On his mother's side, Frank Owsley was a McGehee. For those who know the intricate genealogy of the Highland clans, that will seem no mean burden. These McGehees had changed their name from MacGregor, after James VI had issued Letters of Fire and Sword against the clan in 1603. For sins against the crown of Scotland, it was commanded that the clan be exterminated, its lands confiscate to any strong enough to seize them, its women to be branded and transported. Any outlaw might earn his pardon by bringing the head of a recalcitrant MacGregor before the justices. The remnants of the embittered clan were driven to fugitive banditry upon Rannoch Moor, where they were to be spectators of the Massacre of Glencoe. Others, more prudent, fled their native hills and went to the American colonies. One branch of the McGehees set itself up on a rich plantation in Montgomery County, Alabama, in due time.

On his father's side, Owsley's family history was no less violent. In the 1850s, his great-grandfather had been murdered in Alabama by a gang of outlaws. The shooting had taken place in the family home, to be witnessed by the man's wife and his youngest son. In the spirit of the clans, the child had vowed that he would seek out the criminals and systematically destroy them. And he did so. His long life was divided between an ordinary family life in a remote Alabama valley and errands of vengeance. In his old age, "Uncle Dink" had summoned Frank Owsley's father to his lair. Explaining that he could no longer carry on the vendetta, he asked his nephew, as the male heir, to assume the unfinished task. There were not many left, two or three, not too much work for a young man. The honor was declined. But the story had an unexpected sequel. Several years later, Owsley's father went to teach in Pike County, Alabama. Upon arrival, he was told of a strange old man who would permit no tree or bush near his home, nor let a light be seen from his window at night. It was said that this was the man who, long ago, had fired the shot that killed Uncle Dink's father. And it is said that, when the murderer heard that an Owsley had come to town, he had a heart attack and died clean away.

Such yarns were the commonplace of the Owsley fireside. With such a twofold heritage converging on the youthful Frank Owsley, it is not surprising that he was inclined to see dark shadows in men's motives. When Andrew Lytle turned the tale of Uncle Dink into a novel, The Long Night, he made the avenger seem a trifle psychotic. Owsley objected to the interpretation. To him, such a man may not have been normal, but he was not mad. For people were capable of such things. It is well to keep this elemental vision of human nature in mind when considering Frank Owsley, the Southern historian.
Abner McGehee had founded a substantial plantation in Alabama which by the time of Owsley's birth in 1890 had been divided between his heirs. Owsley’s mother had secured a corner, which formed a still adequate farm. The boy went to the one room schoolhouse that catered to the children of the plantation. Later, at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, he had wanted to train as a farm demonstration agent, a new profession made fashionable by the recent pioneer work of Seaman A. Knapp. But a professor of history had other ideas. George Petrie, late of the Johns Hopkins seminar and proud owner of a “historical laboratory,” cajoled the young man into historical research. It is likely he instilled into Owsley a respect for the German tradition of historical scholarship, dominant at the Baltimore graduate school. From William Dodd at the University of Chicago, to which Owsley later went, the doctrine was less pure. Despite a doctorate from Leipzig, Dodd scarcely bothered to expunge his Jeffersonianism and partisan enthusiasm for the Democratic party from his writing or from his teaching. Under the tutelage of such a Virginian, Owsley did not find Chicago a cultural shock. Indeed, the two most important Northern centers of historical research were both offering pro-Southern interpretations. When Owsley ran into trouble with a few Chicago professors, he contemplated decamping to Columbia University and the seminar of William Archibald Dunning.4

As early as there are records, one finds that Owsley had a deep love for his South and an abiding resentment against the North. He had been weaned on the legend of Reconstruction, and the steady stream of monographs from the Dunning school only confirmed the impression. Owsley liked to tell the story of a fellow lodger in his Chicago rooming house. This man was virulent in his hatred for the South, and hazarded the opinion that a steamroller should have been run over the region during Reconstruction. In all serious rebuttal, Owsley replied that it had been.5

But Owsley was singular in placing his affection for the South over a love for his home state, Alabama. The primacy of that emotion was the guiding impulse of his doctoral dissertation, States Rights in the Confederacy. The idea for the study was Dodd’s, but it meshed with Owsley’s own views. Owsley held that the pertinacity of certain Confederate politicians, like Zebulon Vance of North Carolina and Joseph Brown of Georgia, in upholding states rights during the Civil War crucially sabotaged the South’s chances of success. Squabbles over the surrender of arms to a needy Confederate army, over conscription and the writ of habeas corpus were neatly laid out. Like Tate, Owsley assumed that the South could have won, if this or that had gone differently. As he put it: “If the leaders had been able to bury their differences as to the theory of government, if they had allowed the Confederate government the same freedom as that of the federal (harassed though the federal government was by internal strife)
during the space of the war, it would have been almost an impossibility for
the South to suffer defeat.” This was a contentious assumption, proud in
explaining failure by internal villains; it slighted the not inconsiderable role
of the federal army in bringing about Appomattox. Nonetheless, States
Rights in the Confederacy was an interesting documentation of various
aspects of Confederate dissension and foreshadowed Owsley’s own political
theory, emphasizing sectionalism as a superior alternative to the traditional
Southern doctrine of states rights.\footnote{6}

Walter L. Fleming, an old pupil of both Petrie and Dunning, secured
Owsley a job at Vanderbilt in 1920. Though he was on the campus during
the heyday of the Fugitive and was a subscriber to the magazine, Owsley’s
links with the poets were small. Like most of the historical profession, he
did not know of, care for, or understand the relevance of literary modernism
for the historian. As a discipline, history was the most perfectly preserved
of nineteenth century intellectual pursuits, as yet only indifferently im­
pressed by the worrying arguments over relativism that absorbed novelists,
poets, and physicists. In aesthetic matters, Owsley was a traditionalist. In
Paris during 1927, he wrote home to Davidson: “When I look around over
here and see all these ‘contemporary artists’ in revolt against the old
masters, not because the old masters were not good, but because it is
believed these old fellows painted everything worth while, it seems pathetic
in view of the fact that these rebels are without subject, technique or
philosophy, but merely are ‘revolting’ for the sake of being different.”\footnote{7}

It is
doubtful that he lingered before a Picasso on the Left Bank.

