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The Southerner as Historian (and Vice Versa)

[Joseph R. Stromberg](#) – 04/30/08

A review of Clyde N. Wilson's [Defending Dixie: Essays in Southern History and Culture](#) (Columbia, SC: The Foundation for American Education, 2005), 370 pages, \$24.95.

Publication of a second collection of essays by Southern historian Clyde N. Wilson—*Defending Dixie: Essays in Southern History and Culture*[1]—provides us with an occasion for surveying Wilson's larger contributions to American and Southern history, and to the conservative movement. A native of North Carolina in the general neighborhood of Greensboro, Dr. Wilson is a descendant of Confederates on both sides of his family. A South Carolinian by current address and allegiance, he nonetheless occasionally defends the humility of his native state in relation to its two neighbors. A little intra-Southern rivalry is nothing new.

The editor's introduction to Wilson's essay "Citizens or Subjects?" in the now classic *New Right Papers* (1982) states that Wilson "has seen America from many angles—he was a textile mill worker, police reporter, and is presently Associate Professor of History at the University of South Carolina." [2] Indeed, Wilson tells one story from his days as a police reporter in Charlotte, NC, in a 1991 essay republished in his first collection of essays. [3]

Dr. Wilson did his graduate work in history in the late 1960s at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His dissertation under Dr. Joel Williamson, published in 2002 as *Carolina Cavalier*, deals with the life, career, and thought of James

Johnston Pettigrew. Pettigrew, a North Carolinian who made his way into the upper circles of Charleston and died as a Confederate Brigadier General, proved an ideal subject for an examination of the intellectual life of the Old South. As a young man Pettigrew studied for several years in Berlin, but found himself drawn culturally to Southern Europe, to Italy and especially to Spain.

Chapter 16 of *Carolina Cavalier*, “The Mind and Heart of a Carolinian,” is an insightful and culturally sensitive treatment of Pettigrew’s relation to Latin cultures. Wilson notes Pettigrew’s rejection of Yankee intellectuals’ reigning cult of “Anglo-Saxonism” and his contrasting admiration for Spanish localism and decentralization.[4] The chapter is thus an important excursion into nineteenth-century Southerners’ actual—and possible—affinities for other cultures.[5]

At Chapel Hill, Wilson met the historian and political theorist Sam Francis and classicist Tom Fleming. The Chapel Hill Conservative Club was one result of these friendships and the three went on to become leading lights of the New Right of the late 1970s and early ’80s, a movement later repositioned, with some change in personnel and orientation, as “**paleo-conservatism.**” The group, as Wilson notes, strongly overlaps “the present board of editors of *Chronicles* magazine”.

Wilson became a Professor of History at University of South Carolina, and by the late 1970s, he was working as chief editor of the papers of John C. Calhoun. Here I add that his prefaces to each succeeding volume are nicely focused essays on Calhoun and his times. In the later 1980s, Wilson and Fleming, presently the editor of *Chronicles*, co-founded the *Southern Partisan*, and Wilson stayed through the early phase of the magazine.

By now, Wilson’s writing was appearing all over the place—in *Modern Age*, *Continuity*, *Chronicles*, and elsewhere. In 1982, he contributed to *The New Right Papers*, the manifesto, as it were, of a new tendency on the Right, and in 1985 edited *Why the South Will Survive*, by “Fifteen Southerners”—a collection commemor-

ating and extending the legacy of the Vanderbilt Agrarians. In addition to turning out an able and dedicated cadre of Southern-oriented historians, Wilson has played a major role in the educational projects of the League of the South as well as those of the Abbeville Institute.

A collection of Wilson's essays appeared as *From Union to Empire: Essays in the Jeffersonian Tradition* in 2003, followed by a second collection in 2006, *Defending Dixie: Essays in Southern History and Culture*. In this approach to Wilson's historical work, I shall be culling themes from both volumes, indiscriminately, since each contains essays written between the 1970s and the present.

Conservatism and Enemies of the Lasting Things

Taking the long view of Wilson's work and writings, one sees the gradual emergence of a distinct conservative worldview grounded in an intelligent and self-disciplined Southern nationalism. From this worldview certain large generalizations have arisen, such as Wilson's oft-repeated quip (paraphrasing R. L. Dabney) that, "Northern conservatives have never conserved anything." Another trait is a deep sympathy for populism and actually existing American—and Southern—peoples.

