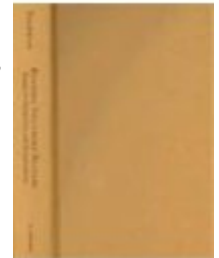




**Glenn Feldman, ed..** *Reading Southern History: Essays on Interpreters and Interpretations*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001. x + 376 pp. \$54.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8173-1099-8.



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Reading Southern History or Reading the History of Southern History?

*Reading Southern History* offers fresh overviews of influential interpretations of Southern history and could easily have been titled, *Reading the History of Southern History* because it also--and perhaps to greater effect--illuminates the interpreters themselves, shedding new light on how they developed their readings of the past. Historians and especially graduate students will find this book to be a most informative resource. By examining the worlds and works of these scholars, various topics with enduring importance for modern historians emerge: Southern politics, religion, culture, class, identity, gender, race relations, civil rights, violence, honor, slavery, secession, war, labor, economics, industrialization, "plain whites," Southern sociology, and sectional differences.

Each essay, historiographical in nature, focuses on the major works and themes of a scholar, seeking to understand his or her overall contribution to the field of Southern history, not just as the study of a region but as an integral part of America's history. The only major limitation of the work

is one that is readily acknowledged by the editor, Glenn Feldman. In the introduction he explains, "The collection makes no claim to be exhaustive or exclusive. Doubtless there are more than a few historians who, for one reason or another--certainly not because they are undeserving--do not appear as the subjects of full chapters" (p. 2). In particular, the collection excludes historians who are still writing because of the inherent problems of perspective and completeness. Yet, many of the influential interpreters excluded as essay subjects are indeed included in the collection because each of the essays, in addition to examining the interpretations of the subject scholar, also addresses challenges to and revisions of said interpretations by subsequent historians. Though the work at times suffers from the lack of a cohesive voice, as do so many other edited volumes of essays, the inclusion of a variety of authors, who themselves are among today's most influential thinkers, often adds to the readers' understanding of bygone interpreters and interpretations by illuminating the direction of modern scholarship in the field.

Despite the unity implied by the subtitle, "Essays on Interpreters and Interpretations," this collection can be divided into three separate sections: pioneers, activists, and path-breakers. The first four essays, devoted to Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Broadus Mitchell, E. Merton Coulter, and Frank L. Owsley respectively, examine the pioneers of Southern history--those men who contributed to the creation of Southern history as a bonafide area of historical inquiry within the field of American history. Anthony Carey, in his essay on Owsley, makes an observation that can aptly be applied to all four historians:

"But one can fairly say that *Plain Folk*, after fifty years, resembles a log cabin that has outlasted its usefulness. When raised amid the wilderness, the cabin provided welcome shelter and a nucleus for a community. As the neighborhood expanded and developed, however, newcomers with ambitious designs and refined materials fashioned larger, sturdier, and more impressive structures. The first cabin, still standing but uninhabited since the children of the original family moved away, continues to remind succeeding generations of their origins, even as time transforms landscapes and assumptions. The cabin and its builders are honored in memory and ritual, but the concerns of the present are not those of the past, and the heirs of the pioneers concentrate on constructing their own world and their own history" (pp. 59-60).

Though their works are flawed by racist assumptions and have been largely discredited and abandoned by the modern historical profession, each did make significant contributions to their individual historical fields. Whether it was the attention they drew to previously overlooked arenas of inquiry like plain folk or slavery or the meticulous ways in which they collected and exposed their evidence, all four can be considered among the forefathers of Southern history. To paraphrase eminent historian C. Vann Woodward (also covered in this collection), historians' Truths

do not last; the nature of the profession is to confront and question--the children eating their parents (p. 149). In many ways all of us are descended from these men. Though it is clear that their "truths" did not last--and for good reason--they provided the food for the meal that has become Southern history.

The next three essays in the collection assess the contributions of W.E.B. Dubois, Rupert B. Vance, and Charles S. Sydnor. All three scholars personify the role that historians can and, many would argue, should play in the world around them as activists. Too often historians' works are little more than a conversation among historians, rarely finding an audience beyond the profession. Less often historians use their work and knowledge to effect change in the society that surrounds them. Each of these three scholars devoted their lives not simply to scholarship, but to scholarship with the intent to make a difference in the South. These scholar-activists are also pioneers of a sort--championing a vision of history as positive contribution to society.

The remainder of the essays are dedicated to Southern history's path-breakers. While most students and scholars of history are acquainted with the historians covered in this section--W. J. Cash, V. O. Key, Jr., C. Vann Woodward, John Hope Franklin, A. Elizabeth Taylor, David M. Potter, David Herbert Donald, Kenneth Stampp, George Brown Tindall, Anne Firor Scott, and Samuel S. Hill--we will all do well to re-visit their monumental works. Though many of their conclusions have not stood the test of time, being challenged by new and innovative work, the work of these scholars remain vivid contributions to the field of history, staples in historians' personal libraries, a constant reference source for facts and historical evidence, and a point of departure for many of today's most thoughtful and creative historians. All too often, these individuals do not even merit a footnote though it is clear their work was influen-

tial as continuing scholarship builds upon the paths they constructed.

This collection should be required reading for anyone doing graduate work in Southern history. Moreover, those of us already in the profession can use a reminder of our forebears as well. Though it cannot replace reading the original works, it can serve as a concise reference work on the history of Southern history and inspire today's interpreters to look to the pioneers, activists, and path-breakers for inspiration.

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