With his Jeffersonianism and antipathy to modernism, it is not too
surprising that his first visit to Europe was no pilgrimage. In pursuit of
reasons for the Confederate failure, he had planned a study of the foreign
relations of the Confederacy. Like Wade, he had fancied a trip to Europe
under the auspices of the Guggenheim Foundation. With his wife as
research assistant and amanuensis, he went to the Public Record Office
and the British Museum in London, and to the Bibliothéque Nationale in
Paris. Despite his gory heritage as a McGehee, he came to Britain full of
enthusiasm for the old country.\footnote{8}

He came away profoundly disillusioned. Sitting in a hired car in the
grounds of Blenheim Palace, he jotted down his distaste in a notebook. It is
a remarkable document of Anglophobia. Owsley had been unlucky in
meeting a steady succession of Englishmen cut in the fashion of Mrs.
Trollope. They patronized him. They lectured him on the American
attitude towards the war debt problem. They told him to eat his peas
with an inverted fork, held in the left hand. He endured the clammy
English climate and the indifferent menus of English hotels with less humor
than a Caroline Gordon, who once wrote to Andrew Lytle from London:
"It has rained every single day since we have been here... The sun shines a few minutes every day, and then our fellow lodgers look at each other and say 'A lovely day, isn’t it?' Sometimes they go about panting and exclaiming ‘How hawt it it is! I can hardly get my breath.’" The severity of the class system appalled Owsley. He didn’t like thatched cottages any more than the drab housing estates of the 1920s building boom. Too many centuries of power had made the English disdainful and insular, he thought, and anyone but a “Rhodes Scholar who begins his career by putting his face on the floor and England’s foot on his head in obeisance” could see it. "With only one exception," he wrote, "during our four months sojourn in England, we found them all patronizing, insulting and ill-mannered."9

Such a reaction contrasted vividly with the Anglophilia of Ransom’s "Statement of Principles" in I'll Take My Stand. Equally, it marked off Owsley from Tate’s love of France. When Tate and the Owsleys travelled together in France during 1932, Tate was driven to moan: “I got so tired of Frank Owsley complaining about the parsimony of the French... that I could have doused him with a glass of bad French beer.” For Owsley was the convinced American democrat. When Davidson sent him in Paris a copy of The Tall Men, he responded nostalgically: “Over here where Tennessee and Pioneer history are as remote as an undiscovered planet your words were music singing to my heart and making me realize just how ‘Tall’ the men were who used bullets for words and who did things Europe can never understand.”10

This antipathy found its way into King Cotton Diplomacy. The book, begun in 1927 and finished in 1931, was a great advance upon the sketchiness of his dissertation. For the most, it was a reliable documentation of the dispatches that passed between Richmond, London, and Paris. But the concluding chapter was sharply etched with his social beliefs. As France had refused during the Civil War to act without England, Owsley concentrated his attention upon the latter in “Why Europe Did Not Intervene.” The central assumption of Jefferson Davis’s diplomatic strategy had been that the Confederate embargo on cotton and the destruction of crops would so cripple the British economy that intervention would be enforced. As it was true that there was severe hardship in the cotton mill towns of Northern England, the problem occurred. Why did not Palmerston’s government act? Owsley discounted the popular theory that the idealism of the cotton operatives made them support the North against their own economic interests. The working class proved as ready to listen to Confederate propaganda as to Union pleas. As Owsley saw it: “The population of Lancashire and of all industrial England was politically apathetic, sodden, ignorant and docile, with the exception of a few intelligent and earnest leaders.” Moreover, as the government was undemocratic, their opinions
had little influence upon Westminster’s decisions. Equally, Owsley could not accept the theory that Britain feared a shortage of wheat supplies from the North: American wheat was only slightly cheaper than that from Eastern Europe and the change would have occasioned only slight inconvenience.

Owsley assumed that there had to have been an economic motive for British inactivity, and he found it in war profits. He saw that Britain had made money from the sale of arms and ships, and noted that the destruction of the American mercantile marine had been welcome to a British merchant fleet severely challenged by the Americans before the war. Britain had even made money from a cotton famine that had driven up cotton prices. In this perspective, Owsley was deeply influenced by the popular theory that the United States had been forced into the First World War by profiteers. He admitted as much by writing: “Those who are at all familiar with the war profits in the last war ought not to have any great difficulty in grasping the rôle England played of war profiteer, and the powerful influence upon government of her war profiteers especially when all, even the small fish, were prosperous as a result of the war.”

In giving primacy to economics, Owsley showed the same reliance upon Charles Beard that was to mark his later writings. The concluding pages of King Cotton Diplomacy lay open to all the caveats that have been entered against a crude economic determinism. It was the more noticeable, because of a collateral failure of historical imagination. Owsley did not much understand British social and political life, nor did he much want to. When he wrote of the English working classes, he was insensitive to the nature of their culture. In his 1927 notebook, he had spoken of the “empty-headed 'yokels' who flock to swill the cheap beer and ale vended at these places [pubs] by the barrels.” Equally, he did not grasp the ambience of British government. As one reviewer pointed out: “His Englishmen and Frenchmen are hardly ever more than names.” As an outsider, he had the worst of both worlds. He saw the working class as a Jeffersonian property owner, and the elite as a democrat. More worrying in King Cotton Diplomacy, emphasizing an undercurrent in States Rights in the Confederacy, was Owsley’s tendency to use his facts to search out the unsavory motive, the conspiracy, the Uncle Dink in everyone. His analysis of British motives and, not incidentally, Northern diplomacy, was less a documentation than an accusation.

Owsley had advised the movement on the Vanderbilt campus that led to I’ll Take My Stand, without being a major instigator. Wrapped in his robes of the objective historian, he had made suggestions on reading in Southern history. The perspective of States Rights in the Confederacy underlay much of Tate’s thinking on the war. But his intellectual discipline was separate from that of Wade, Ransom, Davidson, or Tate. In explaining his view of the South, one must move in a different world from that of
T. S. Eliot or Ellen Glasgow. His was a quite separate Southern Renaissance. Owsley was self-consciously a part of the rebirth of Southern historical studies that boasted Ulrich Phillips, William Dodd, William Archibald Dunning, and the spreading network of their students. They represented a determination to redress the balance for the South, a resolve that found its consummation in Avery Craven’s *The Coming of the Civil War*. And it was a remarkably successful movement. By the Second World War, it had supplanted the pro-Union studies of James Ford Rhodes’s generation with its own pro-Southern perspective.

Owsley was enthusiastic about the proposed symposium. In the spring of 1930, he gave a paper to the Tennessee Historical Society on the causes of the Civil War. This was the basis of his essay, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” for *I’ll Take My Stand*. It is significant that the piece began with Reconstruction, not the origins of the sectional conflict. Owsley’s inspiration was the aftermath of the war, and he gave primacy to an exegesis of the traditional Southern myth of Reconstruction. In this manner, he described the postwar years as uniquely savage, in which the South was delivered to ex-slaves, “some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them hardly three generations removed from cannibalism.” After the physical devastation came the spiritual conquest, in which Northerners wrote Southern history and Southerners were forced to read it. Not until the Dunning school was “the holiness of the Northern legend” challenged. For Owsley, this was a significant shift amongst the intellectuals, but did not yet touch the masses. As he saw it, the purpose of the symposium was “to aid the South in its reorientation and in a return to its true philosophy.”

