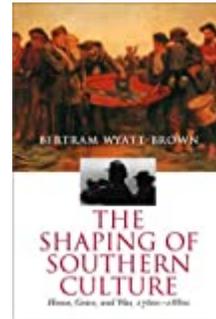




Bertram Wyatt-Brown. *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xix + 412 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2596-9.



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Published on H-SHEAR (April, 2002)

Honor Bound

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In his book *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982), Bertram Wyatt-Brown made the concept and language of honor central to any discussion of southern history and culture. His treatment of honor as an important component of pre-modern culture that persisted in the South both joined a debate that was centered on the distinctiveness of the South and helped reshape that debate in interesting ways.

Eugene Genovese's provocative interpretation of the Old South as a society dominated by a planter class whose values of paternalism were in opposition to the liberal individualism of the northern bourgeoisie sparked a debate over the nature of southern society. Applying Antonio Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony to the Old South, Genovese in *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1965) sought to demonstrate not only that the planter class's ideology opposed that of the northern bourgeoisie but also that it permeated to some degree all levels of southern society, including white yeomen and African American slaves.

In the debate that followed, George Fredrickson portrayed the South in a very different light—as an egalitarian democratic society for whites only, a *Herrenvolk* or master race democracy, in *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971). The ideological bases for the subjugation of African Americans included paternalism, but in Fredrickson's view this was only one of several competing justifications for racial hierarchy and white supremacy. Those that sought to defend slavery as part of a traditional, hierarchical society did not win popularity among white southerners who embraced the democratic, egalitarian ethos of Jacksonian America.

No one rebutted Genovese's interpretation of the South more ardently than James Oakes, whose book, *The Ruling Race* (1982), sought to show the antebellum southern slaveholders thoroughly caught up in the ethos of American capitalism and democracy. Oakes agreed with Fredrickson in his interpretation of a South that was moving along the same democratic, egalitarian, capitalist track as the rest of America, and he minimized the role of race and proslavery ideology as something that shaped white society and culture above the color line. Profes-

sor Wyatt-Brown introduces his book by quoting Oakes, who wrote, “except for its defense of bondage, the slaveholders’ ideology was strikingly similar to the Republican party ideology of the 1850s (p. xi).” John C. Calhoun and most other southern leaders would have disagreed, Bertram Wyatt-Brown asserts, and so does he.

But Wyatt-Brown is not interested in having us see North and South simply as opposing cultures and societies. His is a much more subtle interpretation of uneven cultural change that leaves a traditional ethos of honor persisting in the South and a more modern set of values ascending outside that region. Here is the tacit, underlying historical argument that lies embedded in this volume, one the reader must sometimes tease out of the text and the title: between the 1760s and the 1890s, the South became distinctive because it retained important elements of pre-modern culture while the North evolved in different ways. At the heart of that traditional southern culture, Bertram Wyatt Brown sees the ethos of honor.

The Shaping of Southern Culture builds upon and extends significantly what the author achieved in *Southern Honor*, and those who learned from the earlier volume are not going to want to miss the many new intellectual ventures this book takes the reader through. Among the twelve essays in this volume only five were previously published, one as early as 1982, four in the 1990s. But this is much more than a collection of essays. It is a compilation of essays that emanate from common concerns and share common methodologies. The author has worked hard at smoothing out the seams between essays and inserting segues that help the reader move from one to the next. Not all, but most of the essays stand together like blocks of marble cut from the same quarry, veins of which can be seen running through several pieces in ways that reveal a single mind at work on a coherent project.

The twelve essays are organized in three parts: one that deals with race and politics, another with religion, and the third with war. Wyatt-Brown is concerned with showing how the ethic of honor undergirded those of white supremacy and Christianity and how these pillars of race and religion, in turn, became supportive to the cause of secession and the will to fight and sacrifice in war. The defense of slavery, he argues, was compelled by commitment to honor and duty and cannot be explained simply by material interests and racial imperatives. It was the legacy of dishonor and humiliation that came with Confederate defeat, he further argues, that gave

rise to the white racist rage that erupted in the 1890s. Throughout these essays it is the honor ethos that gives meaning to the various facets of southern culture.

