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The Birth of Jim Crow (Book Review)

Edward L. Ayers
University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

DISCUSSIONS OF RECENT BOOKS

THE BIRTH OF JIM CROW

BY EDWARD L. AYERS

The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation. By Joel Williamson. Oxford. $25.00.

The dramatic changes in race relations of the 1950's and 1960's have long since stopped; no one can tell when new changes will begin or what shape they will take. The 1980's are an auspicious time to reevaluate how we reached this plateau, what twisted paths we followed to get to where we stand now, what new directions we might take. Joel Williamson has pondered American race relations for the last 20 years. He is as knowledgeable a guide as we could hope for, and the book he has written is protean, stimulating, and idiosyncratic. It is bound to create controversy.

The last time anyone tried to draw so broad a map of American race relations, the nation was in the midst of altering the institutionalized racism that had dominated the South for half a century. The year was 1955, the cartographer was C. Vann Woodward, and the book was *The Strange Career of Jim Crow.* Woodward strove to show that change was possible, that things had not always been the same. He focused upon the 1890's, when the Jim Crow statutes that so many white Americans believed inevitable had been first written into law. Woodward portrayed the nineties as a time when the doors of equality were slammed tightly shut against all blacks—no matter how well educated, wealthy, or servile any individual might be. In Woodward's view, the crucial

precipitating event of this terrible change was the rise and fall of Populism. In that movement, he believed, poor whites and poor blacks had threatened to unite to overthrow the entrenched white leadership of the region; when they failed, the poor whites turned against the blacks in frustration, and the powerful whites turned against blacks in fear. The results were brutality, disfranchisement, and segregation.

In the three decades since *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* was published, a host of other historians has written on the evolution of Southern race relations. Although Woodward's thesis is still the standard by which all others are measured, not all historians have been entirely persuaded by his argument. Some have insisted that the codification of Jim Crow in the nineties did not constitute a marked change in the reality of day-to-day life, for discrimination had always been the real law of the land. Others pointed out that the only realistic alternative to segregation in the postwar South had never been integration, but total exclusion of blacks from all public facilities—and thus segregation must be viewed as a glass at least partially full. Others argued that white Populists were as racist as their opponents and that their revolt therefore never presented a real threat to the racial status quo. In the last few years, others (drawing upon Woodward's own earlier work) have suggested that the fundamental drive behind the South's increasing rigidity had less to do with politics per se than it did with deeper changes, especially in some relationship with industrialization and urbanization.

Given this historiographical ferment, it is not surprising that Joel Williamson chooses not to replicate Woodward's argument. What *is* surprising is his choice of alternative explanations. He does not follow the trajectory of recent scholarship, which has been toward a more materialist perspective, toward a vision that places class, economic relations, and political power at center stage. Rather, Williamson's account prominently displays a few individuals rather than the anonymous masses, consciously wrought ideas rather than half-conscious ideologies, psychologies rather

than economics. Indeed, Williamson's book is reminiscent of the late 1950's and early 1960's, when American scholars felt free to explain history by reference to a small number of characteristic men, felt comfortable talking about social psychologies. In recent years, historians have taken a more skeptical stance. Assumptions about society do not so much trickle down from influential thinkers, it seems to many of us now, as they are slowly squeezed out of social experience.

To Williamson, race is a force almost entirely independent of social reality, an awesome and autonomous power. "Racism is, in its essence, a psychological—even a psychiatric—phenomenon," he writes. "Racists need devils, or they need gods, and often they need both. . . . The ideology and the institutions (economic, political, educational, penal, etc.) involved in a given racist set are the paraphernalia in a play, the costumes and scenery designed to promote the illusion, to make people seem to be what the racists need them to be." Williamson's idealist approach has led him to rely very heavily on the letters and diaries of his major characters. The abbreviated notes to *The Crucible of Race* seldom refer to the work of historians who have come before, or to newspapers, social statistics, folklore, popular culture, and other sources that would have provided perspectives other than those of his select *dramatis personae*. The effect is to make the history of race relations oddly ethereal.

Despite this book's prodigious length, it does not pretend to be a balanced survey of the South's race relations; instead, it is an extremely long interpretive essay. From the details and case studies of *The Crucible of Race* slowly emerges the book's major argument. The 25 years between 1889 and 1915, Williamson believes, marked "The Great Transformation" of American race relations. At the beginning of that transformation, the white elite focused much of its concern and energy on the black mass, while generally ignoring the white mass. By the time the transformation concluded a generation later, common whites and elite whites had fused in a new way at the expense of the black mass, who—after two horrible

decades of legal and extralegal attacks on their rights and their persons—were shunted aside and rendered "invisible." In Williamson's model of the transformation, three groups of elite whites play the crucial roles; he calls them "conservatives," "liberals," and "radicals." The white mass and the black mass played generally passive roles, though poor whites did assert themselves during lynchings and (before their disfranchisement around the turn of the century) at election time.

