

Four Episodes in Popular Culture

Doctor Rose presented this Inaugural Lecture as Harmsworth Professor of American History at Oxford University, Oxford, England, on May 4, 1978. The lecture was printed by the Clarendon Press, Oxford University, as a pamphlet in 1979. It was reprinted in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York and Oxford, 1982). Both publications of Professor Rose's lecture bore the title "Race and Region in American Historical Fiction: Four Episodes in Popular Culture." Each contained Rose's full explanatory footnotes.

The Harmsworth Lecture was held out of the hardbook edition of *Slavery and Freedom* so that it could be published first in America in the *Woodward Festschrift*. The piece is now inserted in this paperback edition with the permission of the copyright holder, the Oxford University Press. The text of the essay and all citations to the sources are reprinted unchanged. But the title and the explanatory footnotes have been somewhat shortened, so that this latest of Professor Rose's essays can slip smoothly into her book.

Nearly every scholar who has asked himself Crèvecoeur's famous query "What then is the American, this new man?" has come sooner or later to an explanation that rests on a peculiarly American view of experience that has little to do with the past, much to do with the future. The most widely recognized formu-

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lation of this idea is R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam*, an influential study that regards the authentic American as a "figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history."¹ Lewis based his conception on an insightful reading of the great writers of the nineteenth century, particularly those of the first half, and he clearly identified a theme in American letters that has a continuing if diminishing currency. But it surely does no harm to point out that Lewis's concentration on the "articulate thinkers and conscious artists" means that a large area of popular thought was left out of consideration, a matter of some concern to the social historian.

Perhaps this mattered little in the eighteenth century, when what was distinctly American about our experience was still comparatively new, and most expressions of that experience were limited to the "articulate thinker." But by the second quarter of the nineteenth century the level of literacy in American began to rise sharply, along with a wider than ever spread of political participation. The invention of the steam press provided the technology to produce plentiful reading matter for the new popular taste. As a consequence, it would seem that cultural historians may be missing important clues in not studying more carefully the best-seller lists when they attempt to assess that elusive item the "national character."

The historian interested in the influence of popular preferences and political action may find food for thought, for example, in the curious coincidence that four of the most popular reading-viewing events in all American history—they might even be called public celebrations—have been about the great twin problems in American political life. One is the Civil War and its causes. The other, so closely related to it, is slavery and race in that conflict and the Reconstruction period that followed.

For a people uninterested in the past, this coincidence must at least raise some question whether the vast middle reach of American intellectual activity that fills the space between the lower levels of academia and the upper levels of folk culture is very much concerned to discuss our history, to argue points, strike compromises, and justify the past in the enjoyment of historical fiction, in print and in drama. The "authentic" American may be

irritatingly prone to assuming a posture of innocence on account of our new start in a new land. But he is not dismissing two aspects of our past: race and region. Few critics have taken seriously even one of the four astonishing publishing successes I have in mind. These works have nevertheless in one form or another (more often both book and drama) traveled around the world. They have given a vocabulary to American mythologies and demologies that is generally understood at home and abroad; and in each case they have been recognized immediately as important statements explaining a point of view in the ongoing discussion of race and region in American history. They endure.

I do not mean to be mysterious. The sequence of reading-viewing events I have in mind begins with Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852.² *Uncle Tom* was dramatized promptly by George Aiken and has run almost continuously somewhere in some form ever since. The list continues with the trilogy of works on Southern Reconstruction, especially *The Clansman*, published in 1905, by Thomas Ryan Dixon.³ *The Clansman*, as a book, is virtually unread today, but it was fabulously successful in its time—and the motion picture by D. W. Griffith from the Dixon text, called *Birth of a Nation*, has brought the lurid story through to our own time. This moving picture may have been seen by more persons than any other ever made. *Birth of a Nation* was the first truly modern feature film, and surely the most controversial ever shown.

More recently, *Gone With the Wind*, written between 1926 and 1929 and published in 1936, was Margaret Mitchell's enduring contribution to the fictionalized Civil War. It has sold over 20 million copies and still (forty years later) sells 40 thousand per year at hardback prices, and perhaps ten times that number in paperback. For the first forty years this makes an average of over 500 thousand copies per year.⁴ The classic moving picture made by David O. Selznick is one of the most popular films of all time; CBS television has paid \$3,000,000 for the exclusive right to show it once per year for twenty years.⁵ This princely payment may have some relationship with the fourth event which set my mind back along the direction described.

