Frost Belt. All the derisive belts once belonged to Dixie—the Bible Belt, the Hookworm Belt, the Chastity Belt, all labels invented by Mencken—but now Dixie is in the sun. The South, its numerous champions like to profess, is the place where America might finally work: an unspoiled land of success, optimism, harmonious race relations, and shining new cities. Whether one believes in the new supremacy of the Sun Belt (or whether one even believes that the Sun Belt really has much to do with the traditional South) is not precisely the point. The point is that this new southern success, even if much of it was imported from the North and West—together with substantial gains in race relations of which the southern states can justifiably be proud—gives the South a new confidence, makes it define itself in a somewhat different manner. In the realm of mythologies, it's a long way from the Savage South to the Superior South.

And not only does this newest of Souths view *itself* as superior in many ways—some southerners have always done that—but even outsiders often judge it to be superior. One recalls the "cultural indexes" used in the 1920s by Mencken in the *American Mercury:* the southern states finished dead last in nearly every category. Statistically—it was documented, scientifically—the best southern state was a worse place to live than almost any state outside the South. But beginning about

the 1980s, by which time air-conditioning and the federal government had cured the worst of southern ills and the mythology of the Sun Belt had fully taken hold, one saw something different in the surveys and rankings emanating from New York and Chicago. One year, according to Rand McNally, Greensboro and Knoxville were the very *best* places to live in the United States. In other surveys, Atlanta, Raleigh-Durham, and Winston-Salem came at or near the top. Brevard, North Carolina, was proclaimed the best place to retire to in America, Chapel Hill, the most educated small American city (with 70 percent college graduates), and so forth. Boosterism was not new to the South—in the 1920s Dothan, Alabama, pronounced itself the American city of the future—but the difference in the 1980s was that Yankees, using those social and cultural indexes with which they once damned the South, were making the judgments. Dixie was deemed to be warm and pleasant and prosperous: a land of oil, aerospace, agribusiness, real estate, and leisure. It was modern—with shopping malls, amusement parks, chain restaurants and motels, and acres of resort condominiums—but it was modern with the southern accent: it was reputed to be less frantic, more open and honest, and more genuinely religious than the rest of America. It had symphonies, art museums, ballet companies, repertory theaters—and, after 1966, major league sports.

To some extent, by the end of the twentieth century, the bloom was off the rose, but not altogether. Atlanta, which in the 1960s had labeled itself "The City Too Busy to Hate," and later "The World's Next Great City," in the nineties hosted the Olympics. And with Charlotte rising to a position second only to New York among U.S. banking centers, with Mercedes and BMW, Nissan and Saturn plants coming south—and, more broadly speaking, eight southern states among the top ten in the country with the highest growth rate of manufacturing plants—Dixie finally seemed what its boosters had long wanted it to be: a good place for the nation to do business. (Or, "A Good Place to Make Money," as Charlotte had shamelessly labeled itself in the 1970s.) It was also a good place to do politics, at least of a certain variety. As Republicans took over the country, southerners took over the national Republican Party. In the mid and late nineties virtually every leadership post in the erstwhile party of Lincoln—the Speaker of the House (Newt Gingrich), Senate majority leader (Trent Lott), House majority leader (Dick Armey), and House majority whip (Tom DeLay)—was filled by a conservative southern

Republican, and, of course, the Republican president, elected in 2000, was a faux southerner/Texan. Although I question these phenomena as indicators of southern progress, they are indisputably signs of southern power, and in other realms there were indeed indisputable signs of progress. At century's end the South boasted more school integration than any other part of the country (though such success was only relative), and African Americans were reversing their path of the 1920s and migrating back to the South, a number of them—CBS reported—buying million-dollar homes in and around Atlanta. Peter Applebome, in *Dixie Rising,* wrote that a place such as Charlotte, formerly that also-ran among southern cities ("The City Too Busy Too Late"?) and long consumed with Atlanta-envy, now—with its "blend of Yankee hustle and Southern charm"—possessed "the potential to be not just the nation's economic heart but its best hope for racial peace as well."

