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# W.J. Cash, the New South and the Rhetoric of History

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W. J. Cash began an early version of his manuscript, he claimed, by piling footnotes on almost every page, "writing a tome that was going to look like nothing so much as a doctor's thesis, and calculated to scare off all the cash customers—something I certainly hadn't planned. Wherefore, having gazed at the facts with the long reluctance of a lazy man, I at length heaved all I had done away and started all over again." Cash jettisoned most of the other conventions of academic history as well; the book has not lacked for cash customers, or doctoral studies, since. The question arises: are academic historians unable to write like Cash, encumbered with footnotes and all, or do we know too much to write like Cash? It is easy to imagine him watching over this affair, chuckling to himself in his sardonic way as we struggle with the book he struggled with for most of his life.[1]

Despite the attention devoted to the fiery early chapters of *The Mind of the South,* where Cash's language and audacity take us by surprise, the heart of the book lies in the New South. Cash wrote above all, I think, to explain why the white Southerners he knew—those in the cotton mill country of the Carolina Piedmont—behaved the way they did. Cash wanted to explain why there had not been more Gastonias or Elizabethtons when the hard times hit in the 1920s and 1930s, why mill workers stood with the mill owners when they had every reason to strike, why politicians vacillated between doing nothing and doing wrong, why the middle class remained inert, why religious intolerance and the Ku Klux Klan held the loyalty of so many white people. The years after Reconstruction consume two-thirds of Cash's book because those

are the years that troubled him, that posed the problems he felt most acutely.[2]

The chapters on the antebellum South, the Civil War, and Reconstruction purport to show how the average Southern white man became overwhelmed by a "blindness to his real interests." The "man at the center" had grown simple and hedonistic on the cotton frontier, awash in the violence, romance, and rhetoric of childish egos. He had descended into gyneolotry, conformity, intolerance. He had generated no class consciousness, he tolerated only limited government. Not only had he bought into the "paternalism" of the planters who became his captains during the war, he encouraged their noblesse oblige, their leadership against the carpetbaggers, scalawags, and blacks of Reconstruction.[3]

White solidarity threatened to dissolve, ironically, only after the native white triumph over Reconstruction. Class resentments began to build. Poorer white men, facing the decline of cotton prices, a shortage of money, and dependence on merchants and planters, slipped into a position not unlike that of black sharecroppers. Here we have to allow Cash to tell his story in his own language, for paraphrase fails. The common whites, Cash wrote, "may be said to have been groping in some dim, obscure, and less than conscious fashion toward perception of their position in the Southern world and have been gathering anger against it." Populism promised to bring class identity into the open, but it did not: "however mighty were the forces tending to project these common whites into class awareness and revolt, the forces tending to hold them back were mightier yet." These simple people "had no training in, and no power of, analysis, no notion of social forces as affecting their lives." The Democrats easily herded the farmers into line with token gestures of white supremacy. The farmers, guiltily listening in North Carolina in the 1890s as "black laughter rolled in flood through Tar Heel legislative halls once more," thought better of their rebellion and sidled back over to the Democrats.[4]

Chastened by the narrowly averted threat of poor white class consciousness and resentment, the planters—"the old Confederate captains in large part"—had a "dream. Let us, in this quandary,

take a page from the book of Yankeedom. Let us meet the old enemy on his own ground. Let us, in short, turn to Progress. Let us introduce the factory in force. Let us, in particular, build cotton mills, here in the midst of the cotton fields." Poor white folk would be given a stake in the new order, provided a haven in the mill villages, brought into the bargain of Progress. "So far from representing a deliberate break with the past, the turn to Progress clearly flowed straight out of that past and constituted in a real sense an emanation from the will to maintain the South in its essential integrity," Cash insisted. "The New South meant and boasted of was mainly a South which would be new in this: that it would be so rich and powerful that it might rest serene in its ancient positions, forever impregnable."[5]

