



Crackers & Roundheads by Clyde Wilson

*The Celt in all his variants from Builth to Ballyhoo,
His mental processes are plain—one
knows what he will do,
And can logically predicate his finish
by his start.*

—Kipling

Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South by Grady McWhiney, Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press.

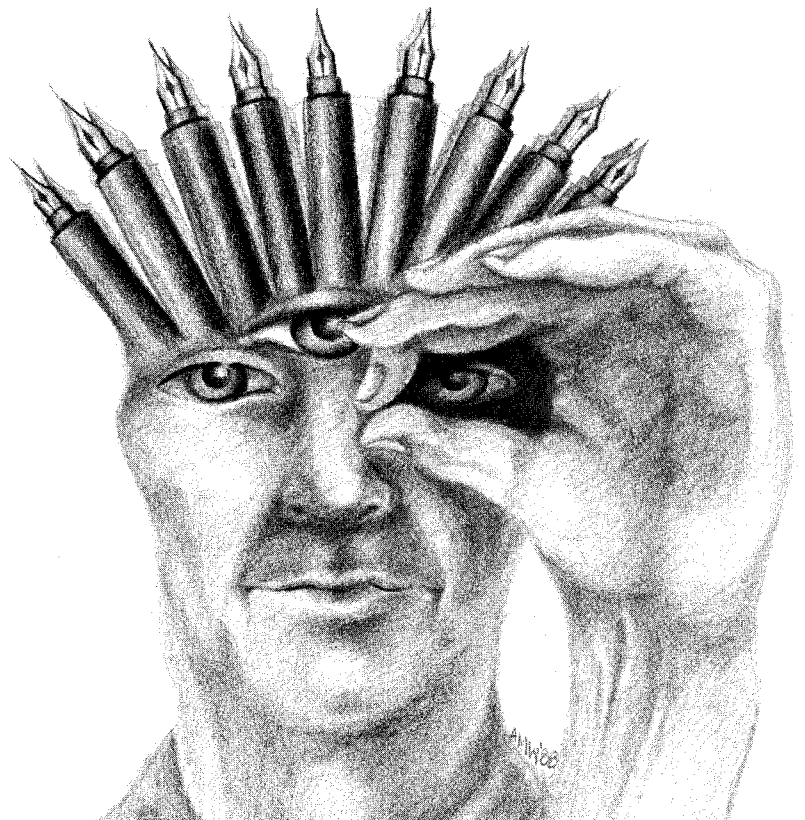
Despite all that has passed since, the Civil War is still at the center of American history. No one has ever doubted this in the South, where every native is a not-too-remote descendant of Confederate soldiers, or of slaves. In my native state (North Carolina) and my adopted state (South Carolina) the Civil War killed a quarter of the white men. There is nothing even remotely approaching this degree of sacrifice and devastation anywhere else in the American experience.

The late great Unpleasantness is not so direct a memory north of the Potomac and the Ohio, not to mention west of the Missouri. (In fact, one gets the impression that Pancho Villa, Trotsky, Gandhi, and Patrice Lumumba are more remembered and honored up there than Grant and the boys in blue. I hope not, but I fear so.) Nevertheless, the Civil War remains the critical core of American experience, not only because of its immense scale and revolutionary impact, but because it is the Gordian knot of our history.

The Civil War presents all of the major issues and fundamental conflicts of America in their starkest form: the meaning of the Constitution; the nature

of majority rule and consensus; the benefits and burdens of industrialization, modernization, and centralization; governmental authority versus individual liberty; the claims of innovation and tradition, social ideals and social reality; the position of the black minority in American society. (It even molds our international role, because every subsequent war and extraterritorial objective of the US has been defined psychically and rhetorically in imitation of the winning side in the Civil War.)

And despite the convention among ignorant and unthinking commentators that the war represented a simple struggle of good (freedom and Union) against evil (slavery and disunion), it does not present these issues in any conveniently simplistic manner. It presents them instead in tremendously complicated and ambivalent ways, which is why that experience will always remain of the most compelling interest to any American capable of historical imagination and understanding. (For instance, was Lincoln a liberator or a tyrant? Or possibly both? Was the South fighting for freedom or for slavery? Or possibly both? What relative proportions did benevolence, racism, and economic self-interest have in the opposition to slavery? Was John Brown a heroic revolutionary, a dangerous subversive, or merely a mental case? The



Clyde Wilson is descended from long lines of Scotch-Irishmen on both sides.

questions are without end.)