From this, Owsley moved to an idiosyncratic explication of the Beardian thesis on the Civil War: “Complex though the factors were which finally caused war, they all grew out of two fundamental differences which existed between the two sections: the North was commercial and industrial, and the South was agrarian.” Owsley’s Beardianism was pure in its emphasis upon economic motivation, but deviant when he insisted that sectionalism was more than an accident of geography, feeding into a fundamental conflict between agrarianism and capitalism. Owsley took sectionalism more seriously than Beard, who assumed it would pass with the transmission of industrial capital to the South. For Owsley, sectionalism was not accident but substance.¹⁴

Owsley dwelt with affection upon the virtues of the agrarian life and foresaw for the Old South, if untouched by war, a future as dizzy as any prophesied by liberals for the New South. But Owsley differed from Ulrich Phillips in seeing the root of Southern agrarianism, not in the plantation, but in the yeoman farm. For shifting the emphasis from the plantation was a major aim of the essay. With it, he played down slavery. “Slavery...”
he wrote, “was part of the agrarian system, but only one element and not an essential one.” Without slavery, the economic and social life of the South would not have been radically different. In Owsley’s opinion, the proslavery reaction was not about slavery per se but the race question. Race united the differing strands of the Southern economy, and states rights was but the defense mechanism of a decentralized laissez faire economy that embraced both plantation and farm. Thus the war was not a struggle between slavery and freedom, but a fight over economic interests in which the North had taken the initiative. Owsley did not see the South as an undifferentiated whole. Indeed, he viewed its system of local government as necessary for an agrarian society that required decentralization. Localism was antecedent to the strenuous use of states rights during the slavery controversy. It was a system of personal liberty that embodied the “Anglo-Saxon principles expressed in the Magna Carta, bill of rights, habeas corpus act, supported in the American Revolution, and engrafted finally in every state constitution of the independent states, as ‘bills of rights.’” It was a tradition whose spokesmen were Jefferson, Madison, John Taylor, and John Randolph.

The last note of the essay was a stern assertion of the permanent gulf between the sections. The economies, political and social philosophies of North and South “were as two elements in deadly combat. What was food for the one was poison for the other.” Nature required that the North should wish to crush a South alien to its existence.  

This analysis was not revolutionary. Owsley had put together several historical traditions: Beard, Dunning, even ironically Rhodes, who had popularized the notion that the regions were irreconcilable. But he did clarify with peculiar force how much the tide had turned against the nationalist historians of the late nineteenth century. A more distinctive contribution was to point away from the plantation towards the small Southern farm. This insight was undeveloped in 1930. For the moment, Owsley was more concerned with the negative task of destroying the nationalist interpretation of the war. In this, Owsley was strictly au coursant as a professional historian. But the subject was close to his heart and his language responded accordingly. Blacks were “barbarians.” Reconstruction leaders were “savage.” Garrison “knew no moderation... no balance or sense of consequence.” Owsley's problem with the historical guild was never the character of his views. Perusing the Owsley correspondence, one is struck by how often his positions were applauded by his fellow historians. Avery Craven agreed in 1934 that the coming generation of Northern writers had no case and were best met by ridicule. Thomas P. Abernethy was to read an Owsley article on the Scottsboro case in 1933 to his Charlottesville students. “It has things in it which are good for them to hear,” he told the author. “In the name of Jove and all the gods, why has
the South so long taken the interference and sneers of the Yankees lying down? I wish that I might have been the author of your article, as it expresses my own sentiments so fully." The difference was that such men left their bluntness in private letters and between the lines of their work. Owsley was bent upon bringing it out into the open.  

He was candid about his intentions to friends. Feeling the gulf between the confidence of his historiographical position and an insecurity, engendered by the sense that his kind of South was slipping away, Owsley tried a reconciliation by suggesting that the intellectual eventually influenced the public. *I'll Take My Stand* was academic, for intellectuals; but its doctrines would find their way slowly among the less intellectual. To Tate, he laid down his credo: "I believe that the spiritual and intellectual conquest of the South, which Dodd laments, is superficial . . . . The purpose of my life is to undermine by 'careful' and 'detached,' 'well documented,' 'objective' writing, the entire Northern myth from 1820 to 1876. My books will not interest the general reader. Only the historians will read them, but it is the historians who teach history classes and write text books and they will gradually and without their own knowledge be forced into our position. There are numerous Southerners sapping and mining the Northern position by objective, detached books and Dodd is certainly one of the leaders."  

This was an awkward ambition, by the canons of the historical profession. On one level, it was straightforward. Owsley believed that the Southern position was the objective truth, so there was no problem. But a professional historian was obliged to rest his case upon evidence. For a John Ransom, history was myth. It did not matter too much what counter-evidence was thrown at him: the final appeal was to an intuitive judgment about the nature of man. As a committed "scientific" historian, Owsley could not merely practice his own prejudices. He was on a knife edge of historiographical change.  

In viewing Owsley's attitude towards historical objectivity, it is instructive to note an exchange of letters between him and Robert Penn Warren in 1938. The former had written an unfavorable review of Robert McElroy's *Jefferson Davis* for the *Southern Review*. In manuscript, Owsley had commented in this fashion upon McElroy's condemnation of Davis's proslavery views: "After all is it the business of the historian to pass ethical judgments? Is it not rather the duty of the historian to explain why individuals and peoples have conducted themselves in a certain fashion or have thought as they have?" Warren was puzzled by this, and asked if it did not contradict Owsley's own known propensity for passing ethical judgments. The historian's reply was a mirror of his own analytical confusion, and it is worth quoting at length: "I am sure that you treed me: what I seem to mean is that Mr. McElroy had no right to pass an ethical judgement, but that I reserve that right for myself. I find that I was being holy on
that particular occasion. I still feel holy: Mr. McElroy obviously does not have the proper ethical values, therefore he should not be permitted to express an opinion. No it is probably not quite so intolerant as that—I mean my position. I still insist that the true historian has no right to say whether a thing is morally right or wrong—not as a historian, though he may do it as a moral or immoral being. On the other hand a historian must say, frequently, that a thing, judged from accepted economic and social standards, has had a good or bad effect—your ‘value judgements,’ I think. For instance, the Civil War had a bad effect upon the South because (1) it destroyed the economic and social institutions of the South without putting anything in their places (2) it killed and maimed several hundred thousand men (3) it sterilized the intellectual life of that section for nearly thirty years (4) it enabled the East to lay a protective tariff which has been detrimental to agriculture (4) [sic] it made reconstruction possible and this created animosities between the negro and white people of the South and deepened the sectional bitterness already existing between North and South (5) It gave rise to the intellectual scalawag who makes a living out of misrepresenting the South in the North. Leaving the latter category of bad effects out, I would not consider any of these ethical judgements—not necessarily.” This was unclear. Significantly, he agreed to the deletion of the passage from his review.

