The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941

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part one:
The Legacy
In his book *The First South*, John R. Alden has demonstrated that there were sectional conflicts during the American Revolution, the Confederation, the formulation and ratification of the 1787 Constitution, and the early years of the republic. Continental political institutions made it likely that the tendency of slavery and the plantation economy to be localized in the South would generate political divisions along sectional lines. From Montesquieu, the American Enlightenment had some notion that character was formed by geography. Alden quotes a striking letter of 1785 from Thomas Jefferson to the Marquis de Chastellux, in which the Virginian set out a table of differences between Northerners and Southerners:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the North they are</th>
<th>In the South they are</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cool</td>
<td>fiery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sober</td>
<td>voluptuary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laborious</td>
<td>indolent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>independent</td>
<td>unsteady</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jealous of their own liberties, and just to those of others</td>
<td>zealous for their own liberties, but trampling on those of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interested</td>
<td>generous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chicaning</td>
<td>candid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>superstitious and hypocritical</td>
<td>without attachment or pretensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in their religion</td>
<td>to any religion but that of the heart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But this observation was not, strictly speaking, sectional, for Jefferson saw a waxing and waning of these qualities in proportion as one moved from North to South. Pennsylvania was a happy medium. Thus climate and environment, and not coherent sectional cultures, were the guiding influences on the formation of a man's character. Nonetheless, this did show the tentative cultural relativism that the Enlightenment had derived from travel books, whose lessons had been driving intellectuals towards a stronger sense of the diversity of man. Jefferson himself, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, had been a practicing student of the genre. In Enlightenment thought, however, relativism was a minor theme. David Hume's contention of uniformity in man and nature was more typical: "It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men in all nations and ages and that human nature remains still the same in its principles and operations . . . . Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: you cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former most of the observations which you have made.
with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular."

From this common lot of human interest and avarice, political arguments in the new nation over the tariff or the role of slaves in fixing ratios of representation were interpreted. With this piecemeal sense of the Southern idea, sectionalism was seen to derive from the fluctuation of interest; interest was not seen as the mirror of a determining cultural sectionalism.

The supersession of Enlightenment ideas by Romantic social theory reversed these sentiments. Romantic nationalism posited very different perspectives. Where the Enlightenment had been cosmopolitan, Romanticism located the wellsprings of man's being in national groups. Where man had been held to be uniform and his experiences similar, the new order decreed that he and they were diverse. No longer could one leap from Greek to Roman and from ancient to recent times without elaborate exegesis on the shifts in cultural context. Mechanistic theories of society were transmuted into organic analogies. Society was not a machine, from which one could subtract or add cogs at one's leisure, but a living thing which might die if the gardener was too cavalier. Rationalism was modified by a mysticism of the Volks. Where the Enlightenment had skipped gladly over a superstitious Middle Ages to return to the classics, Herder encouraged a dallying over the folk origins of modern nations. Old folk songs were collected, Ossian celebrated, medieval Christianity reconsidered. Where the Enlightenment had been cosmopolitan about language, Romanticism insisted that language contained the essence of national individuality: Germans, especially German intellectuals, should abandon the parroting of French for their "native" tongue. A skeptical faith in human progress was replaced by a more devious belief, in which men might win progress through a difficult process of self-awareness, alienation, and rediscovery, and in which the recognition of national diversity meant a splitting of universal moral judgments into the separate assessment of right and wrong in particular milieux. Above all, Romantic nationalism taught that man was part of a whole, his individuality defined and expressed through his membership in the group."

Such ideas were to find their way to the United States, and were domesticated in the South. Partly, they came directly from Germany. Herder was read in Charleston; Hugh Swinton Legarde travelled from Brussels to Bonn expressly to meet August Schlegel; one can find in antebellum periodicals articles that betray direct knowledge of German texts, as well as English translations. Partly, they were translated through the mediation of Britain. Few read Kant, but many did understand Coleridge, the popularizer of Kant's disciple, Schelling. Thomas Carlyle, above all, carried the torch of the new German philosophy. Walter Scott helped to establish the new vogue of the Middle Ages and disperse the
new faith in historicism. Byron, to be found in the pages of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, brought the *Bildungsroman* south of the Potomac. And the South did not merely imitate. In Edgar Allan Poe, it produced a thinker whose variations on the Romantic theme were sufficiently original that the later heirs of Romanticism, the French Symbolist poets, found in him something new.\(^5\)

It would be unwise to see the novel idea of a coherent Southern *Volk* as just a colonial imitation of European thought.\(^6\) The United States had its own traditions and reasons for moving towards redefinitions of eighteenth-century political theory. Federalism, the struggle over slavery and the territories, the hyperbole of manifest destiny, hardening racial ideology, all contributed towards helping the idea into men’s perceptions. Before the Civil War, however, it was a social analysis in competition with others. As the arguments of John C. Calhoun amply demonstrate, the Enlightenment did not die so easily. States rights and Southern nationalism were uncomfortable allies and often fell out. It is unclear, moreover, how far the idea of the South penetrated into the social structure. At one level, to see nationalism as a form of social control—its classic rationale in Europe—can make one argue that the planter class by an ingenious sleight of hand identified itself with “the South,” and used the welding emotion of nationalism to support its position, both in Washington and within the democratizing states. But to review the origins and course of the Civil War is to see that such control was imperfect. The record contains too many poorer “Southerners” who prosecuted the struggle for the Confederacy with diffidence, too many Whigs and Unionists who resisted a separate political destiny for the “Southern people.” The planters themselves were divided between Whigs and Democrats. For some, being “Southern” was an insult to the antecedent loyalty to Americanism: for others, being “Southern” did not preclude being “American.” The confusion was deepest in the 1840s, the heyday of the two party system in the region. But the exigencies of the 1850s diminished the ambiguities in practice, and secession—though most saw it in the light of states rights—helped to affirm the South’s allegiance to an undifferentiated cultural identity.\(^7\) Reconstruction did even more, for it touched the whole question of racial equality and not merely the more local question of slavery.

The idea of the South was strengthened, ironically, by the destruction of its political expression, the Confederacy. The war left welding memories and compelling economic realities. By a strange quirk, it left the South as the embodiment of Herder’s idea of a nation, for Herder had been insistent that a nation was to be sharply differentiated from the formal mechanisms of the state. Indeed, a nation was weakened by the throttling uniformity of a strong central government: its essence was a free pluralism. Willingly or not, the South no longer had a common political structure.
This left Southernism unembarrassed by the propensity of national governments to act partially in society. Sentiment was left free to roam, and men could define their South without the awkwardness of an administration in Richmond to check their metaphysical freedom.9

There was, perhaps, a possibility that in 1865 or 1877 a man might have sat down and reflected that “the South” had been an interesting idea but mistaken. Some came close.9 In their nationalism, New South thinkers like Henry Watterson could urge that the South was “simply a geographic expression” and the old notion that a different species of person lived below Mason and Dixon’s line was a product of “morbid minds.”10 But the assimilation of Whiggery into the Democratic party forced a reconciliation between nationalism and the Southern idea. It was now necessary to have it both ways. One South might be dead, but another was to take its place. The New South was born, which was somehow to be compatible with the Old South while supporting movements that the ancien régime had perished to resist.

