

Who Speaks for the South?

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TELL ABOUT THE SOUTH: The Southern Rage to Explain. By Fred Hobson. Louisiana State University Press. 391 pp. \$35. Paper \$12.95.

BLACK SOUTHERNERS, 1619-1869. By John B. Boles. The University Press of Kentucky. 244 pp. \$24.

Tell About the South belongs to a growing list of recent Southern intellectual histories, whose best-known examples are Morton Sosna's *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue*, Michael O'Brien's *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941*, Richard H. King's *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* and Daniel Singal's *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945*. Each of these books delves into what might be called (still) the mind of the South—the thinking of Southerners about the idea of the South. Each is organized biographically, concentrating on the lives and work of such thoughtful Southerners as Howard Odum, the Nashville Agrarians, William Alexander Percy and Lillian Smith. Although these historians stake out different chronological territories, they overlap enough in time and personality to invite comparison. Of the books that purport to present Southern thinking in general, Fred Hobson's is the most appealing historically, even though he is the only literary scholar of the five. Managing not to bog down in prolonged textual analysis or to indulge in far-flung flights of theoretical fancy, Hobson presents his authors in relation to their times and their peers.

Hobson argues that ever since slavery became an acute political issue in the 1820s and 1830s, the South has been the most self-conscious of all American regions. He identifies two strands of Southern writing about the South—the

shame-and-guilt school of George Washington Cable and Lillian Smith, and the apologists, like Thomas Nelson Page and the Nashville Agrarians—and follows them from the mid-nineteenth century through the civil rights revolution to the era of the Sun Belt.

With serious reservations—more on that later—I find *Tell About the South* a fine book. It is soundly based in history, gracefully written, unflaggingly interesting. Whereas other historians treat separately contemporaries like Donald Davidson, Howard Odum, Wilbur Cash and William Percy, producing the impression that each functioned in tranquil isolation, Hobson looks at them together. They jostle with each other, snipe and praise, in a lively discussion that captures contention as well as consensus. Despite the exhaustive research that obviously undergirds the book, it retains a freshness and a seeming effortlessness that make it a pleasure to read.

On the face of it, John Boles's *Black Southerners* belongs to an entirely different category of writing. Boles's subjects, who are black, do not speak about their own condition in his pages, whereas Hobson's, who are white, are impressively articulate. Hobson presents original scholarship; Boles offers a summary of recent writing, carefully including nearly everyone who has made a contribution to the study of Southern blacks within his period, although Thomas Holt's prizewinning *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* is inexplicably missing.

In his description of the place of blacks in Southern society, Boles is of two minds. Sometimes he scrupulously discusses the various sorts of slave and free black experience over time. He gives due weight to the diversity that existed within the slave community: drivers; house servants, field hands, fancy girls. But despite that explicit recognition of variety, the book mostly presents black experience as a monolith, contrasted with that of whites as a whole. Readers familiar with recent historiography will pause at such

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sweeping generalizations as this: slaves "slowed the tempo of their labor" and "quickly perceived that . . . they were better fed and housed, and less apt to be separated from their families, on more prosperous plantations," and "put much store in semimagical folk beliefs." Or this: "Race ultimately united the white South." The two entities here are "slaves" on the one hand and "whites" on the other, as though the antonym of slave were not freeman.

Whites, Boles says, were united early on by their interest in preserving slavery; he dismisses the class conflicts usually associated with antebellum Southern society over such issues as the Bank of the United States or secession. The picture that emerges is of two racial monoliths solidly confronting each other, a view that is reinforced by the absence of black voices, even though an impressive body of slave narratives exists to illuminate what blacks thought about their place within the institution of slavery and the society of the South. *Black Southerners* thereby becomes another example of what Hobson calls "telling about the South"—more exactly, telling about the South from a point of view completely outside the region's black communities. John Boles, a white Southerner, explains that race divided the South into two mutually exclusive categories (although he acknowledges enormous cultural interchange), and that thanks to slaves' family ties and resilient culture, their situation was not all that bad.

Boles belongs to one of Hobson's schools of explainers about the South—he's an apologist—but that does not mean that the same conceptual mold produced both books. Boles begins by applying the word "Southerner" to blacks as well as whites and says that slavery did not strip blacks of humanity and culture. But if these assumptions are valid, they expose a serious myopia in the work of intellectual historians like Fred Hobson: if black Southerners are Southerners and possess their share of humanity, then presumably they have something to say about the land of their birth, a region in which race has always been a central issue—some would say *the* central issue. But Hobson includes not a single black writer in his analysis.

Other intellectual historians of the South—O'Brien, King, Singal—have failed to notice that black Southerners might have written about the South.

Hobson at least realizes the need to explain why he ignores voices on the other side of the color line. He admits that black Southerners, more than any other Southerners, possessed the rage to explain that is the subject of his book. But even after making this damaging concession, he falls back on a lame excuse trotted out by other historians of the South: "The story of their [blacks'] rage to explain is a book in itself." In a similar vein, Singal assumes that black thought consisted entirely of folklore and the blues, requiring special interpretive skills. He notes that "an important study remains to be written on black culture and thought in the modern South," but claims that the preparation of such a book would call for "the use of sources quite different from those employed for the present book." It is as though black writers and scholars wrote in a language inaccessible to present-day students of the South, as though their views make sense only when discussed separately. A book on what

blacks wrote about the South would doubtless be worthwhile, but why such intellectual Jim Crow? Black Southerners are as much Southerners as white Southerners, and what they have had to say about the South does not belong to some foreign species of thought.

To omit black Southerners from a history of the South is to pretend that well-published black Southerners with pronounced views about their region (Booker T. Washington, T. Thomas Fortune, John Hope, Zora Neale Hurston, Kelly Miller, Carter G. Woodson, Alrutheus A. Taylor, Richard Wright, Charles S. Johnson) did not exist or spoke only to themselves. And to contend that reading their work requires special skills or peculiar source materials is nonsense. Hobson and others would have needed only to recognize that articulate black Southerners have been writing about the South for a long time and that they, too, are worth the research.

There is a hard part, of course. If the views of people who spoke from behind what W.E.B. Du Bois called "the veil" were included, many of the tidy generalizations of these books about "the South" would break down. By ignoring the spokesmen for one-third of the region's people—especially that part of the people who were workers and peasants almost exclusively—writers like Hobson rob Southern thinking of much

of its depth and controversy. No historian of a society so consumed by race as the South can afford to deal with only one side of the color line (whichever side, mind you) and claim to be speaking of the South as a whole. As good as they are, intellectual histories like Fred Hobson's are studies of the articulate white South only, and as such are narrow and nearsighted. The region deserves better. □