These difficulties were compounded by the imperfect match of institutions with the regionalism of the American historical mind. It was impossible to match the tone of his prose to the character of his audience, when the audience was never predictable. The readers of the American Historical Review, the Journal of Southern History, the American Review, or the Virginia Quarterly Review were not identical, nor were they totally dissimilar. The tone appropriate to one was unwise in another, if one wished to have designs upon the beliefs of one’s audience. In moving outside professional circles, as he did fully in the American Review or partly in the Southern Review, Owsley could gain a certain stature from the mantle of objectivity. The young Cleanth Brooks, for example, although he wondered if the tone of “The Irrepressible Conflict” was not too militant, was happy to add: “I have no reason to believe that all of his allegations can’t be proved up to the hilt.” Inside the magic circle of historians, Owsley was to be regarded with suspicion by many for his excursions into the partisanship of agrarianism.

It was a difficult game to play, and he did it badly. The Scottsboro case tipped his hand more than anything. This was one of the few occasions during the 1930s when the three issues of race, intersectional relations, and communism came together. On all three, Owsley was sensitive. When he had been a student in Chicago, he had joined a discussion group called the Current Events Club. Discovering it was left wing, he had resigned.
But, for many years, he had remained on its mailing list and, by the 1930s, they were sending him down from the waste lands of the North a succession of communist pamphlets. Some related to the American Communist Party's position on the race problem, which called for the establishment of black states in the Deep South. Naively, Owsley was shocked by the proposals and got the idea that he was gaining, through the party's blundering, access to their deepest secrets. In fact, one could buy them in any New York bookstore.

Reading *The Communist Position on the Negro Question* coincided with the opening of the Scottsboro trial. The accused black "rapists" were being defended by the International Labor Defense, an adjunct of the Communist party. Owsley thought he saw a conspiracy. "I am exceedingly anxious and seriously alarmed over the present agitation," he wrote. In this mood, he delivered the essay "Scottsboro: The Third Crusade" to the new *American Review* in 1933.

He tried to put Scottsboro into historical perspective by claiming that there had been two concerted attacks on the South by the North, which used the Negro problem as an excuse for capitalist imperialism: the abolitionist crusade and Reconstruction. In Owsley's opinion, Scottsboro was the spearhead of a third crusade. For abolitionism, he insisted, "the industrialists, carefully coached by their lawyers and statesmen and 'intellectual' aides, realized the bad strategy of waging a frank struggle for sectional power; they must pitch the struggle upon a moral plane, else many of the intelligentsia and the good people generally might become squeamish and refuse to fight." Slavery offered the perfect excuse, even though industrialism itself was ridden with abuses. As far as Owsley could see, slavery was a paternalistic system, at least, while the factories provided appalling conditions and sired dubious sexual mores.

To emancipation, Owsley thought, was added the crime of Reconstruction, which consolidated the industrial regime. Again the blacks were pawns in an insincere game. This time the relationships of Southern whites and blacks were fatally poisoned: "The slave-holder of former days was more tolerant of the Negro's irresponsible acts, for he regarded the Negro as a juvenile race badly advised: but being human, he came to distrust and in many cases to hate the Negro." Thus the whites disciplined the presumption of blacks. But Owsley dwelled upon the psychological scars of Reconstruction: "too bitter to be soon forgotten. It has formed and will continue for many years to form the background of Southern society and political attitudes."

Scottsboro was a third move against the South. "The method is familiar," Owsley wrote. "Holding the South up to ridicule as backward, ignorant, unprogressive; waving the bloody shirt during political campaigns . . . and giving wide currency to race conflicts and lynchings in the South, while
ignoring such difficulties in the North as the Chicago and St. Louis race riots.” Again the intelligentsia were put into an attack on the validity of Southern justice. Now, however, the industrialists were split between capitalists and communists. By an uncomfortable analogy, Owsley tried to say that the former, in control of the Republican Party, wished to recover power after the defeat of 1932 by the old methods of “Negro governments and Republican control of the South.” Understandably, he did not press the point. The communist attack seemed more clear. He outlined four groups in the crusade: the industrialists, whether capitalist or communist, “with their smart lawyers and publicity advisers”; the intellectuals paid to be propagandists; the actual victims of Southern “outrages”; and the public itself, “ready because of its inherited dislike of the South to believe the worst of that section.” Thus, lastly, he explained the communist position on the Negro question. As in Reconstruction, he saw the blacks as being tempted by empty promises of land. Once more, he thought it was insincere and impractical. For the arbiter of the Negro fate was not the North, but the Southern white. As long as whites outnumbered blacks in the South by three to one, the power of veto remained.22

Clearly this was no stealthy smuggling of the Southern case into the court of public opinion, but a reprise of the proslavery argument, mixed with Charles Beard and Uncle Dink. To elevate Scottsboro to the dignity of a full-dress onslaught on the South was an ill-considered judgment. The intemperateness of his language, the accusations of conspiracy, seemed a dress rehearsal for the radical right literature of the 1950s. From the viewpoint of tactics, Owsley, if he wished to maintain his standing in the historical profession, would have been well advised simply to bury the essay quietly in the American Review. Instead, he took it with him to the annual convention of the American Historical Association in Illinois at the end of 1933. Ironically, it was the gathering to which Charles Beard gave his presidential address, considering the analytical difficulties of relativism. Tartly, the managing editor of the American Historical Review, in the subsequent report, relegated Owsley’s paper to a footnote. Nonetheless, and interestingly, Owsley reported enthusiastic responses from his fellow Southerners. Davidson passed the news to Wade: “He said he got quite a favorable reception. The Southerners shed tears of joy: the Westerners were quite impressed. As for Easterners, they were not there in any numbers. It is the complaint of the Westerners that the Easterners don’t come to Western meetings, and their antagonism toward the East (which Frank Owsley reports as enormous) is accordingly increased.”23

The mood of Owsley was bitter, almost desperate. He talked of a student organization that might proselytize militant agrarianism. John Gould Fletcher picked up the idea on a visit to Nashville and elaborated it enthusiastically: “The movement should begin not by declaring any bold political program,
but only with the ostensible object of keeping alive the memory of the
Battles and Leaders of the Civil War." He suggested a name, the "Grey
Jackets." They might march with pomp on Confederate anniversaries.
Perhaps they might even "threaten" chambers of commerce who pursued
too strenuously Southern industrialization.24