The New South helped to make permanent the very idea of a South. The doctrine of temporal continuity, built into a world view based on geography and race, required a reconciliation between New and Old South. Indeed, there was a sense in which men like Henry Grady invented the unitary Old South—a society notoriously disunited—by editing out the aggressiveness of plantation culture.11 Within the concept of the South, competing ideologies of agrarianism and industrialization reached an accommodation: it seemed that any man could find a warm spot in such an eclectic tradition. In truth, the first success of the New South was ideological. The physical advance of industrialization was so slow that it was to be decades before most Southerners, long accustomed to Mr. Grady’s rolling periods, were obliged to see a smokestack.12

The reconciliation was not always easy, though it is surprising how readily it came for many—the list of Confederates who ended up peddling railway stock was very long. It was softened because the break between Old and New South was not total. The Old South was never that old: it had lived long enough to see its Romanticism overlaid by Victorianism. *De Bow’s Review* had been as strenuous an advocate of industrialization as the *Southern Manufacturers Record*. The ancien régime’s religion, manners, racism, historicist sentiment, and ideas of sexuality, as they stood at mid-century, were handed over to the New South, not unscathed but substantially intact. Robert E. Lee, the priggish country gentleman, was equidistant between the deist Jefferson and the solemn Nonconformists of the Southern bourgeoisie who sired the New South.

Before the First World War, the business of mating Old and New South was carried on across a wide spectrum of professions. A poet like Sidney Lanier, a novelist like Thomas Nelson Page, a journalist like Henry Grady,
or a politician like General John B. Gordon all played their part. It was not a harmless hobby for intellectuals; in a world in flux, it was a vital process of translating alien ways into Southern terms. Words had to be altered, new connections made within the Southern tradition so that audiences in the South would not bridle at the naked power of the new capitalism. Innovation had to be legitimized. Although the idea of the South was not the only route to a sense of continuity, it helped to integrate the diverse appeals of religion, race, and politics. Such a process handed to later Southern intellectuals a compelling burden of sectional analysis.

There were, indeed, few Southern intellectuals. The war had wiped out most of the educational system and nearly all of the periodicals that had given a fitful patronage to antebellum writers like Poe. If a man had no private income and wished to make thinking his profession, there were few options. By the end of the century, however, things had marginally improved.

The New South may have failed to deliver on its extravagant promises of prosperity by 1900, but if one stretches its term to 1917, one can grant that it did produce the beginnings of a new educational system. Universities and schools, despite the financial burden of segregation and the suspicions of laissez faire state governments, started to provide places for the education of young Southerners and, not insignificantly, employment for Southern intellectuals. In the long run, this was to have its impact on the Southern idea. In the short run, it seemed to make little difference. Even if one defines the term “intellectual” generously, one would have been hard put to find more than a few score, scattered from Virginia to New Orleans. Those that taught in colleges were overworked and underpaid; it was a shade more prudent to find other means of sustenance, such as journalism or lecturing on the circuits. Authorship was not taken very seriously by society. If one bungled the delicate task of treading the line between New and Old South, the penalties could be harsh. William P. Trent, founder of the *Sewanee Review* and a critic of slavery, complained in 1898 to a friend of “the fact that at Sewanee what harasses me is not so much lack of books and of city life as it is the fact that a considerable portion of the people around me consider me a traitor and don’t like me and only keep quiet because they are afraid of me.”

There was little chance of political influence. An occasional state governor might listen to a few intellectuals, but the case was rare. So singular was Charles Aycock of North Carolina that he was repaid with an extravagant devotion from those academics he enlisted in his cause. But even Aycock had little faith in the intellectual as a guide to social reality. He wrote of John Spencer Bassett, the historian who nearly lost his job for breathing the names of Robert E. Lee and Booker T. Washington in the same sentence: “Bassett wrote unwisely, untruly; his view is academic.
He breathes the atmosphere of the cloister. He does not know men.”

For what it was worth, these men usually threw their weight behind the New South. Their economic and intellectual position rested on one basic premise, an alliance with the Northeast. The South had no money and little inclination to sustain an intellectual elite. At best, religious groups such as the Methodists or the occasional state government were willing to employ teachers. The Southern liberal was forced to seek help wherever he could. Southern philanthropists were few and far between, though the Duke family did help Trinity College in North Carolina. But Northerners did have money and, if persuaded, the inclination to “do something” for the “backward” region and, not incidentally, for the struggling Southern intelligentsia. The General Education Board was a child of Northern, Rockefeller, finance. Involved in stimulating the board’s activities, liberals gained power from helping to administer its largesse. But the power was vicarious.

Outside of the university, and most Southern authors did not depend upon it, the impulse was similar. The great magazines and publishing houses where the writer had to seek a market were in the North. After publication, a book was mostly read by Northerners, for Southerners read little. Walter Hines Page complained that “the southern people don’t buy magazines or books…. They have no intellectual curiosity.” Whether the latter proposition was true, Page had wearying evidence of the former. It may be that audience expectations in the North influenced the content of Southern literary culture, but the readership may only have reinforced a natural tendency among these nationalists to find an intellectual modus vivendi with the North. New England, in the words of George W. Cable, was “the intellectual treasury of the United States,” and New South thinkers drew freely upon the capital accumulated there before the Civil War. Emerson could be mentioned in a North Carolina lecture and draw applause. Henry Grady found kind words for Lincoln, the “Black Republican.”

This alliance was not without its ambiguities and dangers. It could not be presented nakedly. Both historians and literary critics in the South had to perform the act of cultural translation, to plot a distinctive graph of the Southern past, to trim a fact here, a figure there, and legitimize themselves.

The historians would claim that in 1800 the South dominated the counsels of American liberalism. Virginians like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison helped to define the democratic life of the new nation. With the passing of that generation, the blight of slavery engendered a decline in Southern statesmanship. As Virginius Dabney insisted: “During the three decades immediately preceding the Civil War, openly-avowed liberalism was virtually extinct below Mason and Dixon’s Line.” William Dodd echoed the theme of a steady recession from the enlightenment of Monticello
to the reactionary folly of Calhoun and the secessionist idiocy of Jefferson Davis.\textsuperscript{19} 

The war was the nadir of Southern history. Woodrow Wilson found more justice in the North's case than in the South's.\textsuperscript{20} He was unusual among Southerners in the rigorousness with which he pursued the logic of his position. Most preferred silence on the political righteousness of the war. As Southerners—and they were bent on retaining that title—they could scarcely pour unbridled scorn upon the South's central experience, the Confederacy. They could, however, turn from the politics of the war to the battlefield. The war may have been wrongheaded, but it was bravely done. Robert E. Lee, in particular, benefitted from this: the Lee who hesitated before casting his lot with the Confederacy, who comported himself with dignity in a desperate struggle and then set a model of reconciliation with the Union after the war. Lee had a little something for everyone. Liberals celebrated the manner of his life, while conservatives could relish the fact of his Confederate allegiance. The greatest monument to this phase of Southern liberal historiography—almost an annex to the history of Virginia—was the work of Douglas Southall Freeman. He produced four volumes on Lee, three volumes on Lee's lieutenants, and six volumes on George Washington, with a sense of genealogy that was impeccable.\textsuperscript{21} 