Wilson began as a keen participant in the synthetic, post-World War II conservative movement outlined by George Nash, with its "fusion" of tradition, free markets, and anticommunism. His disillusionment with the conservative Establishment can be traced in his essays. This disillusion—first gradual and then galloping—led to various heated exchanges from the early 1980s on, as the emptiness and nonfeasance of the "Reagan Revolution" became clear to all who would see. An exchange with Harry Jaffa, dean of the Straussian Lincolnites, in *National Review* was notable, and Wilson began warning against those Johnny-come-latelies, the neo-conservatives, quite early. In 1986, he wrote with respect to those worthies: "The offensives of radicalism have driven vast

herds of liberals... into our territories. These refugees now speak in our name, but the language they speak is the same one they always spoke.”

As the cure for our major discontents, Wilson recommends American republicanism, properly understood, as the means of preserving both freedom and order. Throughout his writings there is an implicit social philosophy in which the relations between communities and individuals are situated in concrete history. For Wilson, virtue—the character traits necessary to sustain a republic—precede and are a precondition of such appliances as free markets. Thus: “The key to republicanism, then, is the precedence of the community over the government.”

Such insights into liberty and community might drag us toward unalloyed libertarianism, if we cared to go there. But as Wilson wrote in 1982, “Libertarianism, while encompassing some respectable criticism and high ideals, is an insufficient philosophy...” This is because “economic problems are not technical problems but problems of morale, that is, essentially moral problems.” Further: “Individual liberty flourishes not in a vacuum but is a possibility within a particular social context.”

Wilson has a definite philosophy for the working historian. In it, history turns as much on imagination and creative engagement as on collections of raw data, statistics, and the like. It ought never to become a mere vehicle for telling the story of supposedly inevitable social forces working themselves out in time. There are real people in the past, with ideas, families, social relations, interests, etc. Historians devote themselves to fleshing out the “objective record” or developing “symbolization”—an exposition of values and ideas characteristic of a particular place and time; “the greatest historians are those who synthesize the two separate functions”—a distinction calling to mind Page Smith’s contrast between “existential” and “symbolic” history.

For Wilson, “Civilization is primarily a spiritual phenomenon” and “begins with the successful combining of the universal with the particularities of time, place and people. Such a

combination results in forms of behavior, standards... revealed in both high and folk culture. . . .”. The formulation here closely resembles Professor Claes Ryn’s notion of “value-centered historicism,” and we are not surprised that in the next essay, Wilson favorably reviews Ryn’s book on *The New Jacobinism*.

The real people of the past are not necessarily very much “like us.” Historians’ treatment of Thomas Jefferson is a case in point and a sore spot for Wilson. Jefferson correctly understood the source of American populism and the notion of periodic “revolutions” in the sense of restorations of a functioning social order (For Wilson’s view of Jefferson’s changing reputation, see 2003, pp. 31–45.)

Wilson can write evaluations of other historians which are balanced and sympathetic as well as critical. On the other hand, he has little patience with historians whose work seems completely given over to replicating and perpetuating the unexamined myths of American (U.S.) nationalism, Official Liberalism, multiculturalism, etc.[6]

Thus, he has kind words here and there for C. Vann Woodward, dean of Southern liberal historians, not merely because the latter’s Southerness mitigates his modern liberalism but also because Woodward, at his best, can be a very insightful historian.

On the other hand, the late Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. was in Wilson’s view, merely a pamphleteer. An “imperial penman,” Schlesinger wrote partisan tracts for the New Deal, helped launch Cold War liberalism—the immediate source of neo-conservatism—and deigned to warn us against “the imperial presidency” only when Richard Nixon held the office, rather than Schlesinger’s friends the Kennedys.

American historians have tended to be carriers of the union-nationalism forged in the war of 1861–1865. That nationalism, nurtured in New England and tempered in the flames of Atlanta and Columbia, “long furnished the matrix for American historical writing,” down through the work of Frederick Jackson Turner and

the Progressive historians of the early twentieth century. Post-national or multicultural historical writing is, in Wilson's view, "a product of the state and not of the culture."

