

Paleo Prophets

by J.O. Tate

The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of

John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and
Donald Davidson
by Mark G. Malvasi
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University
Press; 261 pp., \$35.00

Barbarians in the Saddle: An Intellectual Biography of

Richard M. Weaver
by Joseph Scotchie
New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers;
161 pp., \$29.95



The 12 Southerners who contributed to *Ill Take My Stand* (1930) must have been a terrible failure, for the South as well as the rest of the nation ignored their warnings and injunctions. Yet, in their failure—caused in part by the frustration of the Depression and sealed by the global engagement of World War II—they were also a tremendous success. We live in the bloated and noisy wreck they foresaw, and we know it.

The cultural inversion that is promoted by big business, big government, and education has made a hash of the life of the mind, and produced, as Waco dramatized, a war on the people. The newspapers, as of this writing, are filled with dire warnings about a possible foreign war with an obscure country some thousands of miles away that might possibly possess “instruments of mass destruction,” which might be identified if they could be found. But of course our own economy has been distorted to produce incalculable weapons of mass destruction with which the government routinely threatens others. Meanwhile, the rest of the front page concerns the schedule and whereabouts not of Saddam Hussein but of the President of the United States, whose devotion to duty has kept him from replying to salacious allegations which are supposed to preoccupy us for

the foreseeable future.

The Southerners knew that ideas have consequences. They warned that unchecked capitalism would assume Soviet-style power. They cautioned that radical changes must produce radical results. They forewarned an environmental crisis, a loss of liberty, a swollen bureaucracy, and conditions which would destroy culture, virtue, and the private household. So they urged their fellow Southerners to remain “backwards,” to revere their heritage, and to maintain their culture.

The South today, of course, has largely embraced the rat-race as a way of life, but not all of it has—nor has all of America. Interestingly enough, the Vanderbilt Agrarians were taken to task in their time for being reactionaries, which of course they were. The myth of progress, a mask for power, does not permit any challenges. The Agrarians were also tarred as “racists,” since the Old South was in large part a slave society, and the South of 1930 was segregated. But the race card is only another mask for power. Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson anticipated their case 160 years earlier in describing the differences between the clan community of the Highlands and the commercial society of the lowlands in his remarkable *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). We may note that discussions of race were not an issue at that time and place; that capitalist development continued; and that the issue of power has not died in Scotland to this day. Should the South, because of race, be exempted from any such inquiry regarding cultural values and self-government? That has been the liberal consensus about the South in 1930, in 1965, and now in 1998, with an Arkansan in the White House who has declared that Chechen separatism is as dangerous as secession was in 1861. There’s no business like show business, and no empire like “democracy.”

The most notable contributors to *Ill Take My Stand* made their mark as writers and academics, not as political leaders. John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson were first and foremost poets, critics, and professors. Yet their dissension from the national complacency is remembered as an in-

junction by some, and as a horror by others. They have been called sexists, racists, and fascists, among other terms that say more about those who sling unlettered epithets than about those who suffer them. They remain distinguished in claiming that neither communism nor gilded excess was necessary or desirable. And they remain a challenge for their sense that the South, far from being the whipping boy of national mythology, was actually a model for living. Theirs was the most notable demurrer from the national consensus in the 20th century.

The Old South was long gone in 1930, and the “New South” of 1930 is now also gone. The Southerners had the temerity to suggest that the South, as an example of a traditional society, provided a positive image of a way to live. Mark Malvasi’s study of the Agrarian thought of three well-known Southerners is a valuable new statement of their engagement with their past and their future, which then became our present.

Balanced and critical, Malvasi’s exposition has numerous merits. The first is to draw to our attention the value—the enduring value—of Agrarian insights. The second is to show the diverging evolution of their thinking. Ransom abandoned Agrarianism for philosophical and aesthetic pursuits, repeating a progression that was established by the Romantics. Tate converted to Roman Catholicism and softened his politics, though he did not repudiate the Agrarian enterprise. Donald Davidson wound up as an active reactionary, and a principled one. In remembering him, we have to remember (as Malvasi does) not only his poems and other works, but the ultimate effects that government-enforced racial integration has had upon education and culture in our country.

Some may think, as I do, that Malvasi’s insistence upon a flaw in the Agrarian vision—namely, a failure to apprehend the nature of slavery in the Old South—is too pronounced and schematic. Even so, his survey is valuable for reminding us of the accessible virtues of the rare and imposing criticism that these three Agrarians gave to modern America. Malvasi’s book is not at all a rehash of old arguments but is precisely attuned to contemporary concerns and

issues.