Southern liberal historians did not believe in racial equality, so Reconstruction was regarded with little enthusiasm. Their special moment, after the wasteland of the years between Jefferson and the Compromise of 1877, came with the New South. They were its heirs, sometimes its instigators. In John Spencer Bassett's eyes, the period after 1877 was the hour of the middle class, which had supplanted an economically and intellectually decadent planter class: "The rise of the middle class has been the most notable thing connected with the white population of the South since the War," he wrote in 1903. In 1926 Bassett's friend Edwin Mims was to publish \textit{The Advancing South}, a book that celebrated that achievement, the arrival of the Southern bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{22} 

One phase of the South's history was out of bounds—Populism. Although an account of social reform in his lifetime, Mims's book totally ignored the farmers. Virginius Dabney did mention them and even conceded them some influence on the course of Southern liberalism, but he referred to them with a typical condescension. About South Carolina he explained: "The campaign of 1890 sounded the political knell of the lowland coterie which had been the controlling factor in South Carolina for centuries. The men who had carved for the Palmetto State a place of conspicuous prestige in the annals of the republic and had guided its destinies since its establishment as a British colony, were rudely pushed aside to make way for a raucous band of back-country farmers."\textsuperscript{23} Such distaste was clearly
the horror of genteel reformers for a blunt, often illiterate, and usually disrespectful company of democrats who tended to wield greater political power than their social betters.

This general viewpoint matured over a span of more than forty years, from the late 1880s to the early 1930s. It might be seen as the Whig interpretation of Southern history, and it is far from dead even now. Though professional historians like Wilson and Dodd played a large part in its articulation, it was as much the work of amateur historians. There was no course in Southern history at a university until William K. Boyd offered one at Trinity College in 1907. There were six such courses by 1913, between thirty and forty during the 1920s, and nearly a hundred by 1940. But the institutional structure of a professional Southern history was slow to develop. There was a Southern History Association, which existed between 1896 and 1907, but it was a collection of nostalgic Southerners living in Washington. Not until James G. de Roulhac Hamilton founded the Southern Historical Collection in the 1920s and gathered up the unconsidered manuscripts of the Southern past, not until the foundation of the Southern Historical Association in 1934 was professionalism entrenched.}

The New South produced fewer literary critics. The discrete tradition of American literature was slower to be taught in universities than even American history. Literary study was still bound up with philology and the classics. The number of Southerners who gave serious public thought to the matter of Southern literature before the First World War might almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. Thomas R. Price of Randolph-Macon College published little or nothing himself but had influence over his students, who did. For the rest, one can only count William Baskervill of Vanderbilt, William Trent and John Bell Henneman of Sewanee, Edwin Mims of Trinity College, and Alphonso Smith of the University of Virginia. Of these, only Trent achieved a national reputation, which was recognized by his call to a chair at Columbia University in 1900 and the task of editing the *Cambridge History of American Literature*. Mims acquired some national attention for his biography of Sidney Lanier in the prestigious “American Men of Letters” series, but his standing was provincial.

The line between historian and literary critic was not firmly drawn. Both Trent and Mims contributed freely to the political discussion of the Southern heritage. They did not merely concur in historians' views. Often, they were the historians. It is not surprising that that their theory of Southern literature proceeded *pari passu*.

They had no Jeffersonian golden age to look back upon, though there were occasional efforts to make the political prose of the Founding Fathers a part of Southern literature. The usual starting point was the immediate antebellum period. It was convenient for them that the literature of the Old South was notoriously poor. One could note that certain social forces
developing in the New South—urbanization, professionalization—were absent from the ancien régime and then draw a direct line between this vacuum and the lack of an impressive literature. Edwin Mims summed up the matter in his introduction to the literary volume of *The South in the Building of the Nation*, that great compendium of his generation’s definition of the South: “In the course of this sketch the main reasons why Southern writers did not achieve greater success in fiction have been suggested. None of them, except Poe, and perhaps Simms, were professional men of letters; their literary work was incidental to what seemed to them more important. Most of them wrote carelessly, even slovenly. Furthermore, the absence of anything like a literary center was a hindrance; there was little of the influence of one writer on another. Slavery, and the feudal system perpetuated thereby, militated against purely literary work.” Trent’s biography of William Gilmore Simms had dwelt notoriously upon the responsibility of slavery for the weakness of Southern literature. He had claimed that political obsessions had diverted the talented away from literary careers.

The years of the New South, again, were another matter. The novels of “local color” writers like Thomas Nelson Page, George W. Cable, and the young Ellen Glasgow, the short stories of Joel Chandler Harris, the poetry of Sidney Lanier formed a “renaissance” as real to the literary critics of 1900 as the more celebrated “Southern Literary Renaissance” of the 1930s was to become to their more numerous successors. It was the better for offering no substantial challenge to New South nationalism. Mims cheerfully quoted Joel Chandler Harris, a close friend of Henry Grady: “What does it matter whether I am Northerner or Southerner if I am true to truth, and true to that larger truth, my own true self? My idea is that truth is more important than sectionalism, and that literature that can be labelled Northern, Southern, Western, or Eastern, is not worth labelling at all.” With his usual puckishness, Trent noted: “We of the South are not so peculiar a people as we suppose ourselves to be, and, fortunately, the more closely we scrutinize ourselves the more we perceive that, save in certain restricted circles of society in restricted areas, our characteristics natural and acquired are those of our fellow-Americans, at least of those who were born in the country.” Trent was even struck with doubts about whether it was desirable to write about Southern literature at all, lest the venture be misconstrued as promoting sectionalism.

Literary critics tended to be more forthright than historians about the relative cultural status of the South and the North. Trent asserted that neither “the Old South nor the New can fairly be said to have rivalled New England and the Middle States in contributing to the intellectual development of the nation.” The strain of admitting this was relieved somewhat, because they were not overly convinced of the general superiority of
American culture. The well-modulated perspectives of Henry James were in most of them. To admit inferiority to Boston was less onerous when one added, in the same breath, that Boston was a pale shadow of London. In discussing the weakness of universities and libraries in the South, Trent observed: "No great collection of books answering the needs of scholars as well as those of the general public exists south of Washington, and so long as this is the case the South in a sense cannot be intellectually independent." He went on, significantly: "But, as a matter of fact, America as a whole is still, in this sense, more or less dependent upon Europe." This admiration for Europe, especially Britain, was typical. It was common for literary critics to spend most of their time on English authors and write Southern literary history with, as it were, their left hands. This Anglophilia, noticeable in their critique of culture, was also traceable in their politics. Nothing was more representative of the Southern strain in Woodrow Wilson than his admiration for Walter Bagehot and William Gladstone.

