

Book Reviews

Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History. By C. Vann Woodward. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986. x + 158 pp. \$12.95.)

C. Vann Woodward is justly known as the doyen of southern history, a title earned through the publication of ten insightful books and the training of scores of students who have become major southern scholars in their turn. As Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale, winner of the Pulitzer and other prizes, president of several scholarly associations, and holder of prestigious foreign professorships, Woodward is the very portrait of success as an academic historian.

Yet he began his career by rejecting the verities of his field, much as would many in the generation of the late 1960s and early 1970s who were alienated from prevailing consensus history. Many of the younger historians, particularly but not exclusively Afro-American historians, angrily confronted American history without realizing that they were not the first to dissent. Speaking of his encounter with southern history in the 1930s, Woodward might have been a graduate student in 1968 or 1972 discovering that "each of the masters held up as models for emulation seemed virtually of one mind, united not so much in their view of the past as in their dedication to the present order." Like historians thirty years later, he found it impossible to swallow "the predominant literature, the scholarship, and the prevailing interpretations." He rejected the truths of southern history, producing as his dissertation and first book a biography of a Populist rebel whose life and times abounded

with conflict and discontinuity. Later Woodward accepted the assignment in the *History of the South* series that became *Origins of the New South* (1951) on the assumption that he could now "subvert the establishment."

Woodward pursued his analysis of conflict and discontinuity in southern history at about the same time that the civil rights movement made the reality of conflict and discontinuity manifest in southern society. Without stressing the extensive research in primary sources and the graceful writing that make *Origins of the New South* so formidable a work, Woodward explains the long-standing respect the book has enjoyed by appealing to recent history. The upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s left the older idea of continuity very little in the way of credibility. "I know the present is not supposed to affect our reading of the past," he says, "but in this instance I think it did." Woodward does not see himself as a "fulltime presentist," but he believes that historians have an obligation to make sense of the past in terms of the present. That sensitivity to contemporary preoccupations brought him a vast popular audience through *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) and, together with his stress on conflict, made the impeccably scholarly *Origins of the New South* attractive to his younger colleagues who had seen the writing of history and the demography of the academy altered by current events. For scores of younger historians, Woodward's present-mindedness represents a strength, not a shortcoming. But his version of a life, as presented here, frustrates readers influenced by feminism as well as by civil rights.

The jacket copy of *Thinking Back* calls it

neither personal nor intellectual autobiography. It is some unnamed third thing that I will call nonautobiography. The book's gracious and generous voice, very much that of *éminence grise*, is so cool as to seem to speak in the third person. Beyond a few pages that sketch his youth, *Thinking Back* provides no clue to the person behind the scholar, as though Woodward's scholarship (virtually) equals his humanity. The Woodward of this nonautobiography experienced no family joys or tragedies, no satisfactions beyond favorable book reviews and feisty students; he harbors no doubts, fears, or anxieties, personal or professional, although he briefly recounts events that the reader realizes must have demanded considerable personal courage.

Just one example: As chairman of the program committee of the lily-white Southern Historical Association (SHA) in 1949, Woodward invited the young black scholar John Hope Franklin to take part in the Williamsburg, Virginia, meeting. Southern historians fretted and snorted, but Woodward never wavered, evidently unconcerned that his audacity might cost him the presidency of the SHA. As it turned out, desegregating the SHA lost Woodward nothing that can be discerned from this vantage point. By 1952 he was president of the SHA, and he later presided over both the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association. But what entered his mind in 1949? If, as feminists say, the personal is political, how did the interaction proceed for Woodward? In what ways did that moment and others about which he has not written shape his writing of history, particularly the works aimed at general readers? By refusing to provide very many clues to the human side of his life, and by equating his books with his person, Woodward has not only written a nonautobiography; he has also written a nonfeminist nonautobiography that tells nothing of the continual interplay between life and profession. Given only a sketchy introduction to Woodward as a youth and lacking any discussion of the process by which the young subverter of the historical status quo came to epitomize the historical establishment, readers will conclude that Woodward sprang from the

womb fully formed as a historian, in his intellect and in his character.

Woodward disregarded other, more feminist examples. W. E. B. Du Bois acknowledged the effects of his race and racism on his work in all of his autobiographies, for instance, the last, edited by Herbert Aptheker, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968). Two other essays, prefaces to scholarly works, also affirm that personal history cannot be separated from scholarship. Gerda Lerner explains in "Autobiographical Notes, by way of an Introduction," in *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (1979), that she began graduate school when she was forty-three, and she credits her age with the strength to withstand criticism of her pursuit of women's history. In the preface to *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982), Bertram Wyatt-Brown (a Woodward student) warns readers that semi-southern origins lie behind his thinking. Each of these three autobiographers finds inspiration for the oeuvre in the life, but *Thinking Back's* opacity fuses successes, magnificent books, and a tolerant, gentlemanly demeanor into something resembling a monument that obscures C. Vann Woodward the man.

Nell Irvin Painter
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill