

The Old South, the New South, and the Real South

by Tom Landess

In April 1968, the University of Dallas Literature Department hosted an Agrarian reunion. We invited John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Andrew Lytle, and Donald Davidson to come together in several private sessions to discuss the history and meaning of *I'll Take My Stand*. Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Lytle accepted. Davidson was too ill to attend. Less than two weeks after the reunion, he was dead.

Lytle and Davidson were still Agrarians. Ransom, Warren, and Tate were not. So we expected heated confrontations. Unfortunately, no one wanted to fight. They were like long-lost cousins at a family reunion—affectionate, overly polite, and reluctant to renew old quarrels, particularly with the tape recorder wheeling on the table in front of them. The two best passages in the transcript had nothing to do with Agrarians. One was Warren's story of how Gov. Huey Long, in a ride around the square in Baton Rouge, proposed that he and Cleanth Brooks create and edit the *Southern Review*. The other was Ransom's account of the misadventures of a foot fetishist at Kenyon College. The rest of the tape was not worth transcribing.

This proved to be a lost opportunity. Warren came to Dallas having thought about *I'll Take My Stand* in terms that were far more original and broad-ranging than anything discussed in our two-day colloquy. While the others were attending a cocktail party, I met his plane at Love Field. As we drove to the motel, he said something that put the Agrarians' view of the South in a new perspective. "The overarching question of our time," he said, "is whether the modern tendency to think abstractly is a good or a bad thing. That's a question I'd like for us to discuss." Unfortunately, the conversation never moved in that direction.

In retrospect, I believe the role of abstraction in the creation of Southern history is a good place to start in evaluating the Agrarians. In one sense, *I'll Take My Stand* was a reaction against an ideology called Industrialism, which, like alchemy, promised to transform a base economy into gold. The attacks on *I'll Take My Stand* were, from the very beginning, grounded in an abstraction—a polemical paradigm that had beguiled Southerners and Northerners alike since the War and Reconstruction—that of the "New South." The New South was a construct designed to supplant the "Old South" and posited a theoretical salvation waiting just around the corner, just over the next hill. In creating this concept, visionaries attempted to transcend a controversial past and a demeaning present by inventing a utopian future.

The most famous 19th-century use of the phrase was by Henry Grady in an 1886 speech before the New England Soci-

ety of New York. Full of jokes and anecdotes, the speech nonetheless had at its heart a juxtaposition of those two compelling ideas—the Old South and the New South. As Grady put it:

The Old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth. The New South presents a perfect democracy, oligarchs leading in the popular movement—a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface but stronger at the core—a hundred farms for every plantation, fifty homes for every palace, and a diversified industry that meets the complex needs of this complex age.

Both the Old South and New South were abstractions created by Grady's manipulative mind to win the approval of his audience. They were, first and foremost, simplistic ways of looking at reality, an attempt to reduce the South to a few manageable elements, then destroy and rebuild it.

The Old South—the one that "rested everything on slavery and agriculture"—was familiar to the New Englanders whom Grady was addressing. They created it, and they believed in it as surely as they believed the Pilgrims invented Thanksgiving. They also hated it.

The Old South was populated exclusively by two-dimensional plantation owners who owned hundreds of two-dimensional slaves and treated them with a cruelty unmatched in history. The plantations were concentration camps where slaves were often beaten to death for minor infractions of draconian rules. At the same time, white masters and their sons raped black women at will and fathered illegitimate sons and daughters, who also became their slaves.

The world this institution produced was frivolous and self-indulgent. While the men were whipping and raping, the women were preoccupied with the latest Parisian styles, with fancy-dress balls, and with young, arrogant fops. The Old South produced no serious literature or music and few educated men. It was a society sustained by the sweat of black brows, and for that reason alone it deserved the destruction that the War and Reconstruction brought.

The reality was far more complex. Before the War, the overwhelming majority of Southerners lived on small farms—no more than a few hundred acres. Typically, family members worked the land together, grew their own food, and bartered for the relatively small amount of manufactured goods they needed. After the War, the number of Southerners living on these subsistence farms increased. In virtually all respects, they were no different from farmers in rural areas of the Northeast, the Midwest, and the Southwest, as the Agrarians often pointed out.

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But you will not find small farmers in the “Old South.” In a coach-and-four, you could drive around the countryside, blanketed by abstract magnolias and stereotypical cotton, and see nothing but sadistic plantation owners, spoiled women, and oppressed slaves.

