

Saving the South

WHY THE SOUTH WILL SURVIVE. *By Fifteen Southerners.* (University of Georgia Press, 1981)

THE SECOND BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS: A HISTORY OF THE VIEUX CARRÉ RIVERFRONT-EXPRESSWAY CONTROVERSY. *By Richard O. Baumbach, Jr., and William E. Borah.* (University of Alabama Press, 1981)

Half a century ago, the group of writers generally known as the "Southern Agrarians" in the states of the Old Confederacy published the collection of essays called *I'll Take My Stand*—a book still in print. One of these men was Andrew Lytle, who contributes an Afterword to *Why the South Will Survive*. Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate, along with Lytle, wished to give *Stand* a more political title: *Tracts against Communism*. A deep-rooted conservatism (religious and social, without enthusiasm for industrialism or capitalism) ran through *Stand*, and runs through *Why the South Will Survive*, but these essays are not partisan thrusts.

What survives of the South's peculiar styles of architecture, and its pleasant old urban life, stands in jeopardy today; yet now and again some signal victory for preservation is won against the ugly troops of profiteering "improvement." A grand triumph of this sort was our *Second Battle of New Orleans*, in which the knights of the Old Order defeated the hot advocates of the Riverfront Expressway. Messrs. Baumbach and Borah led that happy charge, and even this reviewer fought as a guerrilla in that struggle—of which more later in this review.

The fifteen contributors to *Why the South Will Survive* take up the South's identity, its present character, its soil, its political traditions, its effect upon foreign policy, its schooling, its literature, its religion, and much else. These writers do not pretend that the southern states have kept their character unaltered. Cleanth Brooks, a valiant and undiminished survivor (like Lytle) from the intellectual and moral contests of the thirties, puts the matter well, in his contribution "The Enduring Faith":

Even if the South is deemed still relatively free from the Gnostic heresy and millennialism, it is by no means immune to the doctrine of automatic progress and other invitations to enter Utopia. The slogans and procedures of the teachers' colleges are loud in the land. The old sense of history is probably being—perhaps already has been—lost. There are too many Burger Kings and Kentucky Fried Chicken entrepreneurs, too much fast food and fast education that manages somehow to bypass the Three R's on its way to the chosen goal of social engineering.

Aye, just so. The authors of *I'll Take My Stand* defended a South that had experienced, for the most part, a tragic continuity extending over seventy years. Their emulators, the authors of *Why the South Will Survive*, look upon a different South—industrialized, in large part urbanized, relatively prosperous, yielding to the fads and foibles that

dominate the United States generally. In fifty years, has the South abandoned its stand?

In the four decades that have elapsed since first I began to wander south of Mason's and Dixon's Line, the very speech of the majority of southerners has altered; television and radio require a "New York" accent, even from southern stations. The new suburbs have forgotten the southern architectural styles. The South's biggest city, Atlanta, becomes indistinguishable from Megalopolis in its outward form and its crime rates. The "New South" preached by Henry Grady sometimes seems to have extirpated the Old South altogether. By the beginning of the twentieth century, will there be a recognizable South? That question has passed through my mind often, as I go speechifying back and forth across the Southeast.

But Clyde Wilson, who writes the Introduction to *Why the South Will Survive*, is not altogether dismayed. "The fact is that American society outside the South has changed in recent decades so rapidly and in so many critical ways that the South is becoming more, rather than less, different," he writes. "It is even possible that 'the South,' thought by many to be a myth or a product of peculiar circumstances, doomed eventually to merge into the American mass, may prove in the long run more able to survive change without losing its identity than can America at large. Indeed, the Southerner may be justified in wondering whether there is any *American* culture anymore, whether America is anything other than a collection of people sharing a common territory, government, and standard of living, but otherwise having no identity."

However much the region may have altered since *Stand*, the South remains suspect to liberals. In recent years I have reviewed a spate of university-press historical studies of the South, written by Harvard doctoral candidates or University of California instructors. Many of these are models of "research" and of superficiality; the authors' familiarity with the South is limited to hasty expeditions to large libraries or archives there; they seem as nervous about actually getting to know southern life as citizens of Torino used to be when compelled to visit Sicily. I suspect that the southern culture will survive what may be a concerted endeavor to rewrite its fantastic and gallant history.

In one field, southern culture has dominated America for nearly fifty years: humane letters. This ascendancy had commenced when *I'll Take My Stand* was published, and it endured almost to the present; indeed, no living American writer looms larger than the late Flannery O'Connor. But in recent years the radicals and liberals of New York's literary oligarchy have been endeavoring to repress southern letters; George Garrett, in this collection, touches upon the matter in his "Southern Literature Here and Now." *The New York Times Book Review* consistently ignores or puts down southerners; the National Endowment for the Arts clearly has been prejudiced against southern writers. Consider these remarks by Mr. Garrett about NEA:

Not at all unusual is the picture presented by the 1979-80 Fellowships for Creative Writers (\$10,000 each) awarded by the Literature Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Of the 275 awards given, 33 went

to writers listed as living in (or visiting) Southern states. Two Southern states, Arkansas and Alabama, were completely ignored. No Southern state received as many grants as, for example, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, or Vermont. New York (and chiefly, overwhelmingly, New York City) by receiving 78 of the grants, was a little more than twice as lucky and successful as all of the Southern states combined.

