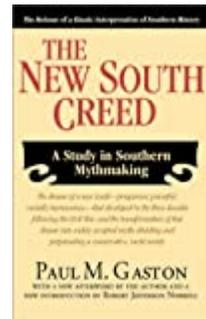




Paul M. Gaston. *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking.* Montgomery, Ala.: NewSouth Books, 2002. 307 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58838-053-1.



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Was the New South a Myth?

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In his introduction to this new edition of Paul Gaston's classic *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking*, Robert J. Norrell reports that he bought his copy in paper in 1972 as a text for Gaston's undergraduate course, for \$1.98. I myself can say that I bought mine when the book first came out in 1970, when I was still an undergraduate; alas, I've long since lost track of the price. I had just completed a senior essay on the New South, and my initial reaction was disappointment that this Gaston guy had beaten me to my topic. With time, of course, I learned better; no book completely fills the space of an historical era, but the best books—like *The New South Creed*—serve as launching pads for fresh agendas for young whippersnappers like (at the time) me.

Now I have a new copy—a fresh edition, supplemented with Norrell's introduction and a brief afterword by the author, but otherwise unaltered from the original. For those not familiar with it (and it belongs on any southern historian's essential reading list), Gaston's study, based on his 1961 dissertation, is an exploration of the thinking of the principal spokesmen commonly iden-

tified with what Howard Rabinowitz has more recently dubbed “the first New South” of the 1880s and 1890s—notably Richard Hathaway Edmonds, Henry Watterson, Walter Hines Page, Atticus Haygood (on race), and of course Henry W. Grady.[1] According to Gaston, these men and a few others worked to develop a “program” of economic development, stressing industrialization, urbanization, and replacement of cotton monoculture with diversified farming. This program would attack southern postwar poverty and help restore the South's lost position within the American Union. Eager for outside aid, disgusted with the disastrous consequences of sectional politics and fine-spun constitutional theorizing, and anxious for a return to “home rule” (under their own control), they preached a gospel of sectional reconciliation and openness to northern participation in what they insisted were the boundless opportunities available on the new southern commercial frontier.

They especially worked to assure skeptical Yankees that they accepted the racial settlement arising out of the Civil War era—the end of slavery, the equal protection of the laws, and equal access of blacks to educa-

tion, economic opportunity, and above all the ballot box. No further “outside” intervention in regional affairs, they averred, was necessary to enforce the South’s commitment to “the American Creed.” Finally, to fend off internal critics who contrasted New South materialism and embrace of “Yankee” values to the allegedly more spiritual ethos of the Old South, the New South publicists avidly embraced the Cult of the Lost Cause, which actually arose simultaneously with the New South Creed. Much as the local-color writings of Thomas Nelson Page sold in volume to middle-class northern urbanites eager to be told of an indigenous alternative to the rat race that increasingly characterized their lives, the Cult of the Lost Cause assured southerners that they could aspire to prosperity without letting go of the supposed glories of the past.

Together, the elements of the “creed” amounted to, Gaston argues, a “myth.” Here, he tells us at the outset, he uses the term in a literary or anthropological sense, to designate a story that a culture tells itself to make sense out of its world. In fact, however, he primarily uses “myth” in the popular sense, i.e. common beliefs that just ain’t so. Thus rather than analyze the creed in terms of its cultural functions, he primarily devotes his attention to its strategic uses and, especially, its internal contradictions and its divergence from “reality.” Thus he faults New South publicists for their naivete about economic development. Drawing upon the work of C. Vann Woodward and the economist William Nicholls[2], and perhaps his own family background among the “single-taxers” of Fairhope, Alabama as well, he argues that they placed far too much faith in the region’s natural resources as the fundamental source of its wealth. By so doing, they not only neglected the deeper problems of southern development—inadequate labor and entrepreneurial skills, poorly developed institutions, and the difficulty of head-to-head competition with the emerging Manufacturing Belt—but paved the way for outsiders to acquire those resources at fire-sale prices. From advocating a turn to Progress, he argues, they quickly came to declare it a fait accompli, papering over the continuing poverty of the region. Above all, their rhetorical acceptance of the Civil War-era racial settlement encouraged northerners to look the other way while racial violence increased and disfranchisement and Jim Crow were imposed on black southerners. Indeed, by the last chapter Jim Crow, for Gaston, essentially *becomes* the New South Creed, and Jim Crow’s persistence into the 1960s the ultimate proof of the Creed’s moral failure.