In many ways, Mims and Trent were but the Southern arm of the "genteel tradition" in literary criticism. Literature was seen to have a moral function in society: it should be judged for what it taught, not just the elegance of its prose. That gave Walter Hines Page an immediate advantage over the proslavery Simms. Yet it was the genteel tradition with an important difference. The impoverished condition of the Southern intelligentsia drove them towards an economic interpretation of literature long before Vernon Parrington. Trent's contemporaries in New England, men like William Lyon Phelps of Yale or Bliss Perry of Harvard, were several generations removed from the economic revolution that had helped to foster the intellectual supremacy of the North. The ducts down which the industrial income of the mills poured to the endowments of Harvard were well established. One might take a prospective donor to the Faculty Club for lunch, but the privilege was rather for the aspirant giver. Who, after all, would not be flattered to offer his money to the Harvard of Emerson and Lowell? In the South, intellectuals went cap in hand to philanthropists and state legislatures and were soundly disabused of any notion that the gifts flattered the giver more than the receiver. In the circumstance of sowing an industrial revolution and attempting to reap its cultural harvest, the connection was glaringly obvious. To insist that slavery was responsible for the weakness of antebellum literature was to posit an economic basis for literary culture.

The words "intellectual" and "liberal" have been used thus far in this discussion as though they were synonyms in the South. They seemed so to Gunnar Myrdal, when he visited the region in the late 1930s. Southern liberalism seemed unique to him in the close identity between intellectual and liberal communities. The conservative intellectual seemed an extinct species, since the proslavery days when the equation had seemed almost
exactly opposite. By 1940, Myrdal was wrong in his diagnosis, for a new breed of conservative Southern thinkers had developed, even though they were in a clear minority. But even before the First World War, there were a few conservatives. Thomas Nelson Page, for example, found Trent’s biography of Simms obnoxious for what he thought a pandering to Northern tastes. Even Page, however, though never endorsing industrialism outright, was patronized by New South writers for the plantation idylls he produced for Northern magazines. He was important to them, for his literature of manners in the Old South helped to yoke together the days of Jefferson and the New South: he stopped Southern history snapping irretrievably in the middle and embarrassing the doctrine of continuity.

The old hardline conservatism of the proslavery reaction had died. Journals like Albert Bledsoe’s Southern Review found it impossible to struggle on after the war; there was no buying public in the South and ideology debarred Northern opinion. When magazines like the Sewanee Review and the South Atlantic Quarterly were reborn, it was under New South auspices. The Southern reading public had not grown much bigger, though there were the few subscriptions offered by the incipient professional classes. The big difference lay in the access to Northern interest.

When one says that the old conservatism had died, one must be cautious. That represented by organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy was, on the contrary, flourishing. But there was very little contact between this sentiment and anything that found its way into the pages of the South Atlantic Quarterly. A gulf had opened up between the social conservatism of many Southerners and the liberalism of their discomfited intellectual elite. Occasional fracas would occur when the gulf was too imprudently exposed, as when Bassett linked the names of Lee and a black in terms too flattering to Booker T. Washington and the wrath of North Carolina was loosed upon him. But it is well to note that Bassett survived and did it by exploiting the elite’s strongest point, its alliance with the new industrial class. The whole of North Carolina did not sit upon the Board of Trustees at Trinity College in 1903, but members of the Duke family did.

A professional intelligentsia was, socially, a new factor in the equation of the Southern idea. In the short run, it seemed to have made little difference. The new men of the universities may have begun their critique with education and poetry, but they ended up with a call for a sound industrial base. Henry Grady worked in an opposite direction. He had started with industry and concluded with a nonchalant prophecy of a flowering of the Southern mind. The distinction of priorities was obscured, for the result came out the same.

The distinction did matter. The intelligentsia’s priority was itself, its diagnosis for survival, its conception of the life of the mind; it had been
acting as an importer and inspector of alien ideas and ways. The Victorian concepts it was asked to pass had happened to dovetail neatly with the New South. But in Europe and the North, the old industrial ideologies had begun to grow doubtful, complex and self-analytical. Some odd notions started to turn up at the Virginia border and ask for admittance. Southerners were asked to believe that industrialism did not help the arts, it destroyed them. They were told that “progress” had died in Flanders. They were even commanded by new disciplines like psychology and sociology to dismantle the very Romantic categories of thought built into the idea of the South. For younger Southern intellectuals, these were to be compelling issues in the interwar years. It did some very strange things to the “myth” of the South.

As has been suggested, there was some consensus amongst intellectuals of the pre-First World War years on matters like race, politics, industrialization, the form of the Southern past. The postwar years saw a breakup of this, and mutations in the social status of the Southern intellectual.

Notable was a weakening in the enthusiasm for industry. If there was a central idea in agrarianism, it was an abhorrence of industrialism and a repudiation of the Victorian faith in progress and science. The 1920s had seen a particularly lively discussion among American social thinkers about the benefits that might accrue from the advances of technology. On one side stood men like Charles Beard, who wrote that the “new drama of mankind has just opened” and expressed the conviction that “the spirit of engineering is rationality, a faith in the power of the scientific mind to undo what should never have been done and to realize whatever human imagination may suggest in the way of material and social arrangements.”

The Agrarian symposium *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, published in 1930, was appalled at this hubris. The Agrarians were convinced that the vulgarity of industrialism was endemic and the comforts purchased by the assembly lines of Mr. Ford were gained at too grave a price. Industrialism was bad for the worker, as it drove him at a frenetic pace and did not even offer secure employment. For the Agrarians, factory work was a matter of enduring the necessary, not enjoying the desirable, as it made labor “mercenary and servile” and no longer “one of the happy functions of human life”. Moreover, industrialism necessarily generated the evils of overproduction, unemployment, and growing inequities in the distribution of wealth.

In their hostility to industrialism, the Agrarians lumped together both capitalist and communist. They objected to the process, not the techniques of ownership. Both social systems seemed limiting and degrading to
individual freedom. As John Ransom put it: “It must be insisted that the true Sovietists or Communists...are the Industrialists themselves. They would have the government set up an economic super-organization, which in turn would become the government. We therefore look upon the Communist menace as a menace indeed, but not as a Red one; because it is simply according to the blind drift of our industrial development to expect in America at last much the same economic system as that imposed by violence upon Russia in 1917.”

These were not sentiments that would have made much sense to Henry Grady, and they were not shared by Howard Odum. The sociologist was convinced that science could be beneficent, and industry was necessary. But even Odum worried about the need to keep a balance between industry and agriculture. He had no enthusiasm for the great cities of the North, and was heard to speak of their “artificiality.” When the Agrarians offered the alternative of a traditional rural society, Odum dismissed it as an unrealistic alternative. He was too impressed by the debilitating costs of the old ways, the disease, poverty, and provincialism. But, as the Agrarians grew—during the Depression—to modify their utopian vision into an agricultural reformation they came close to Odum’s standpoint. While Henry Grady could be enthusiastic about factories when they were but a few looms on the horizon, Odum and the second generation knew a little more, had seen the labor troubles of Gastonia and were more skeptical.

In setting forth these views, the Agrarians were not politicians but dabblers in political ideas. They stood outside political power even more decisively than their predecessors, the New South liberals. An Edwin Alderman or Edwin Mims had existed, at least, within the penumbra of power. They had met and talked with the governors of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. They had encountered the entrepreneurs of Southern industry at their dining clubs, and extracted endowments for their colleges in exchange for a few talks to the local Rotary Club. Not themselves powerful, they moved in sympathy with power and helped it on its way. The Agrarians, however, shunned such links. They neither sought out the company of the economic establishment nor were much pursued by it. While Edwin Mims crossed the gulf between Vanderbilt University and the downtown business section of Nashville frequently and with ease, the Agrarians found the gap agreeably impassable. They were models of the alienated intellectual in the uncertain years when he had ceased to be a cheerleader for the nineteenth century and did not have the option of becoming a brain truster.