The New South was the theoretical antithesis of the Old South. In Henry Grady’s time, it meant, among other things, the fall of the wicked plantation and the rise of the beneficent factory. New Englanders were appalled at the cruelties perpetrated by two-dimensional white slaveowners, while they showed little concern for their own treatment of their workers, which led to the rise of the American labor movement. The thought of the Old South increasingly troubled them. They longed to feel good about themselves and about the country they had founded at Plymouth Rock. But the abstraction they had created haunted their dreams. The idea of a New South—“a perfect democracy”—was a necessary therapy. That is why Grady’s highly decorative oratory struck such a responsive chord. Did Grady understand New Englanders’ passion for intellectual polarities and pander to it? Surely he did.

We have found out that in the general summary the free Negro counts more than he did as a slave. We have planted the schoolhouse on the hilltop and made it free to white and black. We have sowed towns and cities in the place of theories and put business above politics. [Applause.] We have challenged your spinners in Massachusetts and your iron-makers in Pennsylvania. We have learned that the \$400,000,000 annually received from our cotton crop will make us rich, when the supplies that make it are home-raised. We have reduced the commercial rate of interest from twenty-four to six per cent, and are floating four per cent bonds. We have learned that one Northern immigrant is worth fifty foreigners, and have smoothed the path to southward, wiped out the place where Mason and Dixon’s line used to be, and hung our latch-string out to you and yours.

Thus Grady laid out his pie-in-the-sky blueprint for the New South. Its schools would be integrated, despite the fact that New England schoolmarms had come South and immediately segregated the integrated schools that existed on some plantations. Unlike the North, it would be racially egalitarian. It would go into business and leave politics to the Yankees. It would build industries to rival those in the Northeast. At first glance, this last might seem threatening; Grady’s audience, however, would have known that the new textile mills in Georgia and the Carolinas were owned and operated by Yankees, as were the steel mills in Alabama. Besides, Industrialism knew no limitations in the creation of wealth.

The New South, then, was really the Old North, the region New Englanders, in their satisfaction, believed they had always inhabited. The New South would surrender its identity, erase the Mason-Dixon Line, and attract hordes of Yankees to capitalize and run its industries. Southerners would become Americans for the first time in history. Grady does not say that an industrialized New South would also become protectionist and learn to love tariffs, but he did not have to say it—not to that crowd.

By the time the Agrarians came along, the New South had become a full-blown ideology, promoted at Vanderbilt by

Chancellor James Kirkland and English Department chairman Edwin Mims. To Kirkland and Mims, the New South was a futuristic vision in which Atlanta, Nashville, and Birmingham would become industrial giants like Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Detroit, their stacks emitting fire and smoke, as prophetic as the Delphic oracle. The region would become New England. Southerners would be abstractly rich and abstractly happy.



Melanie Anderson

John Crowe Ransom—at that time, the intellectual leader of the group—defined the problem in *I’ll Take My Stand*. In a discussion of Humanism, he makes it quite clear that the Agrarians believed they were opposing abstractionism:

The “Humanists” are too abstract. Humanism, properly speaking, is not an abstract system, but a culture, the whole way in which we live, act, think, and feel. It is a kind of imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition. And, in the concrete, we believe that this, the genuine humanism, was rooted in the agrarian life of the older South and of other parts of the country that shared in such a tradition. It was not an abstract moral “check” derived from the classics—it was not soft material poured in from the top. It was deeply founded in the way of life itself—in its tables, chairs, portraits, festivals, laws, marriage customs. We cannot recover our native humanism by adopting some standard of taste that is critical enough to question the contemporary arts but not critical enough to question the social and economic life which is their ground.

He was talking here about the “New Humanism” extolled in the writings of Irving Babbitt, who suggested that the soul of America could be saved by philosophy and literature. Ransom made it clear in this passage that the Agrarians’ South was a region of concrete particulars. He names them: tables, chairs, portraits, festivals, laws, marriage customs—a South the Agrarians knew from firsthand experience.

All had lived in small towns where agriculture was the chief economic enterprise. They understood the sparse pleasures and quiet virtues of such communities. It was these things they wanted to maintain, not the mere act of hoeing and weeding, though such labor lay at the heart of the South they wanted to preserve.