In the earliest postwar period, when it could be simply declared that the war was a crusade to suppress wickedness, understanding was not much of a problem. As time passed, as the world became more complicated, as the ambiguities of victory and progress became more apparent to the thoughtful, and as more was learned about the sheer complexity of the war, this would not do.

Then for a long time the question of the cause or causes of the Civil War fascinated historians. Unfortunately, posing the blank question of "why" was bound to lead to abstraction, bad reasoning, and artificial disputes. In history, as in every other field of human knowledge, finding the right answers is far less important and difficult than asking the right questions. (My friend Ludwell Johnson, a Civil War historian, has written how it came home to him that we historians were on the wrong track some years ago, when, to the standard essay exam question "Why the Civil War?" a student returned the philosophically flawless answer, "Why not?")

Such analytical dead ends suggest that the old-style history, which attempted to tell a story or to describe a past era, teaches us more than any amount of abstraction over "causes." History is not an expression of abstract laws, or the record of progress. It is a description of the actions of men, of *life*, which in turn is an expression of the (partly unknowable) mind of God. A historian who does an honest and competent job of narrative or description has created something permanently useful to everyone, whether they agree with him or not. The historian who claims to have found the final explanation is a fraud.

You and I may agree in our description of a historical phenomenon or epoch, but disagree in values, as to whether we like or not what we have described, or whether we regard it as good or bad. On the other hand, you and I may be in complete agreement in values but disagree in the proper description and import of a historical phenomenon or period. We may agree that the New Deal was not really very revolutionary. I may be glad of the fact, and you may be sorry. Or you may think that it really was revolutionary, when I don't. If we are both honest and

competent it does not matter, we will learn from each other. The historian who recognizes and declares his viewpoint up front is much more objective and unbiased than the one who thinks that he is simply purveying the universal truth.

Professor McWhiney of Texas Christian University has produced one of those permanently valuable works of historical description. You may value the distinctiveness of the South, as Professor McWhiney and I do, or you may want it wiped out. Either way, and even if you disagree with his answers, you can respect his accomplishment for its solidity, originality, and contribution to understanding.

In *Cracker Culture* McWhiney makes a quantum leap in understanding the South. He enhances our knowledge of what was at issue and what imperatives fueled the gigantic 19th-century sectional conflict. Thus, by asking some of the right questions, he contributes toward the advance on the big answers. McWhiney's ideas have been gathering momentum for several years in preliminary works, and are here brought into fully developed maturity.

To understand what this book signifies, one has to understand what a cracker is in McWhiney's lexicon. He is not simply, as we used to think, a somewhat benighted native of an area of poor soil in South Georgia and North Florida. A cracker is an American of a particular ethnic heritage: the ethnic descendant of Celtic Britain, transferred to this continent in the 18th century, where he underwent an entrenchment and adaptation in the congenial environment of the American frontier and became a major component of American culture—became, that is, what has been known as the Southerner.

The cracker is in part what we used to understand as a Scotch-Irishman, though one of McWhiney's strengths is that he gives the concept of Celticness in America much greater depth and breadth. The cracker can perhaps be most readily grasped as the mythological Southern redneck, in an ethnic contrast to an American of puritan Brit descent, epitomized in the mythological image of industrious, psalm-singing New Englanders. That the largest ethnic rift in American

history took place between two different types of Brits will be a difficult point to grasp, perhaps, for those later-comers who think that all WASP's look alike.

Let us assume as a model a feudal, later a modern, England, developing over many centuries along the lines of intensive agriculture, commerce, and orderly communal life. By contrast, consider the outer fringes of Britain, not only Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, but the north and west of England herself, existing over several millennia (until the 19th century) with an economy based upon stockgrazing and a much looser social structure, more tribal than feudal or commercial—with all the differences in manners, attitudes, and ways of life that these differences in ethnic origin, economy, and social structure entail.

Both these models were implanted in America in the colonial period and both underwent development here, according to the large historical scheme that is postulated and vigorously filled in by McWhiney, with the aid of Forrest McDonald in the prologue.

