
Spring 2000

A Southern Chronicle: The Virginia Quarterly Review and the American South, 1925-2000

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "A Southern Chronicle: *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and the American South, 1925-2000." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 76:2 (Spring 2000), 189-202.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

VQR

The Virginia
Quarterly Review

*A National Journal of
Literature and Discussion*

Volume 76

SPRING 2000

Number 2

A SOUTHERN CHRONICLE: *THE VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW* AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH, 1925–2000

By EDWARD L. AYERS

Since the founding of *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, one topic has turned up again and again: the journal's native region. The culture, economy, past, and future of the American South have presented the *Review* with a constantly changing and yet stubbornly persistent set of anxieties and hopes. To survey the essays on the South that have appeared in these pages is to survey much of the region's history in the 20th century.

The authors who have written on the South in the *Review* have been, almost without exception, prominent white liberal Southern male journalists and academics. The adjectives could be rearranged, but they would still describe the same sort of person: a man who occupies a position of cultural authority in a society about which he has some misgivings but to which he remains devoted. Every essay conveys its affection for the South even as it upbraids the region for one fault or another. That sense of complicity and engagement makes the essays humane and modest, passionate and conflicted. It also

keeps them compelling after all these years, long after the specific situations they address have faded.

The *Review* has always counted a reckoning with the South as part of its mission. Its inaugural year of 1925 coincided with the Monkey Trial in Dayton and still echoed with H. L. Mencken's withering fire on the South. The region was not at its worst off in the 1920's—indeed, the First World War had raised cotton prices, towns and textile mills were going up, and the Great Migration was giving a hope to black Southerners they had not experienced since the days of Reconstruction—but the cultural ferment of the 20's hit the South hard. The conflict between town and country, evangelical and agnostic, and drinker and dry put the rural, religious, and teetotaling South on the defensive. The fascination with movies, automobiles, jazz, and youth made the South seem farther removed from the mass culture of America than before 1915. The Ku Klux Klan flourished across the country but still retained a Southern cast. The South was moving, but not fast enough and not always in the direction liberals hoped; the place seemed to be defined by its shortcomings. That was why Stringfellow Barr, assistant editor at the founding of the *Review*, sought "at least one article provocative of intelligent interest in Southern problems on the title page of each issue." Over the next 75 years, the *Review* attained close to that average.

The man who wrote the first important essay on the South for the *Review* embodied much of what would follow. Gerald W. Johnson served as the editor of the Greensboro *Daily News* and as professor of journalism at the University of North Carolina. He brought a wry skepticism to everything he wrote, a persistent doubt that most people could understand their own best interests much less act on them. Fittingly, he titled his contribution to the first volume of the *Review* "A Tilt with Southern Wind-Mills." The essay asked a fundamental question: what could the South do to remove itself from the political inconsequence in which it had drifted since Reconstruction? Johnson's answer to that question reflected the accepted wisdom of white Southerners in these years. "Of course, all Southerners know what has happened—we have traded in our political principles in return for the privilege of maintaining a white man's government unmolested by attempts to enforce against us two

constitutional amendments adopted in wrath and as irrational as the enactments of furious men always are." In the eyes of this most modern of Southerners, the 14th and 15th Amendments, guaranteeing the right to vote and civil liberties to all Americans, were simply perverse legacies of Reconstruction. Johnson, like many white intellectuals across the country in the 1920's, had little faith in democracy in general and no faith at all in democracy for black people. The white South, he thought, faced a stacked deck.

Johnson, however, refused to accept the status quo as inevitability. He noted that the massive migration to the North by black Southerners was changing the national political equation and that "the development of the Negro race itself in intelligence and in social and political capacity" would change other things in time. "But both these forces are in large measure beyond the control of the Southern whites," Johnson admitted. "Is there nothing we may do toward our own liberation from a position that is, to say the least of it, humiliating?" His answer was dangerous in some corners of the South in the 1920's: whites should do better by their black neighbors. "Every unnecessary hardship inflicted upon the black South postpones the day when the white South can resume its full membership, political, moral and intellectual, in this union."

