

## C. Vann Woodward's Exceptionalism

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## Editorial

### C. VANN WOODWARD'S EXCEPTIONALISM

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Although the Civil War is a topic that historian C. Vann Woodward directly addressed only in late life, with the publication of *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (Yale University Press, \$21.00, ISBN 0300029799), it had long proven formative to his historical consciousness.

The grandson of an Arkansas Confederate, Woodward's early books dissected Reconstruction and the Populist era, when the patient work of social change progressed only to suffer a backlash that -- according to Woodward's interpretation -- was motivated more by economics than instilled racialism. The subject of his dissertation, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (Oxford University Press, \$24.95, ISBN 0195007077), colorfully presented the idiosyncrasies of the period and of Southern history generally, as Watson's early commitment to racial reconciliation gave way to the political efficacy of segregation.

The influx of modern capitalism also proved costly. If materialism was not native to the South, it became so with time. "Southerners did gradually, reluctantly, and sadly conform to the victor's social order," Woodward noted in a review -- one of his last -- published in our Summer 1999 issue. As literary critic Lewis P. Simpson has observed, the South may possess too much reverence towards the past and not enough irony. It accommodated plantation economics, industrialization, and now what Woodward derided as the "Bulldozer Revolution" by incorporating all into its proud tradition.

But Simpson's challenge is not taken up by Woodward. Often described as an ironist, perhaps because his reading of Southern history emphasized discontinuities -- which are examined in an essay collection he tellingly entitled *The Burden of Southern History* (Louisiana State University Press, \$14.95, ISBN 0807118915) -- Woodward actually was a lifelong populist. He insisted, even when in the far reaches of Baltimore and New Haven, that Southernness was implanted in his "heart and mind." In the South's privations and failures he discerned a unique endowment that afforded its people a useful antidote to the

dominant American progressive tradition. "I have something of a leaning against the myths of the nation," he once confided.

A youthful flirtation with the economic determinism of Charles Beard was fleeting. Even when it exacted a price on his early career, Woodward resisted mightily the urge to view history as impersonal. A 1932 visit to Europe is illustrative. After seeing working class neighborhoods in Berlin, he expressed skepticism about the dreary account of a local communist. "My God, man, they've got electric lights and running water!" he declared. The sharecropper shacks in his birthplace, Vanndale, Arkansas, did not.

Despite an intimidating output of books, articles, and reviews, Woodward was never far removed from the raging social controversies. He contributed historical research -- later published as *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford University Press, \$12.95, ISBN 0195018052) -- to the NAACP's *Brown* brief and at Yale he spearheaded the "Woodward Report" that consecrated the university as a free speech haven. Liberal in spirit and politics, Woodward never doubted that the "clownish charades" of political correctness and the vulgarity of the quantitative method ("computers abhor ambiguity") would pass. He so empathized with his discipline that ultimately his historical perspective became timeless. Edmund Burke's assurance is apt: "Man is foolish but the species is wise." *Requiescat in Pace*, Comer Vann Woodward (1908-1999).