All this strikes me as a little excessive: just as the South was never quite so bad as advertised in the 1920s, it is now not so good as advertised in many quarters. But to contend that the new southern image is misleading, that it is based on superficiality, is to miss the point. Skyscrapers, in which Atlanta specializes, are eye-catching, and when one approaches Henry Grady's city on I-20 from the west and sees its shining towers fifteen miles away, one believes he has seen Byzantium. Still, the new image attributes to the South a sort of virtue and energy that it does not fully deserve. I do not know who invented air-conditioning, but I would contend that he, or she, as much as anyone else, is responsible for the new image of the South—and I would bet he was not a southerner. (What made Dayton, Tennessee, brutal to northern and European journalists covering the Scopes trial in 1925 was the hundred-degree heat and humidity as much as the fundamentalism of the natives. And can one imagine Faulkner writing *Absalom, Absalom!* under the spell of central air?) Indeed, the South, as I hope to demonstrate, still fares poorly in many of Mencken's social and cultural indexes, ranking high in poverty and homicides and infant mortality, low in the number of volumes on library shelves.

But in a larger sense, Peachtree Street has replaced Tobacco Road, and one cannot deny the power of public relations. Southern is hot, as Applebome and others have reminded us: it is associated with authenticity, unpretentiousness, country music, good times, and a slower pace of life, not to mention NASCAR and evangelical religion, which a good segment of the rest of the nation seems to take

to. What once was avoided is now embraced: several are the Yankee-born-and-bred Ph.D.'s I know who have taken academic positions in Dixie, fallen in love with its folk culture, and, within a year or two, are not only eating cornbread and black-eyed peas but saying "fixin' to" and "might could" and "hey" instead of "hi." And most of my southern-bred students don't even know they are supposed to be from a benighted land.

It is, then, this loss of the *consciousness* of being benighted—or being considered benighted by outsiders; or, in some cases, of ever having been considered benighted—that intrigues me. It is in this way that the southern temper has radically changed. I am not so foolish as to proclaim on this account the end of southern distinctiveness. Historical graveyards are full of those who have prophesied in such manner, have insisted that this time we truly do have a different South with us. Hardly are the words out of one's computer than any number of South-watchers (and all of us have a professional interest, after all, in seeing that the South remains distinctive) are reminding us that the prognostication is, at best, premature. So it is not the loss of southern distinctiveness I am talking about, but rather the decline of one powerful southern image, the savage or benighted. As that image fades, it is time to take stock of it, time for a summing up, or at least (as this essay proposes to be) a preliminary inquiry. Just as—Richard M. Weaver once wrote—one writes an apologia for a culture and an era just as that era draws to a close, perhaps one should also investigate the origins and long endurance of a powerful perception just as that perception is diminishing.

The image of southern benightedness did not begin with the abolitionists. It is as old as the South itself, older in fact than any region known as "the South"—and thus two centuries older than William Lloyd Garrison and the antislavery crusade. From the earliest days, the southern colonies were perceived as being more primitive and violent and (as David Bertelson has shown) lazier than the other American colonies. By the 1630s it was generally assumed, and not only by New England Puritans, that the settlers of Virginia were deficient in morality and in piety. One early writer attributed the problems of Jamestown to the fact that many of its founders had not "been reconciled to God," but rather were "most miserable, covetous men… murderers, thieves, adulterers, idle persons." By the mid-

seventeenth century Virginia and Maryland were so often maligned that John Hammond was moved to write *Leah and Rachel* (1656) in order to refute the assumption that the two colonies were a "nest of rogues, whores, dissolute and rooking persons." But even Hammond, Hugh Jones, Robert Beverley, and other apologists for the southern colonies conceded that the early colonists were guilty of sloth. Jones contended that Virginians were "climate-struck." And William Byrd, writing in the next century, agreed that the Jamestown settlers "detested work more than famine."