Like the white men who followed him in the *VQR* over the next 40 years, Johnson called for the white South to change itself from within by treating black people with greater civility. Like many of those men, too, Johnson spoke in a patronizing language of "assisting" the "weaker race to achieve competence in that civilization." He put the burden on individual whites. "It is conceivable that the Southern states, as political entities, may within a comparatively short time be discharging their duty to their negro inhabitants so conscientiously as to disarm every honest criticism from the North and West," but even when that era of fairness did come the true problem would remain: "how are people to be made to live up to that ideal in their individual contacts with the negro?"

The standard that Johnson set was so high that it could never be reached. For the South to rise beyond reproach the white Southerner must "become something far exceeding the Californian in tolerance, in sympathy for the weak, in intelligent dealing with the mentally

limited, in higher aspiration, in clear vision, in unbreakable resolution, in generosity, in self-sacrifice." In short, Johnson argued, "if he is not to become a barbarian, the Southerner must needs become something not readily distinguishable from the saints in glory." Gerald Johnson had established one of the great themes of the *VQR*'s essays on the South in its first four decades: a longing for a more humane racial order, generated from within the South itself, overseen by enlightened white liberals emulating "saints."

The other great theme of the *Review*—the conflict between an emerging modern social order and Southern distinctiveness—appeared in the next major essay on the region. Broadus Mitchell's "Fleshpots of the South," published in 1927, addressed two interrelated issues that would preoccupy many subsequent *VQR* writers: the economic development of the South and the disappearance of the South as a unique region. "It is universal knowledge that the South is making spectacular strides economically," this native Virginian teaching economics at Johns Hopkins observed. "The question now is whether these great industrial developments will banish the personality of the South as we have known it." In a tone characteristic of so many of the *Review*'s Southernists, Mitchell thought the worst could be avoided, that the South could enjoy the best of both worlds. Industrial society would mature and "bring up with it the whole of the South—calm, matured, and, be it hoped, resourceful—for the first time established as a part of the American achievement." The South could have it both ways; it could be modern and Southern at the same time. Mitchell, like Johnson, thought the key lay in self-awareness and enlightened leadership.

The most heated intellectual debate in the region in the 20's and 30's turned around this tension between modernity and tradition, change and stasis. In a much-discussed 1930 volume, *I'll Take My Stand*, the Vanderbilt poets and academics who constituted the "Agrarians" called for the South to resist industry and regain the virtues of living close to the land in the Southern tradition. The *VQR* consistently sided instead with the Regionalists in North Carolina, who emphasized social science and economic development as paths to Southern progress. Gerald Johnson used the *Review* to level fire at the Agrarians. "Have they never been in the modern South, espe-

cially in the sections still completely ruled by agrarianism?" Johnson asked incredulously. "Have they been completely oblivious to the Vardamans, the Bleases, the Heflins, the Tom Watsons, who are the delight of Southern agrarianism? Are they unaware of pellagra and hookworm, two flowers of Southern agrarianism?"

Stringfellow Barr encouraged the North Carolina regionalists three years later with a warm review of their thick collection on *The Culture of the South*. Like Johnson and Mitchell, Barr criticized the South but resented the North. The South faced two great enemies, Barr thought: the Unreconstructed Southerner, devoted to the Lost Cause and the Klan, and the Unreconstructed Northerner, devoted to notions of moral superiority above the Mason-Dixon Line. "The Unreconstructed Northerner," Barr noted with undisguised sarcasm, "is able to discuss, though not with much penetration, the Irish problem of the last century, the problem of Ulster today, the Catalonian problem, the Italian Risorgimento, or even Greater Serbia; but he sticks to his point that the only distinctively characteristic things about the South are that it lies south of the North, and is 'behind' in its civilization." Such people would do well, Barr thought, to read the essays on Southern literature, folklore, daily life, and the like in *The Culture of the South*. Southerners needed to read it as well, however, since they "possess very little authentic information to temper the mythology they dish up for visitors." Barr spoke with the same self-critical tone so characteristic of the other Southern essays in his journal. This somewhat disheveled book on Southern culture, marked by confusions and vagaries, "is as good a book as we Southerners deserve."

