

# H-Net Reviews

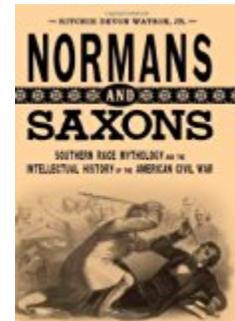
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ritchie Devon Watson Jr. *Normans and Saxons: Southern Race Mythology and the Intellectual History of the American Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 286 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3312-5.

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## Southern Sectional Racism, Secession, and the Civil War

In this lucid, if less than original or persuasive study, Ritchie Devon Watson Jr. analyzes the polemical and literary expressions of the Civil War-era “Southern Race Mythology” that his book’s subtitle announces. Watson, a professor of English at Randolph-Macon College, has in mind less white supremacy than what he provocatively argues was the conviction of “the leaders of Dixie’s political and journalistic establishments” that (white) Southerners were racially distinct from and superior to (white) Northerners, a conviction whose ascendancy he locates in the intensifying sectionalism of the 1850s (p. 17).

At the heart of this Southern “racial fantasy,” Watson contends, was an imagined Anglo-Norman South whose propagators championed it against what they saw as an antithetical and hostile Puritan-Saxon North (p. 34). Drawing on Kwame Anthony Appiah’s work on racial theory, he identifies the fantasy’s intellectual origins first and foremost in the post-1800 rise of polygenism, which he maintains held full sway over Southern periodicals by the 1850s and lent the Norman-Saxon myth they advocated a seemingly scientific cast. A second, almost equally important source, according to Watson, was Walter Scott’s 1819 novel *Ivanhoe*, which he concludes Southerners “read ... arbitrarily,” ignoring its “subtleties” while “using it to validate fantasies of a chivalric and exquisitely honorable southern culture related in both spirit and blood to that of its Norman forebears” (p. 61). In a subsequent chapter, Watson analyzes how the antebellum plantation romance fiction authored by

Southerners and their Northern allies contributed to that mythic mix by celebrating a longstanding “Cavalier character ideal” dating to colonial Virginia (p. 93). “This literary mythmaking,” he neatly observes, “perfectly complemented the racial mythmaking of the South’s polemical essayists” (p. 116).

Northerners, Watson argues, countered with racial mythmaking of their own. They advanced “a powerfully appealing Anglo-Saxon racial myth that was national, not regional in scope,” and that linked Anglo-Saxonism to American “freedom and democracy” (pp. 126, 127). Moreover, where Southerners saw in the North an inferior Yankee-Puritan culture of materialism and fanaticism, Northerners saw in the South “a second rate, morally blind, and even barbaric” culture corrupted by slavery and dominated by “ruffians masquerading as aristocrats” (pp. 133, 128). In effect, Northern polemicists substituted a damning inverse image for the South’s flattering Cavalier-Norman self-portrait. Still, in the author’s view, their indictment never quite reached the same level of intensity as that of their Southern counterparts.

According to Watson, Southern race mythology both justified secession and lifted morale during the war that followed, even prolonging the South’s commitment to battle beyond the point when Northern victory was assured. Informed by Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s work on Southern honor and James McPherson’s on what Civil

War soldiers fought for, Watson further maintains that the concept of honor “implicitly validated the [region’s] racial mythology” and ensured that “ultimately the war was more than a conflict over chattel slavery or states’ rights” (pp. 164, 167). In his arresting formulation, “it was the prospect of shameful subjugation to the North, not the prospect of a South stripped of its slaves, that tended to capture the southern imagination” from Abraham Lincoln’s election to the firing on Fort Sumter (pp. 160-161). Though more urgent, the need to defend slavery, he contends, was “less emotionally stirring” than defending the South’s honor against racially inferior Yankee Puritans (p. 165). Thus Watson, without engaging or citing her book, perhaps because it appeared so close in time to his own, indirectly challenges Chandra Manning’s insistence in *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (2007) that slavery belongs “at the center of [Union and Confederate] soldiers’ views of the struggle” (p. 11).

In a timely and in places pointed conclusion, Watson argues that in the wake of Northern victory, white Southerners virtually stopped proclaiming their Norman superiority to Yankee Saxons. “After all,” he asks, “what would have been the point in promoting the idea of a separate southern race in a nation so obviously destined to be unified under Yankee rule?” (p. 239). Still, he stresses, distinguishing between antebellum/wartime invective and postbellum conviction, Southerners remained convinced of their racial superiority and distinctiveness, a belief evident, if only implicitly, in the region’s Lost Cause mythology, even though the latter’s rise “was not directly dependent” on the former (p. 239). Specifically, Watson insists, Southerners continued to embrace “Dixie’s myth of aristocratic racial descent” (p. 245). Noting that they had historically enlisted that myth to defend white supremacy, he frankly asserts that “there is ample reason to suspect that their continuing urge to see themselves as a distinctive people within the contemporary American Union is tainted by similar white supremacist conviction” (p. 251). He ends by quoting historian Randall Jimerson’s ironic and sobering 1988 observation that the Civil War continued rather than ended “‘the conviction that northerners and southerners were two different peoples’” (p. 251).