Those familiar with the historiographical tradition on

which Gaston draws will quickly recognize his immense debt to C. Vann Woodward. As Gaston himself acknowledges, the dissertation on which the book is based was inspired by Woodward’s chapter “The Divided Mind of the New South” in *Origins of the New South*, and the central figures of that chapter are the figures Gaston chose to consider. While his treatment of the Lost Cause was significantly less jaundiced than Woodward’s, he generally followed Woodward’s assessments of matters ranging from the character of the southern economy to the character of Booker T. Washington.

Above all, Gaston, like so many liberal southern historians of his time, followed Woodward in his view of historical writing as handmaiden to the urgency of the time. For both, the burden of the southern historian was to be “critical”; and, as his new afterword makes plain, Gaston continues to shoulder that burden today. In the afterword Gaston chooses, not to reflect on how time has dealt with his earlier arguments, but to comment on the last thirty years of southern history, launching a scathing attack on what he views as a generation of “reaction,” characterized especially by the conservative campaign to “airbrush” Martin Luther King’s radical critique of American society and transform him into a prophet of “equal opportunity” (pp. 248-249).

How well does this style of history hold up? In many respects, *The New South Creed* holds up quite well. Gaston’s analysis of the relationship between the Creed and the emerging Cult of the Lost Cause is fuller and, I must say, subtler than Woodward’s. (This, by the way, is not to be critical of Woodward, who was after different game; his primary intent was not to explain the Cult but to demolish its lingering, pernicious hold on white southern culture.) In drawing on older works such as William R. Taylor’s *Cavalier and Yankee*, and in setting the Cult in the larger context of the local-color literature of the late nineteenth century, Gaston provided a framework within which such commentators as Gaines Foster and the current crop of “memory” scholars could develop further insights.[3] The nexus between the rise of the New South and the imposition of the Jim Crow regime, which Gaston took from Woodward but developed much further, has been explored since by a massive literature. His critique of the New South publicists’ confusion between natural “wealth” and *actual wealth*—the product of human brain and muscle transforming raw materials into that which humans value—gets close to the heart of the problem of southern poverty.

And yet there remains in *The New South Creed* a

blurry line between a “critical” use of history and a polemical one. This is typified by the ambiguous use of the term “myth.” Several commentators at the time, notably George Fredrickson, suggested that Gaston’s true subject was “ideology,” i.e. a framework created by a ruling elite to justify the existing social order and paper over its failings and injustices, and Gaston has since accepted that criticism.[4] But “myth” was critical to Gaston’s argument, for it allowed him to move easily between an “objective” discussion of the “mythic” content of New South publicity and a wholesale denial that it reflected southern reality.

The resulting argument, while compelling in many respects, is in others a bit beside the point. By treating the likes of Henry Grady and Richard Edmonds as “thinkers,” for instance, Gaston in many ways overlooks what they in fact were, namely representatives of the grand old American tradition of boosterism and promotional bunkum. One reviewer at the time noted that the argument would have benefitted from making use of the booster context, about which there was already an extensive literature.[5]

Several specific points are noteworthy here. First, booster rhetoric may have served broader ideological and “mythic” purposes, but much of what Gaston describes served the needs of specific businessmen pursuing specific business strategies. Anyone looking through the *Manufacturers’ Record* of the 1880s, for instance, will be struck by the enormous amount of attention it gave to various promotional schemes along the Appalachian spine based on coal and iron. Gaston sees this obsession with natural resources as “naive,” and if one regards it as an effort to think through the needs of southern economic development, he is largely correct. A more reasonable explanation of Edmonds’s resource obsession, though, is simply that he made his money as a publicist for land speculators. The close connection between land speculation and American boosterism has been frequently explored; land promoters, of course, needed an initial come-on to lure investors, and in a relatively undeveloped region resource endowment was frequently all they had. With the emergence of Birmingham and Chattanooga as iron centers in the 1880s a major speculative “bubble” in southern iron lands formed, lasting until its collapse in the early 1890s.[6] Like much of the business press of our own time, Edmonds eagerly sought to ride its expansion, opening (or selling) his columns to all manner of extravagant development schemes. However, while such speculative frenzies are, for better or worse, apparently intrinsic to American capitalism, the rhetor-

ical froth surrounding them is not the sum total of the capitalist myth. As Gaston himself notes in passing (p. 205), the *Record* was regarded with skepticism, especially in quarters where somewhat more sober developmental strategies held sway or where the trendier resource endowments were lacking. Insofar as Gaston identifies the New South with this sort of bubble psychology, he mistakes a part for the whole.

