

# CURRENT BOOKS

## SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

### *Dixie's Dictionary*

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SOUTHERN

**CULTURE.** Edited by Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris. Univ. of North Carolina. 1634 pp. \$49.95

Would any scholar try to prepare an *Encyclopedia of Northern Culture*? Not likely. Yankeeedom is too inclusive and too varied to qualify for such an enterprise. Southern culture, whether white or black, persists in the popular imagination as a culture apart. But how should the southerners' apartness be defined?

A leading conservative historian of the South, Clyde N. Wilson, recently suggested that "the South has always been primarily a matter of values." True enough. But the values that he and other conservatives celebrate do not include the dissenting tradition which C. Vann Woodward recorded in his influential *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955). Woodward showed that southerners, both white and black, have periodically striven for racial and class justice, even if those efforts almost inevitably miscarried (or ended up working at cross-purposes). Dangers of simplification and the risks of distortion, both from the right and the left, have plagued the history of the South more than that of any other American region. One notable accomplishment of the *Encyclopedia* is that it avoids polemics, subtle or overt.

For other reasons as well, the *Encyclopedia* falls little short of a *tour de force*. With contributions from 800 specialists, the book contains articles, long and short, some trivial, others serious, ranging from Hank Aaron to Zydeco (black Creole) music. Collectively, they make a kind of intellectual fruitcake, each morsel of which is almost unfailingly rich. One learns, for instance, that as of 1981, on a ratio to total population, Mississippi leads the nation, as does the lower South as a whole, in the

number of professional football players; or that, in 1984, of the top 10 states in the purchases of new mobile homes, eight were in the South. *Moon Pies* and *Moonshine* earn admission alongside such esoteric topics as *Chesapeake Bay Dialect*, *Drawl*, and *Conch* (a linguistic oddity of the Florida Keys). Alphabetically arranged, the *Encyclopedia* places a sketch of *James Madison* on the same page that shelters a lively piece about the *Mint Julep*.

Numbering 1,600 pages of text and weighing close to ten pounds, the volume is not a book to take to bed. (Better reinforce the shelf it is placed on.) To portray "everything that has sustained either the reality or the illusion of [southern] regional distinctiveness," the editors present 24 thematic sections, including history, religion, folklore, language, art and architecture, recreation, politics, the mythic South, urbanization, literature, music, violence, law, and the media. Open it anywhere, and chances are you'll land in the midst of an interesting discussion, often enhanced with a pertinent illustration.

On page 1379, for example, is a striking photograph of an elderly white boss, in sparkling white shirt and suspenders, who has one short, fat leg propped defiantly on the bumper of his car, partly obscuring the 1936 Mississippi license plate. Seated differentially behind him in the shadows of a clapboard grocery is a collection of dark-clothed, black-skinned field hands. The photograph begins J. Wayne Flynt's section on *Social Class*, which shows how convictions about racial superiority made possible a sense of white social cohesion that all but erased class consciousness.

Relations between blacks and whites are never far away anywhere in this encyclopedia. Consider *Religion*. White Christians have generally held the conviction that morality should be approached indi-

vidualistically. But in a South divided largely between two homogeneous groups, "whites" and "blacks," that conviction enabled white Christians to disdain confronting social and racial problems that required collective effort. African-Americans, by contrast, were denied the luxury of considering their moral lot an individual affair. And black churches have provided the leaders and masses to overturn centuries of racial oppression. To their credit, the editors never assume that only the whites' values are truly southern.

Even with 1600 pages at their disposal, the editors had to make decisions. The African-American presence in the southern media, especially news publishing, is woefully scant. Far too many current writers, such as Peter Taylor, Donald Justice, and Ellen Douglas, receive no mention at all. The section on *Women's Life* should have been enlarged—perhaps at the expense of *Music*, which has more rock stars than anyone over 16 need know about.

Nothing so differentiates the South as its much acclaimed—and much criticized—social ethics. While no section of the volume deals specifically with public values, the ingredients abound under such headings as *Violence, History and Manners, Mythic South, and Hospitality*. Such articles suggest that Clyde Wilson is right in saying that the South is best defined by its adherence to certain precepts. The problem is what to make of them.

