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Notes and Comments

On C. Vann Woodward

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C. Vann Woodward, who is ninety on 13 November 1998, is the author of perhaps the most famous work of history every to have rocked the Southern United States. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, first presented as the James W. Richard lectures at the University of Virginia, appeared in 1955: only one year after the Supreme Court's celebrated decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, that racially segregated schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because separate facilities were "inherently unequal." White Southern publicists and politicians stormed and raged that racial separation was in the order of nature, the segregation laws were from time immemorial, and that Chief Justice Warren ought to be impeached; and now came a soft-spoken, professionally respected historian, himself from Arkansas, to tell them, and, worse, to tell the world, that the South's universal segregation or "Jim Crow" laws in fact dated at most only from the 1890s – well within the lifetime of many who were still expressing their opinions.

The controversy was intense and prolonged. And it came to involve less politically motivated questions of historical interpretation because Woodward was often taken to have been referring more generally to the substance of race relations as well as the segregation laws. He accepted that some of his formulations required reconsideration, and the book, in constant demand, went through several revisions and four editions, the last appearing in 1974. But the core of the argument has survived to leave an enduring legacy in Southern historiography.

Vann Woodward had previously earned the high esteem of the profession for his combination of painstaking research and independent judgment, first revealed in his biography of Tom Watson, the Georgia populist leader who had begun by reaching out for racial co-operation among Southern farmers white and black, but later went to the Senate as a violent racist; Woodward had also produced a revealing study of the complex compromise which settled the disputed election of 1876, withdrew Union forces from the ex-Confederate states and abandoned

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the Southern freedmen (and women) to white supremacy. There followed a major contribution to the History of the South series, his massive *Origins of the New South*. This ranks as one of the fundamental contributions in any field of American history of the early post-war period. In a long retrospect, the contours of Union policy and Southern race relations gradually acquired an appearance of inevitability. One of Woodward's intellectually liberating contributions was to re-open the past reality of alternative directions; he reminds us of opportunities lost, of roads that could have been but were not taken. A note of understandable sadness makes its presence known in his widely read essay, *The Irony of Southern History*, in which he drew not only his section's but the nation's attention to a neglected truth: that the standard popular portrayal of American history as a triumphal march failed to reflect the experience of the South. The states of the Confederacy could not join in the American boast of never having been defeated. If America was different, the South was psychologically different in a different way. This essay, published with others in *The Burden of Southern History*, reflected the influence of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's trenchant anti-triumphalist warning to his countrymen in *The Irony of American History*. (That book was noticed with respect, but not absorbed; if it has been, the Vietnam imbroglio might have been averted.) Woodward's sense of sharing in the burdens of the South had reminded readers nation-wide of the credentials of his own Southern identity.

His physical strength (he has been a powerful tennis player, who in his seventies had carried his wife from a burning house) is matched by the steady clarity of his judgment. When so many others wavered, he was never willing to lower his academic standards to accommodate the demands of radical protest. This is not a paradox. It was never his aim to write or teach history at a different level for causes he believed in. His basic disposition, in some ways traditional, has always been marked by a controlling and implacable sense of social justice, which has always meant racial justice. It is significant of the quality of his loyalties (possibly a Southern more than a Northern trait) that although he differed deeply from his close friend Richard Hofstadter's unsympathetic interpretation of the Populists, he felt free to criticize Hofstadter after the latter's death only because he had explained his differences during Hofstadter's lifetime.

It has fallen to Vann Woodward to endure more losses of those near and dear to him than is visited on most men or women. Perhaps it might be too much to call him, as Hamlet says of Horatio, "A man that fortune's buffets and rewards / Hath ta'en with equal thanks." Yet he has retained throughout his tribulations a rare quality: a certain essentially benign and steadying calm, a gift which has been known to have a healing effect on other troubled souls.

Good and well written history, whether ancient, medieval or modern, western, eastern or African, is always in some positive sense "relevant." But, when the historian's inspiration springs from recent events or from his (her) sense of an urgent need for informed comment on matters of current policy, the demands of a quasi-political relevance can easily impinge on professional integrity. Vann Woodward is and has always been a profoundly committed historian; as such, he has allowed his own standpoint to be visible without permitting it to compromise his professional balance. Some of his interpretations have no doubt submitted to

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revision with the advance of research – influenced often enough by his own fearless originality; that must be the eventual fate of almost all historical writing which dares to upset received opinion. But there is a profound sense in which a great historian's influence survives his revisions. That achievement, we can say by way of a ninetieth-birthday tribute, can be ascribed to C. Vann Woodward.

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