

Cuban Confederate General: The Life of Ambrosio Jose Gonzales

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Review

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O'Brien, Michael *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*. University of North Carolina Press, \$95.00 ISBN 807828009

The cerebral South

Antebellum thought and its relation to the world

In this massive study, Michael O'Brien, University Lecturer in American History at the University of Cambridge, places the intellectual life of the antebellum American South in a larger context. O'Brien is well-qualified to write these volumes; he is editor-in-chief of the Southern Texts Society and author or editor of several books on Southern intellectual history, including *The Idea of the American South, 1920-41*, and *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827-67*. In the work under review, he sees the writings of Southerners as being an integral part of American and European history, rather than merely local or parochial as has previously been thought. Moving from late Enlightenment thinking through Romanticism to early realism, Southern thinkers both paralleled and contributed to these streams of thought. Only a small part of their intellectual lives was indigenous to the culture.

Southerners tended to be more intellectual than their Northern cousins, O'Brien argues, and gave less fealty to the American political system than did other Americans. They believed that intellectual and political authority was to be found in ancient and modern Europe. The Greece of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; the Rome of the republic; the Paris and Guttingen of the modern world were the models that Southerners tried to understand and emulate. They did not give credence to the widely held American view that the western commercial republican experiment was a moral or intellectual advance over these other models. Only in one area did they agree wholeheartedly with their Yankee brothers, and that was imperialism. Like Northerners, they did not see the American Revolution as a repudiation of European imperialism.

Because of their differences, Southern intellectuals sometimes suffered from doubts about their culture, which manifested itself in a self-conscious and bristly defensiveness against others' view of them. They realized that under the best of circumstances they would have had a difficult time maintaining an orderly world. But in harsh reality, they were stymied by New Englanders, British merchants, rebel slaves, and their own contrarian natures. Moreover, for all their bluster about the virtues of slavery, they realized that their civilization was based upon compulsion, and therefore particularly shaky. These realities gave rise to a lugubrious and disillusioned cast of mind.

O'Brien's history, based upon a wide reading of primary and secondary materials, reaches a rather surprising conclusion. Recent writers such as Eugene Genovese, Grady McWhiney, and Clyde Wilson have limned Old South Civilization as being the last bastion of agrarian, minimal-government, Whig principles. The intellectual traditions that flourished to 1865 both reflected and nurtured this civilization. Some contemporaries who survived the War Between the States agreed with this assessment, and mourned the destruction of their way of life during the awful conflagration. But, O'Brien notes on page 1199, many others adapted, even flourished in the rapacious Gilded Age of the late 19th century. Having previously invented and administered a regime based upon personal ambition, the enslavement of millions, and imperialism, they were used to the application of ruthlessness to guarantee their own comfort. Hence, many of them quickly conformed to the postwar realities, becoming railroad tycoons, diplomats, doctors, and lawyers. Says O'Brien, For playing the game of power and losing, they do not invite pity. For replaying the game in 1875 and 1900 with equal brutality, still less do they invite sympathy. But his broad, sweeping generalizations are not entirely persuasive, nor are they supported by his vast scholarship. The views of Genovese, et al., are based on more than nostalgia, Southern moonlight and the heady perfume of magnolias.

Paul David Nelson is the Julian-Van Dusen Professor of American History at Berea College, Berea, KY. He is the author of eight books and numerous articles and essays on the American Revolution. His latest book, Francis Rawdon-Hastings, Marquess of Hastings: Soldier, Peer of the Realm, Governor General of India, is forthcoming at Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.