

Southern Character: Essays in Honor of Bertram Wyatt-Brown

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Review

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Frank, Lisa Tendrich (ed.) and Kilbride, Daniel (ed.). *Southern Character: Essays in Honor of Bertram Wyatt-Brown*. University Press of Florida, \$74.95
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Honoring a Giant in Southern History

I vividly remember the first time I read Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1982, we had a small but vital group of scholars working in southern history. From word of mouth, I heard about an important forthcoming book on southern honor, and once I obtained a copy of the proofs, I could not put it down. Setting everything else aside, I read it straight through. To this day, the book is one of the most intellectually exciting works I have ever read.

As we all know, this book put the concept of honor at the center of the region's history. Wyatt-Brown showed how the honor ethic permeated much of white Southern culture, with ramifications for the history of the family, gender, race, slavery, politics, and religion. The author took an interdisciplinary approach when that was still unusual and drew on insights from his study of anthropology, sociology, and psychology. *Southern Honor* also revealed the author's wide reading on many aspects of nineteenth-century American history, for topics on both sides of the Ohio River. The book suggested entirely new ways to think about southern history; it was also one of the rare works that crossed subject boundaries and reached an audience beyond the field. As editors Lisa Tendrich Frank and Daniel Kilbride point out, Wyatt-Brown published on other subjects on the North and South, such as the abolitionist movement, religion, biography, and literary history, but his book from 1982 remains the landmark of his career.

This volume of essays is an outgrowth of a conference organized in Wyatt-Brown's honor in 2005. *Southern Character* takes as its theme

self-explanation or "self-portraits" and opens with an essay by Charles Joyner on Wyatt-Brown's intellectual biography (vii). The fourteen articles that follow are presented chronologically, starting in the eighteenth century and ending in the late twentieth century. They address an unusually broad range of topics: Native American identity, by Andrew K. Frank; the phenomenon of "passing," by Christopher Morris; political culture in the Deep South, by Christopher J. Olsen; Quakers in Virginia, by A. Glenn Crothers; abolitionists in the South, by Randall J. Stephens; the South and the revolutions of 1848, by Daniel Kilbride; Abraham Lincoln and honor, by Daniel W. Stowell; women and Sherman's March, by Lisa Frank; inter-racial marriages in the Jim Crow era, by Stephanie Cole; the portrayal of voodoo by whites and blacks, by Jeffrey E. Anderson; the writer Donald Davidson and segregation, by Benjamin Houston; the environmental movement in Florida, by Chris Beckmann, Steven Noll, and David Tegeder; the career of the conservative scholar Mel Bradford, by John J. Langdale III; and racial politics and abortion rights, by Andrew S. Moore. Many of the authors cite Wyatt-Brown's work and praise him enthusiastically as a teacher and mentor; they compliment his generosity, humor, and willingness to engage his critics.

Standouts among the essays include Joyner's witty observations on sectional themes in Wyatt-Brown's own life; Olsen's explorations of the significance of masculinity in southern politics; Kilbride's insights on slaveholders who criticized France's abolition of slavery in 1848; and Cole's original research on marriages between Chinese men and white women. Most of the articles are very strong, although two of them provide a weak regional context, which is surprising in such a book. The collection might have benefited from more essays on race or race relations. These criticisms aside, *Southern Character* is a fitting tribute to Wyatt-Brown's intellect, his productivity, and his ability to inspire many people over the course of his long career.

Joan E. Cashin teaches American history at Ohio State University. She is the author of First Lady: of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War (2006) and other books.