To be sure, over-the-top claims could be heard in quarters distant from the iron bubble, but others have found in the extravagance of booster rhetoric different implications than Gaston does. Boosters generally engaged (and still do) in what Daniel Boorstin has termed “the rhetoric of anticipation”—a sort of rhetorical time warp in which present opportunity and future glory blur indistinguishably.[7] Thus when Grady and Edmonds inflated southern possibilities and morphed them into southern achievements they were taking their places in a long line of American boomers. That such promotion could easily cross the line into fraud—as it commonly did, especially with Edmonds—is important, but it also represented something more significant—the late-nineteenth-century upsurge among many white southerners of a sense of “boundlessness” that contradicted the grim post-bellum realities they sought to transcend. The rhetoric of a Grady might pull the wool over people’s eyes, but it also inspired southerners—mostly white, but black as well—to embrace new possibilities.

And embrace it many of them did—and in the process the “myth” began to create its own content. However, in his concentration on journalists and orators—specialists not in thinking through developmental problems but in stirring passions—Gaston neglects the entrepreneurial activity that was actually attempting to realize the Creed in brick and mortar. The one southern industrial entrepreneur he treats, the North Carolina industrialist-publicist Daniel Augustus Tompkins, appears in these pages almost exclusively as a publicist. But Tompkins the publicist was a rather dreary laissez-faire apologist; Tompkins the industrialist was a genuine innovator, and far more interesting. By background an engineer, trained by the great Alexander Holley, Tompkins thought comprehensively about the problems of getting industrialization off the ground, paying attention not only to technology but also finance, management, and marketing; his promotional efforts helped create two southern industries—cottonseed products and cotton textiles—and furthered advances in infrastructure and education as well.[8] Gaston does not know quite what to do with this side of the New South Creed—but

the entrepreneurial thinking it evoked among numerous small-town businessmen was arguably far heartier than the promotional froth emanating from Grady or Edmonds would suggest.

And to those small-town businessmen the “myth” was experienced as “reality.” To be sure, as Gaston points out, the aggregate estimates of southern income between 1880 and 1900 show little southern progress in closing the economic gap with the nation. The region, after all, fell into a very deep economic hole in the 1860s and 1870s, and Grady’s rhetoric glossed over the immense problems it faced. But most acolytes of the New South Creed had far less grandiose goals in mind than restoring lost regional glory; more important to them was the success of their own businesses and the development of their own communities. Altruistic claims notwithstanding, the emerging southern middle class had little interest in attacking mass southern poverty except insofar as they could use it to their own advantage, as “cheap labor”; that attitude was, and remains, the scandal of the New South Creed. But, in small towns and growing cities across the region, southerners saw the New South coming together before their eyes.

Moreover, contrary to Gaston, the Creed did not necessarily foster complacency; rather, it led figures such as Walter Hines Page (another spokesman Gaston doesn’t quite know what to do with) to press for more comprehensive programs of modernization. The “New South” movement, Gaston tells us, ended by 1900; actually, after that time it fed into the larger stream of southern progressivism. The modernizers, of course, suffered from their own blindnesses and countenanced their own injustices; not only was their movement, in Woodward’s phrase, “for whites only” (despite a now amply documented parallel stream of African-American southern progressivism), but their elitist, top-down approach was antidemocratic and unresponsive to mass concerns, whether from blacks or whites. But they also extended public services, developed infrastructure, and made the first tentative steps toward spreading opportunity and enhancing the welfare of the underclasses.[9]

So for all the bunkum, the promoters of the New South Creed could boast some genuine achievements; they helped alter the region’s trajectory, pointing it toward its modern self. Which leads to what was, for me, the single most startling assertion in the book: the claim that the southern economy was, as of the time of its publication in 1970, a “continuing failure ... a failure about which there is little argument today” (p. 223).

That the South of 1970 remained rife with economic ills (not least the existence of kwashiorkor on the doorstep of Hilton Head) was, and certainly should be, “a failure about which there is little argument today.” But in 1970 the Southeast census region, whose per capita income had stood at 55 percent of U.S. levels as late as 1940, had within a generation reached 80 percent of U.S. levels, and would continue to converge on national levels into the 1990s. Most students of economic development would call that pretty damn impressive, especially given that the South was catching up to a nation that at the time was experiencing the greatest sustained period of growth in its history.