Howard Odum, however, did have that option and exercised it with increasing frequency. Sociologists came to have an assured place in the new order of government, especially during the New Deal. Moreover, he was energetic in the promotion of various nongovernmental reform
activities and in this, as in much else, was a true son of the laissez faire New South. For the liberal movement in the South before the First World War had been divided between a neo-Populist wing and a smaller urban middle class agitation. Its interests had been spread among such issues as public utility regulation, public education campaigns, child labor legislation, penal reform, factory regulation, municipal reorganization, and the improvement of mechanisms of representative government. It had pressed for prohibition and a more formal version of white supremacy. Like the progressive movement elsewhere, it had been an uneasy coalition. Local businessmen joined in the assault on corporate privileges in concert with humanitarian reformers and “wool hat boys.” By the 1920s, it had become clear that this fragile alliance had fragmented and it was “business progressivism” that had most effectively stayed the course. The highway had become the symbol of Southern change. In such a metamorphosis of the reform impulse, the Agrarians’ repudiation of industrialism represented a disillusionment with the uncertainties of Southern progressivism that had lurch into conservatism. Odum’s cautious continuation of the old ways was a reaffirmation, a desire to put the puzzle back together, but with the middle class firmly in control.40

The progressive movement had, however, removed one item to the margin of the agenda—race. All the Agrarians and Odum were racists and believers in the segregation system. Their relative comfort in such a situation was a measure of the success of the previous generation in establishing a new racial status quo. They had all come of age after segregation was well established. Their education and social training had confirmed the color bar as a normal and proper state of affairs. None seriously questioned the inferiority of the Negro. From the perspective of the 1970s, after a decade in which the formal structure of segregation collapsed with considerable speed, it is difficult to recall how solid the Jim Crow system looked between the world wars. As George Tindall has written: “In the 1920’s the new peculiar institution of Negro subordination had reached its apogee as an established reality in law, politics, economics and folkways—under attack from certain minorities in the North, to be sure, but not effectively menaced and indeed virtually taboo among respectable whites as a subject for serious discussion. The question was settled.” In the the 1930s, the position did begin to slip. The New Deal scarcely mounted a calculated onslaught on racism, but it did indirectly better the lot of the Southern black. Small chinks began to appear in the armor of segregation, but the changes were well below the surface of Southern life. Only in the volumes of sociologists, mostly from the North, did the coming tide of challenge become explicit.41

There were shades of emphasis within this consensus. For most of the Agrarians, race was an unimportant part of their case. To illustrate this, one must look at the only occasion in the early days of the movement
when it was seriously discussed. When *I'll Take My Stand* was planned, Robert Penn Warren was accorded a chapter on the Negro as the symposium's "leavings." He wrote it belatedly in Oxford with some diffi­dence, when his mind was half on writing a novel. It was an essay without passion. When it was sent to the informally appointed "editors" in Nashville, a certain stir ensued. Donald Davidson, in particular, thought it too liberal. He was surprised that Warren had accorded the title "Mrs." to the wife of Paul Robeson and did not much care for the way Warren had talked of equality as a possible, if remote, course of action. Although this incident did touch a raw nerve in Davidson, racism was not the main bone of contention. Davidson's chief objection to the essay was that it wandered from the central lines of the symposium. As he told Allen Tate: "It goes off at a tangent to discuss the negro problem in general (which, I take it, is not our main concern in this book), and it makes only two or three points that bear on our principles at all." He added, a few days later, that "in the kind of lay-out we have chosen, the negro problem, as such, is hardly an issue."

That the Southern racial scene was quiet meant that Davidson could afford relative indifference. When he wrote to Will Alexander, head of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in Atlanta and a leading racial liberal, in 1929, he listed those items in Southern culture he deemed worthy of preservation. At the top of his agenda, he put "country life—as opposed to complete industrialization." To this he added "Southern manners" and leisure, conservatism in politics, religion, economics, local self-determination, "historical-mindedness . . . in politics and government," religious fundamentalism, Southern architecture, and "the folk arts." At the bottom of the list, he put "the Southern view of the Negro question—I mean the better Southern view, not the view of the riff-raff. This means segregation, no social equality, probably economic subjection for a long time to come; it does not mean that the Negro should suffer political injustice, as in the courts, or be the object of any vindictive oppression. I am firmly with the Southern states that keep the vote out of the Negro's hands as far as possible, but that is no real injustice, though it furnishes a convenient focus for agitation, as it did years ago. That is, I sympathize with their point of view . . . I see no objection to a qualified Negro suffrage . . . . Now don't put me down with the 'conventional' Southerners."

Davidson could only have felt reassured when Alexander responded: "I am inclined to think that you and I would be pretty well in agreement on the race question." There was a touch of politeness in this, but not too much. Alexander's views were not dissimilar from his close friend and ally on the Interracial Commission, Howard Odum. Their sense of the time scale for black progress was foreshortened, their positive desire to purge actively the abuses within segregation more aggressive, but the Southern liberal was firmly committed to the system. He spent more of his time,
however, preventing and putting out brush fires. Odum himself had a more complex position than the Agrarians. He had, it is true, been no less convinced of the rightness of the Southern way. In his youth, he had published a racist tract in his doctoral dissertation, *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro*, whose gist was that the black had distinctly inferior traits. In later life, he had repudiated that volume and refused to have it republished. He was to be found instructing his publisher on the dust cover of his book *Cold Blue Moon*: ‘The only further suggestion is my usual one, namely, that the artist do not make a trite stereotyped Negro character, but that what he does have dignity to the general setting and dash to the horsemen. If there is a Negro rider, he ought to show, too, dignity and strength of face.' Odum was moved by the new findings of sociologists in ways that left the Agrarians cold. Nonetheless he remained a long way from accepting the equality of the Negro. In 1926, he submitted a proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation for a ten year study on Southern blacks. Its first eleven items showed a continuing passion for the quantification of the racial differences between black and white. He wanted a ‘comparative study of physical characteristics, including measurement of cephalic indices and other physical traits’; research into ‘the possibility of devising a valid test of Negro mental ability’; studies of racial differences in singing ability; ‘emotional testing in relation to the Negro’; comparative studies of Negroes of varying degrees of ‘mixed blood’; research into the psychology of black religious revivals, with special attention being paid to ‘the swaying, fainting, etc. which often becomes fantastic in the Negro summer revivals’; a look at Negro insanity and ‘feeblemindedness’, black crime, and ‘the relation of the Negro community to white morality,’ in which he thought an attempt should be made ‘to determine what, if any, is the effect of the Negro community upon the morals, achievements, failures, etc. of the white boys of the community.’ All one can say is that Odum had begun to doubt segregation, but not very much.

