H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John B. Boles, ed. *Shapers of Southern History: Autobiographical Reflections.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004. x + 334 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2475-3.

Reviewed by Christopher Curtis (Department of History, Iowa State University)
Published on H-South (January, 2006)

Not in Defense, but Maybe in Memoriam: Reflections from the Southern Liberals

As the title indicates, this is a book about the experiences of southern historians. But it is also a compelling and gracefully told story of the twentieth-century South; and one that suggests some of the potential forces that threaten its demise as a distinctive place. To tell this story, editor John Boles has assembled an impressive collection of fifteen contributors whose names and books are familiar to any serious student of the southern history. This rich story is told primarily in the strong southern accents of John Hope Franklin, Anne Firor Scott, Bill Malone, Dan T. Carter, Chaz Joyner, Pete Daniel, Drew Gilpin Faust, Vernon Burton, and Ed Ayers. But it is augmented by the border dialects of Bert Wyatt-Brown, Jack Greene, Peter Wood, and Darlene Clark Hine, as well as the voices of Tony Badger and Suzanne Lebsock, two scholars who have come to the South from afar. Boles's stated intention in selecting these authors was the hope that, in choosing historians "from diverse backgrounds, doing different kinds of history, [and] pursuing various careers" the book would present a group that would "fairly accurately represent the range of historical endeavors at the end of one century and the beginning of another" (pp. viii-ix). He is quick to point out that he does not wish to suggest that these are the fifteen most influential "shapers of southern history," nor that these fifteen are anywhere near to being a comprehensive list. Indeed, the insufficiency of the list of authors is immediately apparent (although nowhere expressed) by the exclusion of an autobiographical reflection from the editor himself. And while the book is certainly diminished by the absence of an essay from Boles, one can only smile and respect the characteristic humility of a southern gentleman.

Although the editor's intention was to present diversity, the theme that emerges from the essays in toto is a shared, relatively homogeneous interpretation of the contemporary South. This interpretation depicts a pluralistic South composed of many cultures and many traditions, which has, mostly within the lifetime of the essayists, overcome a long history of racial and economic oppression and progressed toward embracing the democratic principles of American liberalism. It is also an interpretation that generally conceives of history as an effective instrument in exposing the sources of such oppression, in giving voice to the voiceless, and in seeking out heroic examples for a more promising future. Admittedly, some of the essays are less optimistic than others; indeed the tension between past and present is manifested by a marked ambivalence toward the region itself, but the liberal ideal of universal inclusion provides the basic litmus test throughout each autobiography. In his brief introductory remarks, Boles acknowledges that, "upon receiving the essays," he was surprised to find a common liberal political perspective shared by these otherwise diverse individuals. In offering a revealing, half-apology for this homogeneity, Boles explains that one historian from "the conservative end of the political spectrum" had to withdraw from the project, and he further justifies those presented by noting that since liberalism is presently "typical of the academy" the essays "accurately reflect the political climate on campuses" (p. ix).

But they do so much more than that. In presenting a series of essays that espouse a shared political perspective as well as common historical concerns, Boles opens an autobiographical window into the formative characteristics of a distinct historiographical school that has come to dominate the field of southern history during the past half-century. In this manner, this collection of essays neatly complements, and in some ways completes, his earlier effort at identifying contemporary trends in southern historiography.[1]

Appropriately, this book begins with a reprint of John Hope Franklin's essay, "A Life of Learning," narrating the now familiar, but never tired story of Franklin's early research trip to the North Carolina State Archives. There, the director, desperately trying to accommodate the pro-

tocols of Jim Crow, assigned Franklin to a private office and gave him direct access to the collection so that the white clerks would not have to deliver manuscripts to a black man. The epiphany experienced by the white researchers in residence with Professor Franklin, that separate was inherently unequal, serves as an ironic allegory for the central themes of alienation, deconstruction, agency, and reconstruction that follow. Franklin's seminal essay stands as mere prologue, however. His scholarship, along with that of C. Vann Woodward (who appears recurrently throughout the essays like the ghost of Hamlet's father), reflects the experiences and attitudes of an earlier generation (the generation of the Southern Renaissance) and thus fundamentally differs from those of the other essayists. Indeed, it was the critical schism fostered by the "backward glance" of these two architects who, along with William Faulkner, Wright, Warren and the others of this venerated generation, created the intellectual climate of alienation necessary for the scholarly inquiries and social concerns of the progeny represented here. And this debt is recognized repeatedly.

Yet despite such recognition, the essays also reveal elements of the generational divide suggested by Lewis Simpson; one marked by the abrogation of "the covenant of memory and history," which characterized the writings of the Renaissance, "in favor of a covenant with the existential self" that reflects not just a modernist sense of alienation, but the particular alienation of the individual alone in the crowd.[2] Doubtless, autobiographical reflections are prone circumstantially to such existential meditations, but, as in much of their scholarship, issues of agency, identity, cultural relativism, and social mobility form prominent threads of continuity through each essay in the collection. Each essay details individual experiences within the flow of the overwhelming social forces characteristic of mass society. Scott writes of her pioneering adventure as a female graduate student at Harvard and her foray into the academic world as wife, mother, and scholar. Wyatt-Brown details his sojourn at St. Botolph's with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath to explain why he became "neither priest nor poet." Joyner and Carter tell of their impressionable adventures at civil rights organizing sessions with the likes of Ella Baker, John Lewis, and Connie Curry. Faust, like the historic fugitives before her, narrates the circumstances of her flight from a Virginia homestead to a friendlier climate north of the Mason-Dixon Line, where she felt secure enough to offer penetrating criticisms of the power structures from which she had escaped.