It did not take long for Progress to have its effects. Resentment calmed even as the whites who came from the farms and hills to work in the mills soon bore the "physical stigmata" of their caste. "By 1900 the cotton-mill worker was a pretty distinct physical type in the South; a type in some respects perhaps inferior to even that of the old poor white, which in general had been his to begin with. A dead-white skin, a sunken chest, and stooping shoulders were the earmarks of the breed. Chinless faces, microcephalic foreheads, rabbit teeth, goggling dead-fish eyes, rickety limbs, and stunted bodies abounded—over and beyond the limit of their prevalence in the countryside. The women were characteristically stringy-haired and limp of breast at twenty, and shrunken hags at thirty or forty." The mill town became like a plantation: "the dependence which had been fastened upon the poor whites by post-bellum cotton-growing was being carried over into industry, and even extended if that were possible. Even more definitely than the tenant and the cropper, the cotton-mill worker of the South would be stripped of the ancient autonomy and placed in every department of his life under the control of his employer." The mill baron "knew these workmen familiarly as Bill and Sam and George and Dick, or as Lil and Sal and Jane and Lucy. More, he knew their pedigrees and their histories."[6]

Those on the top were as simple as those on the bottom. The

nouveau riche mill owners sought the imprimatur of a distinguished past, even if they had to invent one. Cash told of the mythical George Washington Groundling, whose father "had been a drunken old farmer whose forty acres were perpetually under mortgage and who bore upon his head the shame of having hid out in the woods to avoid being drafted into the Confederate Army. Still, George W. was president of the First National Bank, and master of five cotton mills. George W. was said to be worth half a million dollars, and indubitably had the making and breaking of most of the families of the county—including, probably, your own. And so, and though he was known secretly to vote the national Republican ticket and the thing was bitter in your throat, what you said in effect was: 'Oh, Mr. Groundling, we think it just too wonderful that all by yourself you have got up to be one of us, and won't you come to dinner Sunday and bring dear Mrs. Groundling?'" Mrs. Groundling and her daughters called in a genealogist "who demonstrated that Groundling was only a corruption of the Old French *Grauntligne,* and that a certain Viscount Fulk de Grauntligne, who was questionless the ancestor of George W. and the explanation of his masterful qualities, had certainly gone to England with William in 1066."[7]

Some mill workers, faced with low wages, child labor, and their employers' pretensions, allowed union organizers to rouse them from their lethargy and go on strike. "The fact about the Southern mill worker was plain," Cash argued. "He was willing enough to join the union as a novelty, and to strike. It was a part of his simple childlike psychology and curious romantic-hedonistic heritage, in fact, that he was willing to join any new thing in sight, from a passing circus or the Holy Rollers up—or down." The strikes invariably collapsed, partly from violence and strikebreakers, but mainly because of "the strikers' own minds. . . . Under the cold and dangerous glance of their old captains, economic and political, under the stern and accusing glance of their ministers, they wilted much as the Populists had once wilted, turned shamefaced, shuffled, and, as the first joy in battle and in expressing their will to

defiance died down, felt despairingly that they probably would be read out of the Democratic party in this world and of paradise in the next. So the strikes failed."[8]

Cash dutifully if somewhat reluctantly catalogued the changes that came to the post-Reconstruction South. He named the cities, counted the towns, enumerated the mills, nodded toward the middle class, appreciated the schools, regretted the increasing prominence of preachers, noticed the spread of a frank language of acquisition and profit, recognized the rise of parvenus, denoted the widespread "insecurity in rank," tallied the philanthropy, detailed the reformers's efforts. Yet Cash insisted that all the apparent change only strengthened the "Southern pattern," that "simplicity and that pervasive unreality which has always been associated with their simplicity." Cash found little cynicism among these Southerners, no hypocrisy; rather, a "curious innocence." Cash saw the New South, from the late nineteenth century on, mired in cultural inertia, dysfunction, falsity, myopia. Strong stuff, and for fifty years hundreds of thousands of readers have listened, responding to the grain of truth in *The Mind of the South* and admiring the rhetoric deployed with such skill and vehemence.[9]

It is tempting to hurl note cards and computer paper at Cash, offering counter-examples, complicating his neat schemas. On a subject-by-subject basis, in fact, I disagree with virtually everything Cash says. I would stress the diversity, change, and tension that marked every facet of life in the New South: politics, work, intellectual life, religious faith, popular culture, relations between blacks and whites, gender, literature. Cash was right to emphasize the centrifugal forces of the New South, the proliferation of social distinctions among people of both races, the spread of commercial motives, the rapid growth of industry, the anger and confusion of the countryside. He was wrong to explain those away. He was wrong to believe that Southerners of both races were so easily led into complacency or resignation. Everywhere I have looked I have found striving, struggle, resentment, self-awareness. The problems of the New South were not those of drift, but of obstacles and

constraints. It was not for lack of trying that the South did not flourish, that the Democrats were not overthrown, that race relations did not follow a different path. Cash wrote out too much of the history of the New South, explaining it away in his rush to get to the disappointing South of the 1930s.[10]