Alex Haley's fabulously successful book called *Roots* was pub-

lished in late 1976; its author refers to it as his bicentennial gift to his countrymen. Some are referring to *Roots* as the black *Gone With the Wind*, in part because it had much the same astonishing and instant recognition, and was quickly turned into a dramatic television marathon that ran for eight successive evenings in the January following the autumn publication. It quickly appeared that this work, which sold a million copies in six months, was viewed by a larger television audience than any previous show, even including *Gone With the Wind*. Perhaps as many as 135 million Americans watched one or more episodes. Surely, if numbers participating count, author Haley provided the most outstanding cultural event of the American bicentennial.⁶

Haley's book purported to trace his family's lineage back to its African origins in a village near the Gambia River in West Africa. He achieved this feat with the aid of linguists expert in the Mansinka language spoken in contemporary Gambia. Certain "strange" African words, passed down in the Haley family, turned out to be code words for rich African natural phenomena.⁷ Further assistance from a griot of the village of Juffure convinced Haley that he had found the very home of his ancestor Kunta Kinte, captured at the age of sixteen in 1767 and transported to Annapolis in Maryland aboard the slaver the *Lord Ligonier*. This griot from Juffure, Kebba Fofana, it turned out, had stored in his memory bank the key story about how the young warrior Kunta Kinte had been out in the woods carving out a drum when he was captured. It was the very story, Haley marveled, that his grandmother Cynthia had told him when he was a boy.

That Kebba Fofana was no true griot, but a song-and-dance man, a popular entertainer, was bound to come out sooner or later. No nonmythical anecdotes concerning individuals are entered in any griot's memory bank going back so far as the eighteenth century. Surely none would be there concerning a relatively unimportant personage sixteen years old in a society that values age. Haley had simply let out what he wanted to hear, and Fofana had responded. But the outcry that arose when *Sunday Times* (London) reporter Mark Ottaway opened this information to the general public, along with several other incriminating items, showed that the number of Americans, white as well as black, who had taken Kunta Kinte into their hearts was very large.⁸

The 135 million or so who had seen the television series had willingly suspended disbelief to follow the young hero out of his contrived but beautiful African Garden of Eden into the hell of slavery in North America. His name, along with that of Uncle Tom (whom he did not in any way favor), had entered the vocabulary of race relations. Haley was sitting down to talk things over with the contemporary descendants of his ancestor's first owners, and was on television nearly every other morning to discuss, promote, and defend the authenticity of his research. Following reporter Ottaway's charges, Haley's distant relatives from West Africa were flown over to claim kinship on the air.

All this had something of the style of promotion, something of the style of celebration; it clearly demonstrated that *Roots* had gone down where grass roots are, and on some things the general public does not care for an expert opinion. Haley had insisted on the accuracy of his genealogical researches, but admitted freely that beyond that he had improvised at will to give a character and human relationships to Kunta Kinte and his African parents, and to his American connections. Haley called this contact between fact and fiction "faction" and insisted at least on the spiritual accuracy of the *faction*. There is much in the spiritual department that might be challenged about *Roots*, as book and especially as television. The anachronisms on details are so plentiful as to arouse distrust on more important matters in which it is essential to have full faith; the characterizations lack depth, especially those of the white persons in the plot, and the women in general. But since the work was "faction," reviewers of "fiction" could say they supposed the *history* was good enough, and those historians who reviewed it could call it fiction, and applaud its "spiritual truth."⁹

Actually Haley promised to clear up the historical difficulties by producing another book, and was perhaps unaware how neatly he was falling into the pattern already established by his predecessors in the Tom-Klan-Wind-Roots saga. When similarly called to account, Harriet Beecher Stowe produced the famous *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), and when he was challenged on the accuracy of his romantic and exculpatory history of the Ku Klux Klan, T. R. Dixon said he'd get a committee from the American Historical Association to referee and pay \$1000 to anyone who could prove an error. Margaret Mitchell simply answered an

incredible number of letters, reeling out her citations. Not one of the four authors has yet said it doesn't matter, as a few professional historians did in the wake of the *Roots* phenomenon.¹⁰

Actually in most instances the writers in this sequence could offer some kind of factual authority for the historical background in their works. However, the common fault of selective omission runs through all of them, accounting for the dramatic story line, the simplicity of the emotional appeal, and the literary accessibility through so wide a range of readers. This may in fact be the historical interface of the division that exists between popular culture and high culture.