In *I’ll Take My Stand*, they specifically rejected the paradigm of the Old South with its legions of slaves and its great

manor houses. The Southerners they admired were the small subsistence farmers—modest in their aspirations, independent of mind, self-sufficient. These constituted economic units left out of the theoretical equations of both communists and Yankee capitalists. As Andrew Lytle put it in his essay, these plain people lived with dignity and imagination off “the hind tit.” That South was no abstraction. It actually existed in 1930. The Agrarians could look out of their windows and see it.

However, instead of accepting the Agrarians as advocating the conservation of this real and modest world, critics North and South accused them of defending the Old South and proceeded to denounce *I'll Take My Stand* as bigoted and Luddite, quixotically standing in the way of industrial progress, which was even then roaring down the highway like the 9:28 bus to New York City.

Such attacks, highly successful even among Southerners, soon relegated *I'll Take My Stand* to the backwaters of the historical debate over the causes of the War and its aftermath. Their highly accurate version of the South 1900-1930 was buried beneath an unscalable mountain of false rhetoric. Today, it takes a hardworking scholar and a sturdy spade to dig it up.

Meanwhile, the Old South and the New South live on in the popular imagination. Indeed, current attacks on the Old South have reached an intensity no one could have predicted in 1930. Paradoxically, this astonishing burst of malice is the result of a new era of racial harmony in the region. Organizations such as the NAACP and the Southern Poverty Law Center have perennially raised money for anti-Southern activities. In recent years, however, it has become harder and harder to find racist activities in the South. Consider the following facts. A few years ago, the Gallup organization ran a poll on race relations nationwide. The South was the only region where a majority (53 percent) of blacks said they were treated equally.

The press is constantly reporting that a large proportion of white Southerners (some say a majority) attend segregated academies. In fact, Southern attendance at private schools is usually somewhat below the national average, even in Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina. A recent Harvard study reported that the South was the only region where a majority of white children attended integrated schools.

An even more recent report by the U.S. Census Bureau pointed out that the South was the only region where more blacks were moving in than moving out. The ratio was about two-to-one.

Given these depressingly positive trends, the NAACP and other activist groups have begun to attack the symbols of the Confederacy, which they have successfully transformed from quaint evocations of the Lost Cause into harsh reminders of slavery and racism. Adversaries of the Old South are particularly hard on the Battle Flag, in part because it was used by the racist rabble in the fight against segregation in the 50's and 60's. Ironically, when the rabble flew the flag at Klan rallies, they were affirming the New Englanders' interpretation of their region's history, a point of view that Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson would have found repugnant.

Speaking of Lee, he, too, has been turned into cardboard. He opposed slavery as surely as did Harriet Beecher Stowe, writing in 1856 that “There are few, I believe, in this enlightened age, who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil.” Yet he is now depicted as

chief defender of that institution, wearing a black cape, twirling a black mustache, and tying golden-haired Freedom to the railroad track. His portrait, displayed along the Canal Walk in Richmond, was recently removed by the city fathers, restored, and then burned up by some anonymous Yankee of the spirit.

Likewise, the playing of “Dixie” is now equated with the singing of the “Horst Wessel Song.” In Germany, the latter is against the law. In First Amendment America, the former might as well be. Yet the song—written by a Northerner for performance in a Northern invention called a minstrel show—does nothing more than express nostalgia for a region known for its buckwheat cakes and Injun batter.

Schools and streets named for Confederate generals have been renamed. Marble-eyed statues of Confederate soldiers have been removed from public squares. Angry neo-Puritans have even demanded that Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest and his wife be exhumed from graves in a Memphis public park and reburied on private property far from the hypersensitive eyes of out-of-state tourists.

To be sure, this hatred of the Old South was intensified by 50 to 60 years of legalized segregation in the region. Northern states had such laws as well. The *Board of Education*—as in *Brown v. Board of Education*—governed schools in Kansas, which entered the Union as a free state. Still, Southern states were by far the chief offenders, and the Supreme Court ruling affected them disproportionately.

However, it was not Old South defenders who produced Jim Crow. It was the small farmers and industrial workers of Henry Grady's New South—those who hated and envied plantation owners and inhabited 100 farms for every plantation, 50 homes for every palace. The apostles of New South segregation—men such as Tom Watson of Georgia, James Vardaman of Mississippi, and Pitchfork Ben Tillman of South Carolina—overthrew the landed gentry (many of them former slaveowners) and promptly consigned blacks to a discrete and inferior world. Under this upstart leadership, most Jim Crow laws were passed—between 1895-1905, by the way, and not immediately after Reconstruction, as many have erroneously assumed.

