

Cultural Aggression: Did Antebellum Northern Elites Dehumanize Southerners?

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Review

CULTURAL AGGRESSION

Did antebellum Northern elites dehumanize Southerners?

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Grant, Susan-Mary *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era*. University Press of Kansas, 2000-07-01. ISBN 700610251

North Over South is a study of the development of nationalist thought in the northern United States in the three decades preceding the Civil War's outbreak. Central to this study is Susan-Mary Grant's argument that "northern nationalism" increasingly monopolized the "search for an American national identity" during that period and, in so doing, effectively excluded the South from contributing to America's self-definition. Although it is not the purpose of the book to explain the War's origins, the argument extends itself effortlessly to show the impossibility of compromise between North and South by the 1850s. This represents a departure from the usual attribution of a bellicose intractability to the southern states alone.

One valuable aspect of Grant's work is her ascription of emergent northern nationalism (and of the North as a unified, distinct political section) to the insecurity arising in some of the northern states from industrialization, consequent social upheaval, and increased immigration. This insecurity was heightened, in the minds of local writers and politicians, by the image of an increasingly assertive South, apparently enjoying an enviable degree of social stability and cohesion from its "peculiar institution." From this perspective, Grant's treatment of the political crises that stretched from the Mexican War to Senator Charles Sumner's battering at the hands of Preston Brooks strips our understanding of the confidence of hindsight. "Northern reactions to the antebellum South," she writes, "can be fully understood only in the context of northern concerns for the future of the American republican experiment, which was basically the search for an American national identity."

Less valuable would seem to be Grant's attempt to associate such matters with the wider academic debate on nationalism and national identity. The author herself is aware of two problems here, neither of which she really overcomes: first, "nationalism scholars" have trouble defining nationalism and distinguishing it from national identity; second, the same scholars nevertheless cannot resist forcing their "paradigms" on the historical material. In paying more attention to vindicating her paradigm than, say, to what can be learnt from a direct comparison with contemporary nationalist movements in Europe, Grant falls short of her ambitious goal. In the process, she may also scatter some confusion in the mind of the less specialized reader.

Elitist, innovative, progressive, and hubristic

We are often encouraged to believe that irrational and exploitable popular instincts give rise to nationalism. But what seems clear from the evidence of travel books, newspapers, and political material that Grant presents, and from her focus on particular figures such as Horace Mann and Theodore Parker, is the political debt that nationalism owes to an elitist, innovative, progressive, and hubristic mindset - armed with education programs, social experiments, mission statements, and abstracted humanism - that is the constant companion of ambitious politicians.

Bizarrely, in the light of all this, Grant refers to the northeastern Whig/Republican movement as "conservative." Such terminology and paradigms notwithstanding, *North Over South* provides some stimulating reading in an area of history blighted too often by the retrospective discovery of an all-too-manifest destiny.

Ian Crowe was educated at St Catherine's College, University of Oxford and at the University of Bristol. He is currently senior editor of the University Bookman and program director at the Russell Kirk Center, Michigan.