Accounting for Haley's success, Haley's comet, as one wit has it, may be hazardous. On the hunch that the appeal of *Roots* touches some of the primary chords that its predecessors played on, it is an observable fact that Haley's story, like all the others, is at bottom a story about the family. It celebrates the strength flowing from the cultural lifeline for blacks.

Although historians of not too many years ago seemed agreed that Afro-American culture owed little or nothing to Africa, most recent scholars who have worked this field have returned a different verdict. *Roots* serves to dramatize this change of view, in keeping with the favor now accorded Swahili, dashikis, and the "natural" hairstyle.

Another aspect of common currency among these spectacular publishing events is that we have in *Roots* a success story. The family is victorious over slavery, just as Uncle Tom has a spiritual victory over his oppressors, and as the Southern whites "redeem" their region from the presumed tyranny of carpetbaggers and evil blacks in Dixon's story. Like Scarlett O'Hara, who becomes rich and saves her plantation home, Haley is a Horatio Alger millionaire who has, in celebrating his roots, come right out from the story as its own triumph, an example to all, of a black man who made it, and not in athletics, either. Overnight Haley became a folk hero, and the day the television series ended, more than three thousand persons, mostly teenagers, lined up outside a Los Angeles bookstore to wait for the author to sign their copies of *Roots*. Those who take note of these matters informed the public that newborn babies all over America were being named after Kunta Kinte and his American-born daughter Kizzie.¹¹

Haley shared with his predecessors another signal attribute: he had an overt didactic purpose. Haley believed Afro-Americans needed a Garden of Eden and Innocence to look back upon, and so he created a highly romanticized West Africa that owed more to modern anthropology than to history. Here was an African Dixie "before the war." Looking back on the success of the book and the television series, Haley concluded that it was more than his own perseverance that had at last got his book finished, after more than a decade of struggle. "However: this sounds," Haley said, "it was one of those things that God in his infinite wisdom and in his time and way decided should happen. I feel that I am a conduit through which this is happening. It was just something that was meant to be. I say this because there were so many things that had to happen over which I had not control."¹²

Leaving Haley in order to slip backward in time, we learn that Harriet Beecher Stowe was equally modest about her part in the writing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, once telling an enthusiastic pilgrim who had come to shake the famous hand that wrote it that she had only taken dictation; God had written *Uncle Tom*.¹³ In light of President Abraham Lincoln's famous and often quoted remark of her, that here was the little woman who had caused the great American Civil War, Mrs. Stowe may have had a special reason for wishing to share honors with Higher Authority. But it is also true that there is no understanding the phenomenon of Stowe's book without the moral impulse behind it. The work appeared in serial installments in the *National Era* between June 5, 1851, and April of the following year, when the book was published in two volumes and began its spectacular rise. The last episode of the story was actually the one written first, and the real key to the motivation of the plot.¹⁴

One Sunday during communion at her church in Brunswick, Maine, Stowe's imagination divined a scene set somewhere in faraway Louisiana, where a black man was writhing in anguish under the lashes of two fellow slaves who were beating this black Christian to death at the behest of their cruel owner, the villain who became the infamous Simon Legree.¹⁵ As he lay dying, Uncle Tom, the martyr, brought his black persecutors to a saving knowledge of Christ, and forgave his enemies. When Uncle Tom prayed for victory he was asking for the strength to refrain from betray-

ing others in an escape attempt, and of him: his creator writes, "The brave, true heart was firm on the Eternal Rock. Like his Master, he knew that, if he saved others, himself he could not save; nor could utmost extremity wing from him words, save of prayer and holy trust." That Tom's martyrdom is intended as atonement and that he is meant to be the Christ figure is left in no doubt, for in death he calls on God in Jesus' words: "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."¹⁶