The three essays in part one are all fine stand-alone pieces, but as a group they do not seem as coherent as those in the other two parts of the volume. The first revisits Stanley Elkins’s treatment of the male slave experience and considers the relationship of enslavement to honor. A second essay deals with the role of honor and the fear of enslavement in the rhetoric of the American Revolution. A third takes up Andrew Jackson’s career as a case study in the relationship of honor to social and political hierarchy on the Tennessee frontier.

The essays in part two all deal with religion, and they add an important dimension to the author’s earlier interpretation of southern culture. Here Wyatt-Brown seeks to show how central Christian religious thought and sentiment were to southern life, and he does so convincingly. For example, he contends in one essay that proslavery arguments drew heavily on biblical literalism, which, though influenced by secular, racial ideas, remained a matter of faith and God’s will.

The third part deals with war and contains five of the twelve essays, and these take up close to half of the text. These are the essays I found to be the most impressive, thought provoking, and original. In the arena of military combat, of course, concepts of honor take on heightened importance, and Wyatt-Brown is absolutely masterful at relating war to the code of honor.

His lead essay in this section takes up the secession movement as an emotional reaction of “uncontrollable outrage” to the effrontery of northern politicians, their domination of the national government, and the specter of humiliation from the necessity of “submission” to such people. Secession became the only means of preserving honor and manly dignity. Slavery was the cornerstone of white supremacy and to threaten it was to threaten debasement of the white race. Northern abolitionists for their part considered the southern tendency to fuss over affairs of honor but another sign of aristocratic decadence, and more than one of them welcomed secession as a means of purging the Union of such depraved sentiment. In opposition to southern notions of “honor, dread of shame, and demand for vindication,” northern abolitionists stressed matters of “conscience, guilt, and righteousness” (p. 183). In this same essay Wyatt-Brown takes us through the familiar story of Preston Brooks’s caning of Senator Charles Sumner which, in Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s hands, becomes a parable of the larger

conflict between the two ethics of honor versus righteousness. The next essay flows nicely into a discussion of the role of this sense of honor and hatred of the enemy in motivating the common soldiers who fought for the Confederacy and the consequent humiliation and anger that came with their defeat.

Among the most impressive essays comes in chapter ten, "Death of a Nation," which describes that humiliation of the Confederates who returned home to a defeated land. "All gone," wrote one Mississippi soldier, "wealth, servants, comforts, all means of support for my family gone; all lost save honor." But many may have wondered if there was much left of honor after witnessing the loss of slaves and mastery over them, the pillaged countryside, and the occupying armies from the North. Many men feared rebuke from the women at home, who in Wyatt-Brown's view shared the same sense of disgrace, anger, and "emotional depletion" the men experienced. With former slaves and their Republican allies attempting to place bottom rails on top, the defeated whites could only see this as the ultimate attempt at humiliating and dishonoring them. They turned to terrorizing former slaves, to whipping and killing the race whose inferiority and control they had fought to maintain, all out of "remorse for their failure to win" that struggle. As they sought to restore honor by reasserting mastery over freedmen,

white southerners would also attempt to bestow honor on the lost Confederate cause.

In this essay and throughout the book, Bertram Wyatt-Brown shows his unparalleled skill as a historian of emotion. Depression and despair, anger and humiliation, vindictiveness and righteousness are all emotional experiences that are not easy to document or even describe, and for that reason most historians prefer to stick with the more rational and understandable things they see driving history. But there can be no doubt these emotional forces are real and that they cause people to act and speak in bizarre ways and that they make history happen as it does. For historians to understand the powerful grip of religion, racism, nationalism, or the honor ethic, they must learn to understand and explain the very ordinary emotions that give rise to these phenomena. Fear and resentment, a desire for vengeance, or a sense of shame are all emotions that are historically rooted in a particular social and cultural milieu, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown has shown in these essays. In this sense he has provided us with much more than an explanation of the South; it is also an approach to historical understanding that ought to help us think in fresh new ways about how the basic cultural values that shape behavior are rooted in a particular historical setting.

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Citation: Don H. Doyle. Review of Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

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