

Warm Ashes: Issues in Southern History at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century

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Review

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Moore Jr., Winfred B., Editor, Sinisi, Kyle S., Editor, and White Jr., David H., Editor. *Warm Ashes: Issues in Southern History at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century*. University of South Carolina Press, \$49.95 ISBN 1570035105

Living history

Searching the past for clues about the present

Two things are immediately apparent from **Warm Ashes: Issues in Southern History at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century**. First and foremost, the field is as fertile as it has ever been. This collection includes eighteen essays, spans five major topics, and features the work of deans (Emory Thomas and Sheldon Hackney), mentors soon to take the mantle (W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Christopher Waldrep) and younger scholars whose innovation and inquiry in recent years has done much to keep Southern history invigorating.

The second is more humbling. All of our fresh ideas have not helped us figure out how to write reviews of collections that include eighteen essays, span five major topics, and feature the work of such a gallant, eclectic band of historians.

That is no mark against the editors. Winfred B. Moore Jr., Kyle S. Sinisi, and David H. White Jr. have done a remarkable job soliciting and organizing a diverse body of work. The papers, originally presented at the 2000 Citadel Conference on the South, explore broad themes of slavery, religion, memory and Southern identity, violence, and education and segregation, and they employ a variety of analytical tools. In some places the combination of topic, theme, and tool are happily seamless, as is the case in the section titled In the House of the Lord. Here, Paul Harvey, James O. Farmer, Jr., Joan Marie Johnson, and William R. Glass tackle New South religion from angles that include race, class, and gender. In other places, such as the section Enslaved, similar tools on

different themes produce interesting if contradictory results. The plantation widows examined by Kirsten E. Wood are paternalists, confident in both the system and their place in it; the white women studied by Patrick H. Breen seem decidedly less comfortable with the notion that the system could protect them from slave rebellions.

Thus the reviewer's difficulty. Short of demanding that all eighteen authors lock themselves in a room with one typewriter—or perhaps more in keeping with the times, agree to castaway on some remote island for a game of Historiographical Survivor, with the winner writing the final, seamless book—what is one to do?

At the risk of ignoring some and angering all, in this arena there seems only one consistent answer: focus on the work that deals directly with what still seems to be the seminal moment in Southern history, the Civil War era. Such a focus should not obscure the occasionally penetrating work of all the contributors, from Rod Andrew, Jr.'s work on black military schools to Glenn T. Eskew's exploration of civil rights museums in the South. Nor should it obscure the collection's general thrust. Many of the essays find their footing in the interstices of historiography. Aside from the bookend, ruminative essays by Thomas and Hackney, the collection as a whole is characterized by refinements to existing ideas and tools or challenges to those very things. Many of the authors use the opportunity in **Warm Ashes** to expand upon themes they have developed in previously published work.

Such is the case, for example, in Brian R. Dirck's essay, Jefferson Davis, Abraham Lincoln, and the National Meaning of War. Dirck's 2001 book, *Lincoln and Davis: Imagining America, 1809-1865*, takes a long view of the two leaders; the piece presented here explores their war language. According to Dirck, one pivotal difference between them was the meaning each ascribed to war and identity. For Davis, war was the wellspring of patriotism and the means to build a national community. For Lincoln, war was a tragedy, an affliction, a calamity. The difference sprung primarily from their views of the past, particularly the American Revolution. Davis saw the Confederacy as a revitalizing force, a touchstone of the unity originally established by the war for independence. Lincoln interpreted history differently: the natural progression of time, he said, necessarily meant that the influence of the Founders cannot be what it heretofore has been.

The argument is well worth consideration, if only because it counters much of the writing on Lincoln and particularly the Gettysburg Address. Yet it is also open to challenge. Both Davis and Lincoln appear strangely disembodied from the national meaning of war. Allowing for Davis's combativeness and Lincoln's melancholy, one might turn David Potter's oft-quoted observation on its head. Had the Union and the Confederacy changed presidents with one another, it hardly seems unrealistic by virtue of their positions that Davis would articulate the war as a tragedy and Lincoln as a means of national self-assertion. And while Davis's sensibility might be called broadly Confederate, clearly Lincoln's idea competed with other visions in the North that did indeed equate war and nation-building.

Christopher Waldrep's *The Politics of Language: The Ku Klux Klan in Reconstruction*, is similar in analytical focus, yet seems more grounded. In brief, Waldrep argues that the lynching era so well-known to historians—the period between 1890 and 1930—was indeed just that. But it was not because racial violence suddenly erupted near the turn of the century. The *methods* employed by 1890s lynchers were similar to those of the Reconstruction-era Klan; their *motives* and their understandings of what they were doing were fundamentally different. Klansmen tried to position themselves as lynchers: legitimate lynching implied a small, unified community acting for preservation and in self-defense. Yet their opponents, in the South and elsewhere, did not concede the term lynching to the Klan's activities—precisely because they were not willing to concede that the Klan embodied a small, unified community acting in self-defense. Instead, in their meetings, speeches, editorials, and even private correspondence, Republican opponents expressed division and dissent, and joined the linguistic combat by arguing that outrage—a crime *against* the community—better described Klan violence. Waldrep argues persuasively that only in the 1890s, when the revolutionary environment of Reconstruction had dissipated and Conservative whites had firmly established their control, was such racial violence understood commonly as lynching.

Identity politics underpins many of the essays in **Warm Ashes**, but none more so than Christopher Phillips's *The Southernization of Missouri*. Phillips's work has an additional if perhaps unintended point of confluence: it may be read as a case study of sorts for Sheldon Hackney's idea, expressed in the volume's final essay, that the South has always been characterized by its ambivalence. The difference is that Hackney's Southerners are comfortable with paradoxes and even they find their identity in them. In antebellum Missouri, powerful political,

economic, and cultural forces overwhelmed the state by 1854 and forced its residents to choose sides. If Missourians were previously comfortable with any regional identity, Phillips argues, they were Westerners. They identified and even promoted themselves as democratic individualists, and for a time saw their state as a neutral, above-the-fray party in sectional controversies. But the Western identity had more in keeping with two Southern anchors: property rights, and fear of majority tyranny. More importantly, in the Kansas controversy, the crucible in which Southernization took shape, they saw Free Soilism as a threat to one and emblematic of the other.

One need not accept every thesis presented here to accept that the ashes of Southern history are still warm. (In some cases—witness the tremendous outpouring of neo-Confederate emotion at the recent Hunley funeral in Charleston—they are still burning.) It is doubtless true, as Emory Thomas writes in *Clio at Climax*, that much of the work done on the Civil War in particular could be carried away by the next wind and be gone without loss. On the whole, however, **Warm Ashes** is testimony to Thomas's major point—a lesson from dean to mentor to those who would carry the mantle. Good Southern history, as all good history, is about getting answers to questions. In a way perhaps more tangible to Southern historians, including the contributors to this solid volume of ideas, good history is about the present.

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