

That Other Country

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Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1585-1763, by Richard Beale Davis, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978. 3 volumes, xxxi + 1810 pp. \$60.00.

ONLY A FEW TIMES in a generation of scholarship is there produced a study of such unmistakable importance that the reviewers begin to speak at the very outset of critical evaluation of its impact not on the decades but on the centuries to come. The unlikelihood of such immediate distinction is further compounded when the work in question tells us something contrary to the rigid intellectual dogmas of our day: something scandalous, and clearly meant as a challenge to such fashionable opinions. Such is the case with Richard Beale Davis' *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1585-1763*. It is therefore all the more astonishing that its magisterial authority has been acknowledged with the National Book Award for History, a prize usually reserved for scholarship in better conformity with the assumptions of the regnant ideology. Yet Professor Davis has only begun to receive all the credit he deserves. And especially is this the case among his own people in the South. For he has done nothing less than turn upside down the prevailing "Yankee" myth of American beginnings upon which the radical reading of our common history depends.

Though this is a work of almost two-thousand pages, its tone and its announced objectives are modest. In ten chapters Davis undertakes to "tell us about the South" in its infancy and youth, during the 175 years following the establishment of Sir Walter Raleigh's colony at Roanoke. These intentions

along with a set of informative questions, plus an identification of his rhetorical adversaries—the intellectual historians who have for centuries confused the New England heritage with our national prescription—lead the way into graceful and inclusive discussions of narratives of exploration and discovery, promotional literature, early Southern reaction to the presence of the American Indian, early educational practice, the printed word in the original South, the development of science and technology, fine arts in the life of the colonial South, early Southern literature, and the colonial origins of Southern politics, law, and oratory. All of this plenitude is followed by a quiet epilogue on the indubitable implications only touched upon in the antecedent expositions. The results are overwhelming. Davis clearly expects that future research will supplement what he has written. He invites his successors to continue where he has left off. Indeed, annotated bibliographies are provided for each division of the study to assist those who come after him. Yet he may rightfully take satisfaction in the thought that though others may add to his evidence or expand upon his gloss, they will not supplant what he has achieved.

The case made in these three volumes is subtle and multifaceted. It is not possible in a review of even a reasonable length to comment upon each of its stages or component parts. I will mention here only those which I take to be most salient and provocative. To begin, Davis demonstrates that, from first settlement, the South had a culture and a civilization markedly different from that of New England. And that, though not in conflict with its English inheritance as were the Puritans, the result of the Southern errand

into the wilderness was not precisely according to the model of the English rural society it aspired to replicate in a new setting. It was instead a modification brought into being by necessary adjustment to circumstance. Though not a New Jerusalem, neither was it a Kent nor a Wessex. Climate, vegetation, the aborigine, and simple distance from home prevented all such confusion. Also the presence of many elements in the colonial population not frequently found in the English countryside: French and Swiss and German, Scots, Irish, and Welsh. And then of course the Negro. Reinforcing all of this was the powerful experience of space, the remoteness of other human beings, and of the necessity for building so many things, where very little was simply to be inherited. Davis puts finally to rest simplistic readings of the Southern character which trace everything that makes it distinctive to the presence of slavery. The South thought and acted in its own way *before* the peculiar institution was much developed within its territories. Colonial Southerners did not agonize in a fever of conscience over the injustice of the Negroes' situation in bondage. Contrary to recent popular misconception, intense moral outrage at slavery was almost unheard of anywhere in the European colonies in the New World until the late eighteenth century. And remained decidedly uncommon even then. The South embraced slavery in its colonial nomenclature because Negro slavery seemed to fit the region's needs and because the South had achieved a certain mindset through the combination of its intellectual inheritance brought over from the England of the Renaissance with the special conditions of the New World. Spain and Portugal and the islands of the Caribbean had set for it a practical example. One of the distinctions of Davis' book is what little importance he attaches to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century preoccupation with these questions. With anachronism Davis will have nothing to do. As he writes, ". . . it is difficult to see that in the slave colonies any consistent rationale if indeed any at all developed in defense of the peculiar institution, simply because there was

not sufficiently powerful an attack upon it to warrant or require a defense."