A cracker is not simply a backward fellow. Crackers come in all classes with all levels of education and in a variety of religious denominations. Though I have a doctor's degree and have published a few books, I don't mind telling you that I am a cracker, at least by descent. Nor do I think Professor McWhiney will mind too much if I call him one as well. Perhaps the most conspicuous cracker in American history was our seventh president, General Andrew Jackson. I would even argue, though McWhiney does not make this point, that Abraham Lincoln was a cracker. Certainly that was his background, though he worked hard and with only partial success to assimilate himself to a puritan model as his political career progressed. After his death, the New Englanders simply appropriated him as a puritan, as they have done everything else in American history that they wanted to control. (I wish you had been there when I tried to explain to the lady guide at Plymouth Rock that we were *not* on the scene of the *first* English colony. Talk about stonewalling!)

Where earlier historians have been interested in the aristocracy of the South, whether they admired it or

deprecated it, McWhiney believes the distinctiveness of the South is in its redneckery, so to speak, and he gives that phenomenon historical depth by an examination of similarities and continuities ranging over many centuries of Celtic Britain and the American South—similarities in customs, attitudes, recreation, social roles, ideas of family and individual honor, combativeness, and skepticism of progress in its urbanized, puritanical form. The marshaling of the evidence for similarity and continuity, ranging over millennia but concentrated in the 18th and 19th centuries, is the core of the book.

Explanations of Southern distinctiveness have been one of the most creative fields of American historical writing, calling forth the ingenuity of U.B. Phillips, C. Vann Woodward, David M. Potter, Professor McWhiney's mentor Francis Butler Simkins, and a host of others. McWhiney's is the best explanation because it is the most inclusive. It covers the greatest time period and the largest range of phenomena.

U.B. Phillips's postulate of white supremacy as the central theme of Southern history can be seen here from its positive side, as the Southerner's assertion and protection of his own identity among the peoples of the world. Those who before, during, and after the Civil War thought that what they regarded as the violence and unprogressiveness of the South was a product of slavery will, if they are honest, have to explain why nearly identical characteristics appeared with the Celt in ages and climes far from the African bondsman of the antebellum South.

As with any work of history, it is possible to pencil in a few reservations at the margins. What is described is a very real historical phenomenon. To label it "Celtic," however, perhaps raises more questions than it answers, and requires a considerable exegesis. Another reservation I have is that the description of the Celt and the cracker relies necessarily and primarily on the observations of unsympathetic outsiders, resulting inevitably in a negative stereotyping which the author accepts a little too readily at face value.

Such descriptions often tell us more about how the modernizing, urbanizing, puritan observer thought than

about what the Celt-cracker was really like. The puritan is by his very nature interested in condemning. He draws much of his sense of identity and importance from what he rejects, from feeling himself better than others. The cracker, on the other hand, simply wants to be himself. He is hardly aware of the puritan's existence until directly threatened.

To say that the cracker is lazy or violent is to make a partisan value judgment, not an objective description. The cracker does not lack concepts of work, law and order, and propriety. It is just that his concepts are different, and adapted to a different situation. To understand him better, one will have to go to Celtic and Southern literature and song.

We crackers do have our virtues. The American frontiersman and the crackers are synonymous. We have certainly provided more than our fair share of the loyalty that has sustained American society in crisis—the kind of loyalty that goes into combat without thought of profit and without need of folderol about saving the world for democracy. It is not for nothing that the British referred to the American air arm in World War II as the "Royal Texas Air Force," and that the Japanese shouted "To Hell with Roy Acuff!" before a charge. They knew who their real enemy was. It is also true, I think, that us crackers have provided nearly all of the color and creativity of American speech and literature. Billy Faulkner was one of our boys, just to name the head of a long list. Without us crackers, American speech would be the flattest, dullest, and least interesting of any known variety of that magnificent tongue, English.

My last and largest reservation is that, while *Cracker Culture* goes a long way toward defining one aspect of the identity of the South, it does not quite finish the job. In a way, *Cracker Culture* is an improvement on the old story of explaining the Civil War as a contest of Roundheads and Cavaliers, substituting the cracker for the Cavalier. However, the essential point about the Old South, it seems to me, is that *it was a highly viable synthesis of both the cracker and the Cavalier*. Having established the descent and the importance of the cracker culture,

McWhiney needs next to examine the synthesis. Both components—in distinction from the puritan—preferred honor to utility.

Washington, Jefferson, and Lee, after all, were not crackers, though they were heroes to nearly all Southerners. John C. Calhoun, William Gilmore Simms, and Jefferson Davis were not crackers either, though all of them had Celtic fathers. They were a synthesis of what the Celt had brought to the South and of the Cavalier inheritance of the Southern colonial tidewater—a synthesis that has remained characteristic into much later times. (I think of Harry Byrd, Richard Russell, and Sam Ervin.)

