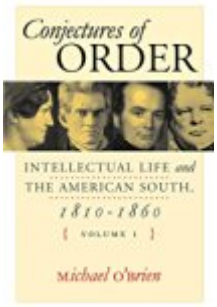
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Michael O'Brien.** *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 1354 pp. $100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2800-7.




**Reviewed by** Jon Wells

**Published on** H-South (October, 2006)

"Magisterial," "masterpiece," and "tour de force" are some of the words reviewers have already employed to describe this work, the most important study of southern literature and intellectual life since Jay B. Hubbell published *The South in American Literature* (1954) more than half a century ago.[1] Like Hubbell's work, *Conjectures of Order* is written by an accomplished author whose encyclopedic knowledge of the region has provided valuable insight into long-forgotten and under-appreciated intellectuals. But while Hubbell focused his lengthy study on southern literature, Michael O'Brien branches out to discuss all aspects of intellectual life in the region, from previously explored topics such as theology, politics, and novel-writing to innovative chapters on letter-writing, conversations, and periodical literature. Most striking at first glance is the sheer amount of research and knowledge that went in to the production of these twelve-hundred-plus pages. One marvels at the extent of the expertise, the decades-long immersion in primary sources, and the opening up of an almost entirely unexplored world of writers, thinkers, editors, and teachers. Of course, there is room for disagreement, and readers will take issue with some of O'Brien's arguments. But aside from the debates it may generate, the best tribute to O'Brien's *magnum opus* would be if graduate students and younger scholars take up the challenges he has laid down for future studies of southern intellectual culture. For, as comprehensive as *Conjectures of Order* is, O'Brien himself would no doubt readily agree that many fruitful avenues still exist for scholarship on the intellectual life of the region.

One of the principal findings of *Conjectures of Order* runs contrary to traditional but persistent scholarly interpretations of antebellum America. As it is often presented in American history texts, the old story is that the South's obsessive defense of slavery caused the region to turn inward over the early-nineteenth century. As northerners and Europeans became increasingly critical of bondage, so the traditional argument goes, southerners simply refused to engage the rest of the western world, curling inward in an intellectual circling of the wagons. Thus, by the late 1850s, an insular, paranoid, and defensive South saw secession as its only recourse. This series of arguments

have helped to explain the coming of the Civil War to undergraduates in American history survey courses, but unfortunately they do not match what scholars, including O'Brien, have been arguing for quite some time now. To be sure, southerners anxiously sought to keep abolitionist ideas from invading the region, and one does see evidence of paranoia in the ranting of demagogues who sought political power in a new Confederacy. But as O'Brien shows clearly in volume 1, the Old South was well attuned to the broader world of ideas all the way to 1861, even though southerners often disagreed with those ideas.

O'Brien is primarily interested in exploring southern engagement with the intellectual and literary currents swirling elsewhere in the world. He begins his study with a look at southerners who traveled to the North; in contrast to Gregg Kimball's important study on Richmond which identifies southern visitors who were disgusted and appalled by their trips to northern cities, O'Brien finds such travelers quite willing to accept and even appreciate life in the North and Europe. [2] Indeed, one of the most original sections of *Conjectures of Order* is devoted to the opinions southerners expressed when visiting countries overseas; in particular the chapter on southerners and the Orient is fascinating and requires further study. Under-appreciated contributions to southern intellectual life, made by scholars like William Brown Hodgson, a linguist and diplomat, provide glimpses into a world we barely understand. That no biography of Hodgson exists is further testimony to the fact that much more work could be accomplished on the minds of the South. In fact, what is surprising perhaps is that, even with all of the studies published on the Old South, a great deal of basic biographical work needs to be done on important southerners such as Calvin Wiley, Daniel K. Whitaker, William H. Trescot, James Garnett, William A. Caruthers, George M. Horton, and many, many others.

