

1984

The Southern Enigma: Essays on Race, Class, and Folk Culture (Book Review)

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

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

 Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L., Review of *The Southern Enigma: Essays on Race, Class, and Folk Culture*, edited by Walter J. Fraser Jr., and Winfred B. Moore Jr. *Louisiana History* 25, 3 (1984): 324-326.

This Book Review 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.

THE SOUTHERN ENIGMA: *Essays on Race, Class, and Folk Culture*. Edited by Walter J. Fraser, Jr., and Winfred B. Moore, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983. x, 240 pp. Tables, preface, suggestions for further reading, notes on the contributors, index. Cloth \$35.00.)

The more historians study the South, the more elusive the South becomes. In the superheated scholarly atmosphere of the past three decades, in particular, central themes and orthodoxies have come and gone with startling speed. Redoubled efforts by historians have produced a surfeit of competing paradigms rather than broadening areas of agreement. A collection of essays such as this one illustrates the gains and losses of such a state of affairs.

The Southern Enigma contains fifteen essays, chosen from over eighty papers delivered at a conference at The Citadel in 1981. Despite this winnowing, the essays still compete for space and average only fifteen pages each, including notes. The constraints of such limitations are visible in many of the essays. Several of them stand as mere manifestoes of what needs to be done rather than as examples of the gains offered by a certain perspective, insight, or method. Others barely state the problem they address before running out of space, while others restrict themselves to narrow topics of limited interest. Yet a considerable number of the essays in this volume manage to accomplish something worthwhile in an admirably short compass.

Leon Litwack opens the book and the section on race with an eloquent portrayal of one of the central tragedies of American life. Generations of

black Southerners struggled to succeed by the rules white Americans supposedly revered, but when a measure of success came to blacks who acquired property or education many whites resented their achievement and sought to strip away black gains through violence, intimidation, and fraud. As Litwack puts it, "To succeed was only to fail." (p. 20) The other four essays in the section on race also turn around the themes of struggle and unfulfilled black hopes. Lacy Ford and John Scott Strickland, in two well-documented and perceptive essays, show how South Carolina freedmen, using labor shortages and traditions of cooperation, exercised leverage against white planters in the immediate postwar years. Richard Westin reveals the complexity of late nineteenth-century Southern politics in his account of the unintended consequences of educational reform by a fusion party of Republicans and Populists. Peter Wood contributes an intriguing essay on the black figure in Winslow Homer's famous painting, "The Gulf Stream." All the essays in this section agree that race relations in the Southern past have been anything but simple.

Agreement on Southern class relations has been harder to come by. As George Fredrickson reminds us in the useful essay that opens the section on class, historians cannot agree whether the South was a true democracy for white men or whether the forms of democracy merely served to obscure the true patterns of domination by antebellum slaveholders and postbellum capitalists. Perhaps as a symptom of this uncertainty, most of the essays in the section devoted to class are disappointing in comparison with those of the first and third parts. Jack P. Maddex does offer a fine interpretation of proslavery evangelicalism that stresses the class dimension of the churches' mission to the slaves, but the other three essays contribute less to our understanding. Blake McNulty's portrayal of a South Carolina slaveholder who became an abolitionist does little to explain William Henry Brisbane's motivation or why so few Southerners followed his path. Ronald L. F. Davis surveys attitudes toward merchants in the South between the colonial and postbellum periods, but is hampered by a lack of sources for the earliest years. E. H. Beardsley's melancholy account of black physicians is suggestive but thin. The topics of these essays are all promising and may well be more fruitful in longer and more developed form.

The third part of the book is devoted to folk culture and historiography. Three of the essays elaborate or extend points made elsewhere by the same historians. Thus, Grady McWhiney finds the sources of indifference to education in white Southerners' "Celtic forbears," William J. Cooper, Jr., offers a stirring and illuminating explanation of secession based on "the politics of slavery," and Emory Thomas reiterates his legitimate concern that Southern historians should pay more attention to the years of the Confederacy. Charles Winston Joyner refines David Potter's notion that the South

can best be understood as a folk culture and suggests more sophisticated ways to go about exploring that culture. The tragic effects of folk culture are stressed in a provocative essay on the Ku Klux Klan by Charles L. Flynn, Jr. Flynn insists that "Redeemer" historians, liberal historians, and "class conscious" historians have all misinterpreted the Klan, which Flynn believes can be understood only as a multifaceted manifestation of a folk culture with European origins and parallels.

Whatever one's own notions of the South might be, then, there are some essays here that will affirm convictions and some that will raise doubts. If this is the state of the art, then Southern historians are as far apart as ever on the basic questions of the region. And that may be inevitable—even just as well—given the complexity and passions of the South's past.

University of Virginia

EDWARD L. AYERS