I hasten to assure you that I am aware that historians long ago proved that the "Cavalier South" was a fraud, that most Southerners were not descended from dukes and earls and did not live in tidewater mansions.

Still, it is a matter of record that a substantial portion of the early settlers of Virginia, and to a lesser extent the other Southern colonies, *were* younger sons of the gentry and higher bourgeoisie of England (something that can be of little interest to a society that prides itself of being made up of the wretched refuse of the earth). But, of course, nobody ever *did* think that most Southerners were descended from Royalist nobility, except for romancers whose works were mainly read by Northern matrons, and unimaginative historians looking for a straw man to knock down. The idea of the Southern Cavalier and the Northern Roundhead was not meant as a photographic reality on either side, but as a metaphor for certain values and principles and tendencies in conflict.

Having given us the cracker in his full glory, McWhiney ought now to describe for us the process of amalgamation between the cracker and that even earlier Southern culture, that colonial tidewater whose social ideals were determined not by the Celtic fringe but by the gentry ethics and ideals of the Southern English counties. The distinctive elements of the Southern accent also came more from this source than from the Celts (or the Africans). All the real authorities agree on this.

The synthesis of cracker and Cavalier culture has had many results, one

of which is that the South has been at the same time more aristocratic and more populist than any other part of America. It thus has remained an incomprehensible problem for those whose imaginations are circumscribed by urban middle-class proprieties. This includes nearly all American historians, many of whom flunked marketing and civil engineering because they lacked

the necessary imagination and so turned to scholarship. (The single greatest shortcoming of American historians, in general, is an excess of literal-mindedness in dealing with ideas. The second greatest shortcoming is a lack of sufficient literal-mindedness in dealing with documentary evidence.)

These reservations about *Cracker*

Culture I intend not as criticism but as addenda and commentary on a stimulating work. Persecuted minority that we are, us crackers will have to stick together. At least we no longer have to worry about the Roundheads. The few of them that are left have their hands full on other fronts.

The President's President by Arnold Beichman

"Politicians neither love nor hate. Interest, not sentiment, governs them."

—Chesterfield

1999: *Victory Without War* by Richard Nixon, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Richard Nixon's second term as president ended over two years early with his resignation on August 9, 1974. Someday, when President Reagan's papers and telephone logs are made public, I think they will reveal that Nixon completed his presidential term in the second Reagan administration as the vicar of US foreign policy. After all, one of Reagan's best friends, Senator Paul Laxalt, anointed Nixon as the Republican Party's one and only "elder statesman."

A reading of Nixon's latest book on foreign policy prescriptions plus his earlier post-1974 writings leads me to believe that in Reagan's second term, the voice was the voice of Reagan but the hands were the hands of Nixon.

How do I know that Nixon, the Sage of Saddle River, NJ, is Reagan's foreign policy Solomon? Because of the reverential, vatic pages in Nixon's book on the necessity for and benefits of annual US-USSR summits. For Ronald Reagan, who began his term of office in 1981 very much against communist imperialism, to have become almost overnight a *sforzando* summiteer—Geneva, Reykjavik, Washington, Moscow and, Gorbachev willing, one more

summit before January 20, 1989—cries out for an explanation. We know what happened to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. We don't yet know what happened to Ronald of Washington on the apostolic road between Geneva and Moscow.

In fairness, Nixon takes a much harder view of Gorbachev than Reagan does. In fact, says Nixon, Gorbachev's accession "represents the beginning of a dangerous, challenging new stage of the struggle between the superpowers." Paradoxically, just because Gorbachev is "a far more formidable adversary . . . it also opens up greater possibilities for peace." Yet if

Gorbachev's reforms succeed and Soviet foreign policy remains unchanged, then Gorbachev will "have more resources with which to strengthen and expand the Soviet empire." Does President Nixon think Soviet foreign policy will or can change? Go figure.

The first term Reagan would never have bought Nixon's ideas on anything. After all, Nixon has never been a conservative, either in office or out. That is why *Newsweek* could praise him (in 1986) for having "left a legacy of solid achievement." It is a legacy invisible to the naked conservative eye. In 1974, the *Bulletin of the National Review* said it was ironic that many American conservatives had harnessed themselves "into tandem with one who is not and has never been a conserva-



Arnold Beichman, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, is writing a book on Soviet treaty diplomacy.