

The Southern Tradition at Bay

AS RICHARD WEAVER has said, ideas have consequences. His *The Southern Tradition at Bay* (Arlington House, \$7.00), which comes to us with a foreword by Donald Davidson, is a magnificent study in depth of the "Southern apologia" which engaged practically every good mind below the Mason-Dixon line between the time of Appomattox and the early years of the twentieth century. Their ideas were in themselves a consequence of the fatal flaw in the U.S. Constitution, which took off from a theory of inalienable human rights yet made pragmatic allowance for the institution of slavery. Nobody could have ridden the two horses of freedom and slavery in tandem forever, and the War Between the States was definitely the consequence of an untenable idea.

But if slavery was a violation of the Western view of human nature, which recognizes the natural urge of every person to be the arbiter of his own destiny, it does

not follow that the South was wrong to defend the institution of States' Rights. The Constitution was a compact freely accepted by sovereign states, and the terms of ratification certainly did not preclude withdrawal if the powers and rights protected by the Ninth and Tenth Amendments to the basic contract were infringed. The War Between the States would never have been fought if slavery had not poisoned the atmosphere of the eighteen forties and fifties. But logic tells us that it was not treasonable for the Southern Confederacy to insist that each separate state had the right to deal with an institution (in this case the "peculiar" institution of slave holding) which had been accepted by the Founders as a given fact when the original contract of federation was being negotiated.

Richard Weaver does not defend the institution of slavery. But he most certainly deplores the centralizing tendencies that have made a mockery of individual and

States' Rights. A Southerner who dallied with socialism in his younger years, Weaver came to suspect the clichés of the collectivistic liberalism which he had originally embraced. His search for his own roots led him to the detailed exploration of practically every publicist, letter-writer, diarist, philosopher, sociologist, historian, and novelist who expressed the "mind of the South" in all those dismal years after the defeat of Lee's army. His conclusion was that much more than slavery was at issue in the convulsive struggle of 1861-65. Slavery would have withered away in any event for purely economic reasons (it was an inefficient method of organizing production), but was it also decreed in the stars that the South must give up what Weaver calls "resistance to the insidious doctrines of relativism and empiricism which the Southerner carried about with him"? Weaver quotes Edmund Burke's lament for the passing of his eighteenth century world: "The age of chivalry is gone — that of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded." *The Southern Tradition at Bay* is, in essence, a comparable lament for the Southern "age of chivalry," when (again to quote Burke) there were "pleasing illusions" which "made power gentle and obedience liberal" and "incor-

porated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society."

The Literature of the South

Regardless of how one feels about the possibility of restoring the eighteenth century, or of recreating a fabric that would "make power gentle," one can only have intense admiration for Weaver's powers of analysis and synthesis. I had not realized the richness of the "Southern tradition" before reading Weaver's study of the post-bellum works of Alexander Stephens, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, Robert Lewis Dabney, Edward Albert Pollard, Bernard J. Sage, and Jefferson Davis himself, works which had the "object of confuting what they believed to be a monstrous aspersion, a 'war guilt lie' . . ."

These were not part of Vernon Parrington's "main currents of American thought," yet they are surely a distinctive part of our literature. We had our centennial of the War Between the States only three years ago, and the outpouring of commentaries and histories that commemorated the centennial is still vivid. But we learned all too little about what motivated the Southern soldier.

Weaver corrects the emphasis by his rifling of the "virtual library" left by people like R. L.

Dabney, John Esten Cooke, and Henry Kyd Douglas on the life of Stonewall Jackson, and by the members of Lee's personal staff who left memoirs. Who among us has read Raphael Semmes's *A Memoir of Service Afloat During the War Between the States*? Semmes, a lawyer as well as a seaman, was commander of the illustrious Confederate raider, the *Alabama*, and Weaver says his memoir is "one of the really fascinating narratives in the history of adventure." Besides being "seven hundred pages of colorful incident and description," the Semmes memoir is also a "remarkably skilled" polemic that reviews in succession "the nature of the American compact, the early formative stages of the nation, and finally . . . the question of slavery as it affected secession." Surely, if we are to have a rounded view of the history of our country, a Semmes should be read in the schools along with a William Lloyd Garrison on abolition, or a Daniel Webster on the sanctity of the union, or a William Tecumseh Sherman on the futility of the Southern rebellion.

Richard Weaver explores the reach of the Southern novel in a brilliant chapter called "Fiction Across the Chasm." He does not aver that John Esten Cooke, Thomas Nelson Page, Thomas

Dixon, Augusta Jane Evans, Grace King, James Lane Allen, Opie Read, Francis Hopkinson Smith, Charles Egbert Craddock, and John Fox were great novelists or even great story tellers. He does not even claim too much for George W. Cable (*Old Creole Days*) or Joel Chandler Harris, the creator of Uncle Remus. But the Southern writers of fiction, if they were not in the same league with Mark Twain (himself a Southerner of sorts), William Dean Howells, and Henry James, did not deserve to be dismissed as dwellers in a Menckonian "Sahara of the bozart."

The Overpowering Burden

At bottom, Richard Weaver represented the War Between the States because it kept the South from working out its problems in its own way. He held to the Burkean belief that society must be a "product of organic growth" if it is not to do violence to "life's golden tree." But, since ideas must have consequences, the explosion of 1861-65 was the end result of the mistakes of 1787, when the Founding Fathers temporized with their own eighteenth century heritage of "natural law." The acceptance of slavery, which the late Isabel Paterson insisted was the flaw in the Constitution, was too great a burden. It prevented men

from seeing things in terms of a reasonable disposition to let "organic growth" have its way.

This does not mean that the successive onslaughts of the North's "liberals" on the theory of States' Rights are justified. No nation made up of distinctive regions can be successfully dominated from a single point. Reality must be restored to the Ninth and Tenth Amendments, which ostensibly uphold the powers and rights of the

states and of the individual citizens thereof, if the general propositions of the Founding Fathers are to be rescued from the centralizing trends which Weaver so eloquently deplored. *The Southern Tradition at Bay* should be read for its general philosophical sense as well as for its evocation of a part of our culture that has been conveniently forgotten and ignorantly derided in most of the country for more than a full half-century. ♦

► RES PUBLICA by Thomas O. McWhorter (Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1966), 265 pp., \$4.50.

Reviewed by Sam R. Fisher

ONE of the important elements in our culture is the heritage of classical political thought, with its search for earthly justice and its roots in the Natural Law. Here is an excellent introduction to this tradition, tracing it from Plato through Cicero and Aquinas down to Burke and *The Federalist*. This book is a useful statement of the fundamental axioms and truths upon which republican government is based.

The author, an attorney, believes with Cicero that Justice can be understood only by reference to the

nature of man, and devotes the opening section of his book to this unique creature. The body of the text is a scholarly disquisition on law and government, amply documented. The concluding chapters show how tyranny grows up within the forms of popular government when the spirit of a people decays because of a failure in understanding and a loss of nerve. This degeneration cannot be repaired, says the author, "until the realities of life cause each to look inwardly at himself and see there . . . a human being with a will, volition, and a purpose in life, susceptible to experiencing the deep satisfaction of self-reliance, independence, and responsible liberty in a political society where he is master." ♦