II

As the terrible depression of the 1930's descended across the South, the voices of the Southern essayists in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* grew more heated. Gerald Johnson used the *Review* to attack those in the South who cringed at the honest new writers of the region such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. Critics in their native land chastised such writers for portraying a "horrible South," filled with "the lame, the halt, and the blind; the morons, the

perverts, the idiots, the murderers, the satyriasis and nymphomania, the lust and lues." Johnson said the critics had it all wrong: it was not the writers who were horrible but the South they chronicled, the "ghastly, cadaverous South that for forty years after the Civil War groped in the twilight region between civilization and barbarism." Things had gotten even worse afterward, for "yet more horrible was the South that began to grow fat at the turn of the century, and that through prosperous years grew fatter and fatter, especially in the head, until it seemed likely that both her brain and her heart were doomed to drown in her own grease. The South whose young women were silent except for giggles, and whose young men were silent except for brays—that was a horrible South." The South in which Johnson and his fellow essayists had grown up exasperated them, holding out possibility and delivering mainly disappointment.

The disappointment turned into despair as the Depression drove the South farther into itself and its own suffering. By the time W. J. Cash published his passionately pessimistic *The Mind of the South* in 1941, W. T. Couch could only say in his *VQR* review that "the whole thing is to me convincing." Couch thought that the "mind" Cash described, in which race, sex, history, politics, and economic life fused into a warped mass that trapped all Southerners, could not be ended by "anything short of a cataclysm that will engulf the South and all Southerners." The 1930's had diminished the hopefulness with which the South's critics had written in the 1920's. Faced with so much suffering, white Southern intellectuals devoted themselves to documenting poverty and chronicling the routes the South had followed into its despair. They could not imagine a way out without changing everything about the South, a transformation whose origins they could not imagine.

As it turned out, of course, a "cataclysm" did indeed "engulf the South and all Southerners" within months of the appearance of *The Mind of the South* and Couch's review. In a profound irony, the cataclysm of World War II, which brought more than its share of death and suffering to Southern families white and black, shattered some of the poverty, inertia, and resistance that had locked the South into an apparently unending cycle of injustice and want.

The Virginia Quarterly Review described that transformation even

as it began. In 1942 John Temple Graves, editor of the Birmingham *Age-Herald*, published two powerful articles on the role of the South in the war. The "Green Room" described Graves as "the writer of the most widely syndicated Southern newspaper column" who "has won the reputation of being 'one of the ablest, most liberal, and best informed men about our Southern economic problem.'" Graves asked first why Southerners so eagerly signed up to fight in the war. He thought he knew the answer: "So many things have been taken violently away from the South in the course of time (or lost to the South) that Southerners today, as a people, have a violent aversion to losing things by violence." Southerners did not "necessarily want to fight, but they don't mind very much, and they do think there are things worth fighting for. They got themselves into this frame of mind and heart by having a lot of trouble and being sorry for themselves and not too sophisticated." Graves thought it good not only for the struggle against Hitler but also for the South that the region had thrown itself into the war. The "region has been growing pathological of late in contemplation of its problems and in practice of hates to which the problems give rise. Forgetting them for a time in favor of the primary problem of the world may do something to save the South from a mess of Communism and Ku Kluxery after the war." The South might be baptized in blood, born again.