Their stories thus reverberate with the shared experiences of dislocation caused by the inherent social and geographic mobility of Woodward's "Bulldozer Revolution." Institutions and places are ephemeral. Greene, Malone, Wood, Joyner, Hine, Lebsock, and Ayers all moved as children. Malone grew up on a farm before moving to town, and Carter routinely worked on one; the rest were all raised as town folk. Religion is rarely discussed; notably absent are any confessions of conversion experiences akin to those of Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon or Walker Percy, and, indeed, Vernon Burton stands alone in talking comfortably about the lasting influence of his faith. Family appears in almost all the essays, but mostly as a measure to explain "where I come from" and not "where I belong." Greene, Scott, Wood, and Lebsock were born into academic families; the rest "discovered" graduate school. Most of them did their graduate study outside of the South and have traveled widely and frequently in their professional career. This familiarity with change and difference created a divide in terms of opportunities, possibilities and expectations, and often inspired a correspondent crisis of identity wrought by the willingness to break from family norms in order to pursue those opportunities. Nowhere is this expressed more poignantly than in Bill Malone's essay when he relates the careful advice given to him by his father, a hard-working tenant farmer who had scraped a living out of the East Texas soil during the Depression, and who, when dropping his son off for his first day of college, told him; "Son, don't sign up for anything big, like lawyer" (p. 106). But if this divide distinguishes this generation, some shared attributes with their modern predecessors remain. Like those of the Renaissance, these authors describe a deep-seated ambivalence toward the parochialism of the South. Naturally, the civil rights movement is considered as a pivotal moment in galvanizing these feelings. Significantly, in most instances, such ambivalence was seldom a direct consequence of the race relations of Jim Crow, but was rooted in deeper questions of experience and identity often generated by the New Deal or the Second World War. Perhaps not so surprisingly, readers find its clearest expression articulated in the autobiographical account offered by Chaz Joyner. Joyner, having been a consciously patriotic child during the Second World War, expressed his difficulty in understanding "how my ancestors, who had fought for the Confederacy, could have fought against my country," since he was first and foremost "an American" (pp. 144-145). And Joyner is by no means alone in such candor. Faust too talks of confronting "the paradox of being both a southerner and an American at an early age" (p. 222). Ayers opens his essay by explaining that he "should be a better southerner" than he is (p. 311). Greene adamantly re-

jected a southern identity in his youth and remains leery of being considered a southern historian to this day. In this sense, Wyatt-Brown's view of his ancestral southern past, from the detached perspective of his Pennsylvania upbringing, perhaps epitomizes the sentiments and experiences of the entire school. Despite articulating this shared ambivalence, however, the differing response to it further distinguishes one generation from the other. Whereas the Agrarians looked at a tarnished South and a corrupted modernity, and then chose the South, the Liberals have chosen modernity.

The question arising from these essays and, indeed, from this historiography is what happens to the South, as a distinctive place and/or culture, when its history is treated by its historians as something to be overcome? The persistence of the South is, of course, not a new question. Around the moment of generational transition, Woodward famously noted that "the time is coming, if indeed it has not already arrived, when the Southerner will begin to ask himself whether there is really any longer very much point in calling himself a Southerner."[3] Many since have attempted to respond. Notably, more than twenty years ago now, John Shelton Reed suggested that despite its unqualified embrace of industrialism, the South would survive because southern distinctiveness was not rooted in the economic models of the Agrarians, but in the cultural values that created a "shared understanding."[4] When considered in light of popular identifications of NASCAR and the "Christian Right," Reed's cultural argument remains rather formidable despite the skepticism of a few of us who, despite having become accustomed to hearing Puritan theology preached with a southern drawl, still wonder what kind of cultural value to attach to it. If Reed is indeed right however, and southern distinctiveness is grounded in a shared understanding, one might reasonably ask what happens to that understanding when those who tell the stories central to defining it identify themselves first and foremost as Americans? Significantly in this respect, Dan Carter concludes his autobiographical reflection by acknowledging that his recent study of George Wallace has caused him to "rethink" many of his "earlier assumptions about the South as a distinct region." As this liberal historiography enters into it second half-century of dominance with no sign of abating, it is appropriate for scholars of the South to ask the question: what, if anything, is next? Whether intentional or not, Boles's entertaining collection of autobiographical reflections encourages just such an inquiry.

Notes

[1]. John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

[2]. Lewis P. Simpson, *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 99.

[3]. C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 3rd. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), p. 3.

[4]. John Shelton Reed, "The Same Old Stand?" in *Why the South Will Survive by Fifteen Southerners*, ed. Clyde N. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981).

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Christopher Curtis. Review of Boles, John B., ed., *Shapers of Southern History: Autobiographical Reflections*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11300

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.