If we shove Cash to ground of our choosing, I am confident, we can overwhelm him by force of numbers if nothing else. It has been obvious from the first reviewers to the most recent analysts that Cash's is not a complete picture of the New South. Not only is his portrayal static and geographically narrow, but it is neglectful of politics, silent on the evolution of segregation and disfranchisement, shallow on the Populists. Subsequent scholarship has rendered large parts of Cash's argument inaccurate—worse, irrelevant. C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South*, published in 1951, challenged Cash at every turn—and with footnotes on every page. Where Cash stressed continuity, Woodward stressed discontinuity; where Cash stressed community, Woodward stressed conflict; where Cash stressed gullibility, Woodward stressed pursuit of self-interest; where Cash stressed culture, Woodward stressed economics and politics. Woodward won. The most important books on Populism, economic development, and race relations have adopted Woodward's emphases, not Cash's.[11]

Within the last decade, moreover, scholars have focused on the very South in which Cash lived—the mill districts of the Carolina Piedmont—and all have found Cash's portrayal deficient. David Carlton revealed the depth of conflict between the mill people and the town people; Jacqueline Hall and her co-authors recaptured the full humanity of the mill people, dispensing with Cash's cruel caricature; I. A. Newby detailed mill workers' move off the farm, telling their story in their own words, reconstructing the complexity of their motives; Allen Tullos attacked any notion of mill-owner desire for white community, placing a stern Protestant spirit of moral and commercial domination at the heart of the New South.[12]

Despite fifty years of criticism, though, Cash's interpretation of the New South shows remarkable staying power. His argument for

the continuity between the antebellum and postbellum eras has been echoed in recent books by Jonathan Wiener, Dwight Billings, Lawrence Shore, and Paul Escott, though these authors emphasize ruling class cohesion and advantage rather than lower-class obeisance. Cash is often called on to make cameo appearances, invoked at the beginning of books in acts of exorcism or at the end for homage. Cash turns up in Joel Williamson's exploration of race relations, in Ted Ownby's study of evangelicalism and male culture, in Jack Temple Kirby's account of the decline of rural life. Cash has become a prominent subject in his own right, winning attention in intellectual histories of the twentieth-century South by Richard King, Michael O'Brien, Fred Hobson, and Daniel Singal. He has been the subject of two biographies, including Bruce Clayton's fine new book.[13]

It is Cash's apparent disdain for the people of the New South, black and white, that poses the greatest difficulty in today's intellectual environment, that embarrasses even his defenders. His is a good-natured kind of criticism, a sort of smiling, head-shaking rumination over widely recognized intrafamilial weaknesses, thoroughly patronizing. Cash spoke condescendingly of black Southerners without apparent shame or hesitation. Unlike many white writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cash, to his credit, did not claim to know the mind of the black South. He did not put words into the mouths of black Southerners. But Cash's reticence was not so much an act of humility as it was a simple narrowness of concern with black people. The presence of black Southerners shaped the private actions and public culture of the white South, Cash recognized, but Cash's blacks exerted their influence from a distance. Cash saw black people important as a problem to whites, as a mass, not as individuals. Cash glanced through a few windows in black neighborhoods, heard the echo of laughter and screams, noted sullen stares and furtive glances. Readers of his book never met black people face to face, never heard what they had to say.[14]

Cash ignored women of every description. Black women appear

only as objects of white men's sexual convenience; white women appear only as objects of white men's sexual displacement and veneration. White women are bystanders, pale and ghostly. The interesting relationships in *The Mind of the South* all turn around white men moonstruck over other white men—their bosses, their captains, their preachers, their politicians. White women, like black Southerners of both genders, are important only as referents by which white men steer, as the people against whom white men define themselves.

