

CURRENT BOOKS

FELLOWS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF THE NEW SOUTH:

Alabama, 1860-1885

by Jonathan M. Wiener
La. State Univ., 1978
247 pp. \$14.95

PLANTERS AND THE MAKING OF A "NEW SOUTH": Class, Politics, and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900

by Dwight B. Billings, Jr.
Univ. of N.C., 1979
284 pp. \$15

After the Civil War, grasping upstarts pushed aside the great planters who had controlled Southern politics—so goes the conventional chronicle of the post-bellum South. By two recent accounts, however, it is mainly a fabrication. Wiener, a historian at the University of California, Irvine, finds that, in five Alabama counties, the planter elite was as dominant in the 1860s and '70s as it had been in the decade prior to the war. The largest landholders, in fact, added to their properties. Plantations had ceased to be workable because freedmen refused to labor in gangs as they had under slavery. But sharecropping developed gradually as an alternative. It eliminated the detested overseer—and the gentry still owned the land. Since freedmen had to buy their supplies and sell their cotton on terms set by the landlord, the planter class profited nicely.

Ante-bellum North Carolina was the poorest of the Southern states; cotton production flourished only in a few eastern counties. Yet from 1880 to 1900, an average of six new textile mills sprang up in the state each year, processing cotton from all over the South. Billings, a University of Kentucky sociologist, shows how eastern Carolina planters supplied the capital for, and were the chief beneficiaries of, industrialization. Located in the western Piedmont hills, where water power was abundant, their mills offered jobs to subsistence farmers and paid for new schools and churches. As both authors stress, the way in which well-to-do landholders held onto their power shaped Southern history. In Alabama, planters with a high stake in sharecropping warded off the mechanization of agriculture and perpetuated the state's underdevelop-

ment. In North Carolina's manufacturing counties, textile workers joined the mill owners to turn back the mixed-race Populist challenge of the 1890s. Soon after, the state legislature disenfranchised both blacks and illiterate poor whites. The legacy of the planters' power—a one-party South and voting discrimination—lasted until the 1960s.

—James Lang ('78)

**THE POLITICS OF
SOVIET CINEMA,
1917–1929**

by Richard Taylor
Cambridge, 1979
214 pp. \$19.95

During the 1920s, a group of young Soviet directors, most notably Sergei Eisenstein, made some of the most innovative films the world had yet seen. They used their art as a tool for political indoctrination—extolling the glories of the 1917 Revolution and of the new Soviet way of life—more skillfully than any director before, or perhaps since. British historian Taylor describes this highly creative period that, ironically, stunted the Soviet cinema's future development. Although filmmakers quoted Lenin's endorsement of the medium ("Of all the arts for us the cinema is the most important") *ad nauseam*, and Communist leaders talked a great deal about the propaganda potential of films, the Party failed to supply the young industry with adequate financial and institutional support. Soviet leaders could not decide whether they wanted to raise artistic standards, to use films as a source of revenue, or to exploit the new art form simply as a propaganda tool. Overlapping film agencies competed for meager funds. Most importantly, Taylor writes, the Russian people, as long as they had a choice, preferred entertaining American films to artistically superior, ideologically "correct" Soviet ones. Taylor has performed a valuable service by deflating the image of the early Soviet film industry as a powerful propaganda machine. He is less successful in explaining how and why a group of talented artists suddenly appeared and made lasting contributions to cinema art. But perhaps that is an impossible task.

—Peter Kenez ('80)