If there is a paucity of biographical work on southern men, even less is known about female intellectuals. O'Brien discusses women's active involvement in the intellectual culture of the region, most notably the efforts of Louisa McCord, Caroline Lee Hentz, Caroline Gilman, and Sarah Grimké. These remarkable female thinkers add richly to O'Brien's analysis, while commentary on others more obscure offers promising avenues for additional biographies. Southern women well known to readers in the Old South, but now little studied (women like Mary Elizabeth Lee, Octavia La Vert, Susan Petigru King, and Penina Moise), deserve to be better known by modern scholars. [3] But, because we have only sketches of these women and their careers, it becomes difficult to place their work into context. Indeed, much more can be done on the female intellectual culture of the nineteenth-century South. Although O'Brien remarks that there were no female literary clubs or debating societies in the region, this reviewer has found a few worthy of notice (p. 260). A female Sigourney Society met in Limestone Springs High School in Gaffney, South Carolina in the late 1840s and early 1850s, and there appear to have been others sprinkled here and there throughout the region.

I would also quibble with O'Brien's de-emphasis of the importance of class and class consciousness in the minds of antebellum southerners. O'Brien argues in chapter 9 that class had little meaning beyond general groupings, an argument that recent authors have tried to dispel. It is clear that early-nineteenth-century southerners usually rejected class appeals and often dismissed the use of class rhetoric. Southerners shared this characteristic with Americans more generally, who, even today, prefer to shy away from identifying with a class. However, southerners by the 1850s certainly employed a language of class that we would find familiar today, and as the antebellum period wore on increasingly saw the world in terms of class. Recent works on southern dissenters would seem to add weight to the depiction of a late ante-

bellum South that viewed society as one of divisions and dissension rather than unity or harmony.[4]

In reading volume 2, one comes to a number of conclusions. First, there is an unstated tension among the intellectuals in O'Brien's study, a tension that was central to virtually all of the individuals under examination here: the struggle between a powerful identification with a state or region on the one hand and identification with a more global perspective on the other hand. As O'Brien shows beyond a doubt, southerners were torn. They identified with their local area and also with their state; O'Brien finds evidence of such localism in the number of periodicals with a state name in the title as well as in the increasing number of school textbooks aimed at state-wide audiences. One of the South's most important and learned antebellum magazines, ***The Southern Review***, was so dominated by South Carolinians, particularly intellectuals from South Carolina College, that it sometimes seemed an extension of the school. And obviously localism won out in 1860 and 1861, when many southern intellectuals, forced to make a choice, cast their lot with their state's decision to secede. Few South Carolinians worked harder to prevent disunion than Greenville's newspaper editor, Benjamin F. Perry. For decades he boldly and defiantly stood against secession. But after December 1860, when his fellow South Carolinians had elected to secede, Perry lamented that "the dire necessity of self defense [has] fallen on South Carolina and we must defend our independence and liberty."[5]

So localism was far from dead in the mid-nineteenth century South. But, by the early 1800s, transportation and communication improvements broadened the world of southern intellectuals dramatically. As O'Brien point out, many southern families, including the Middletons, Izards, and Manigaults, maintained close kinship ties that linked them to families in Europe. Many others visited foreign countries, including some exotic ones like Greece and Turkey, while Scotland and London drew southerners interested in the hugely popular novels of Sir Walter Scott. Visitors remarked favorably on the scenery and architecture they observed, although they were less favorable toward the people. Germany was appreciated mainly for its educational achievements, while the French were licentious, and the Italians degraded and wretched, not to mention Roman Catholic. But despite these varied reactions to the people and places, one must certainly acknowledge the high level of engagement southerners enjoyed with the rest of the world. One of the central achievements of ***Conjectures of Order***, then, lies in its copious and learned documentation of antebellum southerners' intellectual connections to others around the globe.

