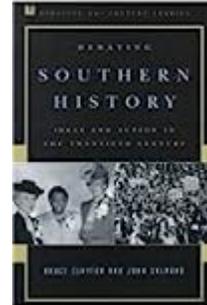




Bruce Clayton, John Salmond. *Debating Southern History: Ideas and Action in the Twentieth Century.* Lanham, Maryland.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999. vii + 195 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9414-3.



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Where Theory Meets Practice

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What was most important to the development of the New South, ideas or actions? Who played a more important role in the South's recent development, intellectuals, theorists and writers or activists and protesters? These questions are the starting point for this intriguing little book. Bruce Clayton and John Salmond, noteworthy Southern historians who have collaborated successfully in the past on two collections of essays attempt to clarify the complex and sometimes conflicting relationship between ideas and action in the South in the period ranging from World War I to the end of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the series title, however, the two essay contributions comprise less a debate about this relationship than they do a discussion between two historians who understand that there is an interrelationship between the intellectual life of the South and the ways in which individuals and groups addressed the problems those intellectuals explicated. Thus the two essays complement one another in interesting and revealing ways. Clayton primarily examines the most important strains in economic, political, religious, social and

cultural thought in the South, while Salmond examines the ways in which ideas were integrated into various social and political movements and countermovements.

A further question, posed in the first sentence of the first essay is: "who speaks for the South?" Rather than conduct a debate over this question, Salmond and Clayton reveal in important ways how intellectual historians traditionally have looked at the thoughts and actions of white males but how today a full understanding of the region and its thought and actions must be understood not only from these traditional sources, but also from the criticism, analysis and actions of men and from women of both races.

This book is another marvelous contribution from Rowman and Littlefield's "Debating 20th Century America" series. The series is intended to present conflicting essays on important themes or questions in twentieth century American history. The books are intended primarily for an undergraduate audience, but are also suitable for graduate students and professors working outside of their immediate areas of expertise. The format is somewhat unique, as books from the series contain es-

says from noteworthy historians who also select a small sample of primary documents to bolster their cases. At the end of each book is a select bibliography drawn from both essays.

The essays in *Debating Southern History* are fairly complex, particularly Clayton's, and many undergraduates unversed in intellectual history might have a difficult job forging their way through his rich evocation of the myriad streams of thought in the South. This is especially important given that many do not associate the history of the South with its intellectual life, despite the incredible diversity and richness of that life, as Clayton reveals. But he comfortably maneuvers through the most important, albeit often overlooked, trends in twentieth century southern thought.

Clayton's essay is wide ranging. It covers the blues and country music. He explores literary figures such as William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright. He reveals the tensions surrounding modernism. He reveals the significance of the vibrant liberal intellectual scene at the South's premiere university in the 1930s, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where Howard Odum explored black life and folklore, founded the Institute for Research in Social Science, and advocated "regionalism" to take the place of outmoded and provincial sectionalism. He explains the importance of the Agrarians, the acerbic criticism of H.L. Mencken, the seminal work of W.J. Cash, the vicious but prodigious scholarship of Ulrich Phillips, the countervailing work of Carter Woodson and John Hope Franklin, the controversial, radical groundbreaking work of Lillian Smith and so many others.

Page after page explores the rich tapestry of thought, art, literature, politics, culture, philosophy, and contentiousness that marked Southern history. He shows the tension between modernism and evangelism, and how individuals such as beleaguered Wake Forest University President William Louis Poteat were caught up in the controversies of the age. In the span of seventy-five pages Clayton covers a tremendous amount of space. Appropriately, he finishes his discussion with Martin Luther King Jr., the most important Southerner not only of his era, but arguably of the century. In his discussion of King, Clayton begins to reveal the way that ideas translated into action, leading the way for Salmond's essay.