One must begin, however, by acknowledging a certain irony of colonial southern history: that the slothful, irreligious, and dissolute southern colonies *began* as a southern Eden—a garden which, because improperly tended, proved to be more curse than blessing. "Earth's only paradise," Michael Drayton had written of Virginia in 1619; a "Garden of Eden," William Symonds had proclaimed in a London sermon in 1609; and early visitors to the colony—not always promoters—had described it in similar terms. (New England, by contrast, was often described as a barren wilderness, sometimes—as in Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*—a "hideous and desolate wilderness.") But in the Virginia Eden lay the seeds of a benighted South, for the fertile soil, the warm climate, and the long growing season contributed to that idleness about which observers complained, and idleness provided time for dissipation, vice, and violence. Numerous colonial writers found other disadvantages in Virginia's apparent assets: the warm climate brought "cruel diseases, as swellings, fluxes, burning fevers," and the prosperous plantation economy soon called for the importation of African slaves. By 1730 slaves made up at least one-third of the population of the southern colonies.

When visitors in the early eighteenth century remarked on the great number of Africans in the southern colonies, however, it usually was not slavery to which they objected—but rather the slave. As Winthrop Jordan and others have shown, eighteenth-century Europeans, following Linnaeus's studies in classifying man, placed the Negro at the bottom of the earth's people, nearest the beasts. Other commentators, more given to religion than to science, solemnly affirmed that the Negro was the descendant of Ham and bore his curse. In either case, black men and women were assumed to be vastly inferior to white Europeans, and their concentrated presence in the southern colonies was said to degrade the entire

southern civilization. By the mid-eighteenth century, then—even more than in the seventeenth—the southern colonies were associated widely with irreligion, licentiousness, and sexual indulgence. The South was indeed assumed to be savage.

It was not until the 1750s and 1760s that writers in any numbers, usually Quakers, began to assert that slavery *itself* might be immoral—and that the region in which the vast majority of slaves were held was even more benighted for that reason. To these writers, slavery was not simply harmful for the civilization that possessed it; rather, to them, slavery was sin. John Woolman recorded in his *Journal* his impressions of a journey in 1746 to Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina: "I saw in these southern provinces so many vices and corruptions, increased by this slave trade and this way of life, that slavery appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the land; and though now many willingly run into it, yet in future the consequences will be grievous to posterity."

Most Americans, it goes without saying, did not read Woolman and the Quakers, and most in the late eighteenth century were little disturbed by slavery. But the image of a savage South controlled by dissolute planters was nonetheless becoming prevalent, and that image was increasingly at odds with the mythology of a new nation which had fought a revolution to attack aristocratic privilege and establish a representative government. But the image of southern savagery was grounded in realities other than slavery: as historian Elliott Gorn has shown, the southern frontier—that is, south of the Ohio River—was cruder and rougher than the northern frontier, more given to clawing and scratching and eye-gouging. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, not only northern writers—who were often something other than dispassionate observers during an era when North and South struggled for control of the new nation—but also English and European travelers and residents remarked on the primitive quality of southern life. Crèvecoeur, Tocqueville, Thomas Ashe, Harriet Martineau, Charles Dickens, Mrs. Trollope: most, particularly the English, found fault with American life in general, but all were critical, often harshly so, of the American South, its violence, cultural backwardness, and general shabbiness and disorder. In *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) Crèvecoeur spoke of South Carolina as the richest province in the northern hemisphere, with "inhabitants… the gayest in the hemisphere": "The rays of the sun seem to urge them on irresistibly to dissipation and pleasure." Yet,

"while all is joy, festivity, and happiness in Charles Towne, would you imagine that scenes of misery overspread in the country? Their ears by habit are become deaf, their hearts are hardened; they neither see, hear nor feel for the woes of their poor slaves." Crèvecoeur then presented a devastating picture of the slave South, a picture harsher by far than those painted by eighteenth-century New Englanders.

