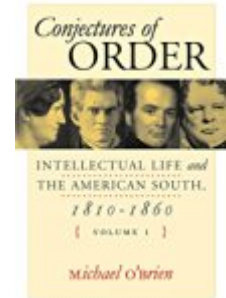


**Michael O'Brien.** *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 1354 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2800-7.



**Reviewed by** Sheri Browne

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These two volumes elucidate and analyze in absorbing detail the intellectual and emotional world view of southerners during the antebellum period. Scrutinizing the writings of approximately one hundred of the region's elite, O'Brien convincingly portrays the South as a "national, postcolonial, and imperial" project relentlessly in search of itself (p. 2).

Revolutionary southerners participated in the national endeavor of winning independence from Great Britain and believed that they had a significant stake in the popular and political culture surrounding that triumph. Later generations continued to assert that they were the true heirs to republicanism; as they became alienated from a northern vision of the future, they sought both to shape and destroy the nation they had created.

During the antebellum era, southern leaders were in the process of creating a postcolonial empire; they had forced much of the indigenous Native American population from their lands and imported enslaved Africans to labor for this new empire. While elites felt confident of their role as conquerors of this region and set out to define it

geographically, ethnically, and psychologically, they were uncertain about their place in comparison to European cosmopolitanism and acutely aware of their own provincialism. What society would ultimately look like, then, for white and black southerners was still a matter of discussion and justification.

These various ventures were not equal but competed with one another, and it is the disorder and anxiety of empire building from the Enlightenment to early realism that O'Brien explores in his massive synthesis. This is a work that subtly challenges, for example, scholarship on ruling white attitudes toward slavery and southern expansion, and seeks to reshape debates surrounding more particular political controversies, such as the nullification crisis. For the most part, however, O'Brien's colleagues, past and present, remain in the shadows. His purpose is to bring southerners to life from the documents they created.

Book 1 (of six) begins with an analysis of southern intellectuals as they responded to encounters from without the region. O'Brien evalu-

ates southerners' responses to northern educators and universities and explores the lives of non-southerners who visited the South and sometimes remained; he also assesses stereotypes and friendships that developed in both regions. Then, in two exhaustive chapters, he takes the reader on the "Grand Tour" with (to name but a few) William Campbell Preston and Richard Henry Wilde to Italy, Charles Izard Manigault to France, George Henry Calvert and Jesse Burton Harrison to Germany, and William Brown Hodgson to the Mediterranean. In Europe and the Orient these travelers, businessmen, students, and future scholars and doctors learned languages and investigated natural science, art, history, medicine, music, and literature, all while commenting on urban milieus, hospitality, and (often) the manners and merits of women miles away from home. Along the way, they wrote letters, diaries, and essays analyzing and criticizing themselves and others; these documents comprise a portion of the extensive primary sources utilized in this study.

One of O'Brien's central claims is that southern intellectuals defined themselves in terms of a European, not an American, cultural tradition and that this preoccupation with Europe shaped their postcolonial world view. They imbibed the languages and classical curriculum taught at Göttingen University and delighted in the archives of Florence, but the southern avant-garde did more than soak up European culture. Southern intellectuals believed that they were the heirs to an expansionist European imperialist legacy that would help to explain and insure the success of a southern empire in America. Through the writings of his subjects O'Brien argues, therefore, that northern American intellectuals made little lasting impact on southern ways of thinking and that while southerners traveled the globe, including to Latin America and South America, "the power of Europe, political and cultural, represented not only what Southerners had been but what they wished to emulate, even to transcend, so their

minds (and their bodies) went more often to Paris than to Rio de Janeiro" (p. 211).

In noting these European roots of southerners' ideas and sense of self, O'Brien argues that it was not just classical culture or pre-modern hierarchies that they found so appealing in France, Germany, and Italy. Modern medical theories, the works of Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, and the eighteenth-century racial ideas of such naturalists as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach were some of the many continental influences shaping southern intellectuals as they sought order in the antebellum era.

The Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality, empiricism, and natural laws, and Romanticism's quest to understand a chaotic imagination and a disordered self, caused elite southerners both to question the world around them and to seek confirmation from European scientists whose work supported their views, particularly their understanding of race. O'Brien traces the origins of southern thinking on race to the German naturalist Blumenbach, whose 1776 dissertation embraced environmental causation for the variety found in the human species. This was standard scientific thinking at the time; however, Blumenbach published revised editions of his work in 1781 and 1795. The latter had considerable influence as it contained more specificity about the geographic classification (e.g., European, Asian, American) of people; Blumenbach began with physiological descriptions rather than climatic distinctions and favored Europeans over Africans. Indeed, Blumenbach's obsession with skulls, and in particular that of a Georgian woman from the Caucasus "who had 'a most beautiful skull'" (p. 230), led him to list Caucasians first in his lengthy categorization of humanity and to editorialize about the value of each group ("The white colour holds the first place," p. 229).