The Nature and Status of "Myth"

To attack an allegedly "false and pernicious 'Lost Cause Myth,'" as Professors Gary Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan do, "confuses books with life." Instead, Wilson holds, myth "is a fundamental human way of understanding human experience. It is found in all times and places. It is neither true nor false. It is art." Further: "A 'myth' like the 'Lost Cause' surely does not spread so widely and last so persistently without a basis in 'fact.'"

Wilson writes elsewhere that myth is "an imaginative conception formulating a social truth in a way that is not counter-factual but supra-factual." The South's claim to be a separate civilization or nation arises in part precisely because of this body of mythic material, sometimes reduced to writing. Understanding the South's self-portrait, including its limitations, is a good portion of Wilson's work.

Wilson's concern with the real sources of Southern consciousness finds expression in his views on the Confederate flag. Ever the empiricist where such matters are concerned, he observes that his father and uncles came back from World War II "with stories of how Southerners... were denigrated and ridiculed by conscripted urbanites for their speech, manners, attitudes.... This was the beginning of their sectional consciousness.... It was after this that we began to display the flag from the front porch... ten years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, and our actions had nothing to do with the Dixiecrat movement or with football".

The 2006 collection of Wilson's essays gives much space to Southern literature, and these are some of the book's most interesting essays. There are pieces on Albert Taylor Bledsoe, William Gilmore Simms, Johnson Jones Hooper, Henry Timrod,

Thomas Nelson Page, Cleanth Brooks on William Faulkner, Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe, George Garrett, and H. L. Mencken. He takes up this thread again with an appreciation of Mel Bradford's work. The thumbnail sketches of literary figures in their context remind one of the essays of Dutch historian Pieter Geyl, as do Wilson's essays on historians.

In a piece comparing the Nashville Agrarians and the Chapel Hill sociologists—Howard Odum, Rupert Vance, et al.—Wilson is surprisingly friendly to the latter. These were Southern sociologists, after all; they wrote well, and for all their liberal politics, were intent on creating a regional sociology. Wilson implies that there was potential here for a liberal variant of Southern nationalism. I have to say that I have wondered as much myself, and I hope Dr. Wilson or someone else will return to this idea.

While sorting out realistic myth from dubious myth, Wilson treats the merits and the limitations of Grady McWhiney's thesis of a Celtic South. He urges that the Old South was "a highly viable synthesis of both the [Celtic] Cracker and the Cavalier.... Both components... preferred honor to utility". Interestingly, this last point reminds us of why Pettigrew preferred Spanish to Anglo-Saxon culture.

Not All Myths Are Equal

Of course not all myth encapsulates genuine social truth. Hence Wilson's sustained attacks on Yankee mythology as ill-founded and not *our* myth, anyway. A reader unaccustomed to this sort of thing might see that Wilson as running a mean-spirited, arbitrary campaign against New England's intellectual producers. But if those men and women did in fact successfully claim and monopolize American cultural life, the distortions they introduced are real—not just where the South is concerned—and stand in need of correction.

Interestingly, Wilson has some praise for the “myth” of American “exceptionalism.” In the first decades of the Republic, he writes, that outlook was “historically based and laced with realism and practicality”. We need not confuse early expressions of that idea with later proclamations of a universal American mission to improve the world, by force if necessary.

In pursuing the history of American cultural ideals and leading myths, Wilson has a Southern Alternative always in view. His Virginia-centric visions of history, whatever its limits, is likely to be far more realistic than the myths about the American “nation” cobbled together for us in Boston and Concord (see “The Virginian Roots of American Values” [1990], in Wilson, 2003, pp. 48–52).

The World We Have Lost

Wilson’s work has left him armed with a number of dangerous critical instruments, including the Virginia-centrism just named, which he employs with good results. From this unusual perspective, he is well equipped to see the actual flaws of the Constitution and the rationalistic idiocies of Little Jimmy Madison. He sees that the Federalists’ big-old institutional devices did not conserve, that the fabled “checks and balances do not work. They ceased to work a long time ago.”