Moreover, that growth, while leaving many southerners out, was lifting many others up, as educational levels sharply improved, opportunities diversified, and the material rewards of American life became accessible to far more southerners than ever before—including, increasingly, black southerners. Gaston claims that “for the myth of the New South the events of the Second Reconstruction [were] more devastating than any previous assault” (p. 236); in fact, by providing it the cover it needed to unlink itself from the increasingly anachronistic Jim Crow regime, the Second Reconstruction strengthened the “myth” immeasurably.

Indeed, the scolding tone of Gaston’s afterword indicates a belated recognition of this fact. To Gaston, as to many southern liberals of the time, the Second Reconstruction *should* have been such a challenge. For that reason, he tells us, the modern conservative elevation of the “color-blind” Martin Luther King above the “real,” radical-prophetic King, is a blatant falsification of history. Maybe; my own suspicion is that King was far more complex a man than either of these images suggests. But who the “real” King was surely matters less here than the fact that the outcome of the Civil Rights Era was so easily assimilated to a New South Creed that is more hegemonic now than it has ever been. As in earlier times, that hegemony glosses over continuing problems, seen in southern inner cities, in the Black Belt and central Appalachia, and now arguably in other parts of the rural and small-town South as well. But here again, for the large and increasing numbers of southerners (including the expanding black middle class) that are its beneficiaries, the “myth” bears a reasonable approximation to “reality.” Many of them are shielded from the problems, as Gaston notes, by retreat to gated suburbs; even worse, many seem not to care, imbued with a contempt for the poor egged on by politicians, religious-right preachers, and talk-radio jocks. But many of them also now have opportunities to live lives

beyond the imaginings of their grandparents, if not their parents; many of them live, not in gated suburbs, but in tract housing and apartments. For them—and their name is Legion—the southern economy has been a success.

So the South of our time sorely needs prophetic voices. But—may I suggest—it also needs scholars to sort carefully through the tangled successes and failures of southern economic life. Woodward in his day, and Gaston in this classic book, sought to combine both of those roles. In so doing, they introduced prophetic passion to the raw stuff of history, and stripped the protective coloring from the dark places of southern life in an age when the region's powers and principalities strove mightily to keep them hidden. For that we are forever in their debt.

But the prophetic role, in the end, yields only partial truths, focusing on the failures and injustices of history while frequently missing its opportunities—or else, seeking those opportunities, not within the mainstream of the historical process, but on its margins. But arguably among the central driving forces of southern history since Appomattox have been, not the revolutionaries, or for that matter the promotional gasbags, but those ordinary southerners, middle class and working class, who, inspired by a distant dream of prosperity, worked through their difficulties one at a time. Their accomplishments leave much to be desired; they also leave much for us to study.

Notes

[1]. Howard N. Rabinowitz, *The First New South, 1865-1920* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1992).

[2]. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); William H. Nicholls, *Southern Tradition and Regional Progress* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

[3]. William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: G. Braziller, 1961); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confed-*

eracy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913 (New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[4]. George M. Fredrickson, Review of Gaston, *New South Creed*. *American Historical Review* 76 (February 1971): 208.

[5]. J. Ryan Beiser, Review of Gaston, *New South Creed*. *American Quarterly* 23 (August 1971): 302.

[6]. Leslie E. Decker, "The Great Speculation: An Interpretation of Mid-Century Pioneerism," in David M. Ellis, ed., *The Frontier in American Development* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969); Justin Fuller, "Boom Towns and Blast Furnaces: Town Promotion in Alabama, 1885-1893" *Alabama Review* 29 (January 1976): 37-48. A fictional account of the boom and its attendant bust, as seen by a participant, is laced through John Fox, Jr., *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908).

[7]. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 296-98.

[8]. George T. Winston, *A Builder of the New South: Being the Story of the Life Work of Daniel Augustus Tompkins* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1920); Lynette Boney Wrenn, *Cinderella of the New South: A History of the Cottonseed Industry, 1855-1955* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995); and Howard Bunyan Clay, "Daniel Augustus Tompkins: An American Bourbon" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1950).

[9]. Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); George Brown Tindall, "Business Progressivism: Southern Politics in the Twenties," in *The Ethnic Southerners* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

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