

Homemade History

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Editorial

HOMEMADE HISTORY

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The distinguished critic Lewis P. Simpson observes that Southerners tend to be too pious toward the past and not sufficiently ironical toward the successive changes wrought upon their soil. His observation came to mind recently, when our editorial office received a review copy of a tract excoriating "the Yankee Empire" and extolling the South's "special air." As the overheated rhetoric of the book demonstrates, the air being rhapsodized in gray resembles, if anything, the "wild gas" of false liberty that Edmund Burke cautioned against.

In the historio-political realm, excessive piety can take many forms. For a southern nationalist, it results in deploring the "Empire's campaign of economic oppression" against the South, without considering for a moment that "Discount City" got its start in Bentonville, Arkansas. Marxists strip human agency from history, in favor of deterministic theories, just as social scientists do when quantitative analysis evacuates contingency from life. In defense of a currently embattled Cabinet nominee, some have noted that the official's favorite historical figure is Abraham Lincoln, as if that signification is shorthand for political virtue. Or isn't. For one prominent journalist authored a book last year deriding Honest Abe's "White Dream." This latter claim led The Lincoln Forum to devote its 2001 essay contest to the question: "Lincoln: Liberator or Racist?"

But history is far too textured (as any Civil War reenactor literally can attest) to sustain simplifications, no matter how piously they are avowed. Simpson notes that irony came late to the southern literary consciousness, which is surprising given the fertile historical stuff with which it has to work. Self-critical analysis awakens us to the possibility that the same person might be a liberator *and* a racist. We should not presume that to be the case, but neither should we obscure the many historical examples of discontinuities and incongruities. The task for historian and critic alike is not to embrace moral equivalency, but to be open to reading the past-with all its glories and follies-as it actually happened.

Yet we should not overlook the valuable purpose served by those who seek to connect personally with the past. In his famous essay on "Homemade Esthetics," art critic Clement Greenberg argued that perceiving beauty in objects is intuitive. But historical consciousness operates at different level, one that draws its vitality through symbols and rituals-battlefield walks, family albums, folklore. Attending The Lincoln Forum last fall, I lunched one day with two Lincoln reenactors, who exchanged tips on presenting Lincoln to school children. Hours later, a parade of Civil War reenactors marched through Gettysburg. At their best, such rituals seek to re-enchant the past, as a way of conferring dignity to existence, including our own. Historical consciousness is not intuitive, but is cultivated through the telling of fact and myth until they become almost the same.

A decade or two after the German sociologist Max Weber pronounced that modernity involves the disenchantment of life, a nationalistic movement in his own country sought, with devastating consequences, to recover the mythology of the past. Fortunately, the "greatest generation" rose up in opposition, inspired as it was by a different set of beliefs and memories that had been cultivated by our own mythmaking. Waterloo really was won on Eton's playing fields, as perhaps the Great Wars were at Gettysburg. The past is not always worthy of celebration; it demands our critical engagement and, finally, judgment. Which is to affirm the powerful imagery that history provides, but also our own role in sorting it all out.

Morgan Knoll, Editor