The line on religious matters was more clearly drawn between Odum and the Agrarians. They had all been reared in the Church, the Agrarians as Methodists and Odum as a tub-thumping fundamentalist. The latter had experienced great difficulties when forced to reconcile his youthful intoxication at country revivals with the blunt agnosticism of his new profession, sociology. He never came to doubt that it was wise for society to have churches, but he came to care less and less for his private religious beliefs. In later years, he gave up churchgoing for his hobby of rearing prize Jersey cattle. It seemed time better spent to be grubbing in the mud of his farm than sitting, prim and well shaved, in a pew.

The Agrarians, however, belonged to a profession that had less clear feelings on religion. Religion and art had a complicated relationship in literary modernism. Many Agrarians had read and absorbed, with varying
enthusiasms, the French Symbolist poets, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce. Allen Tate was to identify himself most thoroughly with the modernism that, appalled at itself, turned to the social and aesthetic conservatism of Eliot.⁴⁹ An aspect of this movement was an elevation of the role of religion in both society and literature. Collaterally, it was an attack on Romanticism’s expansive faith in the capacity of the individual to challenge and master nature. The attack on Romanticism was led in America most prominently by the literary and social critic Irving Babbitt, by whom Eliot himself had been taught at Harvard.⁵⁰ Babbitt had welded together the issues of religion, art and education in a way that the Agrarians tended to find sympathetic. Trained in an educational system that had emphasized the classics, the Agrarians agreed with Babbitt’s insistence on the value of the classical curriculum and dislike of its replacement by “utilitarian” subjects, under the aegis of John Dewey’s progressive educational theories. Babbitt saw education as a way of encouraging and disciplining man’s better “intuition.” Although the Agrarians shared Babbitt’s view of education as a moral process, they did not share the cool view of his “humanism” towards the Church. Babbitt had written: “The two most notable manifestations of the humanistic spirit that the world has seen, that in ancient Greece and that in Confucian China, did not have the support of Christianity or any other form of revealed religion.” To this, Ransom, Tate, and Eliot took public exception. They were far less sanguine about the reliability of man’s intuition when unguided by dogma. Without religion, they saw only a decline for morals, manners, and the literature that could flourish only in the context of an “organic” society.⁵¹

Nonetheless, their devotion varied in intensity. In later life, Tate turned from an indistinct protestantism to a more intense Roman Catholicism. Most could not be regarded as zealots. They talked about religion more than they went to church, and went to church more than they liked. Ransom did publish a volume of eccentric theology and Wade wrote a history of his local Methodist church.⁵² But the overall impression of their religious commitment, when contrasted with the previous generation, was of a softening of belief. It was not that they did not render unto God the things that were God’s, but that they went through an elaborate process of thinking about it first, whereas the New South had been born into faith and took it for granted. It is true that the Victorian Southerner had had no shortage of challenges to his faith: there had been the crisis of evolution, after all, and hadn’t “In Memoriam” been one of his favorite poems? But the challenges had been external. For the Agrarians, the doubts were internal.

Unsurprisingly, they were born and raised in the South. Indeed, they came from a fairly narrow central zone in the region. Their South stretched from the central Georgia of John Wade and Howard Odum northward
to the southern middle Tennessee of Ransom and Davidson. Westward, the Owsleys came from Montgomery County, Alabama. Northward, Allen Tate spent his youth divided between Winchester, near Lexington in Kentucky, and the areas in Virginia, close to Washington, of his mother's family. And their Southern roots struck deep. All came of white families that had arrived on the American continent no later than the eighteenth century. Some had ancestors who had been prominent in Southern politics. John Wade was related to the first governor of revolutionary Georgia. The Odums, the Tates, and Owsleys had all had plantation holdings in their recent family past. Only Ransom and Davidson had neither the family memory nor the personal experience of considerable property, but it is not unlikely that, in the recesses of the kinship network, there once lurked a tolerable estate.\(^5\)

The vagaries of Southern economic life had, however, flattened out their fortunes, such that it is not inappropriate to regard their backgrounds as middle class. Only Wade had a youth of conspicuous prosperity. For the rest, their homes were the Southern variation of the Victorian bourgeoisie. John Ransom's father was a Methodist minister; Donald Davidson was the son of a schoolteacher; Allen Tate's father was a lumberman. Only Howard Odum and Frank Owsley grew up outside the small town: their fathers were farmers. These were homes that encouraged a child's education, parlors in which one might find books though not large libraries. A child might sit over a volume and not be thought eccentric. And these were homes untouched by genuine poverty, the barefoot poverty of sharecropping pellagra, though occasional memories of past grandeur might make their modest gentility seem like deprivation.

Relative prosperity is attested by their attendance at universities. Three went to Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Wade and Odum were graduates of the two most prominent Georgia colleges, the University of Georgia and Emory. Owsley went to Alabama Polytechnic Institute, later to become Auburn University. Four had some manner of postgraduate education. Ransom was a Rhodes scholar. Wade and Odum had doctorates from Columbia University; Owsley had one from the University of Chicago. For good measure, Odum had a second Ph.D. from Clark University. Only Odum and Owsley could actually be regarded as one of the new breed of professional scholars who came to inhabit the colleges, the American Historical Association, and the American Sociological Society; but all ended up as college teachers. Tate resisted as a free-lance writer for more than a decade, but he was eventually drawn into its secure web. Wade was granted some detachment by his private income.

It was nothing new for Southern intellectuals to be dependent upon the university, but the scale of dependence was unprecedented, especially for poets and novelists. Once the Southern writer had been a country
gentleman, a journalist, or a free lance, living on royalties and the lecture circuit bureaux. The interwar years did not see as complete a movement into the colleges as the record of the Agrarians suggests. William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Erskine Caldwell, and others survived in the old ways. But this was becoming difficult, and by the 1950s the Agrarians' solution was the norm.

The claims of seminar and lecture combined uneasily with the demands of poetry, the novel, and social commentary. The Agrarians were forced to endure an awkward and exhausting moment of transition in Southern education. In the past, college teachers had been jacks-of-all-trades. When William Dodd had gone to Randolph-Macon College in 1900, he found himself teaching fifteen hours a week in five courses: Greek and Roman history, English history from 1265 to the accession of George III, the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, the history of Virginia to 1828, and European and American government. And he could count himself lucky not to be teaching English and foreign languages, anything and everything remotely related to the humanities. In the future, universities would find not too onerous duties for writers, whose main task was "creative writing." The Agrarians were in the middle. They held their place as ordinary college teachers—though now they had to deal only with one subject—not as adornments to otherwise functional departments.

What they did had to be made to pay. If publications went unrewarded, it was an act of sacrifice. Occasionally, they might benefit from sabbaticals and Guggenheim fellowships. Usually, they were obliged to teach for most of the year: summer schools were a necessary supplement to inadequate salaries. Casting their lot with ill-endowed Southern universities, they were underpaid, spent long hours distracted by irksome administrative tasks, taught courses that were usually uninteresting, struggled with unresponsive bureaucracies for raises, listened to the needs of wife and family, lived under permanent strain, and tried painfully to eke out a few hours of peace in which to write a poem, an essay, or a piece of social criticism. Donald Davidson complained in 1929 that "my life has become quite absurd . . . . It is given up altogether to mercenary pursuits. I teach classes and I edit a book page, both things being done in order to live and to support a family; and, completing the circle, apparently I live and support a family in order to teach classes and edit a book page. In such a scheme of things there has been no room for letters (other than strictly business), for poetry, for thought, for decency."

