

Reassessing the 1930s South

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Review

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Reassessing the 1930s South: Stagnation, dynamism, and the contest for definition

Within the text of the National Emergency Council's 1938 Report on the *Economic Conditions of the South*, President Franklin Roosevelt wrote, "It is my conviction that the South presents right now the Nation's No. 1 economic problem." It is certainly powerful when a president broadly defines an entire region in a sentence. Probably for many Americans living outside the region Roosevelt's simplistic generalization was conclusive. Many within the South resented that assessment as far too broad, offensively ignoring the region's dynamic reality. *Reassessing the 1930s South* demonstrates the frailty of such a stark definition.

Reassessing the 1930s South is an excellent collection of thirteen essays that reveal a much deeper contest for defining the region. Editors Karen L. Cox and Sarah E. Gardner present a compelling examination of a simultaneously stagnant and dynamic region full of paradox and contradiction, and the voices struggling to define it. The essays show modernization and backwardness folded together in a clumsy, almost imperceptible tumult of consequence. One article describes landowners using cars to more efficiently monitor sharecroppers. Other farmers, the essay notes, escaped economic impoverishment by literally driving away from it. And still for others in the region, car ownership only resulted in greater debt. The impact of automobiles defied monothematic explanation.

The essays within provide a number of lenses which effectively reiterate that complexity. Essential to this examination is, like the presidential quote above, the struggle for definition. Federal and state agencies, writers, tourism promoters, radio shows, and labor movements were among the many factions vying to define the region and solutions. Cox and Gardner divided the

book into five sections where the contests occurred: literature, art, tourism, rural representations, and racism.

Consider the paradox of tourism: a modern economic contributor based upon a mythic past. One essay, in part, examines Tennessee Williams's fictional *Streetcar Named Desire* and its cinematic success. His probe into the complexity of human interactions, specific to region and time, sparked profitable New Orleans tourism. The city, hoping to cash in on the popularity replicated the fictitious conveyance, the author posed with it, and tourist flocked there. Cities outside the South copied the trolley for their own tourist enticements.

One essay regarding the battle to define Greene County, Georgia epitomizes the book's goal of revealing the struggle for regional definition. The 1920s collapse of cotton prices devastated an already impoverished county. Noted University of North Carolina sociologist Arthur Raper conducted a detailed study of Greene County. Additional studies and articles transformed this county into a national icon of the South's backwardness. In January 1938 *Collier's* published "Devil in de Cotton" which reinforced the 1920's perception of Greene County's (and the South's) stagnation and the need for reform. Local elites fiercely rejected their portrayal. By 1938 New Deal programs and outmigration had, in fact, substantially altered Greene County's economics. The growing media sophistication of the threatened leadership responded with reaction and progress. They fiercely defended tradition while portraying a much more dynamic county than a simple dichotomy of paternalism and destitute sharecroppers.

While readers will obviously find certain subjects more to their liking than others, it seems that all thirteen essays stay true to these battles for definition, change and tradition. The essays, collectively reveal a region blighted with poverty and racism yet underneath those dominating realities lied a region exploding with cultural transitions, both influencing and influenced by government, work, tradition, and modernity. Together the essays expose southern and outside perspectives of self-evaluation, promotion, and transition; it is a big conversation with many impassioned participants.

Never evading the truths of poverty, stagnation, and racism, *Reassessing the 1930s South*, reveals the cultural battlefronts debating the remedy or preservation of those realities. The results are not proof of a sclerotic place and people monolithic in reaction but rather of a region undergoing immense economic and social challenges. It is a fascinating examination of multiple

debates going on inside and outside of the South; government and cultural discussions with and within the South.

Nearly all the essays utilize culture as a common thread; from the symbolism of TVA architecture, broadcasting Appalachian folk music, to Tennessee Williams's representations of New Orleans. Much of it concerns entrenched southern poverty and attempts to alleviate it. The results are, almost universally, for those fomenting change, those trying to prevent it, and the intended recipients, in the course of debate and action all are transformed in important ways. Traditions are borrowed to break racial barriers as well as preserve them; re-writing lyrics to spirituals to reflect new realities, new thinking. Automobiles provided overseers of tenant farmers to more easily supervise his farmers but it also provided sharecroppers with greater mobility but sometimes failed dreams and debt. New Deal programs assisted and curbed both impoverished citizens and corporate growth. Importantly, southerners were concerned about how they were portrayed and received; how they represented themselves and how outsiders perceived them. And just as importantly, the essays show, whether successful or not, southerner had a complex view of themselves, were introspective, and did change.

Time and again, especially in their totality, the essays reveal the complexity of the human experience specific to the 1930s South. Of course there are common realities of economic depression and racial oppression but even within those stark realities lies human dynamism. Whether failing, succeeding in part or (rarely) in whole, the people of the South regularly challenged their social, cultural, and economic boundaries. Their efforts, debates, and reactions reveal a place deep in transition. *Reassessing the 1930s South* is a valuable reexamination of region and our propensity and the fragility of generalizing.

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