O'Brien also makes clear that many antebellum southerners were burdened with a powerful "cultural anxiety" that governed their behavior (p. 6). Far from the traditional depiction of a South turned inward, concerned only with being left alone, on the contrary the intellectuals under study here were constantly comparing southern institutions and accomplishments to those of the North and Europe. Not only were comparisons made, but acknowledgment of inferiority in comparison to the North was a constant refrain in newspapers, magazines, and other vehicles for creative expression. Southerners knew they came up significantly short when paired with the North in regard to systems of public schools, the number of periodicals published, and the size of cities, manufacturing enterprises, and other categories. Southerners even openly admired Yankee progress, energy, and ingenuity. But when it came to their own region, southern intellectuals threw up their hands in frustration. Thus, O'Brien deftly identifies and analyzes the main dualism experienced by southern thinkers: even while they admired northern progress and modernization, southerners still could not escape their need to defend their region and all of the questionable institutions that went with it. Antebellum southern

thinkers were open to challenging their society on matters like the paucity of public schools, the need to publish periodicals, and the lack of commercial and manufacturing enterprises. But when it came to slavery, almost to a man and woman each defended the institution--and defended it mightily.

It is hard to know how to place these intellectuals into a context that would render them meaningful and understandable to a broad audience, including the students we teach. Indeed, many of the men and women in O'Brien's study seem to fit no pattern familiar to the modern observer. Take Josiah Nott of Alabama. On the one hand Nott was an iconoclast, and reveled in ridiculing the Bible and religion. As a physician he doggedly placed science and reason above superstition and uncritical thought. In *Types of Mankind* (1854) and other writings he mocked the story of Genesis and always claimed his goal was the pursuit of truth no matter what the social cost. He spoke out more strongly and for a longer period of time than anyone against the domination of religion on the minds of southerners. And yet, despite this desire to question basic tenets of faith in his own society, Nott just as firmly and vigorously clung to extreme notions of racism that culminated in his theory of separate origins. He defended slavery as a reflection of the fundamental biological inferiority of blacks, and as much as any southerner served as the voice for the "scientific" defense of bondage.[6]

Can we reconcile southern intellectual achievement and engagement with the defense of slavery? Alienation from one's surroundings, a sense of emotional and intellectual distance from one's society like that felt by Nott toward his fellow southerners, is not only a characteristic of the modern intellectual. To be sure, today one of the defining traits of an intellectual is the ability to look at society from the outside, to be able to determine with some level of objectivity what are the fallacies, assumptions, and contradictions that govern the thinking of those who accept uncritically the thinking of others. It is hard to imagine a modern intellectual being taken seriously today who would uncritically or reflexively adopt or embrace all of the foibles of American society. But, again, such characteristics are not twentieth- or twenty-first-century creations. One of the reasons why we value the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Frederick Douglass and others is precisely because they were able to examine critically the society in which they lived. But can the same be said of southern intellectuals? For the most part the answer is a definitive no. We know from debating society records and from private letters and diaries that many white southerners were in fact open to discussing a wide range of issues regarding the treatment of Native Americans, the need for a system of public education, and customs like the practice of dueling. But aside from a precious few (writers and thinkers like Kentucky's Cassius Clay, North Carolina's Hinton Helper and Benjamin Hedrick, or Maryland's John Pendleton Kennedy) who among the southern literati were critical of slavery or southern society more broadly? If we are to determine the worth of their contributions to American intellectual culture, we must first judge southern intellectuals on their originality, critical thought, and creativity. O'Brien's remarkable scholarship helps us to understand the individual achievements of these southern thinkers. How to assess the significance of these achievements and where to place them in the broader context of American intellectual culture is now a matter open for debate.

Notes

[1]. Recent reviews that include these descriptions of *Conjectures of Order* are Mary Kelley, review of *Conjectures of Order*, *Virginia Magazine of Biography and History* 113 (2005): 312-317; and Charles J. Holden, review of *Conjectures of Order*, *Civil War History* 51 (June 2005): 218-220.

[2]. Gregg Kimball, ***American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Richmond*** (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

[3]. There is, however, a recent biography of Louisa McCord. See Leigh Fought, ***Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879*** (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

[4]. See, most recently, Hyman Rubin III, ***South Carolina Scalawags*** (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

[5]. Benjamin F. Perry, quoted in Carl N. Degler, ***The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century*** (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), p. 130.

[6]. O'Brien devotes much space to the discussion of Nott; see especially pp. 240-248. See also Reginald Horsman's excellent biography ***Josiah Nott of Mobile*** (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).