The above oversimplification of Blumenbach's racial ideas does not do justice to how deftly O'Brien unpacks Blumenbach's theories. South-

erners' almost wholesale dismissal of evolutionary science, their debates over the unity of the human species versus polygenesis, the implications that Blumenbach's work had for the development of scientific racism, and the history of the concept of race itself had ramifications far beyond the realm of slavery in the antebellum South. With a detailed and nuanced reading of not only Blumenbach's controversial ideas but also those of South Carolina physician and botanist Stephen Elliott, scholar Francis Lieber, physician Josiah Nott, and others, O'Brien argues persuasively that southern intellectuals were fascinated by science and natural history. They were preoccupied with trying to define (and confine) "bodies" and to understand their anthropological origins. These undertakings confirmed existing racial hierarchies, but they also influenced theological discussions, impinging upon definitions of the self, and, significantly, allowed complex and contradictory constructions of gender to flourish in the antebellum South.

For elite southerners, the success of the imperial project lay in carefully defining their terms for the empire and in setting the boundaries of what was possible for the postcolonial future. Delineating relationships of power not only influenced slavery but also dealt with all aspects of inequality, dependence, and hierarchy in southern society. This is made abundantly clear in southern intellectual men's musings about gender and in women's letters, diaries, poetry, and literature. While O'Brien's chapters "Private Impartments" and "To Write a People," in particular, contain substantial analyses of women diarists and poets, it is his sustained exegeses of the works of Louisa Cheves McCord, Sarah Grimké, Augusta Jane Evans, and Mary Boykin Chesnut that are the most revealing. All of these women negotiated powerful societal norms in the years leading up to the Civil War, and O'Brien writes with depth and sensitivity of the tensions, possibilities, and disillusionments that comprised the life of a southern intellectual woman.

Of these, McCord is perhaps the most illuminating. Her "turbulent defense from within slavery's heartland" (p. 268) presented a rather dark and fatalistic perspective on society, and especially women's role therein. O'Brien contrasts McCord's writings on gender with those of the expatriate Grimké, and the juxtaposition of their views is striking. While Grimké glimpsed the possibilities of using theology to further the rights of women and argued throughout her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (1838) that women's inferiority was not ordained by God, McCord's bleak and often scornful conclusion was that women's submission to men was a natural phenomenon. "Go then ... and cavil with God who hath thus dictated it. He gave to the man the right, even as He gave him the power," she wrote (p. 277).

As O'Brien describes, for McCord sex and gender (and race) were biological facts, immutable realities against which there was no point in struggling. Instead, she granted for herself and other women of her class a sphere that encompassed the intellect and argued that women's role included influencing men and persuading them of their better natures. The irony of this position became starkly obvious during the 1850s, after McCord was widowed. Langdon Cheves, the strong-willed patriarch of the family, increasingly lost his health and his mind, and McCord was left to manage his affairs without the legal or financial means to do so, frequently writing pleading letters to her brother for assistance. She and many other intellectuals argued that paternalism was the reward for women and slaves in the new empire of the antebellum South; however, the protections it promised had not materialized for McCord. Yet she still maintained and defended the fiction even though the promise was unfulfilled. In a perceptive analysis of McCord's situation that is merged with quotations from letters regarding her father's long illness, O'Brien writes, "This was the 'concocted falsehood' of the doctrine of separate spheres. Everyone was told what they must

be, but it was seldom possible to accomplish this, for reality was too fluid, 'constantly confused, constantly restless, constantly changing'" (p. 284).

*Conjectures of Order* concludes with a discussion of four writers who had to come to terms with the "constantly confused, constantly restless, constantly changing" world of the 1850s: novelist Augusta Jane Evans, travel writer and eventual general James Johnston Pettigrew, historian and diplomat William Henry Trescot, and diarist Mary Chesnut. Although each experienced the late antebellum South differently, these authors enable O'Brien to demonstrate several major themes that collided before the war: the anxieties of a forward-looking but alienated generation that came of age during the secession crisis; the never-ceasing search for self and God in communion with society; the desire for power and the justification of brutality; the Romantic fascination with bodies and sensuality; and the dialectical relationship between mind and morality.

It is fitting that O'Brien ends with Chesnut, whose disillusionment with the crumbling southern empire and frustration with its disorder was palpable in 1865. This sense of disorder and disillusionment is apparent not just in Chesnut's post-Civil War predicament but is a subtle theme that runs throughout O'Brien's text. He argues, in fact, that southern intellectuals constantly tacked from order to disorder. This concept is also reflected in their anxious looking back toward Europe even as they looked ahead toward an undefined postcolonial future. Utilizing meticulous research, innovative analysis, and compelling prose, O'Brien achieves his ambitious goal of placing southern intellectual history into an expansive literary and global context.

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