As Graves' references to communism suggested, however, white liberals warned that the South had to be careful not to change too much. The signs that the relationship between black and white was running out of control had already become clear to Graves by 1942. "The simple and tragic truth of the race situation in the Southern states where three-fourths of the country's Negroes live is that in a time of total war Northern agitators of the black man are giving new leases of life to Southern agitators of the white. The whole story is in that." Graves, like other white Southern liberals, had wanted gradual progress for black Southerners and had welcomed Northern allies in that cause. But in the heat of the war, Graves warned, black people wanted too much too fast. In an ominous sentence that anticipated much white Southern thought over the next 20 years, Graves baldly declared that "Segregation in the South is not going to be eliminated. That is a fact to be faced, but it does not preclude a constant

improvement in the Negro's side of Jim Crow." Those would be the terms offered by many of the white liberal Southerners: segregation must stay for progress to continue.

To its credit, *The Virginia Quarterly Review* did not follow John Temple Graves down this path. Instead, the journal brought to the fore a new generation of liberal writers who tried to picture a South that no one before 1941 could have imagined. H. Clarence Nixon, a former Agrarian who had changed his mind, began thinking about "The South After the War" as early as 1944. He saw the emerging order with remarkable clarity and prescience: "The South, by whatever comparative test, will emerge from this war with more social change and more unfinished business than any other section of the country." Nixon foresaw "fewer share-croppers, but more welders and pipefitters," "less rural isolation and more urban sophistication." Such progress would bring with it changes that would require those in control of the South to confront new kinds of people and situations. The postwar South "will have more than a million men and women in the ranks of organized labor. It will have a Negro population with varied new skills and war experience on or beyond the seven seas. It will know a standard of living for the common man that was undreamt of in its prewar philosophy." The Second World War brought welcome change but change that would require shaping and directing. Nixon called for an active role by the federal government, for "the South will fare better under a sympathetic national administration with progressive leanings, and more so by meeting such an administration half way and on the level."

Other liberals in the *Review* expressed such hopeful visions as well. William Carlton, a young professor of political science at the University of Florida, thought he saw a resurgence of the Populist, egalitarian South in 1946. Carlton downplayed the Dixiecrats and argued instead that "today fear of the Negro in politics is diminishing in the South. The relative decline of the Negro population, the spread of the racial views of the New Deal, in spite of protestations to the contrary, and educational advances are softening the old prejudices. The cry of 'Nigger,' employed to divide the liberal forces, is losing its old magic." A few years later H. C. Nixon agreed with Carlton that the Solid South was gone: "in no full and real sense is

there a solid South or a psychopathic South, as is sometimes assumed." In the South as a whole, Nixon argued, the election of 1948 had attracted more black voters than white Dixiecrats. Such writers dared applaud such disquieting innovations though many of their white neighbors would disapprove.

III

In 1957 the *Review* published one of the most influential essays ever written about the South: C. Vann Woodward's "The Search for Southern Identity." Like H. C. Nixon, Woodward, the leading historian of the South then and for decades thereafter, looked around him and saw Southern identity faded and tattered. "The time is coming, if indeed it has not already arrived," Woodward audaciously announced, "when the Southerner will begin to ask himself whether there is really any longer very much point in calling himself a Southerner." The situation seemed clear. The Southerner of the 1920's and 1930's "may not have been very happy about many of those old monuments of regional distinctiveness that are now disappearing. He may, in fact, have deplored the existence of some—the one-horse farmer, one-crop agriculture, one-party politics, the sharecropper, the poll tax, the white primary, the Jim Crow car, the lynching bee. It would take a blind sentimentalist to mourn their passing. But until the day before yesterday there they stood, indisputable proof that the South was different."

Things had changed by 1957. A "Bulldozer Revolution" was plowing under the old order and many of the injustices it bred. Woodward welcomed the changes, by and large, but he noted that many white Southerners resented the changes because they felt powerless in the face of big business, big government, and big labor. Disgruntled white Southerners felt they had control over only one thing: race. "Advocates and agents of change could be denounced as outsiders, intruders, meddlers," Woodward warned. "Historic memories of resistance and cherished constitutional principles could be invoked. Racial prejudices, aggressions, and jealousies could be stirred to rally massive popular support. And with this dearly bought unity, which he could not rally on other issues, the frustrated

traditionalist might at last take his stand for the defense of all the defiled, traduced, and neglected aspects of the traditional order." The South could expect a spasm of racial hatred by these alienated whites, Woodward predicted, but it would pass.

