To undertake a venture into the history of the American South presents an immediate problem. There is no agreement on the meaning of the term “the South.” When I first visited the region in 1968, as an innocent English undergraduate, I recall that I asked for a definition of this much-banded word. It was the year of George Wallace’s most formidable challenge for the presidency, and the talk was more insistent than usual. I knew little or nothing about the South and my informants served me with a welter of contradictory suggestions that managed only to bemuse. The South, I was told, is a splendid old European civilization, gentle, leisurely, polite, now somewhat ravaged by time and the contagious acquisitiveness of frantic Northerners. The South, I was told by anxious liberals, is a land of peculiar hypocrisy and oppression to poor whites and blacks alike, its pretensions a sham. Later, on a visit to Harvard, to mention that I had spent the summer in Alabama was to cause looks of amazed horror, as though I had stepped alive from the Orinoco with the toothmarks of piranha fish still on my flesh. The South, I was told, is a quite separate culture. The South, I was further informed, was just like the rest of the United States. The South, it seemed to me by the end of that summer, was anything anyone wanted it to be. But one thing was apparent: it seemed desperately important to Southerners to work out a definition of Southern culture and fix their place in it. Everyone had an opinion on the subject. When I thought of my own relationship to English culture, and that of my contemporaries, the contrast was striking. No one felt the need to define a relation to an entity called “England,” least of all to define the nation so as to collapse the distinction between individuality and the society around them.

I offer this small piece of autobiography merely to explain how an outsider became interested in the problem of Southern identity. Later, of course, I discovered that the informal opinions were fragments of an old, if not too ancient, debate about the region and found my way through the writings of C. Vann Woodward, Ulrich Phillips, Howard Zinn, and others who have attempted to distill the essence of Southern distinctiveness from the confused record of the Southern past. But it may be wise to caution the reader, especially if he be a Southerner, that the outsider feels no partisanship on the competing moral claims of these various versions of Southern identity; that is a private debate, on which it would be impertinent to intrude. To him, the debate is an interesting problem in intellectual history rather than a matter of social passion projected into history. To him, it does not matter personally whether Southerners are racist baboons or the true heirs of Aristotle, but he is intrigued by how such opinions should have come to pass. I hope this does not make criticism irrelevant, or incapacitate sympathy.

Since the Second World War, certain changes have occurred in Southern historiography that have made studies of the idea of the South both necessary
and plausible. A partial consensus has arisen amongst Southern historians about the relationship between the South and the nation, traditionally and properly a crucial factor in any attempt to understand the region. It has been claimed that the South is and always has been a fundamentally American place, merely a variation on the general norm. Thus racism is not just of Tuscaloosa, it is also of Boston; the politics of the South have been about socioeconomic relationships, like those of the North; the South has had a viable liberal tradition, despite its image as a conservative section. Dewey Grantham is perhaps representative when he holds that “the basic ingredients of Southern politics have been, not doctrines of race, but socioeconomic groupings like those outside the region—business minded conservatives, agrarian radicals, middle class progressives, and the like.”

The most polemical version of this viewpoint was the collection of essays from a symposium, published in 1960 under the explicit title *The Southerner as American*. It may be significant that these historians came to maturity after the New Deal had impressed anew upon Southerners the value of embracing the American consensus, and the symposium was planned during the 1950s when the struggles over segregation had suggested the inadvisability of not doing so. They were also, to some extent, the Southern wing of consensus historiography: the contention of Louis Hartz that American civilization was peculiarly a liberal culture put these nationalists under an obligation to demonstrate that the South was not exclusively conservative.

At the same time, and not very compatibly, the perspectives of an atomistic sociological tradition had come to inform Southern historiography. Implicitly, sociologists have worked to dismember the concept of a homogeneous region. By close analysis, they have stressed how large and diverse an area the South is. The extent to which Florida with its tourist culture and Atlanta with its corporations, the delta lands of the Mississippi and the clay hills of Alabama, can usefully be grouped under the generic category “the South” is far from clear. As contemporary political scientists have indicated how much political life has varied from state to state, even from county to county, so the assimilation of such methods into a historical discipline eager for new tools of analysis has rendered the leap from the particular to the general, from Macon County to the South, more problematical.

The nationalist perception is not original to our own times; it is strongly reminiscent of the New South movement after the Civil War. But its conjunction with the sociological tradition, not powerful in the South during the 1880s, has mounted a serious challenge to the traditional assumptions of Southern historiography. For it has been a fundamental premise of the discipline that, firstly, the South is different from the rest of the nation and, secondly, areas within the region have shared enough characteristics to make a generalization, “the South,” meaningful. Remove
these and “Southern history” looks a curiously misconceived exercise. Into the vacuum left by these contrary impulses has tumbled, somewhat dishevelled and unfocused, the historiography of Southern self-consciousness. One is left with the not inconsiderable difficulty that many people, for many years, have been convinced of the South’s coherence and reality. Whatever else it may have been, “the South” has been a matter of social perception.