History is sometimes too complex for historians to grasp.

In any era, the real South is infinitely more complicated than either the Old South or the New South—just as flesh-and-blood blacks are more complicated than Mr. Tam and Mr. Bones. The Agrarians attempted to counter two abstractions with a concrete reality and, in so doing, discovered that most people—North and South—prefer the abstractions, which simplify life and give it the illusion of easily attainable meaning.

On the other hand, for 75 years, *I'll Take My Stand* has maintained its purchase on the imagination of a saving remnant; and it has never been out of print, a statement untrue of many earlier polemical works. (H.C. Nixon was a contributor to the Agrarian symposium who later changed his mind and wrote *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*. Try getting a copy at Barnes and Noble.)

Napoleon said that “history is the agreed-upon lie.” At present, it appears as if he was right. However, life has a way of overflowing even the deepest bowl. The historic South may yet overcome all abstractions, however well dressed. It would take only one bright latter-day Agrarian to wipe out the abstractions and redeem the past. At present, I could name at least a dozen good scholars who could make that happen.

Reattacking Leviathan

Starving the Beast

by Mark Royden Winchell



Melanie Anderson

In 1989, Russell Kirk recalled browsing through the library at Michigan State College as an “earnest sophomore” over 50 years earlier. It was there that he happened upon Donald Davidson’s *The Attack on Leviathan*. “It was written eloquently,” Kirk notes, “and for me it made coherent the misgivings I had felt concerning the political notions popular in the 1930s. The book was so good that I assumed all intelligent Americans, or almost all, were reading it.” As Kirk would later learn, nothing could have been further from the truth. When it sold fewer than 600 copies in the 11 years after its publication, the University of North Carolina Press pulped the remaining unbound copies of the book and allowed it to go out of print.

Though *The Attack on Leviathan* was widely ignored at the time of its first printing, it has been reprinted at least twice (most recently by Transaction Press in 1991 as part of Kirk’s own series, the Library of Conservative Thought) and seems more pertinent today than it did at the height (or depth) of the New Deal. Consisting mostly of essays previously published in the *American Review*, Davidson’s book is subtitled *Regionalism and Nationalism in American Life*. Although regionalism has been one of the defining tenets of agrarian thought since ancient times, none of Davidson’s fellow contributors to *I’ll Take My Stand* emphasized the concept as much as he did.

If anything, their desire to restore the agricultural economy of the South led several of the Nashville Agrarians to look to the federal government for deliverance. Herman Clarence Nixon was a lifelong proponent of the New Deal, while John Crowe Ransom and Lyle Lanier did not believe that the Roosevelt administration had gone far enough in championing the small

farmer against the captains of industry. In contrast, Davidson expressed early skepticism concerning policies that simply transferred control of a centralized economy from private industrialists to government bureaucrats. Not only did he believe in limited government, he regarded the United States herself as more of a domestic empire than a legitimate nation.

Although not as well known as his pronouncements about the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory of sectionalism seemed to give scholarly validity to much of what Davidson instinctively knew to be true. Sectionalism has become so pronounced in the United States for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the sheer size of the country. As Turner points out, the distance between Charleston, South Carolina, and the West Coast is comparable to the distance between Constantinople and the west coast of Spain. Similarly, the distance between our northern and southern borders is comparable to the distance between the Baltic coast and the island of Sicily. Add to this the cultural diversity of our people, and it is difficult to think of America as a nation in the same sense that France and England are nations.

Because Davidson’s native South had economic and cultural interests but insufficient political power, it had been perpetually exploited by the industrial Northeast. Were the two regions not part of a larger political entity called the “United States,” the situation Davidson describes might well be labeled colonialism. Sociologists such as Howard Odum of the University of North Carolina demonstrated the enormity of the situation. “You cannot accuse a page of statistics of being nostalgic,” Davidson writes in *The Attack on Leviathan*. “There is no Javeh-worship in a chart of taxation figures. It is impossible to charge Mr. Odum with renewing the War Between the States when he points out that the per capita farm income for New York state in 1929 was \$493, while in Tennessee it was

Mark Royden Winchell’s next book, *Reinventing the South: Versions of a Literary Region*, will be published by the University of Missouri Press in January.