

Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History. By C. Vann Woodward. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986. Pp. x, 158. \$12.95.

This elegant, witty, and cagy book falls into no established category. Part intellectual autobiography, part historiographical debate, part reflections on a career of engaged accomplishment, *Thinking Back* seems to me, as a student and friend of Woodward's and therefore not entirely nonpartisan, an essay of irresistible charm. Woodward's job during World War II was making sense of naval battle reports. Here, he summarizes intellectual conflicts, with an eye to shaping the terms in which his life's work will ultimately be seen. Too subtle to engage in straightforward apologetics, he is more concerned with explaining the circumstances in which his major books were produced and with making clear what he intended, generally and in detail, in each. Disarmingly generous to some critics, especially younger ones, he is coolly withering toward others.

Woodward's dissertation and first book, a biography of the Populist Tom Watson, was a product of the Depression South. A budding liberal southern intellectual in revolt against regional tradition and its attendant historical consensus, Woodward had completed four chapters before he began his unedifying graduate training at Chapel Hill. The decade's stark poverty, as well as his acquaintance with prominent liberals and leftists of both races, and with union organizers, sharecroppers, and lintheads, encouraged what he now believes was a somewhat overgenerous treatment of the young Watson and his third-party supporters. He does not, however, retreat from his view that Watson turned from idealistic Jekyll to demagogic Hyde as a result of frustration with the Establishment's suppression of the Populists.

After toying with projects for biographies of several other southern radicals and of the socialist leader Eugene Debs, Woodward received the assignment, with title and period already fixed, to write what became his most profound book, *Origins of the New South*. Existing monographs on the subject being at once extremely thin and mostly misleading, he created the period as a field of historical study. Finding more conflict and less

consensus, more oppression and less paternalism, and more continuity between Redemption and Reconstruction and less with the Antebellum South than previous historians had, he was surprised that his indictment of the period's politicians and industrialists met with such ready acceptance when it came out and for many years after. While acknowledging an overemphasis on economic motives in *Origins* and its companion volume on the Compromise of 1877, *Reunion and Reaction*, Woodward, in a preview of a forthcoming book, convincingly rejects recent attempts by scholars on all sides of the political spectrum to resurrect the "central theme" of the unity and persistence of the White South.

A sketch of the history of segregation written for the NAACP's use in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* formed the basis of a series of lectures at the University of Virginia in 1954. Published as *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, the book became the means through which hundreds of thousands of students were introduced to the history of race relations in America, the fount of Woodward's popular reputation, and the subject of more controversy than any of his other works. Having reviewed and responded to the debate several times before, Woodward is content now merely to note new contributions by, for instance, John W. Cell and Joel Williamson, without really telling the reader what he thinks of them. While understandable, this is rather disappointing.

Comparative history has been for Woodward the non-chronometric equivalent of the explicit counterfactual, and he has not only pushed other historians to develop comparisons, but has employed such arguments continually in his own work—the youthfully optimistic and older, soured Populists, the antebellum and postbellum regimes, the northern and southern United States, emancipations throughout the world, the age of segregation and its predecessors, the first and second Reconstructions, America in the eras of no military threat and continuous preparation for war. As the last three of these comparisons make especially clear, he has often employed analyses of the past to inform the present.

Underneath his graceful prose, ironic tone, rhetorical commitment to the narrative mode, and declared kinship with novelists, Woodward, as his policy-oriented comparativist impulses show, is at heart a social scientist.

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