So much has changed in the moral and cultural atmosphere of the South that debating its particularity in the manner of Clyde Wilson and C. Vann Woodward—and indeed the *Encyclopedia* itself—might seem at first a weary exercise in nostalgia. After all, the McDonald's in Coosawhat-chie, South Carolina, is just the same as the one in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. To further complicate matters, economic pressures and inducements in the South have pushed out rural blacks and pulled in hordes of Northern urban whites. Two-thirds of all southerners now live in cities, Yankeeized in their skylines and squalid downtowns. Only a fraction of the southern population still works the soil.



Even the regional literature has changed. A new breed of writers—Madison Smartt Bell, Lee K. Abbott, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Larry McMurtry—has succeeded the generation of Eudora Welty and Robert Penn Warren. Generally the most recent fiction depicts characters suffering more from a sense of dislocation, alienation, and amnesia than from dreams of past crimes and spurious glories, the cultural mood which William Faulkner explored. The old southern code of honor has become a subject of ridicule, as in John Kennedy Toole's satire, *The Confederacy of Dunces* (1980). In it, the "Night of Joy" bar in New Orleans has a plantation decor with a comically mindless stripper in easily unhooked crinoline billed as "Harlot O'Hara."

In politics, too, the "Solid South" has vanished; old courthouse regimes disappear with each election. As James Hodges observes, southern white political ideology has begun "to look suspiciously American"—and Republican. Since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, southern Democratic aspirants rely ever more heavily on black votes. African-Americans have gained many more state and local offices in the South—some 3,233 by 1985, Darlene Hine tabulates—than ever they controlled during "black Republican" Reconstruction.

Under these circumstances, the question of the South's inherent character (and its continuation) seems less a matter of sectional separateness than of the southernization of the country at large. Now that cotton is no longer king, the South's major export is "culture"—music and language, black as well as "redneck." A kind of country talk has invaded the national media. In politics, by waving the Stars and Stripes, not the old "Bloody Shirt," Ronald Reagan and George Bush sound more southern than earlier heirs of Lincoln's mantle. Southern-born black leaders like Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young have a national, not solely regional, impact.

Despite all these changes—and partly because of them—the supposed advent of a "New New South" has been too loudly proclaimed. The bedrock of the southern temperament has included and today still includes these unhappy signs: continued insensitivity about matters of race and sex; undue leniency in criminal justice toward "justifiable homicide" and contrasting severity about "wrongdoers who threaten the moral values, beliefs, and social mores of the general public"; "schizoid" attitudes toward alcohol, as David Courtwright calls drinking in the Bible Belt. Forty percent of all adult southern males own guns, records Fred Hawley, some "16 percentage points higher than in non-southern areas." Atlanta, Houston, Tuscaloosa, Richmond, and the South as a whole have had greater rates of homicide per 100,000 than Colombia to the south and New York City to the north.

Of course a brighter side exists as well.

Southern politeness and unwillingness to hurt others' feelings, at least when unprovoked, are not mere trappings of an obsolete gentility. Charles Wilson notes that "Southerners have traditionally equated manners with morals, so that unmannerly behavior has been viewed as immoral behavior." Common gestures, language, and tacit understandings have sometimes helped whites and blacks to achieve an accord that northerners might envy. Among southern blacks and whites there is, as Frederick Douglass once said, "a rigid enforcement of the law of respect for elders," an etiquette (if it survives) that will become ever more pertinent as the American populace ages. Even newcomers quickly learn to be southerners in spirit if not in accent. Like the natives, they are entangled in the web of place and persistent custom. Southern values, especially those surrounding family life, are at times the exemplary exception in a nation of growing homogenization.

In light of these factors, editors Wilson and Ferris offer stunning testimony to regional vitality. One need not be a conservative to appreciate Melvin Bradford's notion that "a culture is made up of a set of habits or modes of conduct, 'of chairs and tables, songs and tales,' and also of familiar sights and sounds and smells, and finally of manners." The South will continue to change, even drastically. Somehow, though, it promises to remain the South, for better or worse.

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### *Portrait of the Poet as an Andalusian Dog*

**FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA: A Life.** By Ian Gibson. Pantheon. 551 pp. \$29.95

Reading this life of the Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) was for me a nostalgic adventure. As a sophomore about half a century

ago, with my Hispanophilia freshly kindled by a stay in Cuba, I had as my Spanish professor the brilliant Don Augusto Centeno, who had been a classmate of Lorca's as well as Luis Buñuel's at the University of Madrid. His descriptions of Lorca's poetry indelibly stamped my sensibility. Lorca's