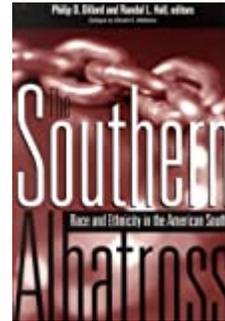




Philip D. Dillard, Randal L. Hall. *The Southern Albatross: Race and Ethnicity in the American South.* Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1999. 280 pp. \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86554-666-0.



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The Reality of Myth: Constructions of Race in the American South

The Reality of Myth: Constructions of Race in the American South

Philip Dillard (Assistant Professor of History at James Madison University) and Randal Hall (Assistant Director of Admissions at Wake Forest University) have undertaken a difficult task in their collection of essays *The Southern Albatross: Race and Ethnicity in the American South* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1999). The collection seeks to probe and illuminate the definition(s) of race in the South, the way those definitions have shifted over time and space, and the manner in which those perceptions have affected the lives of Southerners. These essays were presented at the Symposium on Southern History, held at Rice University in 1997, by an interesting group of young scholars. As with most edited collections, some of these essays are more successful than others in exploring what has always proven to be a very challenging subject. The reader of the entire volume does not necessarily come away with a clearer idea of how race has evolved with a fixed set of social constructions but rather an appreciation of how tangled, complex, and even contradictory such constructions really are.

The first essay, by Samuel Watson, analyzes the often reluctant role played by U.S. army officers in the Second Seminole War. Watson finds that although the army officers fighting a poorly understood conflict certainly held many prejudices against their Indian opponents, they were even more dissatisfied with the military institution in Washington which had consigned them to a miserable fate. These officers even retained an appreciation, however paternalistic, for the “noble savage” against whom they fought. Clayton Jewett also looks at a conflict with Indians in the South, this time focusing on Texas’ struggle to control its Indian problem during the Civil War. His essay discusses Native Americans’ attempt to parlay internal discord among white Americans into territorial and political advantage in Texas. And, as with other examples ranging from the Iroquois to the Cherokee, Native Americans residing in Texas were mostly unsuccessful in holding off white encroachment.

David McGee’s study of Wake County in North Carolina provides a microcosm for studying the African American response to emancipation. While the experience of blacks in and around Raleigh, both the county

seat for Wake and the state capital, was not dissimilar from other accounts of other places in the South, the high proportion of black women in Raleigh provided additional economic challenges. McGee also concludes that the decision about whether to live in an urban or rural area led to major differences in the experience of the freedmen and women. James Wilson examines a fascinating, and often overlooked, issue in his essay on intra-race relations within the African American community during the 1860s in Louisiana. The racial hierarchy in Louisiana has long been understood as more complex than in many other parts of the South. Wilson sheds light on the very different experiences of those blacks who had been free before the war and those for whom the conclusion of the war brought emancipation. In that timeless debate over race and class, it appears as though class was a more important determinant than race in Louisiana during and after the war in the formation and development of new communities.

Angela Boswell's essay on women and domestic violence in Texas during the 1870s makes interesting use of court records and demonstrates the complexities of analyzing family relationships based on relatively dispassionate court recordings. Yet her essay does not really tell the reader much about how race may have been a part of the court's deliberations or, for that matter, the women's responses to their husband's violent behavior. She concludes that domestic violence was widespread but that it did not challenge the use of marriage as a fundamental means of community and social organization. This is hardly a new finding; it's a pity that sources are perhaps not available to tell us more about whether their experience in the court system offered other forms of empowerment.

Stephen Brown's essay on Leo Frank and the role of anti-Semitism in the Southern pantheon of racial stereotypes inspires exactly the sort of re-analysis of Southern racial stereotyping which the editors hoped to provoke. Why did the white South accept the word of an African American man over that of a hard-working and respectable Jew? In what ways did myths of sexuality affect white Southern reactions to Frank's supposed crime? (Frank was lynched in 1915 after being accused of raping and murdering a 13-year old girl working in the factory he managed.) Brown's essay indicates that Southern ideas on race were not static and that when conflicting or

competing stereotypes met, the outcome could be unpredictable.

Nancy Lopez's essay on the child murders in Atlanta in 1980 is similarly provocative. What makes this case so compelling is that it reveals the challenges associated with growing African American political power in the modern South. The new black power structure was reluctant to conclude that an African American was the most likely culprit. The shocking murders also reflected unflatteringly on a city which had prided itself on its racial moderation and its progressiveness. The difficulty the city had in reconciling its own press with the demands of solving the case provides a fascinating example of the challenges that black political leaders have faced in the post-1960s era.

The final essay, by Jeff Roche, provides another, quite unique, angle on how racial attitudes have changed in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. Asa Carter, the vitriolic racist behind some of George Wallace's more inflammatory speeches of the early 1960s and an active white supremacist of long-standing, transformed himself into Forrest Carter, author of the extraordinarily popular "The Education of Little Tree." With this transformation, Carter not only attempted to shed his unsavory past (although not necessarily abandoning those philosophies) but embraced a new identity belonging to another minority group, the American Indian. Roche demonstrates not only Carter's facility with self re-invention but also the various confused responses of Forrest Carter's associates after his 'unmasking'.

The Southern Albatross does not leave the reader with a clearer picture of how race has emerged as a set of social constructions in the South. If anything, the reader might feel even more perplexed, and more dismayed, at the ways this region has been crippled by its unwillingness to let go of such prejudices. In the Epilogue, Donald Mathews writes eloquently about the creation and uses of myths in the South. And by their very definition, myths remain mysterious while, as this volume makes clear, their legacies can be all too real.

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