So it is no accident that recent years have seen a growing interest in the “images” that have been entertained about the South since the early nineteenth century: the agrarian South, the states rights’ South, the Deep South, the lazy South, the Old South, the New South, and so forth. The nationalist school has acted as the stepfather of Southern intellectual history and its cousin, the history of Southern mythology. George Tindall has had a strategic role in both representing the “nationalist” position and consistently calling for a new approach to Southern mythology. He has even suggested that such studies might yield the final answer to the riddle of the South. “Perhaps by turning to different and untrodden paths,” he has written, “we shall encounter the central theme of Southern history at last on the new frontier of mythology.”

But shifting the emphasis from social to intellectual history presents its own analytical difficulties. There are great, and complicated, controversies among students of human consciousness and myth that the Southern historian is now obliged to address. Defining what is myth, what is “reality,” and where myth can be disentangled from intellectual traditions of perception is not easy. To reduce the difficult to the simple, he is obliged to take up a position in an old dispute: that between philosophical idealism and positivism. In Southern terms, this is a choice between seeing the South itself as an idea, used to organize and comprehend disparate facts of social reality, or viewing the South as a solid and integrated social reality about which there have been disparate ideas.

Given the positivist traditions of American historical writing, it is not surprising that the latter viewpoint has been strongest in the new business of writing Southern intellectual history. In 1964, for example, a symposium was published under the title *The Idea of the South*. Its presumption was to document the ideas held about the South, and to see these as history’s imperfect way of describing an underlying positivist reality, “the South.” Frank Vandiver put it this way: “Surely there lurks somewhere a South, a tangible, knowable, living South, with traditions and meanings and ideals to serve the present and future as well as the past... The South... must be self-defining, self-contained, self-reliant, a section more than a section, a province, or a realm.” Most of the authors in *The Idea of the South* would have agreed, one suspects, with a comment by Clement Eaton the title was a misnomer, for there was no idea of the South, merely ideas about the South.
It may be the impulse of the outsider, but this study is posited on the contrary assumption. To the author, the South is centrally an intellectual perception, closely tied to the survival of the organicist tradition of Romantic social theory, which has served to comprehend and weld an unintegrated social reality. One of the difficulties of the positivist analysis has been the disconcerting habit of the South to alter its objective realities, without quite changing its subjective perceptions pari passu. With each social change since 1800, there have arisen cries that the South must vanish when a particular revolution was complete: the abolition of slavery, the dismemberment of segregation and migration of the race problem to the North, or the spread of industry to the South. Each time, when the dust settled, the South had not consented to vanish with its defining institutions. This perverseness gives rise to the real possibility that “the South” has taken on a psychological reality, not entirely distinct from social reality, but capable of fastening on to successive regimes. It has secured such a hold on the American mind that it is a postulate, to which the facts of American society must be bent, and no longer a deduction. Equally, the reliance of perception on formal intellectual structures—such as the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Victorianism, or modernism—and the fact that ideas migrate across local social boundaries make it hard to explain perception by local social history alone. Naturally, to say this is not to deny the enormous weight of social history in the record of self-consciousness. But, in examining phases in the history of the Southern mind, one comes across systems of perception—Old South, New South, and the as yet unlabelled modern South—that seem essentially local variations on some very old friends: Romanticism, Victorianism, and modernism. The variations are deeply important. The intellectual historian must be interested in the manner of translating these phases into the code of Southernism.

How local social history and intellectual structures have interacted is a chief subject of this inquiry, particularly as the interaction affected the shift from Victorian to modern thought between the two world wars. These years saw a significant intensification in the debate about the region. Ulrich Phillips published most of his pioneer work on antebellum society. The Virginia Quarterly Review was established in Charlottesville in 1925, and the Southern Review in Baton Rouge ten years later. A whole host of regional organizations for intellectuals appeared: the South Atlantic Modern Language Association in 1928, the Southern Economic Association in 1929, the Southern Historical Association in 1934, the Southern Sociological Society in 1935. Regionalism, especially but not exclusively its Southern variety, was—apart from Marxism—the nearest thing o a central vogue that American literature had in the late 1920s and 1930s. Shops seemed maniacally full of books by and about Southerners. These were the years of the “Southern Literary Renaissance,” of William Faulkner, Thomas
INTRODUCTION

Wolfe, Erskine Caldwell, the later works of Ellen Glasgow and James Branch Cabell, the early ones of Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter: a time when Southern intellectuals would chant lists of novelists, poets, and historians, and grin complacently.

It would exceed the grasp and intention of this study to examine all of this. I wish to examine the borderline between the comfort of the nineteenth century with literal definitions of Southern identity and the faltering of such coherent images under the fragmenting influence of modernism. One consequence of this faltering was the growth of symbolic writing on the region, which was partly an attempt to come to terms with the intellectual tension between Romantic sectionalism and modernity of thought by exploiting the fragmented and unilateral images of the novel and poetry. There is much to be said for the argument that this has become the norm for recent Southerners. Some considered herein, such as Allen Tate in The Fathers, took this tack in the 1930s. But there is an extensive secondary literature on these aspects of Southern writing, and the reader may readily turn to them to find out what being Southern meant to authors like Warren, Faulkner, and Wolfe; better, he can turn to the novels and poems themselves. So it is prudent to warn him that, although some of my studies deal with figures whose main reputations rest on their literary achievements, this is not an exercise in literary criticism. Consequently, it may seem that I am trying to perform Hamlet without the prince. This is illusory, however, for these men hazarded themselves as students of Southern history and society. It is in such moments that I consider them.