Tate stood a little aside from this. But the free-lance man of letters had his own problems. Except for a brief boom in the 1920s, the independent writer's lot was also between two happier times. Since Mark Twain's day, the lecture circuits had gone and the royalties shrunk. The aesthetic doctrines of modernism had cut off many authors from a wide public.
In the distance lay the paperback revolution and the rebirth of the lecture circuit, under the more solemn auspices of the university. In between lay Allen Tate's frequent flirtations with debt.57

For Odum, the pressures were different. Sociology had always been intimately involved with the university, peculiarly so in the United States. And Odum liked the rush and complexity of the modern university, the unending parade of committees. But sociology was an expensive discipline. Research assistants had to be found and paid. For Odum, the thing that made him run was not freshman English, but the constant search for grants. In his case, the transition lay in the change of emphasis in sociology. No longer did a sociologist sit in his study and draw up abstract schemes of human evolution. He was obliged to collect facts, figures, and people. That cost money, and not usually his own.

For all their troubles with time and money—in Odum's case, because of them—they travelled widely. All but Odum had spent extensive periods in Western Europe, and he compensated with a dizzying rate of movement within the United States. But it would be a mistake to contrast a provincial New South generation with cosmopolitan successors. The older men had as often crossed the Atlantic. There had been a steady flow of Southerners to the German universities, at a time when Southern and most American colleges offered inconsiderable graduate education. The intellectuals of the interwar years were building on the experiences of their predecessors, who had helped to transform Southern country boys into liberal Americans and surrogate Europeans. As a result, the movement in Southern thought was away from cosmopolitanism, towards provincialism, and not vice-versa. Odum knew about the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt before he discovered George Fitzhugh. Allen Tate read Yeats before he bothered with Sidney Lanier. And this movement gave a distinctive cast to the new provincialism: it offered the resonance of a wider experience.

So there was a witches brew of social tension in the careers of these Southerners, and a variety of social experience to enlist in the formation of an ideology. There were also institutional pressures. The idea of the South was not a private abstraction. It had found its way into the fabric of public life. An adherence to Southern identity was a subtle personal decision, but others had less fussy criteria. Publishers and editors had a vested interest in tapping "local" talent and channeling it into "Southern" modes. Many works were to be semicommissioned. Publishers' agents came trooping through Chapel Hill and Nashville in the late 1920s, looking for "Southern" authors to feed the literary boom in regionalism. John Ransom wrote to Edwin Mims in 1927: "Oxford Press has written to ask me to do a volume for them on [the] History of Southern Literature; they were inspired to this idea specifically by your book on Southern life generally, and by this consideration that there is now a great market for writings about the
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South.” Davidson confessed in 1929: “One can’t resist the publishers. They have hungry scouts in the field, looking for Southern authors. At least three publishers have been after me.” H. L. Mencken, amused and impressed by the reaction to his own swingeing attacks on the South, was ever keen to invite Southerners into the pages of the American Mercury. Of Odum he was particularly fond. It could, after all, be useful to be a Southerner. It sometimes required an effort of will not to be one.58

When they came to look at their region, they shared a certain breadth of interest with their New South predecessors. Odum was a sociologist, but he wrote three novellike volumes of folk literature, history, and occasional pieces of literary criticism. Ransom, Davidson, and Tate were poets, but they hazarded economics, history, the novel, and a little sociology. Wade hovered between history and literary criticism, and turned his hand to a novel and odd pieces of poetry. Even Owsley, the narrowest of the six, once wrote portions of a Civil War novel (unpublished and later destroyed). Nonetheless there was a certain decline of catholicity from the late nineteenth century. It was not that they knew less. On the contrary, they knew much more. But each was a touch more identified with a particular discipline, and that discipline had refined its laws and private logic with the years. One can see the lines of that first allegiance even in their wanderings into other fields. The shades of specialization had not yet closed, but they were closing.

When Donald Davidson had written to Will Alexander of the defining qualities of Southern life, he had spoken of “historical-mindedness.” Many observers have shared his belief that this was a peculiar part of the Southern scene. This is doubtful. There is no evidence that the study of history was developed in the South before other regions in the United States. If anywhere, the palm went to New England.59 That there are more historians or archives or historical works per square mile in the South is questionable. A sense of the past is a run-of-the-mill quality of Western culture, found alike in Paris, Charleston, or Duluth.

It may be true, however, that the South’s tradition of social analysis has been more insistent upon historical legitimacy. That historians should have wished to get up genealogies for their social beliefs should surprise no one. That poets, sociologists, and politicians should have shared the same impulse requires more explanation. Davidson himself expressed the interweaving of past and present in the debate of the 1930s: “Since, for better or worse, the Southern habit of mind is historical and retrospective, probably few Southerners ... would attempt to answer such [social] questions without first committing themselves to some interpretation of Southern history. The historian’s question — what the South was? — and the related question — what the South is? — underlie every important literary work or social investigation of the past fifteen years. The discussion of such questions
centers in turn upon a strategic problem: how to arrive at Southern policies that will be well founded historically and at the same time applicable to the existing situation."

Although only Frank Owsley could be considered a professional historian, all committed themselves rather haphazardly to a reevaluation of the Southern past. For some, it was a conscious decision. For others, it happened without premeditation. But the Agrarians wanted to do more than dust off the family portraits. They were convinced that an accurate diagnosis of the conservative elements in Southern history would give their contemporary position both consistency and reality. Without it, as Allen Tate remarked, they were “only American liberals offering a new panacea and pretending to a concrete background that doesn’t exist.”

Odum and the Agrarians disputed most heatedly the relationship of the South to American nationalism. As the New South school had wanted to move the region towards the American “mainstream,” so Odum wished that assimilation to continue. The Agrarians desired a reversal. It was a change of direction posited, however, on the political triumph of the American union. No one was suggesting a return to the Confederacy. Where each drew the line between North and South, between nation and section varied importantly. Drawing the ideological Mason-Dixon line was a subtle and crucial piece of metaphysics. Neither Odum nor the Agrarians wanted any part of an Americanism that extinguished Southern distinctiveness. But the Agrarians were the more sweeping historical revisionists, for they focused upon those aspects of the Southern past that the New South intellectuals had spent decades edging towards the margin of the Southern historical consciousness: the agrarianism of Thomas Jefferson, the political thought of John Taylor and John C. Calhoun, the politicians of the Confederacy, the Ku Klux Klan, the critics of Southern industrialization before 1900. Insistent upon the continuity between themselves and a conservative Southern past, they were forced to minimize social change in the region just as the New South school had been—and was—obliged to overestimate it. They needed a static vision of the South’s past. As Andrew Lytle saw it: “Southern interests, customs, economics, and problems have been, still are, and will be, fundamentally the same.”