To this, Owsley responded promptly. He and Davidson had decided to
organize the group after Christmas 1933 from sympathetic students at
Vanderbilt. They were to draw up a credo, "based upon the framework of
the apostles creed," which members would have to commit to memory.
They would keep up a stream of correspondence to the press. "Open
debates and forums will be scheduled, and our opponents invited to enter
on occasion so that we may slaughter them in the presence of the multitudes
— the multitudes usually being hand picked by ourselves," Owsley suggested,
almost waggishly. Appropriate reading would be assigned: Howard K.
Beale's study of Reconstruction, The Critical Year, J. T. Carpenter's The
South as a Conscious Minority, Avery Craven's biography of Edmund
Ruffin and Tate's life of Jefferson Davis. In the spring, the group could visit
the Confederate cemetery at Franklin, Tennessee. If the idea was a success,
other Southern universities might take it up. As Owsley saw it: "They
should be dignified, restrained, but grim in the purpose of renewing the
spirit and self respect of the South."25

In his letter Fletcher had half apologized for writing with emotion.
Owsley replied: "You do not have to excuse yourself for being emotional
on such subjects—the angels must weep at the arrogance, complacency,
conceit and success of the Northern Industrialists. I am bitter to the marrow,
clear through to the marrow. So bitter that I feel that I am losing my poise
as a historian." This was written a few weeks before Owsley went to the
convention in Illinois. Bitterness and a fear of violating the discreet canons
of the historical profession vied in his feelings. Later he would admit to
Warren that he had "stepped outside the limits of history" in his Scottsboro
article. For the moment, bitterness held the upper hand.26

So was born the student organization, called Phalanx. At first it was
secret. But in the spring of 1934, it was forced into the open. Vanderbilt
University had a regular radio show on a local station, WSM. Owsley gave
a talk on "Communism and the Southern Negro." There seems little doubt
that it carried the same message as his Scottsboro article. He had shown it
to Chancellor Kirkland of Vanderbilt, who had cleared it for transmission.
After Owsley had spoken, however, WSM abruptly cancelled the series. In
the ensuing controversy, the existence of Phalanx came to light. Much to
Davidson's surprise, the stiff New South liberal of a chancellor didn't mind:
"He is positively friendly—is glad 'there's some organization to speak out
on such matters.'"27

Benjamin Kendrick, fresh from his row with Howard Odum, came to
speak to the group. Seward Collins was invited. The organization would appear to have survived until the autumn of 1934, as Owsley then asked Wade if the latter was interested in a chapter of Phalanx at the University of Georgia. But it did not run as smoothly as he had hoped, for he toyed with changing its membership basis. “Only a half dozen or so serious thinkers should be admitted. Let the others go and join the K.K.K. or the Southern Manufacturers’ Association,” he grumbled. Perhaps its seriousness was diminished by undergraduate flippancy and Owsley disbanded it: after 1934, one finds no more reference to Phalanx.28

As late as 1936, Owsley was bent on his assault upon the Northern “legend” and wished to write a study of the “irrepressible conflict” between 1820 and 1876. As he outlined the plan, “It is my object in particular to examine the papers of as many abolitionists as possible—particularly political abolitionists like Charles Sumner—to see what motives besides religion or humanitarianism . . . lay behind the Anti-Slavery Movement.” He saw his conspiracy and he would have it out. But he had scarcely articulated his intention, before he allowed the project to die. By the summer of 1936, he had changed direction. To explain this, one must retrace steps a few years.29

For reasons of ill health, Owsley had not been active in the agrarian movement immediately after I’ll Take My Stand. In fact, his wife was obliged to put King Cotton Diplomacy through its final stages with the University of Chicago Press in 1931 for him.30 Despite his youthful farming experience, he had been slow to interest himself in the practical side of agrarianism. But, like Tate, he was impressed on a visit to France in 1932 with the ability of an agricultural nation to withstand the Depression. As an enthusiastic Democrat, he was to be given much hope by the New Deal. By August 1933, he felt that Roosevelt was a great leader: “He aims, I am convinced, to reduce the plutocrats to ranks as far as control of government goes.” And he thought, correctly, that he saw in the new administration an inclination to restore people to the land.31 In 1935, he decided to put his thoughts on the land movement into print. “The Pillars of Agrarianism” was an attempt to “restate and elaborate the fundamental economic and political principles on which an agrarian society will probably have to rest in the United States, and most particularly in the South.”32

Like the North Carolina liberals, for whom Denmark had held a certain fascination in the 1920s, Owsley saw a useful analogy in the agricultural-industrial balance of Scandinavia and France.33 Restoring the strength of agriculture would not only help to solve the Depression, but it would have ideological benefits. It would create a profoundly anticommunist society; for Owsley identified the enemy as “a system which allows a relatively few men to control most of the nation’s wealth and to regiment virtually the whole population under their anonymous holding companies and corporations, and to control government by bribery or intimidation.” But, if
economic power were decentralized, a proletariat would be rendered ineffective and communism made impossible. How could this be done?

Owsley’s strategy was sectional, his prime concern to offer “a fundamental program for the South.” The first priority was to take land from absentee owners, the insurance companies, and banks, and give it in fee simple to smallholders. Tenancy should be abolished, with the government buying and redistributing land. It should give “every landless tenant who can qualify, eighty acres of land, build him a substantial hewn log house and barn, fence him off twenty acres for a pasture, give him two mules and two milk cows and advance him $300 for his living expenses for one year.” Such land should be assigned on the condition that, if any attempt be made to mortgage or sell it, the state would reclaim it. The unemployed might be brought from the cities to the country; those with agrarian experience could go straight to a farm, while the others might serve an apprenticeship on a plantation. Owsley also saw a need for rehabilitating soil long abused by wasteful methods, and suggested a system of fines for those who damaged the land.

Subsistence crops should be given priority. This would not eliminate the need for cash, so commercial agriculture would still be needed. Unlike most commentators, Owsley saw a bright future for the South’s two staples, cotton and tobacco. Protective tariffs should be lowered and a subsidy on cotton exports established, based on the differential between domestic and world prices. In this way, the natural superiority of Southern short staple cotton would enable it to restore its primacy in world trade. Moreover, he demanded that “in order that foreign countries shall have sufficient American exchange with which to purchase our staple farm products we further insist that all farm products and raw material shipped into the United States be used in creating foreign exchange with which cotton and tobacco may be purchased and exported.”

This was not too different a program from Odum’s, and it faced similar difficulties of implementation. Unencumbered by Odum’s nationalism, however, Owsley turned to simpler solutions. It was clear to him that none of this was possible in a government dominated by the sectional imperialism of Northern industry. It was necessary to bypass it by fundamental constitutional reform, in which the American constitution would finally recognize the reality of sectionalism. Regional governments must be established to embody the fact that the United States was not a nation, but “an empire made up of a congeries of regions marked off by geographic, climatic and racial characteristics.” In this demand, Owsley was echoing a recent study by William Yandell Elliott, The Need for Constitutional Reform. Although a Harvard political scientist, Elliott had been at Vanderbilt in the 1920s and had even written poetry for the Fugitive. Under such a scheme, the federal government would retain control over matters of war and peace, interregional and interstate commerce, banking and currency matters. Sections
would be equally represented in Congress, the Cabinet, and in the process of electing presidents. Congress itself would be unicameral and dominated by regional legislatures. Each region would control its own tariff or, at least, a national tariff would be the product of intersectional bargaining, "somewhat in the fashion of the late Austro-Hungarian tariff treaties." The Supreme Court would have regional seats, determined upon the nomination of individual sections. In these ways, sectional imperialism would be contained.

