H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph P. Ward, ed. *Britain and the American South: From Colonialism to Rock and Roll.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. ix + 281 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57806-580-6.

Reviewed by David Woodard (History Department, Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota)

Published on H-South (April, 2006)

A Truly Complex Relationship: Great Britain and the American South

It seems an appealing intellectual exercise to contemplate the stated purpose of this volume, which is to "consider the influence of early modern British culture on race relations, religion, and attitudes toward the outside world in the modern South" (p. xiii). So what connections might a reader immediately think about? Initial thoughts would probably lead one to the colonial era. There was obvious connection then between Great Britain and the thirteen North American colonies–at least six of which would have labeled themselves Southern. And, between the conclusion of the American Revolution and the Civil War, we know there was a substantive relationship between the American South and Great Britain. More specifically, once slavery became a real national issue, we can begin to identify a political "South" in the United States. And that section took clear positions on a number of global and international issues–many of which would have concerned Great Britain.

But after failing to gain British help during its futile attempt at independence, the South lost its position as a viable section. As Northern capitalism gained ascendancy after Reconstruction, we would not expect the South to have the same kind of relationship with Great Britain or any other foreign nation. In fact, it is hard to imagine any time after 1865 where we would be able to see a "South" even referred to in international affairs.

Before examining specific articles in this book, it behooves me to continue making a preliminary search for connections and links. There are two issues that stand out as possible points of departure: race and Southern culture. In the book's afterword, Michael O'Brien writes in his fine summation, "On the Irrelevance of Knights," that the two links between the South and Great Britain–at least in the early years–were race and imperialism. O'Brien suggests that both places had "by 1850, accepted a sense of themselves as imperial and racist cultures" (p. 221). While I would agree that this very well might have been a unifying theme before 1850, it still leaves us searching for something more in the post-1850 era.

And this thorny chronological issue keeps resurfacing. While I did enjoy the book, I was never convinced that this could be a truly comprehensive work–it might have instead been titled *Britain and the American South to 1865.* In Joseph Ward's defense, however, he does include a brief but impressive bibliography in the foreword listing some recent studies on the topic, several of which cover the twentieth century. I do not mean, however, to discount the important of this book. Six of the eight primary articles are indeed about the period before 1865. So we do get a picture of the era when the American South was at its peak in international affairs.

In spite of my concerns about the chronological parameters, the book contains some excellent pieces. The first two concentrate on Great Britain's colonial legacy. In "Virginia's Religious Revolution: From Established Monopoly to Free Marketplace," Frank Lambert traces changes in Virginia's religious beliefs leading up its 1785 Statute for Religious Freedom. Lambert discovers connections between the economic marketplace and the frontier "free marketplace of religion," which provided Virginians the opportunity to worship and chose the sect they desired (p. 5). He argues that this free marketplace of religion provided both a check on fanaticism, and also offered a competitive market granting people choice and religious options. Lambert's primary theme is that this chaotic frontier marketplace of freedom was just what the population desired. He concludes that the "planters recognized that economic success depended in

large part on attracting more settlers and laborers, and that required religious toleration" (p. 9).

In fact, the traditional leaders of Virginia worried that these various religious sects would make the state an "asylum for free inquiry, knowledge, and the virtuous of every denomination" (p. 21). They also worried that slavery and free religion could not exist side by side. But Lambert reasons that the Statute of 1785 would not have been possible without "thousands of dissenters who over the previous forty years, had poured into the state, many of whom emigrated from Pennsylvania" (p. 24).

Holly Brewer, in "Power and Authority in the Colonial South: The English Legacy and Its Contradictions," goes back to the debates in Parliament during the seventeenth century searching for evidence of the influence of British authority on the South. She seeks to find out how those debates were interpreted in Virginia and Barbados and what effect that ideology had on slavery and Southern society. Brewer maintains that interpreting the ideology is critical because slavery has too often been explained as stemming simply from climate, economic necessity, and geography. Instead, writes Brewer, ideology might have played a larger role especially in terms of "how and why land and status became distributed and inherited as they were, how the laws shaped these patterns of distribution and inheritance, and why these laws were passed" (p. 49). It was in the late 1600s when England held fierce debates about birth status, perpetuity, and political and economic identity. Brewer concludes that the Southern colonies fell on the side of the traditional arguments about power. Slavery had much to do with what laws were accepted. Brewer helps us understand the theoretical underpinnings of slavery much better.