But Cash did not write to celebrate white men. He patronized them most of all. He had no hesitation about putting words in the mouths of farmers and mill hands, in telling us of their deepest fears and wishes. According to Cash, they felt only dog-like loyalty, a dull throb of longing, inarticulate resentment. Perhaps Cash felt entitled to this kind of mind-reading, this useful ventriloquism. He had, after all, put in hours in steamy cotton mills during his college summers; he had watched his parents suffer in the depression; he had worn cardboard in his shoes; he had written his book in a freezing room lit by a single light bulb while neighborhood boys tossed gravel at the window, mocking this strange man who sponged off his parents well into his thirties. Maybe his words grew out of pain and empathy.[15]

The problem is that his words don't sound like it. Cash did not voice the sympathy for the oppressed that has marked, in varying degrees, virtually every book of New South history published since World War II. Fortunately for Cash's reputation today, he was also contemptuous of the South's planters, businessmen, and politicians, fair game throughout the intervening half century and into the foreseeable future. Yet, by today's standards, Cash would have to be considered racist, sexist, and elitist.

Perversely enough, in the light of all I have just said, I would like to spend the rest of my time suggesting that Cash's book still has things to teach us about the New South. *The Mind of the South*, as a pioneering effort at social history, calls our attention to strategies

of understanding and narrative that have fallen into unpopularity and disuse. Cash dealt with facets of experience for which we do not currently have a language. By taking Cash seriously despite his sins, we can see some of the boundaries of our own ideas. I say "we" and "our," for what follows is a critique of my own ideas as much as anyone else's. The notions I discuss are shared to a disconcerting degree across political and methodological lines; they are not so much arguments of any given school as they are widely held assumptions, articles of faith. Let me be clear: I do not argue that we return to the prejudices of Cash. But I do believe that we should recognize our entrenched predilections for what they are, that we think about the limits imposed by our own rhetoric, our own poetics. We need a language that captures some of the power and range of Cash's.

In most ways, writing on the New South has followed the general contours of European and American historiography over the last fifty years. New South historiography has seen a typical succession of interests and trends: quantification, case studies, comparative perspectives, interest in work and labor, the dominance of social history. There has been a turn toward anthropology, recent experimentation with narrative. The field has been heavily politicized, especially over the role of the capitalist market and the meaning of race. Some of the most exciting new work concerns itself with gender. In all these ways, New South history reflects recent historical practice. Cash stands as an affront to most of them.

First of all, Cash turned to psychology to show why poorer whites followed the leaders of the South even when there was no good reason for them to do so—which was almost always. The common white man, Cash wrote, "identified his ego with the thing called the South as to become, so to say, a perambulating South in little." It felt good, Cash thought, for the common man, poor and defeated, to meld his identity with those of his superiors. Cash built from this individual consciousness out, filling the South with the projection of what he imagined to be the psychological traits

of the man at the center. As a result, Cash's South was drenched with violence, fantasy, escapism, irrationality. Cash's South has a dreamlike, nightmarish quality to it; the sense of proportion and time are those of sleep, not of sociology. Cash's mind of the South was a gland, secreting uncontrollable substances. His leading men were as lost as his followers.[16]

Current historians have no taste for such irrationality. We look back on the myth and symbol school of the fifties with satisfaction in our subsequent intellectual growth; we shake our heads over Richard Hofstadter's misguided and condescending portrayal of the befuddled Populists; we note the short and conflicted life of psycho-history. The lesson seems clear: social behavior has a social explanation whose logic can be discovered. Everything from disease to ideas of sexuality appear to us as socially based, ideologically driven, culturally determined. We are just as certain of this as Cash was certain that the id played a key role. For Cash, everything was personalized; in history today, nothing is personalized. Only Joel Williamson has been willing to venture into such territory in the New South, and even he distances himself from Cash. Most social historians today seem uncomfortable discussing individual psychology at all.[17]

We stress the rationality of the oppressed and the oppressors. Notice how few poor people in our books of today act against their own interests. Their interests are often thwarted by the powerful, of course, or done in by circumstance, but the failures seldom grow out of mistaken motives or sheer lack of knowledge among impoverished protagonists. The Populists, for decades an embarrassment to liberal and leftist historians, now appear perfectly rational, in fact superrational. Charles Macune, cerebral inventor of the subtreasury plan, has replaced the raving, one-eyed demagogue Ben Tillman as the Populist prototype. Some historians even labor to show that lynching had social correlates, that feuding was economically motivated, that segregation grew naturally out of modern institutions, that disfranchisement was a shrewd move by white Democrats to forestall white rebellion under the guise of

killing the black vote. You see the pattern. Cash might well have been skeptical.[18]