If this were done, Owsley saw the prospect of an agrarian renaissance. "The old communities, the old churches, the old songs would arise from their moribund slumbers," he imagined. "Art, music, and literature could emerge into the sunlight from the dark cramped holes where industrial insecurity and industrial insensitivity have often driven them. There would be a sound basis for statesmanship to take the place of demagoguery and corrupt politics. Leisure, good manners, and the good way of life might again become ours.\textsuperscript{34}

This was Frank Owsley's vision of an agrarian America, more thoroughly sectional than anything John Ransom ever proposed. When Ransom had dabbled in agrarian reform, he had found it weakening his sectionalism. In Owsley, the sectional instinct was more basic and showed in this daring attempt to slice through the old tension between states rights, sectionalism, and nationalism. Nothing better illustrated his indifference to states rights and devotion to the South. As a set of proposals, "The Pillars of Agrarianism" bore the mark of several influences: traces of Populism in the cry against absentee owners; progressive conservation policies as old as Owsley's ambition to be a farm demonstration agent, though purged of the implications of "efficiency"; a demand for a sectional voice in the federal government as old as Calhoun.\textsuperscript{35}

It would be easy to dismiss this essay as daydreaming. If so, it was of a species all too common during the flexible days of the New Deal. Indeed, those interested in influencing the Roosevelt administration were to react to its publication. The essay fell into the hands of Francis Miller, chairman of the Southern Policy Committee. The committee had been founded to promote debate amongst Southerners, to hold conferences and distribute pamphlets, and to act as a lobby in Washington. The Agrarians themselves were interested and involved in the committee's activities, which formed a bridge to Odum's North Carolina group. Miller was enthusiastic about Owsley's suggestions and ordered a hundred copies of the article to be distributed among the "Southern Policy Groups" into which his organization was divided. It seems likely that, through Miller, a copy passed to the hands of Senator John H. Bankhead of Alabama.\textsuperscript{36}

The senator had proposed a bill in Congress that would establish a subsistence homestead program. By 1937, it was to pass as the Bankhead-
Jones Farm Tenancy Act, which created the Farm Security Administration. Owsley liked to think that he had influenced the course of events. It is true that Bankhead had written to him in praise of “The Pillars of Agrarianism.” But, in fact, the chief inspiration for the Bankhead act was Frank Tannenbaum of Columbia University, a specialist in Latin American history who had been impressed by agrarian revolution in Mexico. Tannenbaum’s scheme had been hatched in concert with the Rosenwald Fund and certain Southerners, such as Will Alexander, who had intimate contacts with the Chapel Hill group. Owsley’s correspondence with Bankhead came in March 1935, a month before the Congress established the Resettlement Administration, the Farm Security Administration’s immediate predecessor. The former had been brewing as an Agriculture project for some time.³⁷

Nevertheless, Owsley’s article ended up as part of the general Southern pressure for the Bankhead-Jones bill, a lobby that united both Nashville and Chapel Hill. In late April 1935, Owsley, Davidson, Lyle Lanier, and others forming the “Nashville Policy Group” went down to Atlanta to participate in the Southern Policy Committee’s conference that endorsed the bill. And Owsley found himself beguilingly in the midst of a buzz of interest. William Dodd, now American ambassador to Germany, congratulated him on the article: “What you say about the way to recovery represents what I pressed upon the President before inauguration.” Hugo Black, the junior Senator from Alabama, responded to an Owsley reprint with a more than perfunctory answer. Apart from echoing the historian’s call for tariff reform, his criticism of too much power being concentrated in too few hands, he added: “Many of the ideas included in this article have been advanced in ‘I’ll Take My Stand.’ Perhaps with most of the arguments present[ed] by you I am in thorough accord.”³⁸

There was a wide consensus among Southerners in 1935 that some measure of land reform was necessary. Chapel Hill, Nashville, Washington, all concurred on that. On details, consensus failed. Some wished to establish peasant proprietorship, some to break the power of the landlords. Owsley himself was particularly virulent against absentee ownership. In his eyes, landlords themselves were not villains for they had long since lost their power to mortgage holders. In this, he was influenced by his own family history. As he told William Couch: “My father died two years ago with about 1,000 acres of land, a warehouse and a large ginnery. He had mortgaged it all to keep going during the depression which really set down in the cotton belt about 1924, and the Metropolitan Insurance Company and a couple of banks took it all over for the indebtedness which none of his heirs were able to take up because they too were in as bad a plight.”³⁹

From Chapel Hill itself, Owsley received encouraging letters. The foremost student of the cotton economy, Rupert Vance, expressed sympathy with the thrust of Owsley’s arguments but doubted that Southern agricultural
interests were sufficiently united to back even the Bankhead bill: "Areas of disorganization and poor land may welcome such a measure, but certainly not the richer areas where landlords make money occasionally by the aid of government bounties." Moreover, Vance could see little advantage in fixing people to the land "in a world of mobility." William Couch, who had published his own "agrarian program for the South" a year earlier, was inclined to look benignly upon Owsley's proposals, though his own designs were more collectivist. Couch had called for farm villages, not unlike the Russian zemstvo of the late nineteenth century, in which the title of all village business property would be vested in the village itself: private enterprise would be limited, to prevent the growth of monopolies, and investments possibly restricted to government bonds.

That Owsley was resistant to collectivism was unsurprising in that the intertwined concerns of racism and communism had impelled much of his thinking about land reform. He was keen to deny Couch's belief that economic rivalry lay at the base of racial antagonism. "There is considerable doubt in my mind," he wrote to the North Carolina editor, "whether the homesteading and general economic betterment of the negro would remove the negroes' chief grievance against the whites: the desire of the white man to maintain his social and political supremacy for the purpose of preserving the integrity of the white race." While Owsley was willing to take certain neo-Populist steps towards socialism in the form of public ownership of railroads, power companies, gas companies, steel corporations, and public utilities. he was oppressed by the fear that America might have to choose between fascism and communism. In that event, the race issue was decisive in driving him away from Marxism. As he put it to Couch: "The jargon of Marxism . . . is the wrong language for a land with a bi-racial population. . . . The moment violence starts the tenant white farmer and the industrial worker will become a fascist rather than a communist."

