

## A New History of the American South

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## Review

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**Byrne, Frank J.**

**Brundage, Fitzhugh W.**, ed., and **Laura F. Edwards** and **Jon F. Sensbach**, associate eds., *A New History of the American South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2023. HARDCOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9781469626659 pp. 616.

*A New History of the American South* is an ambitious collection of fifteen essays written by a range of distinguished scholars that explore the history of the region from its earliest inhabitants to the dawn of the twenty-first century. Broken into three roughly equal parts, the chapters proceed in chronological order. Editor W. Fitzhugh Brundage's introduction deftly lays the foundation for the collection by grappling with the challenges even defining the region over time as well as introducing several of the themes that bind this collection into a coherent whole. These include the often-overlooked diversity across the South in terms of its population, culture, and political economy. Brundage also underscores how the collection highlights the "wrenching transformations" that repeatedly shook the South and put the lie to the stereotype of the region as "hidebound, as steeped in timeless traditions" (p. x). Yet another current that appears in most chapters is how local circumstances at any given time often played a larger role than any state or regional factors in shaping its history. While the tone and approach of these essays naturally vary, they are consistently well-written and insightful.

Part I of *A New History of the American South* is titled "Precontact to the American Revolution." Robbie Etheridge begins by describing the vast array of Native peoples who lived in what is today the American South. Covering several thousand years requires Etheridge to move

quickly but how the people in these societies negotiated trade, war, the transition to agriculture, and finally contact with Europeans, highlights their agency and power in revealing ways. In chapter two James D. Rice focuses upon Native American and European rivalries in the seventeenth-century South. In particular, Rice offers an excellent summary of Spanish Florida and Spain's geopolitical position there and across the Caribbean. Jon S. Sensbach's chapter "Indians, Africans, and Europeans in the Early South" builds upon Rice by analyzing the tensions and violence between the Spanish and English in the Southeast and the implications this had for Native people across the region. Of course a critical transformation during this time is the growth of the enslaved African population in coastal areas from Maryland to Florida. Michael A. McDonnell's essay on the South during the American Revolution summarizes how the region's experience differed from that of the northern colonies. The unique diversity found in the South once again comes across as McDonnell details how enslaved Africans and Native peoples fomented and negotiated much of the wrenching changes in late eighteenth-century North America.

Readers of the *Civil War Book Review* will probably find Part II, "The Long Nineteenth Century," of most interest. The section does not disappoint. Despite using Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* as its structural conceit, Laura F. Edwards' chapter on the South during the Early Republic moves beyond a study of political leaders, "widening the perspective" that illustrates a region "defined as much by continuity as by change" (p. 165). A particular strength of this essay is how it illustrates the tensions between local control versus state or federal authority. Chapters by Martha S. Jones and Kate Masur describe the hardening of sectional boundaries that eventually led to the Civil War. It was at this time, as Jones notes, that "the South was a designation that associated the region with proslavery law, the politics of white

supremacy, and ways of life that promoted both” (p. 200). Gregory P. Downs’s essay, “The Southern Nations, 1860-1880,” offers an excellent overview of southern society and politics during and after the Civil War. Divides within the South, be they racial, economic, gender, or political continues to be a major theme in this chapter. Readers interested in pure military history will probably be disappointed. Scott Reynolds Nelson’s chapter, “The Bourbon South,” tells the story of two vastly different Henry Grady’s, one the prominent “New South” booster and the other a carpenter, to describe the economic change and racial turmoil that in many respects made the region distinct from the North but also demonstrates that “there was no common South” (p. 325).

The final part of *A New History of the American South* includes six chapters that examine how the region did or did not change over the course of the twentieth century. Essays by Kari Frederickson, “The South and the State in the Twentieth Century,” and Peter A. Coclanis, “The Southern Economy in the Long Twentieth Century,” are particularly noteworthy for describing how segregation, political choices, and an economic order still shaped by a plantation system impeded the region’s development in sundry ways. The unique, and once again varying, role religion has played in southern culture is detailed in an essay by Paul Harvey. Echoing most of the other contributors to this volume, Harvey points to the “deep divisions” that “continue to define race and religion in the South and the rest of America” (p. 462).

*A New History of the American South* will appeal to those interested in a region of the country that many of us still struggle to understand. General readers will appreciate its accessibility and the verve with which it is written. Graduate students, in particular, will benefit from the relative brevity of these essays and the questions they address. Specialists will not find much new interpretive ground being plowed in their respective areas. There are some editing

choices that some may find frustrating. Several essays incorporate sub-headings while others do not. In order to make the book clearer, the editors chose to only cite direct quotes. While this does make these essays more readable, there is something a bit unsettling about a thirty-page chapter with three endnotes. Those unacquainted with the relevant historiography will have difficulty appreciating how these essays engage the literature they summarize. However, this does not seem to have been one of the goals of this work. Rather those seeking a well-written, capacious overview of the South rooted in the recent scholarship will find much to admire in *A New History of the American South*.

Frank Byrne, a professor of history at the State University of New York at Oswego, is author of *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865*. His current project focuses on William Porcher Miles and southern conservative thought in the late nineteenth century.