From Mrs. Stowe's decision regarding Tom's character the rest of the action flowed toward this conclusion she had already written. Studying antislavery tracts and narratives of fugitive slaves, and putting these together with a visit she had once made into slaveholding Kentucky some years before, Stowe developed a galaxy of characters and events as alive today as they were a century ago. Her plot has been much criticized, for it is full of extravagant coincidences, surprise endings, and not a little preaching to the dear reader, but it nevertheless served to get Tom to his martyrdom within the year. It drove home Mrs. Stowe's main point relentlessly, with illustration after illustration, from Upper South to Lower South, under all sorts of masters, that slavery could never be ameliorated as a social system so long as slaves were objects of *trade*. The kindness or goodwill of individual owners availed nothing when slaves might be taken for debts. Indeed two of Tom's successive owners are generous to a fault, and Stowe refers to "good-humored indulgence" of masters and mistresses, and "affectionate loyalty" of slaves on some plantations, but it is only to add:

So long as the law considers all these human beings, with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many *things* belonging to a master,—so long as the failure, or misfortune, or imprudence, or death of the kind: owner, may cause them any day to exchange a life of kind protection and indulgence for one of hopeless misery and toil,—so long it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best-regulated administration of slavery.¹⁷

Mrs. Stowe's specific target: and immediate impulse for writing her novel was the enactment of a new fugitive-slave law as a part

of the famous sectional compromise of 1850, a law more stringent and difficult to evade by antislavery men and women who were engaged in aiding fugitive blacks escaping from the South. The enormous and instantaneous success of Stowe's book came in large part because concern about this law was reflected across a far wider spectrum of public opinion than the abolition movement. Stowe's own family had not been in the front of any movement in that direction before this time, and even as she spoke out in the most unequivocal terms against oppression in her novel, she conceded enough to the Southern argument to suggest that she might have hoped to win a few converts there. Of the three successive owners of Uncle Tom, only the last, Simon Legree, is vicious. Mrs. Stowe makes him a pushing, driving Northerner. The other two are Southern-born and easygoing. The failing of the first is that he had let himself get into debt; the second only that he did not live long enough to render his emancipation of Tom effective in the courts. It is in fact through *this* owner of Uncle Tom, the charming, slightly Byronic Augustine St. Clare, that Harriet Beecher Stowe makes a major sectional concession to the South, and a rebuke, if you will, to her fellow Northerners. The slavery question is frequently discussed between St. Clare and his angular New England cousin Miss Ophelia, who has come South to help look after St. Clare's small daughter, the Little Eva of legend. Miss Ophelia is a woman of conscience, who is, says Mrs. Stowe, a bond slave to the word "ought," but St. Clare notices that as a trenchant as she is in her observations against slavery and slaveholding, his cousin flinches with displeasure to see Uncle Tom and Little Eva in physical contact with one another. Miss Ophelia shudders. "Confess it, cousin," St. Clare presses her,

I know the feeling among you Northerners well enough. Not that there is a particle of virtue in our not having it; but custom does with us what Christianity ought to do,—obliterates the feeling of personal prejudice. I have often noticed, in my travels north, how much stronger this was with you than with us. You loathe negroes as you would a snake or toad, yet you are as indignant at their wrongs. You would not have them abused; but you don't want to have anything to do with them yourselves. You would send them to Africa, out of your sight and smell, and then send a missionary

or two to do up all the self-denial of elevating them compendiously. Isn't that it?

And Miss Ophelia admits thoughtfully that "there may be some truth in this."¹⁸

By conceding racial prejudice to the woman who otherwise speaks the views of the author, Mrs. Stowe was conceding a significant point to the proslavery argument. She did not convert the South, but she did write a book around which all shades of antislavery opinion could rally. One of her favorable reviewers even seemed to believe that her book reopened the hope that some form of gradual emancipation might yet be undertaken, or some amelioration of the system effected by favorable legal reform.¹⁹ There were even reviewers who believed that the great success of the book was rather in spite of its antislavery than because of it, holding that it was the religious faith of Uncle Tom and his small charge, Miss Eva, that swayed the public.²⁰ The impact of the book surely owes something to religion and family, but Mrs. Stowe placed these in the service of her main theme, which was the terrible suffering caused by the internal slave trade. Few were the young mothers who could not identify with the beautiful mulatto Eliza Harris, who flies from the clutches of the slave-trader with her little boy in her arms, chancing a wintry dash across the frozen Ohio River in her attempt to avoid separation from her child. Few young fathers could help sympathizing with George Harris, the mulatto husband of this brave girl; few could blame him for despairing at the thought of losing Eliza, for choosing life in Liberia over America, for saving his sympathies for his mother's race and not his father's, for saying he wished himself two shades darker rather than two shades lighter.