If I have a complaint about Clayton's piece, and I am not certain whether I do, it is a minor quibble about his treatment of C. Vann Woodward. Although Clayton refers to Woodward on a few different occasions, he does

not give the historian the same treatment that he gives many other thinkers. One wonders why. From the 1930s through the period in question and way beyond, Woodward was clearly among the most important of all American intellectuals, never mind Southerners. *Origins of the New South* redefined Southern history, and stands as one of the landmark works on the American historiographic landscape. Martin Luther King called his *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* the bible of the civil rights movement. This being the case, it would seem that Clayton could have and should have given him slightly more focus beyond a few passing references. Certainly an undergraduate audience should know how important Woodward was not only as an historian, but as a Southern intellectual who not only wrote about, but who played a significant part in, the life of the region he spent a lifetime trying to understand. This is not a damning criticism. But in an essay of such breadth and scope, it was disappointing to notice this oversight. Otherwise, Clayton's scholarship stands as a model of what intellectual history should look like in the twenty-first century.

Salmond leaves the life of the mind and enters into the world of activists. His essay too is wide reaching and comprehensive. In some ways his job was easier than Clayton's, inasmuch as it introduces far less new or unfamiliar material to students. Approximately a quarter of his essay covers the civil rights movement, a topic that will certainly be more familiar to undergraduates than, say, the twelve Southerners who wrote *I'll Take My Stand*. Nonetheless this is material he covers ably, with a couple of noteworthy exceptions. The first three quarters of the essay cover the intersections of race and class, beginning with a well-done discussion of the checkered history of labor unionism in the South. He explores the difficulties unions experienced in getting a foothold, the way in which they opposed civil rights and the unique challenges facing labor in the South. He also shows how racial tensions manifested themselves in violent re-creation on the part not only of mill owners but also between workers whose economic interests presumably should have been similar.

Although his essay is inexplicably titled "The South in the Depression Decades" (it covers the same time period as Clayton's essay, the period from the late 1910s to the mid 1960s) Salmond complements the end of Clayton's essay well by taking his discussion up to Martin Luther King Jr.'s role in the movement, and he makes his admiration for King clear. The problem is that this admiration periodically clouds his judgment as an historian. In his zeal to express King's importance in merging ideas

with direct-action civil rights protest, an importance that is undeniable, Salmond periodically reveals an unwillingness to allow any criticism of King's behavior. Thus he rejects out of hand SNCC criticism of King's behavior at Selma and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's acquiescence to the Johnson administration's handling of the seating fiasco at the 1964 convention. On both fronts, criticisms of King are both well known and justifiable. In both cases Salmond rejects the criticisms virtually without addressing them, using the argument that things turned out well, and so King must have been right. The SNCC and MFDP argument was that things could have been better. They may have been right. But even if not, Salmond would have been wise to give greater credence to the countering arguments. Not to have done so is to shroud a figure many of us so admire in hagiography.

Each essay comes with several primary documents submitted both as evidence and to show students the sorts of things that we explore to craft our arguments. Clayton follows his essay with five documents, including a selection from Gerald W. Johnson's "Saving Souls," Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," William Faulkner's December 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, a 1956 letter from Lillian Smith to Martin Luther King Jr., and King's famous 1963 "Letter From Birmingham City Jail." Following Salmond's essay are a

segment of Martha Gellhorn's 1934 report to Harry Hopkins on "Economic Conditions in South Carolina Following the 1934 Textile Strike," part of the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown decision, the March 1956 "Southern Manifesto," and an excerpt from King's "I Have a Dream" speech. These are all well chosen. But after such in-depth, well-crafted essays, they seem almost perfunctory. Nonetheless, they will serve as a useful teaching tool, and my criticism can most likely be interpreted as a call for more documents, and not for better ones. The book concludes with a solid bibliography worthy of most any reading list for students of the South. Given that Clayton so emphasizes literature in his essay it would be nice to see more examples, but as a scholarly bibliography it is a welcome addition.

On the whole, then, this is a fine little book. It deserves to be used in advanced undergraduate and graduate classrooms. The essays are very well crafted, readable, thorough and sophisticated. Although there is not much of a debate, there is a wonderful discussion going on in *Debating Southern History* and it deserves to be widely read.

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