Woodward, influenced by "Faulkner and Wolfe and Warren and Welty," did not want the South merely to forget its tortured past, which seemed finally receding. Rather, the South needed to remember, even cherish, its defeats and disappointments—and the South needed to remind other Americans that these, too, were American experiences. Here, in the days of Cold War and unchecked consumerism, Americans needed the South's heritage, "a heritage that is far more closely in line with the common lot of mankind than the national legends of opulence and success and innocence." Liberal writers of the *VQR* in the 1920's and 1930's could only hope the Southern heritage of loss and suffering would slowly disappear. It had now changed so suddenly than Woodward felt compelled to remind his fellow Southerners who they been only yesterday.

Southern whites acted in less heartening ways than C. Vann Woodward had hoped. In the decade after 1957, Southern guilt did not modulate and humanize economic change but rather turned on itself in a paroxysm of denial, projection, self-torture, and violence. The guilt manifested itself in ever more desperate protestations of innocence from Yankee materialism and greed, of Yankee self-righteousness and hypocrisy, even as Southerners paved over much of the South. The racial struggle broke loose from moderate restraint, thrashing around desperately and dangerously. By 1961 Leslie Dunbar, executive director of the Southern Regional Council, the South's oldest bi-racial organization, expressed a far darker vision than Woodward had put forward four years earlier. Dunbar looked around at the events in Little Rock and Greensboro and spat out his disgust: "The South is about to go down again in defeat, and can hardly wait. The region has been the place where American error and excess go to retire. The most enormous of all, Negro enslavement and peonage, came here to live out its suffering." In language more bitter than the *Review* had printed in the darkest days of the Great Depression, Dunbar concluded that "This land of cast-offs has been

a maligned society and has, in truth, deserved most of its infamy." W. J. Cash could not have put it any more strongly.

Yet even in the turbulent, humiliating days of the early 1960's, Dunbar could not let go of the white Southern liberal faith so characteristic of *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Some of the South's "bitterest, ugliest episodes" probably lay ahead, Dunbar predicted. "But the South—the South, that is, of racial oppression and of enervating tradition—will lose again. And *that* South will not win the peace." That one last defeat was just what the region needed. "I believe that the South will, out of its travail and sadness and requited passion, give the world its first grand example of two races of men living together in equality and with mutual respect. The South's heroic age is with us now." The greater the despair, the greater the hope for redemption.

For some white liberal Southern men, however, the faith dimmed in 1963 and 1964. Virginia Dabney, a leading progressive of the prewar era, backtracked after witnessing the marches and sit-ins: "Clear warnings on the horizon indicate that excessive demands by our colored citizens can easily boomerang." Dabney spoke in a language that would have surprised no one before World War II but which by 1965 marked him as out of step with Southern white liberalism. The "immigrant Irish, Italians, and the rest got where they are by hard work, by attention to the job in hand, and by willingness to abide the slow but steady processes of change," he lectured black people, if any were listening. "The American Negro can profit by their example." The *Review* published no other essays of this sort as change raced ahead without such former allies.

IV

By 1975, the chapter of Southern history that turned around the black freedom struggle seemed already to have closed. William C. Havard cast his gaze over the preceding 30 years and could only marvel. "The social foundations of the old politics have been altered almost beyond recognition: the South today is essentially an urban and industrial society, its former insularity has all but disappeared, its 'racial problem' has become a national one, and the economic and

social class divisions of its population increasingly reflect those of the rest of the country." What remained unclear were the political consequences of this deep change. Would whites and blacks divide among themselves politically, or would whites retreat into a lily-white Republican party and blacks remain strictly Democrats? After the remarkable transformation of the last two generations, commentators offered predictions only tentatively. No one could have foretold the rapid unraveling of the old order, seemingly so entrenched; who would dare predict what might happen next, given the South's new prosperity and rate of change?

