

The Letters of C. Vann Woodward

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Review

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O'Brien, Michael *The Letters of C. Vann Woodward*. Yale University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-300-18534-8

Unpublished Letters of a Great Historian

Historians who write about the United States constitute a notable subgroup of the “greatest generation.” Born during the first two decades of the twentieth century, they came of age during the Depression and wartime. They were at the height of their visibility and influence during the 1950s and 1960s, when higher education expanded dramatically and their writings reached exponentially increasing audiences. Their ranks prominently included Perry Miller, Edmund Morgan, Bernard Bailyn, David Donald, David Potter, Richard Hofstadter, Eric Goldman, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.—and C. Vann Woodward, the pre-eminent historian of the American South.

Michael O'Brien has culled Woodward's voluminous unpublished papers to craft a single volume that spans from the 1930s to the end of the century (Woodward died in 1999 at the age of ninety-one). The letters from his early years depict a gifted but insecure young intellectual, casting about to find a niche for himself. He had a “ravenous appetite” for books, Woodward revealed to his close friend Glenn W. Rainey, but no clear career direction (4). To obtain the credential that might open the door to an academic appointment, he presently decided to pursue a doctorate in history at the University of North Carolina. There he found himself suffocated by most of the historical scholarship he was obliged to study. But a sympathetic graduate advisor, Howard K. Beale, encouraged him to follow through on his ambition to write about Tom Watson, a Georgia Populist turned demagogue.

Many historians write forgettable first books and do not hit their stride until their middle years. Woodward, by contrast, blazed to attention with the deftly-written *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*, published in 1938 just before his

thirtieth birthday. Rarely if ever has a doctoral dissertation so stood out. It used biography to debunk the smugly celebratory conventional wisdom about the history of his home region. It depicted instead a South riven by class conflict and racial oppression, misruled by a predatory web of economic and political elites, and suffused with terrible tensions that often flared into unspeakable violence.

Tom Watson landed Woodward a commission to contribute to a series on the history of the South. Slogging from archive to archive and taking time out to write for the Office of Naval Intelligence during World War II, he eventually brought forth his masterwork, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*. While engaged in that project, he unearthed a related tale that required fuller treatment. So it was that the arrival of *Origins* in 1951 was accompanied by *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*. The seemingly self-effacing Southerner had become a star.

Several years later, Woodward teased out from his labors on *Origins* a slender study destined to reach a wider readership than any of his other books: *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Written in the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, *Strange Career* contended that the fully developed system of legalized racial segregation had only taken shape in the South around the end of the nineteenth century. Woodward implied that what had been made could be unmade. *Strange Career's* linkage of history and advocacy earned a tribute from Martin Luther King, Jr., who dubbed it "the historical bible of the Civil Rights Movement."

The mid-1950s marked a key juncture in Woodward's career. He never wrote another "sustained piece of historical narrative and interpretation" (xxviii). His preferred format became, instead, a steady output of graceful and erudite essays. From time to time, he compiled anthologies of these shorter pieces. He left to others, however, the task of fresh research. Stimulated by the celebrated success of *Strange Career*, he embraced his new role as historical pundit and public intellectual. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement burst upon the American scene and did battle against Jim Crow, his reputation peaked. He believed that "he belonged and was relevant" (xl). In 1962, the historians at Yale University lured him away from Johns Hopkins, where he had taught since World War II and where he had mentored an array of accomplished graduate students. He remained in New Haven for the rest of his life.

Starting in the mid-1960s, however, Woodward found that the world had “moved on to places he found less congenial” (xl). “Greatly troubled” when black power advocates splintered the “racial reform movement” and white support for civil rights atrophied amid anxieties about upheaval and disorder, he groused to Robert Penn Warren in 1966 that it “looks like the Second Reconstruction is about over” (xl, xxx, 248). Soon Woodward abandoned the history of the First Reconstruction that he was contracted to produce. He rejected the traditional white Southern view that heroic “redeemers” had rescued the South from wicked carpetbaggers, scalawags, and their black pawns, but he never was comfortable with inside-out history that placed radical Republicans on a pedestal.

Woodward deplored the whirlwinds that buffeted American universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Even though he had been “a passionate non-interventionist” before World War II, he sourly judged that anti-Vietnam student demonstrations had “prolonged the war and neutralized the more important opposition of the working-class people” (312, 346). He also feared that his chosen profession had lost its way. He thought historians should have “the gift of blending narrative with analysis, detachment, balance, and above all, writing ability.” By that standard, he judged the work of most historians who wrote about the United States “tedious, pedantic, or unimportant” (303). He doubted the merits of “social history” and the “quantification fad” (352, 246). He ruminated with Robert Penn Warren that there might be “more truth in poetry than in history” (352).

Most of all, Woodward’s outlook was darkened by the specter of death. Cancer claimed two of his closest and most accomplished friends, Richard Hofstadter and David Potter, each still at the height of his powers. The hardest blow of all came in 1969 when his only child, Peter Vincent Woodward, was cut down by cancer as he pursued his doctorate in political science. Neither Woodward nor his wife Glenn ever recovered; she too succumbed to the scourge in 1982.

The letters published here faithfully recapitulate the trajectory of Woodward’s career, from obscurity to prominence, and from his influential pinnacle to a diminished visibility. They remind the reader that he was the product of a particular time and place. A half century after *Tom Watson* appeared, its author reflected that he had written a book “for the 1930s and of the 1930s, a book for hard times and hard scrabble, when rebellion was rife and the

going was rough. . . . It was also a book of, as well as for, the provincial at odds with the metropolis, for the colonies against the colonizers, for the exploited against the exploiters, and perhaps, at unguarded moments, one for a partly imagined past against a very real and hostile present."¹ That same spirit carried forward into his spectacular trifecta in the early and mid-1950s, built on the foundations already laid down in the 1930s.

Woodward's austere office in the Hall of Graduate Studies in New Haven had but a single photograph on the wall—William Faulkner. "I began reading him in college," he later recalled, "without knowing what the hell he was saying but without ever a doubt that he was saying it to me and that it changed everything" (245). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner demanded that young Quentin Compson "tell about the South." Woodward faithfully heeded that admonition.

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¹C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge, 1986), 42.