The appalling American presidency is a case in point: “In constructing the office,” the Federalists “violated all the wisdom of American experience.” As for constitutional “original intent,” Wilson is skeptical unless the intentions of the ratifying state conventions get primary billing. “The Constitution can be interpreted finally only historically, not juridically.” Thus Wilson will not fall victim to the phony “originalism” currently offered by Official Conservatives—Straussians, Neocons, and civilian militarist lawyers (John Yoo, Alberto Gonzales, and others). He has already spotted the remote ancestor of their doctrines, Jacksonianism, which stood for two things, “an insistence on maximum presidential prerogative” and “firm opposition to

abolitionism.” True, today’s Homeric glorifiers of the Unitary Executive profess global abolitionism via U.S. military aggression; but this does not prove their commitment to presidential dictatorship right, and it certainly does not make them “conservative.”

In America, Wilson writes, the masses have been conservative; it is the elites that have been radical. The story of our vaunted two-party system has always been about struggles for and against mercantilist special privilege. Recurring ideological manias have complicated a political situation already undermined by mercantilism.

New England elites provided the radical ideology—first, Puritanism—a “strange amalgam of abstract moralism and ruthless utilitarianism.” New England and German intellectuals reacted badly to the French Revolution; neither reaction was sound, and when they fell together in Transcendentalism and in the Free Soil and Republican parties, the Puritans’ “City upon a Hill” became “a new temple of universalized aggressive Americanism.” Wilson traces the ideological stages of American nationalist messianism from Lincoln’s mystical unionism through TR’s Progressive nationalism, and on to post-World War II universalist nationalism.

Oddly, messianism and mercantilism were quite compatible in practice. Naturally, this brings us to another of Wilson’s themes, the Republican Party, which “never had favored an open economy. By free enterprise it meant private ownership with government support and subsidy.” By tying themselves to that “contaminated vessel,” conservatives have ensured the defeat of their ideas.

What Is To Be Done?

For Wilson, the “deep moral problem of modern society” is “an inability to care about posterity and act for the future.” If we were inclined to act, what could we do? First, we would use the states—they “are what we have got.” Next, we would overthrow

the winner-take-all system for counting electoral votes; it only benefits politicians. Third, we would “derail the present party system.”

Reviewing two books on Southern agricultural history, Wilson endorses the demand of some Agrarians in the 1930s, for an American land reform. This entailed that, “unemployed or underemployed families be staked to a homestead, even subsidized, to remain on the land and produce.” Such a program would be heresy to Beltway conservatives and libertarians, and so much the worse for them.

The Contours of Southern History

Southerners founded the Republic before falling victim to the American Empire. Who better, then, than a Southern historian to discuss such fundamental issues? Wilson’s Southernness gives him a perspective outside the received national-liberalism of the historical guild. Unlike Southern liberal historians who “retreat into irony” when criticizing American society, Wilson takes matters head on. The results are there for those who will read him; they might well begin with “The Jeffersonian Conservative Tradition,” a classic essay first published in 1969.

Wilson is a Southern partisan in the best sense. In this, he somewhat resembles the tireless Lyon Gardiner Tyler, who defended the South as editor of the *William and Mary Quarterly* in its first decade, and thereafter in *Tyler’s Magazine of History and Genealogy*. The vocation has chosen Wilson, as much as he has chosen it.

Notes

1. Clyde N. Wilson, *Defending Dixie: Essays in Southern History and Culture* (Columbia, SC: Foundation for American Education, 2006), with an introduction by

Thomas H. Landess, ix–xii.

2. Robert W. Whitaker, ed., *The New Right Papers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 106.
3. "Police Brutality" in Clyde N. Wilson, *From Union to Empire: Essays in the Jeffersonian Tradition* ;(Columbia, SC: Foundation for American Education, 2003), 243–45.
4. Clyde N. Wilson, *Carolina Cavalier: The Life and Mind of James Johnston Pettigrew* (Rockford, IL: Chronicles Press, 2002), 206–37.; For a similar appreciation of Spanish localism, see Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "Donoso Cortés and the Meaning of Power," *Intercollegiate Review*, 3, 3 (January-February 1967), 109–27.
5. On the broader point, see especially, C. Vann Woodward, "The Southern Ethic in a Puritan World" (1968), reprinted in *American Counterpoint* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1971), 13–46.; The work of Eugene D. Genovese and the Mexican historian Leopoldo Zea is also suggestive in this area.
6. A term I have coined on the model of Tsarist "official nationalism."

END