The closest historians of today come to irrationality is in the notion of "hegemony." Hegemony seeks to explain the same thing Cash sought to explain: why conflicts that should have broken into the open did not. In a hegemonic argument, people act out of motives of class, filtered, camouflaged, yet logical beneath it all. Eugene Genovese and like-minded historians find hegemony at work in the antebellum South, mediating relations among whites and between slaves and masters. Yet few historians have spoken of hegemony as such in the New South. Historians see white supremacy and Democratic loyalty feeding into class hegemony in the New South, but the post-Reconstruction era seems too filled with conflict and brute force to grant forces of ideological cohesion much power. Paul Gaston, in one of the most innovative books on the New South, did explore the construction of myths that explained away failure and shortcomings. Yet Gaston, too, mentions Cash only to criticize him for his continuity thesis. Charles Reagan Wilson and Gaines Foster, imaginative students of the Lost Cause and its powerful obfuscating effects, also refuse to enlist Cash as an ally. These historians, discussing distinctly Cashian themes—illusion, deflection of criticism, the building of cultural bonds among whites—are unwilling to be tarred with the Cashian brush.[19]

No one can blame them. To be seen as an ally of Cash is an embarrassment. Cash, after all, sought to explain the coherence and cohesion across class lines. We, on the other hand, intently search for the cracks, visible and otherwise, in the Solid South. We look for potential conflicts, hidden resentments, manifestations of suppressed class anger. We celebrate the rebels and ignore those who went along. Cash explained away conflict; we explain away compromise, agreement. Cash ridiculed Populism, but today we lionize the rebels. Few historians today ask why more farmers did not vote for the Populists when they had every rational reason to do so. We assume Democratic fraud or inadequate education by the

Farmers' Alliance, not farmers' party loyalty and veneration of the heroes of the Civil War and Reconstruction.[20]

There is an irony in this, for Southern social historians, like other social historians, idealize "community." We look for the egalitarian bonds of mutuality, shared ideals, and common interests that unite people. Outside lurk merchants, planters, and politicians, driven by interests that would destroy community, replace it with anomie and alienation. Our stories about the New South tend to be stories of community betrayed. Cash's merchants and planters, on the other hand, face their customers and tenants face-to-face; they build bridges of loyalty and obligation. His politicians win power through flattery and cajoling, through barbecues and swigs on the same bottle, not through fraud and intimidation. His poor, unlike ours, seem to pay little attention to one another, their gaze, in Cash's portrayal, is fixed on the mill owner, the charismatic demagogue, the planter with their future in his hands. His portrayal is an affront to our vision of a more communal, democratic past that holds out hope for a better future. Cash was less sanguine.[21]

We might ask ourselves, then, whether some of Cash's questions no longer need to be asked. Given the wrenching social change and poverty of the post-Reconstruction South, why was there not more rebellion? Given the pathological racial violence and distrust of that time and place, should we not make more room for psychological explanations? Given the enduring popularity of the Confederacy among whites, should we not talk more about social solidarity, about shared memory and identity across class lines? Given the bonds of patronage, kin, and religion, should we not grant cultural bonds a greater role than structural conflict? Even the questions make me uncomfortable.

Current historians have not distanced themselves from Cash in every regard. Certain commonalities remind us of shared, if unspoken, assumptions, remind us that historians are still children of Cash's first modernist age. Although Freud has declined in stat-

ure, we still assume that reality is somehow hidden beneath the obvious manifestations of everyday life. Although the Monkey Trial has long since passed, most modern historians of the New South grant no more autonomy for religion than Cash granted. Although we have articulated more complicated ideas of culture, we portray its operation in many of the same ways as Cash.

