

smallpox contamination. Shortly before she died, Colter donated the drawings to the Little Bighorn National Monument—her way, perhaps, of giving back to a dying culture what she'd stolen in good faith.

—A. J. HEWAT

**THE REBUKE OF HISTORY:
*The Southern Agrarians and American
Conservative Thought.***

By Paul V. Murphy. Univ. of North Carolina Press. 351 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper

Intellectuals cultivate what Freud termed the “narcissism of small differences,” so it’s no surprise that the intellectual history of American conservatism embodies as much contention as consensus. Even so, for those who like their history simple and linear, the story Murphy tells with such thoroughness and insight will come as a rebuke, as it were. A professor of history at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, he offers a dense but cogent account of how the radical movement known as Southern Agrarianism became one of the main strands of American conservatism.

Agrarianism’s manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), was written by “Twelve Southerners,” including poet-critics John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, and novelist-poet-critic Robert Penn Warren. The Agrarians contended that an agricultural economy was uniquely suited to human flourishing, and that the values and traditions of an agrarian ethos were ideal to support a stable, coherent society that emphasized family and community. Such a traditional social order was hostile both to state power and to the untrammelled market, while inclined toward natural piety and religious

observance. As the prime historical exemplar of such an ideal order, the Agrarians unapologetically touted the antebellum South. Not surprisingly, and not entirely unjustly, they were accused of being economic reactionaries, cultural and social traditionalists, and racists.

In the more affluent but anxious Cold War era, the Agrarians and their followers shed the agricultural emphasis and became identified with a general defense of traditional Western-Christian culture against the acids of modernity and secularism. As such, the movement was seduced by William F. Buckley’s largely successful “fusionist” effort to create a broad church of conservatism, with latter-day Agrarians such as Richard Weaver and M. E. Bradford generally siding with the traditionalist (as opposed to the libertarian) wing. By the 1980s, Agrarianism had transformed itself once again, this time becoming a largely academic exercise caught up in questions about the survival of southern identity.

In a book with many virtues, Murphy skillfully charts Agrarianism’s twists and turns. Along the way, he lucidly explicates—and then criticizes—positions with which he clearly disagrees. He emphasizes the Achilles’ heel of race and slavery that southern conservatives, except for Robert Penn Warren and a few others, never really overcame.

Beyond race, Agrarianism’s problem was that it never had the courage of its convictions against finance and industrial capitalism; nor was it willing to take a stand on the environmental damage inflicted by capitalist as well as socialist economies. Rather, it took the easy way out by embracing American conservatism’s obsessive hostility to the state. In doing so, southern conservatism acquiesced in the late-20th-century version of the Gilded Age.

—RICHARD H. KING

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