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

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WHAT CAUSED THE CIVIL WAR?

REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUTH AND SOUTHERN HISTORY

EDWARD L. AYERS

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PREFACE

IT IS hard not to have mixed feelings about the American South. To know anything about the region is to know that it is both simple and convoluted, seductive and frightening. To know the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century is also to know that the South is of central importance to the nation and thus to the world. The region accounts for an ever-larger share of the country's population and economic growth. It has dominated the nation's politics for the last several generations, both in numbers and in values, and shows every sign of doing so for generations to come. The South's culture, black and white, has become America's culture in everything from sports to religion to music.

As a professional historian who is both a native and a longtime resident of the South, I have struggled to understand the region. I have written books about crime and punishment in the South, about the turbulent half century following Reconstruction, and about the coming of the Civil War. I have spoken with groups of

black and white teachers about ways to teach the history of segregation, with members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans about the connection between slavery and secession, with Rotary clubs about poverty and economic exploitation, and with Appalachian audiences about stereotypes they face. I have tried to explain the South in California and New York, in the Netherlands, Italy, and England. The essays that follow began with those conversations.

Three themes weave throughout the book. First, the South is much more complicated than either its defenders or detractors think. People of every sort have tried to simplify the South. Some explain away the hard parts of the region's past by invoking a sanitized heritage while others use lazy generalizations about weather, religion, or gene pools to portray Southerners as hopelessly backward. Such simplifications deny the fascinating human complexity that defines the South.

Second, old and new, past and future have intertwined throughout the South's history. Modernity has appeared in strange places and in strange combinations. The oldest South, the South of plantation slavery, grew up as part of the most advanced economy in the world at the time. The Confederacy stood as a remarkably sophisticated effort at creating a brand-new nation in a matter of months, one that waged effective war for years. Segregation was not merely a holdover from slavery but something created anew in the world of railroads, electric communication, and mass merchandise. The latest South invokes politics and religion in the image of an old-time world that never existed. Past, present, and future must be untangled before we can understand any of them.

Third, we need fresh ways to think about the South. We have

fallen into habits of speech and writing that do our thinking for us, that keep us from seeing things in proportion and motion. Cliché has come to mark much of what we say about the South. The essays of this book experiment with voice, perspective, and idea to see if we might talk about the region in some new ways.

It is important to get the South right. No matter how it changes, the region will play an important role in the nation's future just as it has in the nation's past. By reflecting on the South, especially on the Civil War that defines so much of its history, we can see larger patterns. We can understand complexity, how it is that powerful events grow from intricate social processes. We can understand ambiguity, how it is that straightforward dichotomies so seldom explain social reality. We can understand the unexpected, how it is that cause and consequence so seldom seem to follow straight lines.