In all this, Owsley had found himself drawn into contemporary political discussion. As a professional historian, he was painfully aware that he was paying a price. At the last, he got cold feet. When Tate and Agar were planning *Who Owns America?*, Owsley in an abrupt change of policy refused to join the symposium. "I am strictly an amateur in social criticism," Agar was informed, "and I feel that I am weakening myself professionally by taking too prominent a part in affairs in which I have no great knowledge." Too much time was being lost from historical research and "the kind of writing and thinking in which my training and my taste—and the means of my livelihood—lie." To Tate, he announced that he was "irrevocably out of the picture." Agar came back with a conciliatory letter, pleading that New Deal affairs were at a critical moment and all influence needed to be brought to bear on Washington: the group in the administration, sympathetic to agrarian ideas, must be helped in their struggle against the
"planners" from New York. Because Owsley had been offended at the way Tate and Agar had planned the symposium without much help from Nashville, Agar made efforts to soothe Owsley's wounded pride. Briefly placated, the historian agreed to try and find time for an essay. Partisanship could not be abandoned so abruptly. He continued to find himself in the middle of the correspondence between the Agrarians and the miscellaneous land reform groups who were to come to Nashville for the Agrarian-Distributist Conference in 1936. Catholic priests from the Middle West took to praising him and pointing out the sympathy between agrarianism and Benedictine feudalism. It was all getting to be too much. Agrarianism had a way of turning to strange forms, many of them speaking in accents decidedly non-Southern.

But the long term decision remained. "For years I have personally and through my students, been digging at the abolition roots of American history and its writing," he had told Agar. "Until recently, I have got mighty far under some of these roots without being distrusted or accused of bias or motive... but I detect a certain suspicion which has without doubt arisen out of my partisan writings in the American Review and elsewhere." As he saw it, in his essay on Scottsboro and in *I'll Take My Stand*, "I not only stuck my knife in the enemy's belly, but I turned it." Inconveniently, the enemy had noticed.

His essay for *Who Owns America?* was a more systematic attempt to wed his Beardianism to his sectionalism. By taking a Beardian analysis of the Constitution of 1787, he argued that the natural rights philosophy of the Founding Fathers had been modified in Philadelphia and subsequently diminished by the power of judicial review, exercised by the Supreme Court. Thereby Hamiltonianism had come to dominate the governmental process. It seemed to Owsley that it was imperative to return to first principles, especially Jeffersonian ideas, and apply them afresh to the problem of political structure. Without the philosophy of natural rights, among which he counted those of life, liberty, property, the pursuit of happiness and self-government, he saw no hope of escaping "the communist or fascist totalitarian State." In Owsley's opinion, states rights, as seen by Jefferson, was not a fundamental doctrine but a strategic improvisation to meet the needs of Jefferson's day. In the 1930s, a comparable strategy in defense of self-government would be the establishment of regional governments. Moreover, Jeffersonian laissez-faire had been so appropriated by the monied interests that Owsley thought a measure of government intervention was now necessary to protect natural rights. Most importantly, the right to personal, but not corporate, property had to be restored, for property was the basis of all other rights. Without property, a man could have no control over his fate and the American people would lose both its inheritance and its instinct for freedom.
This essay showed, even more than the “The Pillars of Agrarianism,” that Owsley had added Frederick Jackson Turner on sectionalism to the influence of Charles Beard. Pessimistic observations on the decline of individual property holding were not far from Turner’s gloomy fears for American democracy upon the demise of the supply of free land. Owsley had reviewed Turner’s posthumous volume, *The United States, 1830-1850*, in the summer of 1935 and given partial approval to the frontier thesis, though he preferred to see Turner’s later work on sectionalism as a more mature synthesis than his earlier frontier hypothesis. As Owsley put it: “Turner finally realized that frontier conditions were transitory while regional and sectional factors were permanent elements and hence of more importance.” And it is not idle to see in Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Section in American History,” with its comparison of American sections to European nations, the shadow of Owsley’s call for regional regimes. In Turner’s words: “The thing to be avoided, if the lessons of history are followed, is the insistence upon the particular interests and ideals of the section in which we live, without sympathetic comprehension of the ideals, the interests, and the rights of other sections. We must shape our national action to the fact of a vast and varied Union of unlike sections.”

So it was no accident that Owsley permitted his project for a study of abolitionist motives to die. By the summer of 1936, he was planning research into the role of the “yeoman” in the Old South, a subject at which he had barely hinted in *I’ll Take My Stand*. Polemical interest in land reform had deepened his engagement with the topic. Save for the writing of a textbook, this was to engage his energies for the next twelve years. No less an expression of his agrarianism, it was crucially less suspect. For it removed him from the contentious area of intersectional relations, where he had difficulty in controlling his emotions. With an issue interior to the history of the South, he was safer.

As a student of Southern history per se, Owsley was markedly less iconoclastic than many of his fellow Agrarians. He shared their disgust with the New South, even deepened it, but he was sanguine about the democratic credentials of the ancien régime. He shared none of Tate’s doubts about Jefferson’s deism or Davis’s self-perception of Americanism, none of Lytle’s brooding on the entrepreneurial aspects of Jacksonian democracy. He was as uncritical as Douglas Southall Freeman on Robert E. Lee. Sensitive on the issues of race and industrialization, Owsley was indifferent to the wider issues of social conservatism that Ransom and Tate had urged. Where they saw a contradiction between the South and the liberal democratic tradition, he saw none. In the terms employed by Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America*, where they wished to supplant a Lockean philosophy construed as Burkean with Burke pure and simple, Owsley
was happy with the mingled status quo. In Owsley’s case, however, racism drove him into desperate stratagems in his interpretation of the progressive heritage.

Owsley’s research on the “plain folk,” despite long and hard work for himself, his wife, and his students, was to remain inconclusive. In the days before computers, it was a tedious and exhausting business to collate and assess the scattered evidence of censuses, county records, and reminiscences.\(^9\) His main achievement, the recovery of the nonplantation Southern middle class, was very important if swiftly accomplished. The point scarcely needed to be asserted, before it was proved. Only the ideological myopia of the generation of New South historians, too bent on coping with the awkward heritage of slave plantation culture, too busy with shying away from its agrarian culture towards their own urban bourgeois society to spend time exploring the niceties of social structure in the countryside, had prevented its discovery. For too long, nonplantation whites had meant “poor whites.” Owsley sometimes got his precise figures wrong, as Fabian Linden indicated in a devastating review in 1948, and was prone to overestimate the political weight of the yeoman class, but his central argument was important and inarguable. What he did with the society he had uncovered was more contentious.\(^30\)