The stage for the Great Transformation was set by the disintegration of the "organic society" of slavery, in which the dominant and the dominated lived within the personal relationships of "the peculiar institution." Williamson sees the half century after emancipation as essentially a period of the "disengagement," "alienation," and "feudalization" of black life in the South. Where other scholars have seen the building of black churches, schools, and fraternal orders as evidence of the growing self-confidence and self-sufficiency of the black community, Williamson sees them more as evidence of deteriorating race relations and the erosion of shared ideals by blacks and whites.

The whites he calls "conservatives" tried to check the disintegration of Southern race relations by a return to the "paternalism" they believed had ruled during slavery. They sought to help blacks without moving the ex-slaves from their true and just place in the Southern social order. A few liberals sought a frank confrontation with the racial problems of the region, but the evasive conservative approach dominated for the 15 years or so after the end of Reconstruction. The liberals were ignored or driven from the South. Thus matters stood until radicalism suddenly gained a hearing. Williamson, in his one bow to a materialist explanation, argues that the desperate economic crisis of the early 1890's created a context of paranoia, fear, and hysteria in which radical claims about the deterioration of black morals, self-control, religion, and white power suddenly seemed compelling to more whites. Once the proponents of radicalism gathered an

audience (Ben Tillman of South Carolina, Rebecca Latimer Felton of Georgia, and Thomas Dixon of North Carolina are the major examples Williamson uses), that frame of mind took on a life very much of its own. In Williamson's vision, for example, the major "cause" of the race riots in the early 20th century was radicalism. No longer dependent on social events, its spirit ruled the South for 25 years. Those two and a half decades were the undeniable nadir of American race relations: lynching reached its all-time peak, blacks were stripped of the vote in state after state, the North openly abandoned Southern blacks, and segregation was written into law. Fully three-fourths of Williamson's large book wrestles with the complexities of this terrible era in both the North and the South. In those hundreds of pages, whatever reservations one may hold about Williamson's fundamental assumptions, he adds more to our knowledge of race in America between the Civil War and World War I than any book published since Woodward's classic.

The final portion of the book, while just as provocative as the remainder, is even more problematic. It opens with an eloquent account of W. E. B. DuBois and the evolution of his doctrine of black soul. But Williamson seeks to balance DuBois with Edgar Gardner Murphy, who espoused what Williamson calls "Volksgeistian Conservatism" or "white soul." The first responsibility of the white race, Murphy argued, was to bind itself together through education and uplift. There was no need to worry about blacks, for progress would ultimately bring about the best of all Americas—one in which each race would have a place defined by its own special gifts. The white elite would serve everyone best by tending to its white brothers. Because each race had its own genius, its own destiny, interracial action was unnecessary and misguided. Democracy would eventually triumph as long as each race took care of itself. Segregation was not only necessary but beneficial to both races. Murphy was clearly no match for DuBois, and Volksgeistian Conservatism remains unconvincing as the dominant mode of racial thought in the

early 20th-century South. One cannot help but feel that Williamson has greatly exaggerated its importance for the sake of symmetry and closure.

It may be because of the limitations of Volksgeistian Conservatism as an explanation that the 20th century gets such short shrift in such a long book. Williamson sees race relations in our century as largely inertia, the playing out of Volksgeistian Conservatism and the institutions it created. He argues that the Civil Rights Movement "has resulted in no great revolution on race relations." He portrays the years between 1915 and 1940 as a period of great self-satisfaction and cohesion among Southern whites, now that their race relations were "settled." Divisions among whites mattered little; class barely existed. Such a view, of course, ignores disruptive events and forces that proved extremely corrosive to the white psyche: the Scopes trial, bloody labor conflict, massive uprooting of tenants, F.D.R.'s proclamation that the South stood as America's "number one economic problem." While the turn of the century certainly was a great watershed in our country's racial history, there is no need to pass over the turmoil and ultimate progress in race relations of the 20th century in such a dismissive way. And it is dangerous and misleading to romanticize the unity of Southern whites.

Near the end of his narrative Williamson, in an example of the brilliant prose that percolates through this book, offers an arresting and evocative metaphor of race in America: "Blacks are related to whites as moon to earth, two worlds in distant conjunction, a dance without touching." Almost as if in compensation for this profound vision, though, *The Crucible of Race* imposes a false simplicity on relationships *within* both races. Where others have seen many subtle but significant differences—even in racial ideas and practices—among Populists, Democrats, Progressives, and Republicans, between uplanders and lowlanders, town dwellers and country dwellers, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, men and women, Williamson sees homogeneity. Now that he has added a new complexity to our understanding of race rela-

tions, it remains for someone to go beyond black and white. The finer gradations of geography, party, gender, religiosity, age, and class still need to be drawn. In the meantime, *The Crucible of Race* has more than enough to teach us for any one book. Those who want to understand America will be wrestling with it and its implications for a long time.