In this twilight era of the mid-1970's, Louis Rubin, Jr., a leading literary scholar, offered one of the most elegant essays the *Review* has published on the South. Rubin described a scene back in his hometown in South Carolina, among four young girls at a restaurant, three black, one white: "As they talked away, eating, chattering, making jokes, laughing, giggling, I thought of how much political rhetoric, how much scheming and planning and denouncing and defying and editorializing and drawing up legal briefs and passing laws and the like had been expended in my part of the country in the vain effort to prevent those four girls from eating lunch together in that restaurant. How many dire predictions of social catastrophe, how many lamentations over the imminent destruction of the Southern Way of Life, the violations of all that was sacred and noble, had come thundering forth on all sides!" Rubin set aside the predictions of earlier liberals, who equated economic change with the loss of Southern identity. The South "is always changing, and in recent decades the change has been especially dramatic. But there is little conclusive evidence that it is changing into something that is less markedly Southern than in the past. After all, why should it? Does anyone, for example, seriously believe that the liberation of an entire segment of its population, its black folk, into full participation in the region's political and economic life will make the region *less* distinctively Southern in its ways? Is not the reverse more likely?" The old equation, around since Broadus Mitchell's essay in 1927, had been shattered: economic change and racial progress did not mean the end of the South. The place could be prosperous and humane and yet remain distinct and connected to its past.

Such hopeful views coexisted with deep disappointment from long-time activists such as Leslie Dunbar. He looked at the post-Civil Rights era South and saw mainly complacency and self-satisfaction. "The civil rights movement meant to the general public something we had not realized," Dunbar complained. "It meant fulfillment." Such warriors for justice spoke with nostalgia of the dark days of struggle, when the South had seemed more fully alive. "The old, damning injustice of slavery, segregation, and terror did keep us all, black and white, Southerner and Northerner, liberal and resistant, wondering, thinking, fearing, forgiving; shaming ourselves, summoning ourselves, risking ourselves; kept us in a tension where we sometimes hated, sometimes loved, but always felt. We escaped from it on cheap terms—by agreeing to obey our own law—and slumped down into the sweetness of freedom from principle." Dunbar regretted what generations of Southerners, black and white, had sought: relaxation from the torment of being Southern. He saw complacency where others saw accomplishment. In a 1994 essay, Dunbar surveyed the South and focused on enduring poverty and unemployment. He found "no principled (i.e., truth-respecting) reason for optimism regarding the next 40 years."

John Shelton Reed, the leading sociologist of the South, articulated a far more optimistic assessment. Reed enumerated the ways that black Southerners were better off in the 1990's than in the past—and better off than in the rest of the country. While few white Southerners deserved much credit for these remarkable changes, Reed believed, "*black* Southerners can be proud of their accomplishment, and they have served their region—our region—well. The South is now more worthy than ever of Southerners' affection for it." Reed, ironically, quoted Leslie Dunbar from the *VQR* in 1961 to drive home his point: "I believe that the South will, out of its travail and sadness and requited passion, give the world its first grand example of two races of men living together in equality and with mutual respect."

The hopes of the white men who had written for the *VQR* in the 20's and 30's had come to pass, but not in the ways they had expected. The South's transformation had not been led by enlightened white liberal Southern men such as themselves but by black Southerners,

women as much as men, with no access to journals of opinion. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, chronicling that tempestuous history at every step of the way, had come full circle. Its first years held out glimpses of Southern progress and an almost quixotic hope for far deeper change. Its middle decades described and encouraged changes that inspired the world and transformed the South. Its most recent years speak of a new period of apparent stability, of a mixture of self-satisfaction and longing for a more fully humane kind of society. Judging from the back issues of the *VQR*, we can see that Southern history has not ended. It is only resting, waiting for the next wave of history that will wash upon it when people are looking the other way.