Like Odum’s, Owsley’s feeling about the “plain folk” was Herderian in its emphasis upon “folkways” and nationalism. As he wrote in *Plain Folk in the Old South*: “It may be contended with much force that there can be no true nationalism where the population does not constitute a folk. The Southern people... were a genuine folk long before the Civil War.” With such a premise, he was obliged to be rather cavalier with ethnic anomalies in his folk. He took as his norm the Scotch-Irish and the English and merged them into a unified folk with a nonchalance that, though traditional, would have been impenetrable to a citizen of Wiltshire or Londonderry or Glasgow in the eighteenth century. Southerners were “predominantly British, being a mixture of English and Scotch, with here and there a dash of German, French, or Irish.” Nor was it clear that the Salzburgers of Georgia or the Creoles of Louisiana would have been unjustified, in protesting their dismissal as just so much seasoning in an Anglo-Saxon stew. And Herderian was Owsley’s emphasis upon a Southern language. “The spoken English of the South,” he wrote, “was as distinctive a characteristic of the Southern folk as corn bread, turnip greens, and sweet potatoes.”\(^51\)

The impulse to recover the past of the nonplantation white was to broaden and complicate the vision of Southern social structure. But Owsley was unwilling, unlike his contemporary Roger Shugg, to deal with the corollary of social conflict.\(^32\) For his Herderian historicism led him to merge the problem of social conflict into the issue of class struggle, and
the latter was anathema. In this he was similar, ironically, to Ulrich Phillips. Whereas Phillips had ignored the small farm, on the grounds that it was the shadow of the plantation, Owsley ignored the plantation because he saw it as the cultural cousin of the farm. Thus on language he wrote that “the speech of the plain folk and that of the more cultivated Southern people was basically the same, except, of course, that the well educated would not customarily use archaic word forms.” Owsley’s animosity to Marxism and his related devotion to the group loyalty of Southernism required this emphasis upon Southern cultural unity. “The Southern folk,” his study insisted. “...were not class-conscious in the Marxian sense, for with rare exceptions they did not regard the planters and men of wealth as their oppressors.” Later one finds this: “Such were the association of rich and poor in all religious activities and in the schools, the frequent ties of blood kinship between them, and the generally folkish and democratic bearing of the aristocracy. This sense of unity between all social and economic groups cannot be stressed too much, in view of the strongly and widely held opinion to the contrary. Indeed, when the entire social and economic structure of the Old South is placed in perspective, rather than viewing each segment as a separate thing, all parts will be seen as bearing a relation to the whole.” Not for nothing has Herder been seen as one of the intellectual progenitors of gestalt psychology.

Once again, Owsley had shown how deeply he was committed to a sectional view of American social structure. That he was himself an offspring of the “plain folk” had both qualified him to be a prime author in its historiography and disqualified him from being its dispassionate historian. As his enthusiastic and nostalgic reveries on barn raising, corn shucking, and revival meetings abundantly showed, he cared a little too much. To be in the thralls of one analytical presumption, the idea of the South, was a severe handicap, though a common one. To be caught by a second, an Arcadian vision of yeoman life, was further inhibiting. Thus a great deal of useful social history went begging for a perspective.

Owsley’s work on the “plain folk” absorbed him during the 1940s. His decision to abandon polemics served him well, for he steadily rose in the graces of his fellow professionals. In 1940, he was president of the recently formed Southern Historical Association, the “white hope of the South,” as he, not inappropriately, called it in 1938. He was well launched upon becoming one of the elder statesmen of a flourishing Southern historical profession. His friends and former students were numerous and affectionate towards a man who breathed more daunting fire in his prose than in his good-natured presence. His Plain Folk of the Old South was, with important exceptions, well received both in and out of the South. In 1948, he retired to a generously endowed chair in American History at Tuscaloosa in his native state and so took a final step away from the Vanderbilt of his embattled agrarianism.
With age and seniority came a growing conservatism. By the early 1940s, anticommunism had usurped pride of place in his thinking. Even in 1938, he had been mildly encouraging to an American fascist who had sought his advice, because he saw fascism as a possible counterpoise to communism. By 1944, he had switched his national allegiances to the Republican Party, a long step for a man whose political perspectives had been nurtured on the legend of Reconstruction. What tipped him away from the Democrats was, by a devious logic, the wartime activities of John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers. During 1943, Lewis had staged two strikes in defiance of the War Labor Board and threatened a third to stop a government move to draft miners. Owsley's reaction showed how the categories of South, anticommunism and American patriotism had jumbled in his mind. In November of 1943, he wrote to Tate in a bantering spirit that did not conceal his seriousness: "Behold in me, sir, not even a Conservative but a reactionary. On race and on the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' I stand where my friend John C. Calhoun stood one hundred years ago. If I must choose between 'big business' and 'big labor'—a choice I'd always hoped never to be compelled to make— I must choose big business . . . . Carnegie, Rockefeller and Guggenheim were civilized crooks, but John L. Lewis is a Neanderthal cannibal, and his entire union and many of the other labor unions are in his image. God help this country, for it is losing at home what the soldiers are being sent abroad to fight for: the sovereignty of the people as against the sovereignty of government."57

The logic of switching political allegiance, as Thomas B. Alexander later observed in a letter, was curious when one recalled that Lewis himself was voting Republican and the Republicans were themselves striving to recover the black vote from the Democrats. But one infers that Owsley was concerned over the Roosevelt administration's wartime improvement of the position of blacks and saw the Democrats now standing where the Republicans had stood during Reconstruction. It had become more important for Owsley to register his protest against the movement of the times than to be tidily logical about the appropriateness of his vehicle of protest. It is well to remember that Owsley's faith in the common man had never extended to the very common man, not the poor whites below his "plain folk" nor the English working class. His ideal was a property-owning democracy, and his reaction to unionism in the 1940s demonstrated that, at the last, property weighed more heavily with him than the abuses of corporate capitalism.58

As the 1940s wore into the 1950s, he became more belligerent in his anticommunism, until he became almost indistinguishable from the new Radical Right. We have, as painful evidence, an undated manuscript entitled "The Chief Stakes of the South in World Affairs Today." His old weakness for the conspiracy theory found new vent. "The tactics of the Kremlin," he wrote, "are to plant its cells and agitators in every area where there
is any kind of tension between social and economic and racial groups, and to increase this tension by constant agitation of grievances, until violence, disorder and chaos result.” He railed at “communist agents, and their fellow travellers, and soft headed dupes.” The South, he thought, had been a special target of “agents of the Politburo” for thirty years.  

He became wilder in his views but, beyond the perfunctory gesture of switching his vote in presidential elections, he held to his old resolve to refrain from active political polemics. Unlike Donald Davidson, he held his public peace when the crisis of desegregation broke. He might speak in private against the views of his old friend Robert Penn Warren and lace a lecture with scowls at the Supreme Court, but he preferred the discretion of silence. When Davidson taxed him with the need for action, Owsley was to wave it aside with the remark, “Well, I’m just going to brighten my own little corner.” In the event, he was spared the growing intensity of the racial situation in Tuscaloosa, for he died unexpectedly of a heart attack in Winchester, England, in 1956.