Ironically, in scraping away the topsoil of liberalism on the surface of Southern life, the Agrarians often used liberal historiography. As they were not usually thorough analysts of original sources, they had little choice. Any attempt to reinterpret a dominant historical tradition must pick its way through the evidence and assumptions of the old school: fragments of the old perspective will always cling to the new orthodoxy. Odum was much taken with the frontier hypothesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, but the Agrarians went further in a reliance upon the “progressive” historiography of Turner, Charles Beard, and Vernon Parrington. Beard
offered an analysis of the Civil War as a struggle between agrarian and industrialist forces, Parrington saw the American mind in sectional terms, and Turner's later work seemed to prove the political and economic permanence of sectionalism. These perspectives, though not strictly compatible, were spliced together and fitted beside the more ancient Southern tradition of regionalism. Southerners did not need, though they welcomed, the approval of a man from Wisconsin to tell them that sectionalism was a real thing, not the paranoia of the politically displaced. William Dodd, who had taught Frank Owsley at the University of Chicago, had been saying it for years.64

Although nothing was more common in criticism of the Agrarians—Odum was fond of the charge—than that they were uncritical defenders of the Old South, it is inaccurate.65 It is true they were protective towards it, but they were very divided in their attitudes towards the ancien régime. Some were glad to honor Jefferson as the philosopher of the yeoman. In this they were in harmony with the sociologist. Others damned the Virginian as a deist. Some saw no fault in the egalitarianism of Andrew Jackson; others agreed with Andrew Lytle that Jackson's hand was in their own predicament, that Jackson "came forward as the defender of the plain man... but his defense was that the little man might have an opportunity to grow rich, to exploit the riches of the wilderness as well as the Eastern financier... he must bear his share of the blame for reducing this democracy to a state of landless tenants and helpless workers in mill and office." Embedded in these disputes was a deep ambivalence over the Southern democratic tradition and the question of whether the Old South should be seen as a mature, settled and semi-aristocratic society or as a child of the American frontier.66

Odum continued the New South tradition of depreciating slavery as a feudal incubus, but the Agrarians had more mixed feelings. Lytle, always a little more thoroughgoing, stated one mood when he suggested that "the personal slavery of [John] Taylor's day had the great virtue of fixing the worker to the soil and defining the relationship between master and man. The loss of this has done farming incalculable damage."67 But slavery embarrassed most of them and they did not make it central to their view of the Old South. Instead they rested their case on the courtliness of Southern manners, on the principles of self-determination and on strict construction of the Constitution. Convinced that the South was justified in seceding, they saw the Civil War and Reconstruction as the culmination of a Beardian struggle between agrarian and manufacturing interests. Whereas the New South historians had discreetly turned their eyes towards the heroism of the battlefield, the Agrarians divided their critical shafts between both generals and politicians. Convinced that the South came desperately close to winning, they needed to explain the failure. As reasons, they offered
the debilitating tactical weakness of states rights feeling in the Confederacy, too great an absorption in the Eastern theatre of war, too many errors in handling its relations with the European powers, and even a certain faltering of will amongst the Southern people. The nationalist school had, after all, been sure that the South was doomed by either providence or the big battalions to failure and responsibility mattered less.68

Neither the Agrarians nor Odum changed much in the essential structure of the Southern legend of Reconstruction. New South historians had agreed that carpetbagger corruption had been a terrible experience and racial equality worse. The disciples of William Archibald Dunning were painstakingly insistent on the point. Odum continued the old ways by stressing that Southern truculence was a regrettable short-term necessity, not to be taken as a general standpoint. The Agrarians insisted that resistance was a general and proper principle. Although they had little sympathy with the gimmerack Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, the Klan of Nathan Bedford Forrest seemed a distillation of the political indomitability of the section.69

As might be expected, the gulf between Chapel Hill and Nashville over the heritage of the New South itself was wide. But it was fairly narrow over one of the main challenges to industrialization, the Populist movement. Rupert Vance offered some dissent to Odum's hostility to radical agrarianism, and was to influence the next generation's main celebrant of the Populist tradition, C. Vann Woodward. Odum's own father had been an enthusiast for Tom Watson, but the sociologist had been impressed by the divisiveness Populism had caused in his home town of Bethlehem, Georgia. According to a later report, it had "wrecked the town and divided the school as well as the church, community and families." As for the Agrarians, middle class, and the children of landowners, they relished the Jeffersonian challenge to industry but were suspicious of its social radicalism. As Lytle was to observe: "anything I knew about it, I was distrustful... Landed people, which my family was, don't like things like that."70

This was the disputed outline of the South's political past, shorn of nuance. But each had his own intellectual specialty, which imposed its own need for defining the past. For Odum, the situation was simple. There was no indigenous tradition of sociology. There were scattered sociologists. Odum himself had been influenced by a young professor of sociology at the University of Mississippi, Thomas P. Bailey. In addition, there was the tradition of rural economics, sometimes stretched to mean sociological study. Odum was to foster its growth at the University of Georgia before he went on to Chapel Hill in 1920. And the sociology department at the University of North Carolina was the offspring of Eugene Branson's Department of Rural Social Economics.71

However, there was a living tradition of Southern literary criticism. In the person of Edwin Mims on the Vanderbilt campus, the young Fugitive
poets had been vividly reminded of it. Their reaction was decidedly hostile. The New Criticism that Ransom, Tate, and Robert Penn Warren were to found after their Agrarian phase was a continuation of that hostility to such a genteel, historicist, hortatory attitude towards literature. Writing poetry was their essential business, not discoursing on Southern history or economics. Their audience was more than provincial, more even than American. They were read with respect on the other side of the Atlantic. As such, they were too exposed to afford special pleading for their Southern literary heritage. Almost in compensation, they were unsparing in their criticism. Allen Tate said it for most of them when he wrote: "We lack a tradition in the arts; more to the point, we lack a literary tradition. We lack even a literature." In applying this judgment to the Old South, they changed little. In applying it to the New South, the Agrarians buried the reputations of Cable, Murfree, Thomas Nelson Page, and the local color school beneath their indifference. Sidney Lanier, the pride of Edwin Mims, was singled out for a particularly savage demolition job.

A major thrust of the New Criticism was to derogate the Romantic tradition. The Fugitives had admired the metaphysical poets. Cleanth Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* had sketched a literary genealogy for the Fugitives that ran from John Donne and side-stepped the Romantics. This made them peculiarly unfitted to sympathize with the dominant Romantic tradition of Southern literature. But it is important to note that they were inclined to ignore Romanticism rather than assess their own relationship to it; so they underestimated their own Romantic heritage. They were unaware that their Southernism was a devious legacy of Romantic social thought. The contradiction bred deep tensions in their thinking, and proved crucial to their relationship to the Southern idea.

Even for Howard Odum, less fussy about intellectual origins, the link between Romanticism and sociology was to prove more significant to his success as a student of regionalism than he knew. But, for both poet and sociologist and historian, the Southern myth was an inarticulate stepchild of Romanticism. The years since Herder had masked the intellectual assumptions. Later generations used the idea without knowing why; but the structure of the ideas was still potent. For a time, at least, these men in the interwar years showed a public need for the myth of the South. Some were to continue to do so, others not. They came together, debated and wrote letters to one another, disagreed and went their separate ways. This study attempts a partial explanation of why they felt the need to express themselves in terms of a Southern tradition, how they did it, and why it seems to have failed some of them, but not all: to ask the motives and consequences for Southern intellectuals of the sectional analysis of American life.