Thomas Ashe, an Englishman traveling along the western frontier in 1806, found a different sort of benightedness. Southern society was in a state of "shameful degeneracy" and was guaranteed to produce "turbulent citizens, abandoned Christians, inconstant husbands, unnatural fathers, and treacherous friends." Martineau, in *Society in America* (1837), similarly painted a picture of a primitive, violent South, degraded by "that tremendous curse, the possession of irresponsible power [over slaves]." Two years later Mrs. Trollope spoke of southerners as a "people so besotted by their avarice as to be insensible to the sure approach of the vengeance which all others so plainly see approaching them." Three years later, Dickens wrote of his thoughts as he traveled through Virginia: "Where slavery sits brooding… there is an air of ruin and decay abroad, which is inseparable from the system... Gloom and dejection are upon all." Tocqueville, writing about the same time, was in some ways kinder to the southern states but still could not escape the conclusion that the American South was a doomed civilization: the "evils" of slavery and the "indolence of the inhabitants of the South" were so ingrained that there appeared to be no solution (not even emancipation) for the southern dilemma.

Demonstrably, then, there existed a powerful and prevailing image of a savage South long before and apart from Garrison and the militant New England abolitionists. That image was deeply rooted before they began to raise their voices in the 1830s. No one can deny, however, that the anti-South invective was carried to a new level by the abolitionists, whose number, modest before the congressional debate over the Missouri Compromise in 1819 and 1820, began to swell not long after that. Garrison pictured a "blood-stained" South guilty of "driving women into the field, like a beast, under the lash of a brutal overseer… stealing infants… trafficking in human flesh." Wendell Phillips described the South as "a daily system of Hell," Theodore Weld as a society given to "dissipation, sensuality, brutality, cruelty, and meanness." To the New England abolitionists, as to the

eighteenth-century Quakers, slavery was sin. How would southern slaveholders and their apologists, asked Garrison, "be able to bear the awful retributions of Heaven, which must inevitably overwhelm them, unless they speedily repent?"

If the voices of Garrison, Phillips, Weld, Lewis Tappan, Gerrit Smith, and other leaders of the abolitionist movement were heeded by relatively few Americans in the 1830s and 1840s, and the antislavery newspapers *The Liberator* and *The Emancipator* were not widely read, the works of more popular writers—Lowell, Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe—carried greater influence. The vivid description in Lowell's *Biglow Papers* of the "grasping, over-reaching, nigger-drivin' States"—or Whittier's indictment of a southern system which held "two millions of God's creatures in bondage," or Stowe's depiction of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—moved readers as Garrison and Phillips could not. So did narratives by Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup, James W. C. Pennington, and other ex-slaves which became best-sellers in the mid-nineteenth century. (Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* not published until 1861, would have to wait until the late twentieth century to find most of its readers.) Particularly harrowing was the nightmare experience of Northup, a free northern black who was kidnapped and taken *into* slavery in the backcountry of Louisiana. What reader, in an age of sentimental novels, could fail to be fascinated and moved by stories which had all the conventions of gothic fiction—confinement, torture, escape, and life-and-death chases—or fail to indict the civilization that sanctioned such horrors?

Another of the many ironies of southern history is that the northern perception of a savage South was modified by a war in which southerners killed and maimed more than a hundred thousand Union soldiers: southern defeat in the Civil War led to the mythology of a southern Lost Cause—the death of a noble and gracious civilization—that by the 1880s and 1890s was embraced by the North as well as the South. The perception of southern savagery was not altered immediately, of course. Shortly after Appomattox, the northern reading public turned eagerly to harshly anti-southern books by Whitelaw Reid, Sidney Andrews, and J. T. Trowbridge, as well as to numerous articles on the barbarism of southern prisoner-of-war camps, bitter anti-South essays in *Harper's Weekly,* and, somewhat later,