Despite their differences, Cash and C. Vann Woodward shared several assumptions and have passed them down to us. Both Cash and Woodward came of age in the interwar era in which "realism" of one sort or another was the goal. Both H. L. Mencken, Cash's inspiration, and Charles Beard, Woodward's inspiration, professed to see through history to its essence underneath. For Mencken, that essence was often the common man's gullibility; for Beard, that essence was economic. Menckenism tended to glorify the man in the know, whether he was an aristocrat, the educated person conversant with Darwin or Freud, or the author and readers of *The Mind of the South*. Menckenism exaggerated that man's wisdom and caricatured the average American's perceptions. Woodward's Beardianism, on the other hand, had a more democratic bent. For Woodward, all men had economic interests that encouraged them to behave rationally. The common man, black as well as white, knew what he needed and wanted (women were not mentioned), though powerful people had their hands on the machinery of power. The hidden aspect of Woodward's argument came in the political realm, where corrupt bargains and smoky-room deals tended to count more than public campaigns. Both Cash and Woodward assumed that reality lay beneath appearances.[22]

Southern historians adopted this realist perspective immediately and then pursued it with new means in the 1970s and 1980s. Quantification offered the possibility of cutting beneath the rhetoric and stereotypes of the Southern past to the reality underneath. We could find out how the slaves really fared, what the yeomen really felt about secession, who really supported the Populists, who really pushed disfranchisement. Marxian analysis

and anthropology, too, detect powerful submerged currents running through history. Both frames of reference portray forces that people at the time could not fully see or describe, even if contemporaries could feel the power of mercantile capitalism and an archaic honorific culture. Those of us who use those categories thereby assume ourselves able to perceive what our subjects could not. It comes across in our language, distanced, knowing, and judgmental.

Cash's realism and Woodward's realism had something else in common: neither had a good word to say about religious faith. Woodward, in fact, had barely a word of any kind to say about religion. *Origins of the New South* maintained a sort of embarrassed silence on the subject; Woodward admitted that churches grew rapidly in the post-Reconstruction era, but he did not dwell on the meaning of that growth. Cash, on the other hand, had plenty to say about religion, all of it bad. Woodward and Cash, both from religious families, had come of age in the shadow of the events in Dayton, Tennessee. The church, it appears, seemed to both men an impediment to a realistic understanding of the common man's true position. Religion seemed a hall of mirrors, otherworldly compensation for hard times that could better be confronted in the here and now. That is pretty much the attitude of everyone else who has written on religion in the New South. We turn out one book after another on the failed Populist crusade yet ignore the simultaneous development of Holiness and Pentecostal denominations that today claim millions of adherents. Surely that is inadequate.[23]

The realism we have inherited from Cash and Woodward tends to define Southern history by what failed to happen. Our questions are not why, but why not. Why did the common whites not balk at the power of the planters, especially at the time of secession? Why did they not desert the Confederacy in greater numbers? Why did they not turn against their captains after defeat? Why did they not strike class alliances in Reconstruction? Why did they not push aside the Democrats in the agrarian crusade? Why did they not fight harder against the capitalists who increasingly

ran their lives? Implicit in all these questions is a vision of what should have happened had people acted rationally. A different kind of realism, one that stresses things over which no one had control—poor land, world economic trends, population growth—is less common; only Gavin Wright has put such issues at the heart of Southern history. Most historians have tended to look for the cause for poverty in the ideas and acts of Southerners, in the greed of the rich and the lack of will or the inability of the white poor to fight for and win what they needed. This makes for stirring history, but it does not fully reckon the odds.[24]

Despite many superb studies, in other words, New South historiography has not moved very far from ideas staked out several generations ago. We keep turning the same problems over and over, worrying them smooth and familiar with so much handling. We adopt new techniques and perspectives to answer the same questions that bedeviled Cash, that bothered Woodward. By this time, virtually everything has been debunked. There is scarcely a popular myth to demolish about the post-Reconstruction South; for most Americans, whatever their race, only the South's poverty, injustice, and ignorance seem worth noting. Youngsters raised on *Mississippi Burning* and *Deliverance* are scarcely shocked by anything we tell them in our history books about the South between 1870 and 1970. First-time readers of *The Mind of the South* can scarcely feel the sense of risk and danger that surrounded that book in its early years. In fact, the challenge now, I would argue, is to bring the people of the New South back to life by portraying the complexity of their motives, the difficulty and multiplicity of the choices they faced, the variety and contradictions of their actions. How can we expect readers and students to care about a society where every endeavor could only fail, where the oppressed saw every meaningful option closed? The rhetoric of social history, and of New South social history in particular, has become impoverished, foreclosing important questions, condescending to the past in a way different from Cash but condescending to it nevertheless.