Watson renders vivid the extraordinary depth of Southern animosity toward the North (and, secondarily, vice versa) during the 1850s and the Civil War itself, at least as revealed in the primary sources he relies on most—periodicals, novels, and poems. This, indeed, is the major strength of his highly readable, jargon-free

study, which falls clearly and forcefully in the “irrepressible conflict” camp of Civil War historiography. Reading it leaves one impressed anew by the central role of mutually hostile sectional words, images, and ideas in the drama of secession and war, and wondering about the depth and pace of the postwar reunion emphasized by some scholars, most notably David Blight, in recent years.

Author of *The Cavalier in Virginia Fiction* (1985) and *Yeoman Versus Cavalier: The Old Southwest’s Fictional Road to Rebellion* (1993), Watson is particularly well equipped to analyze how sectional conflict played out in antebellum fiction and wartime (as well as postbellum Southern) poetry, two of the more interesting and lively chapters of his book’s eight. He is rightly attuned to the gendered dimension of Southern Civil War-era literary productions, intriguingly asserting in the chapter on poetry, for example, that “there were immense psychological benefits for the South in poetically celebrating the Civil War as a conflict undertaken in the defense of [chivalrous manly] honor [rather than chiefly slavery], an honor inseparable from the honor of the pure and virtuous southern ladies who were for Dixie’s warriors objects of veneration” (p. 206).

Many readers will experience a sense of déjà vu, as Watson covers much the same ground as William R. Taylor fifty years ago in his *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (1961). Watson early on quotes a lengthy passage, which he characterizes as brilliant, from Taylor’s study, but neglects to say how his own work differs from or adds to his predecessor’s. The answer would seem to lie in its valuable inclusion of the Civil War years (Taylor’s ends in 1860) and, above all, its singular focus and insistence on Southerners’ “sectional racial mythology” with its “scientific veneer” (pp. 27, 33). Though Watson rides his thesis hard, doubts remain. Most obviously, it is debatable and probably ultimately unknowable with any certainty whether most Southerners who used the term “race” or invoked the Norman/Saxon trope did so with the same biological, polygenetic understanding he delineates among the period’s scientists. Moreover, in this regard, Watson’s own evidence is less clear than he acknowledges. For example, the poetry he presents is characterized primarily by its virulent sectional demonizing and fervent chivalric imagery, neither of which was necessarily racial in the way he contends. Language is notoriously slippery or multivalent, and at least some of the time one wonders if the meaning of the phraseology Watson incorporates as evidence of sectional racial mythmaking might not

have been more elusive and unstable than he seems to assume. Ironically, and perhaps revealingly, a work whose focus is white Southerners' sectional racism ends with a final paragraph in which the author remarks on Dixie's white supremacy past and present, as if reminding us that, however much antebellum and wartime Southerners may have seen themselves as Northerners' racial superiors, it was, at bottom, their belief in and assertion of their racial supremacy over black Southerners that was central to the history of the Civil War, the postbellum South, and thus the nation, even down to the present.

Also problematic is Watson's contention that Southerners saw themselves as defending their honor rather than slavery during the Civil War (though he clearly acknowledges the war was about the latter). Had he incorporated subsequent scholarship on Southern honor by such historians as Edward L. Ayers (*Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* [1987]) and Kenneth S. Greenberg (*Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* [1996]), rather than limiting himself to Wyatt-Brown's work on the subject, Watson would have had to reckon with compelling evidence that honor and slavery were inextricably intertwined in the South, meaning that a defense of one was simultaneously a de-

fense of the other.[1] This problem is symptomatic of the book's general datedness with respect to relevant historiography.

While Watson is a skilled writer, his book suffers from repetition as he returns over and over again, albeit from a different angle in each chapter, to his basic point that Southerners saw themselves as a race separate from and superior to Northerners. There are also some nuisance errors; for example, in a single early note the subtitle of Taylor's book is cited with a second "the" and, more glaring, historian Edward Pessen's last name appears as "Pessin" (p. 254n6).

Watson's book complements without surpassing Taylor's still important study. Its limitations notwithstanding, it deserves wide readership and will be required reading for anyone interested in the intellectual history of sectionalism and the Civil War. It may be profitably read as well by those seeking historical perspective on how white Southerners today imagine "the South" and its relation to the rest of the nation.

#### Note

[1]. Unlike Wyatt-Brown, Ayers and Greenberg root Southern honor firmly in the soil of slavery. For more on this point, see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 239-240n70.

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