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Review

HISTORIAN OF THE MASTER CLASS

Scholarly essays honor Eugene Genovese's work and influence

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Paquette, Robert L. and Ferleger, Lou. *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History*. University Press of Virginia, 2000-05-01. ISBN 813919517

Presented as a tribute to Eugene D. Genovese, the ten substantial and arresting essays in **Slavery, Secession, and Southern History** are on varying topics in the history of the antebellum South. But either explicitly or implicitly, each testifies to the importance of Genovese's remarkably comprehensive contribution to the struggle of American historians to interpret the history of the Old South's slave society, and the relation of this history to the Civil War. In addition, the appended interview with Genovese, in which editors Robert Louis Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger put questions to him, commands as much attention as the essays that precede it.

Genovese observes in this interview that until he renounced Marxism in 1995, his inquiry into the culture and ideology of the slave society of the Old South was governed by "materialistic and atheistic" suppositions. Yet, he adds, his application of Marxist doctrine to southern history always tended to be "idiosyncratic." Never one to treat the American South as "just another regional variant," he sensed from "the beginning" that "it was indeed different," and should be viewed as "a historical phenomenon that once generated a people apart and had the germs of a separate nationality." Although for a long time he did not allow himself to doubt the Marxist faith, he recounts an increasing attraction to the possibilities of interpreting the distinct world of the Old South in the light of the thought of social and literary conservatives from Edmund Burke and John C. Calhoun to T.S. Eliot and Allen Tate.

If we look at Genovese's career to date, we detect the developing influence of conservatism in his penetrating treatment of George Fitzhugh in his second book, *The World the Slaveholders Made*. In this work, even as he deplores their

support of slavery, he portrays the pro-slavery writers of the antebellum South not as curious anachronisms but as uniquely significant contributors to the body of modern thought on social relations. His growing insight into the complexities of the world the masters made suggested to Genovese that in order to grasp the full meaning of this world, he must "weigh the slaveholders' view of the slaves against the realities of slavery and the perceptions of the slaves themselves." The result was his remarkable *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.

The mind of the master class

In their survey of Genovese's role in "Changing Views of Slavery in the United States," an essay that introduces **Slavery, Secession, and Southern History**, Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman single out *Roll, Jordan, Roll* as the author's greatest work. In view of this evaluation, it may be surprising that no other contributors to the volume place such explicit emphasis on this book. However, the comparative inattention to *Roll, Jordan, Roll* is in accord with the place it occupies in relation to Genovese's primary goal (which he shares with his wife and co-author, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese) in the interpretation of southern history: a comprehensive work on the mind of the master class.

Since his renunciation of Marxism, Genovese sees his experience in writing *Roll, Jordan, Roll* as resulting in a significant enhancement of his awareness of religion in the history in the South, that is, religion "understood to include the spiritual, the institutional, the social, the political, and the intellectual." Thus *Roll, Jordan, Roll* may be read as a work that implicitly projects what Genovese indicates is "precisely at issue" in the historical study of the South: the achievement of an "integrated history" of the world the masters made and the world the slaves made.

Although not by deliberate design, the essays in **Slavery, Secession, and Southern History** represent various approaches to the problem of writing such a history. Part I of the volume, titled "Slavery," includes David Brion Davis's masterly comment on "The Problem of Slavery," which provides a way of looking at the complexity of master-slave relations in the American South in the general context of such relations from Grecian times to the present. Essays by other contributors to this section examine the master-slave relationship within the specific context of southern history. Robert Paquette investigates the relation between the masters and the "drivers," the slaves whom plantation masters

entrusted to take charge of the other slaves. Peter A. Coclanis describes the differences between the relationship of masters and slaves on plantations employing the "task system" of slave labor as opposed to the situation of those employing the "gang labor system."

Historical burden of slavery

In Part II, "Secession," Clyde N. Wilson presents a cogent analysis of Calhoun's "economic platform," demonstrating how the "great depth and subtlety" of Genovese's profound explication of Calhoun's defense of the "organic society" of the southern plantation allows us to understand how this society was an expression of the "worldview of the planter class." It was a vision that allowed for "material progress, but a progress morally centered" in its necessary commitment to the "unique historical burden of slavery." Douglas Ambrose offers a provocative study of Henry Hughes and the Reverend John Henley Thornwell as proponents of "statism in the Old South." Contrary to the claim that Southerners always opposed the centralization of power, Ambrose demonstrates how, in trying to cope with the moral and social burden the southern masters believed slavery imposed on them, Hughes and Thornwell advocated what amounted to an "expansion of state intervention into nearly every aspect of society."

Drew Gilpin Faust shows how, in the case of one female member of the Virginia master class, Catherine Edmond-ston, "the legitimation the southern master class embraced and practiced" during the Civil War "proved literally self-defeating." In the section's final essay, Thavolia Glymph recalls how another woman of the master class, the South Carolinian Mary Boykin Chesnut, revised the manuscript of her wartime journal after the War to achieve a "literary victory for women of her class and race" at the expense of "African-American women, slave and free." In doing so, Glymph argues, Chesnut was essentially perpetuating the myth that the mistress of the plantation epitomized the virtue and honor of the defeated South.

The concluding section devoted to "Southern History" features two essays that address the history of the South in other contexts. In "Measuring the South: Health, Height, and Literary Myths," Louis Ferleger and Richard H. Steckel deal with another aspect of the myth of the ruined South, presenting evidence that William Faulkner's depiction of Southerners as stunted in mind and body by economic deprivation is contrary to statistical studies of the physical condition of

Southerners. Ferleger and Stickel seem to find that the chief value of literature is its "power" to "inspire" historians "to consider issues and questions raised by literary sources and impressed on the popular mind," and in so doing "separate the truth from the fiction." In marked contrast to this view of fiction and history, Mark G. Malvasi's astute analysis of Allen Tate's examination of the failure of the myth of the traditional South in Tate's famous novel *The Fathers* raises the question of whether myth may be truer than fact.

Altogether, **Slavery, Secession, and Southern History** is at once a distinguished contribution to southern studies and a worthy tribute to one of the major American historians of his generation.

Lewis P. Simpson is the author of Mind and the Civil War (1989, reissued 1998) and The Fable of the Southern Writer (1994).