But if the colonial South was a variant version of rural England, subsisting without a nobility and without a strong religious establishment, living with the innovation of black slavery that, despite an un-English originality, "was not a major influence" on its "thinking," what habits of mind strong enough to mark the region's history for over three-hundred years could be expected to develop in its context? Why did they so develop and so long survive in this particular setting? Davis expands upon a few of these persistent components of the Southern mind in his peroration—a joy in the gifts of life, a horror of ideology, a penchant for arguments based on precedent and history (from "circumstances"), and a certain reasonableness or flexibility in the approach to problems. These qualities have an intelligible relationship, and may be expected to co-operate to produce a unified effect. When operating in unison, they foster what Allen Tate described as a "rhetorical" (as opposed to a "dialectical") view of the world: a vision of things according to which certain questions are settled before any serious deliberation concerning a preferred course of conduct may begin.

Prudent, prescriptive, and somewhat worldly people, immigrants who have come to cultivate the land and enjoy the bounty of nature through an adaptation of familiar forms, are not likely to employ what the older rhetoricians called the *oraculum* (*i.e.*, "talking for the gods") or to make broad general statements concerning universal human nature—statements that require a root-and-branch reformation of established modes and orders—in approaching practical questions of policy. For such people, reality tends to be external, not subjective. They are like Rooney Lee, the satiric target of Davis' *bête noire*, Henry Adams, in that Brahmin's autobiography. But as Adams refused to believe, deliberative discourse—non-theoretical discussion of buildings to be built, crops to be harvested, soldiers to be led, and problems to be solved—is no less "cerebration" than

endless and disruptive prying into "first principles" and big "ideas"—the Puritan habit of mind that is inappropriate in a constitutional régime. Settled questions need not be belabored. Yet though they may not choose to speak of these things, it is not to be expected that extroverted, non-theoretical men will forfeit the comfort available in an *inherited* religion or an *inherited* political identity once they have settled in a strange and dangerous new land. Indeed, their deepest commitments are likely to remain unannounced. Though not philosophical, they will accept their roles as Christians and Englishmen *on authority*; and then, if necessary, be prepared, out of the same attitude, to make a revolution if that authority is challenged from within or without.

The antiquity of this part of the Southern character is a subsidiary theme in many of Davis' long chapters on separate preoccupations of the colonial South. That vigorous mental activity may result in gardening, architecture, agricultural science, and narratives of men and manners instead of metaphysics and spiritual autobiography is a thesis of this work. Yet it is nowhere more in evidence than in the chapters on early Southern historians, Southern reading, and the region's passion for law, oratory, and constitutional theory. Concerning the legalistic, prescriptive, and English origins of the South's decision to participate in the American Revolution, Davis is very clear. Unlike their counterparts in the other colonies, the public men of the early South often received an English education, concluding with a term of study in the Inns of Court. "It was a British sense of history, a British knowledge of the lessons of classical antiquity and of what the British believed to be Anglo-Saxon liberties, that the legally trained political leaders of America employed against what they considered arbitrary and to them un-English oppression." Almost three-quarters of these English-trained American lawyers were from the South. And many other Southern attorneys got their education from members of the Middle or Inner Temple. New England had only a handful of trained English lawyers

throughout her colonial history. Her constitutional thought, coming from men who had rejected much of the prescription or who could not know it, was therefore of another kind. On the fulcrum of this distinction between Old Whig Southern legalism and the neo-Puritan calculus of the radical Whigs, much of subsequent American history has turned. *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1585-1763* should become required reading for the students of American politics who prefer to project into our national beginnings a great departure from the English principles of the Glorious Revolution. They will find there a marvelous correction for their stubborn ignorance.

