

“Origins of the New South” Fifty Years Later: The Continuing Influence of a Historical Classic. Edited by John B. Boles and Bethany L. Johnson. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. ix + 305 pp. Tables, notes. Cloth, \$62.95; paper, \$24.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-807-12905-4; paper, 0-807-12920-8.

Reviewed by Bess Beatty

“Origins of the New South” Fifty Years Later is a compilation of reprinted and original essays, edited by John Boles and Bethany Johnson, that pay tribute to C. Vann Woodward, perhaps the most prominent and influential historian of the American South, and the book he published a half century ago that revolutionized writing about the South by emphasizing the impact of racism on the region and the limits it imposed on democracy. Chapters include earlier reviews of *Origins*, coupled with retrospective responses by their authors, as well as five papers and commentaries drawn from the 2001 Southern Historical Association Symposium on the book. Many of the authors combine scholarly analysis with their own memories of Woodward and his role in their professional development. In the introduction, Johnson recounts how Woodward’s *Origins of the New South* came to be written, a story that is repeated in several of the essays and in one by Woodward himself.

In a reprint from his memoir, Woodward, who died just as plans for publishing this volume were underway, explained the inception of *Origins*. Writing thirty-five years after the publication in 1951 of his monumental book, Woodward addressed the continuing debates between believers in his thesis of change and those who insisted on southern continuity. While expressing regret over the continuing polarization between the two camps, Woodward concluded that “no end to the debate seems yet in sight” (p. 159).

This collection offers evidence that he was correct about the persistence of the argument, although it has branched out in ways that he may not have anticipated. Woodward had time only to glimpse a new direction for the debate. Glenda Gilmore and Ann Scott, in two of the most interesting essays in the volume, add gender to questions of race and class. Gilmore agrees with Woodward’s position, but for a reason he would hardly have considered in 1951. “If one uses gender to analyze southern history,” she

writes, “change overwhelms continuity.” Furthermore, she claims, although “the South was hypergendered,” in *Origins* “women are scarcer than hen’s teeth” (p. 221). Gilmore offers the provocative conclusion that Woodward had “an ulterior motive” for excluding women (p. 224). By avoiding the subject, Woodward, she believes, avoided “the race/sex dilemma” (p. 226) and accordingly was able to write a book that liberal southern whites would find useful in promoting change. Ann Scott is not so sure. “All the clues,” she convincingly writes, “suggest that Woodward did not take women of any persuasion seriously” (p. 289). The difference between these two scholars of gender and the South may be explained, at least in part, by their personal relationships with Woodward. Scott recalls his dismissive attitude at their first meeting; despite subsequent decades of friendship and her conviction that C. Vann Woodward “was a great man” (p. 293), she points out that he “became somewhat conservative as he grew older” (p. 293). Gilmore, by contrast, first met Woodward in the late 1990s, by which time, she concludes, he had finally “embraced the value of gendered analysis for southern history” (p. 235).

Barbara Fields, in a review of Woodward’s treatment of the “Negro Question,” finds more to praise in *Origins*. Although not without criticism, Fields concludes, “Woodward’s refusal to jim-crow Jim Crow is the great gift that *Origins* has bestowed on the study of Afro-southerners” (p. 276).

Significant essays by Southern scholars James C. Cobb, Robert McMath, Harold Woodman, and William F. Holmes, first delivered at the 2001 symposium are also reprinted here. Business historians will be particularly interested in McMath’s and Woodman’s fresh insights into economic questions prompted by *Origins*.

Several of the scholars writing for this project have been given the opportunity to analyze how their own early contributions to Woodward historiography—what James Tice Moore calls a “cottage industry of Woodward criticism” (p. 133)—have withstood the test of time. Reflecting nearly thirty years after he first critiqued *Origins*, Sheldon Hackney concludes that although “there are now alternative opinions on every major question” raised by Woodward, the book “is still the mandatory starting point for any serious study of the South between 1877 and 1913” (p. 53). Hackney also argues that the book offers important lessons for contemporary society, as Americans today can learn from the South portrayed in its pages that “the costs of keeping the dispossessed down

are significant and are borne by society as a whole” (p. 57). Although Carl V. Harris, in 1976, amassed statistical evidence that effectively challenged Woodward’s interpretation of a conservative redemption by the Democratic Party, a quarter-century later he concludes that “historians have not come close to exhausting the mighty agenda set by *Origins*” (p. 108).

Bertram Wyatt-Brown, one of several Woodward students whose essays are included, praises the symposium that inspired the book’s publication for helping “to assure that consignment to oblivion will not be Woodward’s fate” (p. 305). Boles and Johnson have helped to preserve C. Vann Woodward’s legacy, producing an excellent resource for students of the American South who choose to work on this “mighty agenda,” adding new insights on *Origins of the New South* as it enters its second half-century that will assure its enduring importance.

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