Thus *Survive*, like *Stand* fifty years earlier, is the work of a conscious minority, a Remnant, aware that modernity bears them no good will. Their essays are pious in the old Roman sense: they praise old ways and famous men; they defend "the little platoon we belong to in society"; they champion vicinage against universalism. Marion Montgomery, in his moving essay "Solzhenitsyn as Southerner", expresses this bold defiance of the heavy drift of events in America: "What a Southerner of my persuasion fears is that our national spirit more and more breathes within a world whose thermostat and filters are set by gnostic intellectuals; a climate in which there are more destructive contaminants than the Southern intelligence and will may detect; certainly more than the Midwest Research Institute can measure, given its emission standards with respect to 'quality.'"

M. E. Bradford, who writes the Conclusion to this very lively and thoughtful collection, is not disposed to surrender the South to some tapioca-pudding society.

What we were told would be progress has left a vacuum in which solipsism and deracination, Marxism and related nostrums have moved at will. The Gross National Product at its best cannot negate this truth, nor may religion be expected to flourish under such circumstances. What has survived of the South that traced its lineage to the England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is still visible and functioning because agriculture has been the 'model,' the prototype for all other vocations in which the Southerner joined the public and private things. Stewardship is still an intelligible conception for the host of Southerners who live in clusters surrounding our great cities and who do a work very different from that performed by their ancestors. Real property is yet preferred over other kinds, and liberty is understood by them as being dependent upon their participation in the corporate life, the intermediate institutions. . . . For the sake of memory let us preserve the iconic things—buildings, monuments, gardens, rites, celebrations, and stories—which have defined us for over three hundred years as a people apart, and which carry in themselves the seeds of restoration as a context for the tradition.

Say not the struggle naught availeth. Some "iconic things" indeed have been preserved in the South. *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, dispassionate though written on a note of triumph, is a full and systematic account of the attempt to disfigure New Orleans (and conceivably invigorate its Canal Street commercial district) by constructing a vast expressway along the Mississippi, overshadowing and spoiling the Vieux Carré, the old Spanish-French-Italian quarter, and working other mischief. By resolute and intelligent opposition, New Orleans' preservationists—conspicuous among them Messrs. Baumbach and Borah, this study's authors—succeeded in defeating the scheme, despite powerful interests backing it.

Originally, in 1946, the New Orleans Riverfront Expressway was proposed by Robert Moses, the Napoleon of parks and highways. Mr. Moses, a New Yorker, substantially ruined Long Island and its railway system by a merciless expressway built after World War II; elsewhere, too, even in the little Michigan town where I was born, Mr. Moses' touch blighted old beauties. He professed himself a conservative; but his only accomplishment that met with my favor was his New York World's Fair of 1964—which everybody else seems to have denounced as a failure.

As matters turned out, happily, New York taste was not permitted to devastate New Orleans. Through my syndicated newspaper column, I swung my little mace in the Second Battle; the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, zealous for the expressway, cancelled its subscription to my column; but the preservationists distributed 20,000 copies of my denunciation on the streets of the city. At length John Volpe, Secretary of Transportation in the Nixon administration, was persuaded to cancel the whole project.

The Second Battle can be used as a manual by other people, in other cities, trying to defend the amenities of urban living against "renewers" with federal funds and powers who are bent upon creating urban deserts and jungles. The New Orleans fight saved the oldest and best quarters of one of the South's three most interesting cities. This victory suggests that the southern spirit remains capable of self-defense; and that some things iconic will still stand, in the southern states, when all the rest of America is one monotonous sprawl.

Russell Kirk

Will South Africa Survive?

SOUTH AFRICA: TIME RUNNING OUT. THE REPORT OF THE STUDY COMMISSION ON U.S. POLICY TOWARD SOUTHERN AFRICA. *Foreign Policy Study Foundation, Inc.* (University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1981)

In 1947 Arthur Keppel-Jones, a distinguished South African historian, published a book entitled *When Smuts Goes* in which he predicted his country's coming breakdown in a bloodbath. Mr. Keppel-Jones set a fashion; ever since 1947 liberal-minded academics, journalists, clergymen, and television commentators have predicted South Africa's impending violent demise. A massive array of "guilt-gloom-and-doom" books concerning South Africa now fills library shelves. Between them, their authors have created a strange fantasy world where the clock eternally points at five minutes to twelve, and