

The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview

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Review

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Genovese, Eugene D. and Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview.* Cambridge University Press, \$31.99 ISBN 521615623

Beyond Race and Slavery

A New Perspective on the Southern Mind

Historians have waited a long time for this book. Its arrival, coupled with Michl O'Brien's recent *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860* (The University of North Carolina Press, ISBN 0807828009, \$95.00 hardcover), has finally brought the study of the southern mind to a level of sophistication and comprehensiveness comparable to what Perry Miller did for the New England mind over fifty years ago. And like O'Brien the Genoveses understand that southern intellectual life in the first half of the nineteenth century consisted of a great deal more than an obsession with race and slavery. Unlike the more comprehensive *Conjectures*, however, the Genoveses focus primarily upon Southern views of history and religion.

There was a time when most people, including scholars, saw the antebellum South as a region of limited intellectual activity. While the North produced Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the South united behind a pro-slavery argument articulated by various second and third-rate thinkers. This book has weakened that old conceptualization in two ways. First, the southern mind does not seem nearly as homogenous as it once did. Our authors set forth theses, demonstrate them with evidence, and then set forth contradictory theses and argue them with the same amount of evidence. These changes in perspective can disorient the reader, but they demonstrate the diversity of opinion that existed in the slaveholding South. Second, with their emphasis on history and faith, the Genoveses are able to focus on two things southern slaveholders did remarkably well: namely, write history books and make complicated theological arguments. Historians such as T. R. Dew and theologians such as Robert Lewis

Dabney were equal to the best of their colleagues in the North. These men could thrive at what they did because, as our authors demonstrate with a fair degree of plausibility, neither traditional Christianity nor the bulk of world history threatened the worldview of the slaveholders.

The world that arose in the wake of the French Revolution, however, did threaten them. The Genoveses describe a South that treasured much of modernity but that wished to reign in its excesses. Slavery formed the basis of the antebellum South, and white southerners hoped that slavery could allow them to remain in the modern world without fully becoming a part of it. In those days before the Holocaust and the Gulag, the excesses of new modes of thought and behavior could be limited to the guillotine and to urban poverty. The first few chapters demonstrate how Southerners viewed the French Revolution and the various upheavals that flowed out of it. Hoping to use the peculiar institution to keep America from looking like either France during the Terror or like the working-class slums of England, Southern intellectuals carefully read the works of European historians while simultaneously writing more than a few of their own. And while treasuring the American Revolution and its legacy, Southern slaveholders believed that slavery would enable them to solve labor conflicts in a way that fulfilled a pre-modern conception of rights and duties.

The slaveholder's conception of rights and duties had its roots in traditional Christianity. As the Genoveses point out on several occasions, such Christianity does not necessitate the freeing of slaves. The Golden Rule, by this interpretation, demands that a master treat his slave exactly as he would wish his slave to treat him if their roles were reversed. As Christians, southern slaveholders saw themselves as bound to high standard of behavior. They believed that northerners had largely rejected traditional Christianity in favor of materialism or of a liberal and non-scriptural version of the faith. If slavery could keep the South orthodox, many slaveholders thought it a blessing and not a curse. And when the Confederate Experiment failed, many argued that God had punished them not for slaveholding, but for failing to live up to their full obligations as masters. Our authors acknowledge that the racial aspect of southern slavery could not easily be made to comport with Christian values, but they implicitly chastise those scholars who focus exclusively on racial aspects of the peculiar institution.

The Genoveses do not argue that slavery made the South into a pre-modern society. Slavery merely allowed certain aspects of traditional society to survive.

Like many other scholars they emphasize the honor ethos that guided the behavior of slaveholders, but they also note the strength of oral traditions in the antebellum South. That oral traditions could thrive in such a highly literate culture deserves further study. To elucidate how slaveholders self-consciously cultivated a chivalric ideal of behavior our authors describe medieval-style jousting tournaments that commonly occurred throughout the South. It is all too easy to snicker such affectations, but they resist the temptation, believing that historians have yet to fully decode these rituals of a lost time and place.

Naturally, with a book of such size and scope every reviewer must voice a few caveats. It would have been nice if the fifty-six page chapter on the ancients had followed a clearer set of subdivisions. Perhaps southern attitudes about the Greeks and the Romans could have been treated separately. As usual, the Genoveses do not try to demonstrate change over time, so their picture is rather static. Perhaps most seriously of all, their emphasis on the pre-modern aspects of the Southern mind will make it difficult for them, in forthcoming works they have promised, to come to terms with southern constitutionalism. For what they, with some justification, call The War for Southern Independence had its roots not only in slavery but in a very modern understanding of the right of a state to leave the Union.

The relatively loose structure of this book will annoy some readers. It is a compendium of what Southern intellectuals thought and said; it rushes over the reader like a tidal wave carrying little snippets and specks of long-dead southern thought. But by so doing it impresses upon the reader both the seriousness and the intellectual ability of southern slaveholders. And after an initial read-through, the index can guide the reader to whatever part they seek. Even better, this volume has a remarkable seventy-page section of supplementary references. Want to know what southern slaveholders thought of, for instance, the *Arabian Nights*, or Goethe, or Sparta? One can simply flip to the back of the book and find a series of references to the relevant primary and secondary sources. In these days when complete runs of antebellum periodicals such as the *Southern Literary Messenger* can be found on-line such references will be of interest even to non-specialists. But it is those who seriously study the South who will find this book indispensable; it will serve as a *vade-mecum* for a new generation of scholars.

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