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Emily S. Bingham, Thomas A. Underwood, eds. *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays after I'll Take My Stand.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001. xi + 336 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1995-9.

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Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood bring the Agrarians themselves back into the long-standing debate over their movement's significance. In *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal*, Bingham and Underwood present twenty essays published between 1928 and 1939 by six members of the Agrarians: Donald Davidson, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Herman Clarence Nixon, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate. These authors, Bingham and Underwood argue, were the key figures "responsible for promoting the Southern agricultural economy as a practicable political and economic model for America" (p. 7). During the decade of the 1930s, Bingham and Underwood argue, these Southern Agrarians actively participated in public policy debates about how to rebuild the wrecked economy. The editors contend that the Southern Agrarians cannot be understood without these texts, which otherwise are scattered in periodicals and in the Agrarians' 1936 volume *Who Owns America*.

The editors preface the essays with a densely packed introduction explaining the Agrarians' efforts in the 1930s and the contours of the huge historical and literary scholarship focused on their works.[1] Students will find this essay and its notes a valuable starting point from which to enter the secondary literature on the movement. Viewing the Agrarian movement as a constellation of writers and thinkers, Bingham and Underwood arrange the essays by author to preserve each writer's distinctive perspective. Brief introductions to each piece and a rich array of annotations identify individuals, events, and literary references, and explain the origins and publication histories of, and responses to, each author's essays.

Even so, several themes familiar to readers of *I'll Take My Stand* (*ITMS*) run through this volume. One such theme is the value of sectional identities and culture, central to the Agrarians' understanding of the South as perhaps the United States's last surviving organic culture. Having constructed their preferred South in *ITMS*, the Agrarians' discomfort with contradictory images of the region is palpable in their 1930s essays, especially in their reviews of sociological studies of the rural South. Several essays attempted to buttress the Southern Agrarians' credibility by dispelling the perception that they wished to undo the Industrial Revolution. Reiterating their arguments from *ITMS*, Agrarians claimed that they accepted the need for some industry in their Agrarian South, but that unchecked industrialism led only to rapacious corporations, wage slavery, and empty consumerism on the one hand, or class war followed by collectivist dictatorship on the other.

Fearing that the Depression could lead to communism or, just as bad, a resurgent corporate capitalism, the Southern Agrarians saw in the Depression and New Deal an opportunity to restore America's lost agrarian heritage. Land is a central theme for these writers, for whom agriculture was the key to the Southern economy and, ultimately, to a moral life. As Davidson wrote, "we realized that the good life of the Old South–and the life of our own South–was not to be separated from the agrarian tradition which was and is its foundation. By this route we came at last to economics" (p. 96). Lytle's "The Small Farm Secures the State" painted a romanticized picture of farm life, and revived the argument that the small-scale farmer enjoyed the economic independence essential to personal liberty and proper government. Owsley applied the same premise to American political history, painting it as an enduring conflict between Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian principles, and called for an agrarian political reconstruction that would restore widespread property ownership.

Owsley and others did try to spell out plans of action that New Deal administrators or other political leaders could adopt. Ironically, given their distaste for activist governments, most required state or federal government intervention in the economy. Davidson hoped for an "Agrarian statecraft" that "would use the power of the government to restore gradually to American life a system of tasks and functions which within themselves

beget ethical ends" (p. 131). John Crowe Ransom, who called for "an agrarian agitation, sponsored by people who may speak with authority, and leading to action on the part of people who are already on the land or who may return there" (p. 234), became more specific when calling on government to provide farmers with roads, electricity, and education. Both he and Owsley endorsed protective tariffs for farm products as a means by which the federal government could benefit agriculture as much as it did industry. Herman Nixon, who had few illusions about the realities of life on most Southern farms, directly addressed New Deal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act and called on the Roosevelt administration to engage in a more thorough overhaul of Southern land tenure.

The racism endemic in Southern Agrarian writings, often discussed by current scholars, was very much an issue for Agrarians and contemporary critics and contributed to their failure as policy makers. At times, they tempered their racism by acknowledging that farm tenancy trapped both African Americans and white Southerners, or by admitting that some African American farmers might deserve the worthy status of landowner. Yet outsiders' critiques of the South's racial problems invariably triggered bigoted outbursts. Owsley's diatribe against an alleged third stage in the Northern abolitionist conspiracy against the white South in "Scottsboro, the Third Crusade" is an obvious example, but Allen Tate's "A View of the Whole South" concludes the volume with an equally disturbing message. "I argue it this way: the white race seems determined to rule the Negro race in its midst; I belong to the white race; therefore I intend to support white rule. Lynching ... will disappear when the white race is satisfied that its supremacy will not be questioned in social crises" (p. 295). As such, he concluded that any attempt to redress racism other than black economic independence was unwarranted. As the collection reveals, the Southern Agrarians contradicted their own claim that their political economy would generate a renewed and moral organic culture.

Perhaps the Southern Agrarians had a chance to participate in shaping America's future, but the limitations of their own vision, growing internal divisions, and the revelation that their editorial ally, Seward Collins, was a fascist relegated them to the sidelines of New Deal policymaking. Bingham and Underwood's selection of essays, buttressed by the editors' introductions and careful annotations, build a strong case for the importance of looking beyond *I'll Take My Stand* for understanding the Agrarians' intentions and the fascination they have held for later scholars. Later generations might sympathize with the Agrarian critique of industrialism as an economic system that substitutes consumption for a moral culture. As Tate wrote in his satire "The Problem of the Unemployed: A Modest Proposal," "[t]here is no life worth living for men who cannot work and consume manufactured goods" (p. 284). But whether the Southern Agrarians offered a decent alternative is debatable–a debate that will benefit from this valuable collection.

Note

[1]. Editor Thomas Underwood is the author of one of the most recently published works on an Agrarian, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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