Malvasi goes on from the Agrarians to link their thought with that of their best successors—Richard Weaver and M.E. Bradford. And he connects this story with the failure of “conservative” politics in recent years. Though the Agrarians had pointedly refused to worship the god of Progress, that is precisely the rhetoric of the conservative coalition today, as well as the ostensible rhetoric of the organized left. The Old Right has been put out to pasture, having served the purposes of others. Nevertheless, in the long run, the truth will out; when it does, Malvasi’s analysis of the ultimate concerns of Ransom, Tate, and Davidson will prove most useful in assembling an agenda for the future.

Richard M. Weaver, the subject of Joseph Scotchie’s related study, is remembered as an author and as an editor of *National Review* who wrote for that periodical from the time of its founding in 1955 until his death in 1963. Readers of this journal are aware that The Rockford Institute has bestowed The Ingersoll Foundation’s Richard M. Weaver Award for Scholarly Letters on such luminaries as Russell Kirk, Andrew Lytle, Robert Nisbet, John Lukacs, Edward Shils, Forrest McDonald, and Eugene Genovese. And some may remember that Weaver himself received the Young Americans for Freedom Award at a rally at Madison Square Garden in 1962, for “service to education and the philosophy of a free society.” He would not receive any such award today, any more than M.E. Bradford could become the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) is one of the strongest reactionary statements rendered in modern times. Possibly more than any other book, it stimulated the formulation of a philosophical conservatism in this country, as Robert Nisbet claimed. In those years, Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley, Jr., joined with Weaver in trying to prevent the self-destruction of civilization. *Ideas Have Consequences* is very much a useful book today, though I must say that Weaver’s attack on jazz seems more than quaint. Jazz today is museum music, sad to say, in need of nothing so much as a government grant. What has replaced it makes Louis Armstrong seem like Beethoven. In his other writings, such as *The Ethics of Rhetoric* and *Visions of Order*, Weaver showed his connection with the Agrarians. He had studied with

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren at Louisiana State University in the early 40’s, and went on to affirm a traditionalist view even though he himself was an apartment-dwelling urbanite who died alone in Chicago.

Joseph Scotchie’s book is bracing and provocative. He sees Weaver clearly, and sees clearly too the repudiation of his values by the political forces with which Weaver allied himself. In that sense, though he is less critical, Scotchie’s view of the political prophet is much like that of Malvasi. As Scotchie concludes, “Weaver, Davidson, Lytle, Bradford. Some days you get the feeling that the South’s greatest export isn’t cotton, tobacco, peaches, or sugar, but producing prophets without honor in their own country.”

Indeed. But these books are nevertheless honors to those prophets. And their country has never needed them (the prophets as well as their visions) more than it does right now.

J.O. Tate is a professor of English at Dowling College on Long Island.

Hijacking History by Gerald Thompson

History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past

by Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree,
and Ross E. Dunn
New York: Alfred A. Knopf;
318 pp., \$26.00



The most important thing to know about this volume is that its authors were the principal formulators of the infamous National History Standards of 1995. The United States Senate was so dismayed by the History Standards that it voted 99 to 1 to reject the efforts of this trio of historians from UCLA. *History on Trial* is an attempt to re-visit the History Standards debate and show how “ultra-right wingers” managed to dupe the public and sabotage the authors’ “moderate” standards.

A little background may be a useful antidote to *History on Trial*. By the late 1980’s, many Americans were calling for

reform of the history curriculum. A critical event in the movement toward curriculum reform occurred when education professors Chester Finn, Jr., and Diane Ravitch published *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (1987). Drawing upon a standardized history test administered to over 8,000 students, the report showed in alarming detail just how poorly many K-12 teachers were doing when it came to teaching historical studies. The one “positive” showing was that this historical ignorance cut broadly across boundaries of race and sex.

A few examples from their study will demonstrate the depth of the problem: only one-third of high school seniors could date the founding of Jamestown as occurring before 1750; less than a third could place the Civil War within the era of 1850 to 1900 or connect the Reformation with the formation of Protestant sects; four-fifths failed to associate “Reconstruction” with the post-Civil War South or the “Progressive Era” with pre-World War I reform. Even long-standing clichés went unidentified. Only 50 percent of surveyed students could name the person who said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Finally, only a third managed to link the phrase “we hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal” with the Declaration of Independence.

The general public, recognizing that something awful had transpired in education in the years since most of them had attended high school, was appalled. Those of us teaching college survey classes in American history, however, were hardly surprised. Almost any semester would confirm the results of the Finn and Ravitch experiment. But with the publication of *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, history teachers at all levels finally possessed the hard evidence needed to declare that the “feel good” methodologies developed in recent decades by professional educationists had not only failed to improve students’ grasp on historical learning but had created an intellectual wasteland in the attempt. The observation in the halls of higher education that college professors were often expected to teach courses dumbed-down to the level of a good high school history class from the 1950’s, or earlier, became commonplace.

Many historians, including a substan-