Whatever else we might say about Cash's book, the pain he felt

for the South came through in every word. *The Mind of the South* was a book of passion. As such, it was one of many written between 1929 and 1941. In those bleak years, after decades of segregation and disfranchisement, after the ravages of the Great Depression, sensitive writers could feel the change in the Southern air. Some wrote to hasten the change, others to slow it, others to salvage what they could of the old. The Nashville Agrarians espoused the glories of the South's rural civilization (ironically, Frank Owsley and his wife Harriet pioneered in quantitative social history to help prove the Agrarian case). William Alexander Percy wrote an elegant conservative apologia for the life of a Delta planter. Douglas Southall Freeman won enormous national success by composing tributes to Robert E. Lee. Margaret Mitchell's triumph revealed that Cash's acerbic view was very much a minority view of the white South even in the North and abroad. The 1930s marked, too, a golden age for sociologists and anthropologists studying the South, led not only by Howard Odum but also by Liston Pope, Charles S. Johnson, John Dollard, and Hortense Powdermaker. W. E. B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson challenged many of the ideas about black Southerners that Cash unblinkingly perpetuated. Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner created complex visions of a complex South.[25]

In the year of *The Mind of the South* and Cash's death, James Agee brought post-modern anguish to the act of writing about people such as poor Southerners. "It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying," Agee admitted at the beginning of his book on Alabama sharecroppers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, "to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of 'honest journalism' (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and unbias which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money." Agee's prose twisted and contorted

under the pressure of his doubt. Cash's prose surged and swayed, doubled back on itself, questioned its own sweeping assertions. Ours, by contrast, is placid, cool, clinical.[26]

To compare our own work with that of Cash and his contemporaries is to notice how we have narrowed our questions and constricted our answers. The South's past is no less tortured today than it was fifty years ago. We have no more mastered the Southern past than Cash did. But where is the range of voices that wrote in 1941? Where is the diversity, the anguish? Regardless of politics, the history books of today speak with a common tone, a tone of authority, a judgmental bent. Our ideal is understatement, concision; we live under a self-imposed tyranny of Strunk and White. We distrust people who write in idiosyncratic ways; the profession rewards the well-placed rejoinder more than it does a singular vision. It is considered bad taste for a Southern historian of the South to reveal any emotional identification with the region; we are supposed to be distanced from the South, to cultivate—or feign—a professional interest uncolored by parochial loyalties.[27]

Humor in various guises—sarcasm, parody, satire, mimicry—gave Cash's book much of its power, drive much of its analysis. Cash, reading our books about the South, might wonder whether the American Historical Association had passed a by-law against the use of humor in the writing of history. Southern historians today seem no more likely to commit humor than they are to insist on the literary merit of Thomas Nelson Page. It simply isn't done. We go about our work with a mien of solemnity, deploying appropriately lugubrious language. I cannot help but think that the subjects of Southern history—men and women, black and white, rich and poor—would smile in amusement at our straight-faced and straight-laced accounts of their lives. They recognized the tragedies of the South's, their own, histories, but it was the most oppressed people of both races who created the most rebelliously joyous music, the most joyous faith, in the face of that tragedy. We might follow their example, and Cash's. We have forgotten laughter's power to resist indignity, to deflate pretension.

Maybe some will say that the course of Southern history since

1941 has necessarily led us to write in the way that we do, that we cannot, in this prosaic day and age, be expected to maintain the fire of the Southern Renaissance. Maybe Southern historians of today are writing on borrowed time. The glorious movement against segregation and disfranchisement has come and gone, after all, leaving ambiguity and unfocused frustation along with a heroic standard succeeding generations despair of matching. The forces of progress and the forces of evil are not as clearly marked as they once were. Histories written in an era such as ours are not likely to hold the kind of passion Cash and his contemporaries possessed.

But perhaps our position is not without its compensations. Maybe there is something to be gained if a passionate empathy should replace a passionate indignation. A lot about the South still needs to be explained to ourselves and to our children, in our own voice. Because softly, behind the roar of the interstate and the chatter of the satellite dish, do you not hear the clank of chains, the sounds of a revival, the rustle of crinoline, and maybe even the chuckle of Jack Cash, all tempting us to explore, one more time, with feeling, the minds of the South?