There was some agreement before the Second World War that the issues of Southern identity were most cogently focused in the dispute between the liberal sociology of Chapel Hill, led by Howard Washington Odum, and the conservative aestheticism of Nashville. Both groups, relatively indifferent to the general issue of the South in the early 1920s, had come by the 1930s to spend much of their time refining their definitions of the region. In their history can be found many of the themes and tensions that have characterized the modern problem of Southern identity.

This study starts with a discussion of the nineteenth-century origins of the idea of the South, and proceeds by viewing the fragmentation of the Victorian South's consensus into the disparate standpoints of Odum and the Agrarians. Attention is paid to the mutations in the social environment and standing of the post-First World War Southern intellectual. Then individual chapters deal with Odum, who stood at the heart of the Chapel Hill approach and whose intellectual biography is a poignant instance of the ambivalent relationship between Romanticism and modern sociology; John Donald Wade, a man between two camps, who had been a friend to Odum and liberal reform in his youth but turned later, with mixed feelings, towards the Agrarians; John Ransom, whose biography shows how a
commitment to modern poetry could both create and destroy a commit­
ment to the South; Allen Tate, the most subtle and self-aware of Southern
moderns, who tried to fashion the Southern tradition into a solvent for the
dilemma of belief; Frank Owsley, a historian who resurrected a forgotten
part of the Southern past, and whose life betrayed the uneasy conjunction
between the professional's theory of objectivity and private social passion;
and Donald Davidson, who, more than any other Southern intellectual,
was left dispossessed by changes in literature, sociology, and society. The
final chapter tries both to consider what was happening in these years and
to move beyond that to an interpretation of the Southern idea.

It will be clear from this menu that in the dispute between the disciples
of Arthur Lovejoy, who hold that the history of ideas can be written
without close reference to those who held the ideas, and intellectual
historians, my sympathies lie with the latter. To commit oneself to the
Southern idea has been a personal decision, one's definition of the region
idiosyncratic, and the texture of one's discussion private. The Southern
idea has been Janus-faced. In one direction, it has looked towards the
"realities" of society; in another, it has reflected the individual's own needs.
The idea has sat, uneasily and unstably, poised between the two. Thus
these chapters are biographical in form but should not therefore be
mistaken simply for biographical essays. The destination of each essay is
the idea of the South held by that person, its coming, changing, and going.
To get there requires the recovery of the dialectic of personality, ideology.
and social environment, but that is not identical with their lives. Men, even
professional Southern intellectuals, are much more than what they think
about the South.

The sequence of these essays has an internal logic. They run from the
least modern mind to the most modern and back again: from Odum to
Tate and back to Davidson. A few years ago, I would not have chosen to
arrange it in that way. I assumed that Odum, as a student of that most
modern of disciplines, sociology, would be the logical culmination of such
an analysis. But I rapidly learned that Odum was a proponent of a version
of sociology that was relatively insensitive to the breakdown of the Victorian
consensus. A little later, I might have arranged the essays in a sequence
from the least to the most modern. But I have grown increasingly aware
that modernism cannot merely be defined as that which has happened
most recently, or that its beliefs are necessarily triumphant. On the contrary,
its spread has been uncertain, uneven, and problematical, especially if its
presence in different intellectual disciplines and in the perceptions of the
public-at-large is considered. The circular motion of the essays stands as a
metaphor for this conviction. Modernism undoubtedly came to the South
between the world wars, but its success was not thoroughgoing.
By modernism I mean that shift in sensibility that has been closely linked to, but not necessarily sympathetic with, the process of modernization, the growth of industry, cities, secularization, democratization, and a mass bureaucratic society. It has been marked by a heightened awareness of the sharp pace of social change; a sense of intellectual dislocation and doubt in the sufficiency of inherited wisdom; a feeling that change, allied to the individual's greater social mobility and experience, has enlarged the existential obligation of self-definition, whether the resulting definition be idiosyncratic and anarchic or expressed in a self-conscious sinking of individual identity in a social group such as the South; “a weakened sense of objective reality” coupled to a stronger awareness of symbolism and myth; a knowledge that private “freedom” had been coupled to increasingly structured and influential public institutions. Such modernism is not, as I shall argue in my conclusion, a sharp break from the Romantic tradition, but it is undoubtedly a shift in man’s sense of confidence in approaching the problems of alienation and progress. Modernism is, in short, a sensibility in dialectic with modernization. It is not, however, a unified sensibility. The professionalization of intellectual trades—sociology, history, poetry, the novel, and so forth—has given each subgroup of the intelligentsia private rules to be obeyed or challenged, and has thereby reduced the community of discourse typical of the mid-Victorian world.