The Southern Creek Indians and their dealings with the colonists is the topic of Kathryn E. Holland Braund's essay, "Like a Stone Wall Never to Be Broke: The British-Indian Boundary Line with the Creek Indians, 1763-1773." Braund's primary theme focuses on how the Creek political system developed coherent policies and strategies to deal with the land demands from the Southern colonists. The Creeks saw land boundaries as permanent, but the colonists kept encroaching and trying to gain more concessions. The Creeks worked extremely hard to internally develop consensus policies–something important to them. They did seek clearly delineated lines to divide their land from that of the colonists. In order to get both peace and boundaries, the Creek agreed to several conferences. But what hurt the Creeks, according to the author, was the "divisional nature of the Creek polity" (p. 65). That is, many of the decisions were made by individual jurisdictions. The more aggressive actions of the colonists overwhelmed these attempts at consensus policies on the part of the Creek.

The cultural identity of South Carolina lowcounty planters is the subject of S. Max Edelson's "Carolinians Abroad: Cultivating English Identities from the Colonial Lower South." When these planters traveled to Britain, they were able to compare and contrast their culture and habits with those of the British–this helped them begin to develop an identity. In general, the South Carolinians felt culturally inferior to the British elite, yet strived to adopt some of their ways. But plantation life in the South forced the planters to develop their own culture–a hybrid mixture of British ways with the necessities of home. One of the more interesting aspects that Edelson discusses is that many of these planters, still feeling inferior, often made sure their sons were sent to Europe and Britain in order to gain the refinement they could not get in the South.

How can we better discern British views of the South? Marcus Wood examines this topic in his selection, "The American South and English Print Satire, 1760-1865." Most British satire concerned the Revolution and the Civil War. The South in particular, was most often stereotyped by these satirists using the themes of slavery, savagery, dueling, lynching, and chewing tobacco. Wood includes a wonderfully illustrative 1852 engraving from *Punch* showing a leisurely, tobacco-smoking Southern gentleman amidst a disturbing scene of violence, slavery, a brutal annexation of Texas–all watched over by the Devil. In general, Wood points out that until the sectional crisis of the 1850s, the North was dealt with a little better. But as slavery became more of an issue in the United States, slaves began to appear in the British satires. Slaves were often portrayed as unbiased bystanders viewing a nation which was destroying itself.

A familiar topic, the American Civil War, is R. J. M. Blackett's subject in "British Views of the Confederacy." Blackett seeks to discover the primary British supporters of the Confederacy. He points out that many British views on the war depended upon how they saw reform at home. Those who opposed political reform in Britain often supported the Confederacy–seeing the democratic North as rabble. But how did these Confederate supporters deal with the more sensitive issue of slavery? Many British defenders of the Confederacy still had difficulties supporting slavery; but they often tried to skirt the issue–which caused numerous problems. Since Britain

seemed to have an anti-slavery tradition, British Confederate supporters had to make a case. When Confederacy supporters did make their case, the pro-Union side was quick to respond. What Blackett really achieves here is that he demonstrates the disparate elements in Britain that supported the South, and all for a variety of different reasons. And even with those reasons, they still found it hard to overcome the slavery/free labor issue.

Now we get to the postbellum era, and are left with only two selections. While these articles are of high quality, we are left wondering if they were really necessary. Hugh Wilford's "The South and the British Left, 1930-1960" talks about the how the British political left viewed the South. He reports that after 1930, the left in Britain surprisingly held some very complex ideas about the South–unlike earlier eras where stereotypes abounded. Wilford reasons that this complexity had much to do with the outbreak of racial problems in Great Britain–allowing the British to at least sympathize with racial problems in the American South.

Finally, Brian Ward looks to find music connections in "By Elvis and All the Saints: Images of the American South in the World of 1950s British Popular Music." Ward does a fabulous job discerning what British listeners thought of the South by listening to its music. Initially, Southern music transmitted typical stereotypes across the ocean. Ward writes that British listeners made Southern music part of their "set of preconceived, often highly romanticized and stereotypical, ideas about the region (p. 188). But things changed during the 1950s as music helped British listeners transform their views of the American South. Britons began to see the American South as a complex region–not as romanticized–but more real. This coincided with British knowledge about racial violence in the South–they still loved the music, but often doubted the culture.

Did I find a unifying theme here? First of all, I do not think it is necessary for all the articles to have a connection. After all, this is simply a work about Great Britain and the American South, right? Do we need more? But I actually did discover a thematic focus in these impressive writings. That theme is complexity–in all of these analyses, we see that Britain's view of the South might have been steeped in some preconceived notions and stereotypes, but upon further reading and examination, those biases become much more balanced and the complexities come to surface. It is there that we see the real global interactions and richness of the relationship between Britain and the American South.

In spite of my earlier concerns about the post Civil War era, I think readers will embrace this book. The selections are all well-written with a clear purpose. In addition, the articles cover a variety of topics–from colonial religion to music, and from parliamentary debates to satirical engravings. There is something in *Britain and the American South* for everyone. I recommend this book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-south

Citation: David Woodard. Review of Ward, Joseph P., ed., *Britain and the American South: From Colonialism to Rock and Roll.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11643

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.