Davis' analysis of the South is a veritable treasure trove of seemingly curious and unconnected information. The essays on special subjects may be read on their own. They stand as separate achievements. Yet they also work together. The University of Tennessee professor's work has been building toward a comprehensive view of the colonial South for the past thirty years. And that overview undergirds each of the chapters in his *magnum opus*. His discussion of the emergence of a distinctively Southern view of the American Indians is noteworthy in its own right. The colonial South knew the red man better than its neighbor to the north. It neither sentimentalized nor systematically demonized the native American. And often studied him as a human phenomenon even while it dealt with the problems of living in his proximity. These comments on the Indian relate directly to Davis' observations on Southern naturalists and on the narratives of exploration and settlement. And also to his essays on the arts and sciences in the South. There the prudent, practical, convenient, curious, and comfortable side of the Southern temper is examined in its earliest expressions. A regional social science and the skills that decorate life and make use of the providential things emerge in their connection with these colonial Southern concerns. The historians and men of letters too often ignore such evidence. What Davis calls the "rationalism" of the Southern mind is really nothing more than an openness to

experience, a freedom from "a priori" attitudes, an ability to learn. And the "hedonism" to which he refers is only a delight in the variety of creation, an acceptance of the given order of things as a gift of God. Both postures have an essentially religious implication. The evidence for these attitudes is not merely in *belle lettres* and in political writing and speech. As Davis insists, the region's "polemical writers and legislative statesmen historically wrote and acted from a deeper cultural context than politics and law and agriculture. . . ." Yet despite that fact, our author follows a natural order of importance in concluding with those portions of his subject. I must treat now in some detail his last two chapters, "Literature, Principally Belletristic" and "The Public Mind: Politics and Economics, Law and Oratory"; and his essays on Southern religion and religious writings, which appear in his second volume.

On the latter subject, Davis is once again largely corrective. The spiritual life of the colonial South was generally orthodox. Thoroughgoing deism was actually quite unusual. And the Great Awakening had its warmest reception below the Susquehanna. Yet the sermons and the religious literature of the early South reflect a plural establishment more concerned with questions of churchmanship and Christian duty than with doctrinal dispute. All of which is to say that religion in the colonial South was a piece with other aspects of the region's life. The composite Southern church, even though its roots were Anglican, was Protestant and anticlerical: a church of the squires, the elders, the patriarchs—of the clans. Yet despite these distinctive traits, it offered scope for private piety, for churchmanship, and for reasonable discussion of questions important to the practice and survival of the faith. It was finally not so Erastian as to be vulnerable to the varieties of modernism that plagued the New England of the late Enlightenment. It was premillennial, antimillenarian. And it restrained the vanity of private speculation, even with many Southerners living outside its official organization.

Early Southern letters, in all of its ne-

glected multiplicity, is as much subject to social definition as were the colonial Southern churches. Davis has long been the acknowledged authority here. He tells us much of the classical, occasional, folk and religious origins of an indigenous Southern poetry, of journals, wills, letters, autobiographies, and meditative lyrics. And also of comedy and satire (some of it described in an earlier section on the theater). Most of his material for this discussion carries with it the marks of English Augustan influence, especially the essays, narratives, and satires. From the beginning the Southern writer has followed the example of the Romans. Davis makes some very useful observations on the continuity of colonial Southern literature with the best Southern writing of our own day. What we have had since 1763 has been in many ways an expansion and development, not a repudiation of the *vatic* muse.

Which brings us finally to the highest flowering of the culture of the colonial South—its public men—and to their role in the creation of the Republic. I have already indicated most of the important elements in Davis' explanation of that breed. The rest I will draw from his epilogue to the total work. The original Southern mind sought in this world the "middle ground" of what Leo Marx has called the "cultivated garden." It was, from the first, agrarian—concerned with the acquisition and cultivation of land. It was a mind that reflected a culture of families, not individuals in the modern sense. It was a literate and religious mind, informed by a sense of the past, by a modest view of human nature, by irony and humor. And it assumed the goodness of creation, even though stewardship would be required to make the most of the providential blessings.

I believe that future work on the life of mind in the South may follow the direction of recent studies of New England. An inquiry into the role of images or types in the formation of a regional identity may offer a more inclusive view of the wellsprings of Southern particularity—and an explanation for the region's way of approaching certain troublesome questions. We could perhaps do

with a more inclusive exploration of the South's special relation to certain features of English thought. And, as Davis insists, we will need editions of previously neglected materials. But in these labors we will enjoy the advantage of the guidance Davis has

provided in *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1585-1763*. All Southerners wearied of the customary and malicious distortions of their inheritance will, moreover, owe to him a personal debt. By the patria he has done very well indeed. Let us honor what he has made.