

Perspectives From Afield And Afar A Column By Morgan N. Knull, Contributing Editor: Southern View

Morgan N. Knull

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Knull, Morgan N. (2002) "Perspectives From Afield And Afar A Column By Morgan N. Knull, Contributing Editor: Southern View," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol4/iss2/3>

Feature Essay

PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR A COLUMN BY MORGAN N. KNULL, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Southern view

Knoll, Morgan N.

Spring 2002

Feldman, Glenn *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: Reading Southern History: Essays on Interpreters and Interpretations*. University of Alabama, \$54.95 Hardcover ISBN 817310991

Southern view The export economy of the South has contributed a distinct legacy to the rest of America: tobacco and Wal-Mart, George Washington and George Wallace, Billy Graham and Louis Armstrong. Its insular, even tribal culture produces a style of literature and politics that, in turn, captures the interest of historians. If the South is exceptional, how and why is it so?

Was C. Vann Woodward right to insist that the South's tragic sensibility offers a necessary corrective to the North's hubristic idealism? Or does the persistence of southern antiquarianism reveal a withdrawal from worldly affairs, as David Potter's description of his native South suggests: "a land that remembered the past very vividly and somewhat inaccurately, because the present had nothing exciting to offer, and accuracy about either the past or the present was psychologically not very rewarding."

This much is certain: the 18 historiographical essays in **Reading Southern History**, contributed by an interdisciplinary group of scholars and edited by Glenn Feldman, collectively illustrate the fertility of the South as a research subject.

The literary genre of essays by scholars about fellow scholars has its origins in the now-classic work: *Jernegan Essays in American Historiography* (University of Chicago Press, 1937), edited by William T. Hutchinson. A more recent example edited by the late Robert Allen Rutland, *Clio's Favorites* (University of Missouri Press, ISBN 0826213162, \$29.95, hardcover), includes

four essays that overlap with **Reading Southern History** in their choice of subjects.

A dominant thread in the essays is the Civil War, whose disputed legacy clearly continues to inspire researchers. Although Glenn Feldman's introduction exhorts historians to retain scholarly dispassion about their subjects, such critical distance is not present in all of the essays. John Herbert Roper's treatment of Woodward is a model of historical criticism, whereas John White's account of John Hope Franklin is downright panegyric. The essayists' uneven quality is, in one case, encountered within the same writer: Fred Arthur Bailey's contribution on E. Merton Coulter appears devoted only to documenting Coulter's racialism, yet a separate essay on Charles S. Sydnor delivers a nuanced assessment of a complex man.

Several of the essays, such as David S. Heidler and Jean T. Heidler's profile of David Potter and Jean H. Baker's consideration of David Herbert Donald, are retrospective surveys of a scholar's whole career, whereas pieces by James Oakes on Kenneth Stampp and by Anthony Gene Carey on Frank L. Owsley focus on the influence of particular books. John Shelton Reed and Daniel Joseph Singal recall Rupert B. Vance's example of humane sociology. At the hands of other essayists in **Reading Southern History**, Ulrich B. Phillips is remembered as paradigm builder, W.E.B. DuBois as an activist-scholar, W.J. Cash as a populist historian, A. Elizabeth Taylor as a subfield pioneer, and V.O. Key Jr. as a methodological innovator.

Although essay collections of this kind resist unified conclusions, they often succeed admirably in raising questions that invite further reflection. For example, why did northern universities modeled after German research institutions, such as Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Chicago, and Wisconsin-Madison, give rise to social scientific interpretative traditions that now seem as crude in their racial assumptions as Bull Connor? Meanwhile many of the southern historians who rejected social science as mechanistic and inhumane simultaneously dehumanized their black neighbors. Scholars may profitably mine southern history for examples of irony, but they must not stop there.

Morgan N. Knull, contributing editor to CWBR, may be reached by e-mail at mnknull@eatel.net