By playing splendidly on the deepest instincts of her readers, Mrs. Stowe wrote the most effective of all tracts against slavery, so that an English reviewer claimed that *Uncle Tom*, especially after it was put on stage and was being played everywhere in the middle and late fifties, had in effect repealed the Fugitive Slave Act.²¹ The same reviewer thought the process was a remarkable transformation that had little to do with rational analysis. Referring to the pandemic racial hostility throughout the North,

particularly among working-class people, he pointed out that *Uncle Tom* ran 150 consecutive nights in New York alone, and that George and Eliza Harris had converted "the sovereign people" while audiences cheered them on. The impact of *Uncle Tom* on the coming of the Civil War has never been properly evaluated, but it was great. Surely the fact that Simon Legree could be found cracking his whip in six London theaters at once in the late fifties made it unlikely that the public opinion there would readily yield to Southern desires for recognition once the Emancipation Proclamation had introduced antislavery as a Northern war objective.²²

Dramatic art is more vulnerable than written literature to the impact of change in popular choice or preference, and the degradation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the late decades of the nineteenth century is a particularly said example of that truth. So long as the idealism of the best aspirations of the Civil War era retained some vigor, the old melodrama retained a certain amount of dignity, however badly played it was in country towns across the land. But soon there was no barrier to making Uncle Tom a poor parody of the brave Christian of the original, and as a traveling road show the play gave rise to the miserable stereotype of shuffling cowardice that has caused Tom's name to become an epithet of derision in the twentieth century. Live bloodhounds to enhance the drama of Eliza's flight, real angels to gather around Little Eva as she died her beautiful death, these all but eclipsed the real meaning of the original book and play.²³

Fortunately the book, as distinct from the play, with all its flaws, read and imagined, remained an internationally recognized American classic and is now regarded by several highly perceptive critics as being very serious literature indeed.²⁴ Nobody expressed better the reason this should have happened in time than Henry James did many years ago. As he remembered it,

We lived and moved . . . with great intensity, in Mrs. Stowe's novel . . . There was, however, I think for that triumphant work no classified condition; it was for no sort of reader as distinct from any other sort, save indeed for Northern as differing from Southern; it knew the large felicity of gathering in alike the small and the simple and the big and the wise, and had above all the extraor-

inary fortune of finding itself, for an immense number of people, much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness, in which they didn't sit and read and appraise . . . but walked and talked and laughed and cried . . . in a manner of which Mrs. Stowe was the irresistible cause . . .³⁵

However ludicrous *Uncle Tom* became at its worst, his was too realistic and compassionate a story to lend itself to the vicious hate-inciting characterizations of blacks that became increasingly common as the nineteenth century reared its close. In time the moving-picture industry would favor blacks and restore much of the original dignity of Uncle Tom, but that development had to wait many years. In fact the most successful movie of the era of silent film was David Wark Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, a brilliant piece of technology in the development of a new art form, and a drama that gave evidence of the very nadir of race relations and the badly deteriorating images of blacks. The classic picture was released in 1915, and it continues to be seen regularly in spite of its characterizations of blacks as beastly savages, in part because of its historical position in the development of silent film, in part because, at the time it appeared, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People secured the removal of some of the more shocking scenes. They have been lost, but what remains sums up the clichés for an unhappy epoch in American life and suggests how harsh the excised footage must have been.³⁶

The movie was an adaptation of a best-selling novel called *The Clansman*, by Thomas Ryan Dixon, a native of North Carolina, who was brought up in poverty in the shadow of the Civil War and Reconstruction years.³⁷ Dixon shared some characteristics with his Georgian contemporary Thomas Watson, whose sudden onslaught of racist bigotry at the end of the century is explained by his biographer, C. Vann Woodward, as being born of frustration that reflects a souring of his hopes as a Populist leader working for political cooperation across the color line.³⁸ Though Dixon was not a Populist, he had been in the decade of the 1890s a highly influential Baptist minister preaching in an unashionable section of New York, who packed in great crowds to hear his Social Gospel message. He was admirably solicitous of the poor and the immigrants. The words he had for blacks in those days

were encouraging and favorable to their progress since emancipation. But, for reasons not entirely clear, the Reverend Mr. Dixon had concluded by 1902 that the Negro was a "menace." Some writers have suggested that America's entry into the scramble for empire combined badly with Dixon's unabashed Darwinism and caused him to turn against blacks; it is true that just at the time this change of race is registered, Dixon began fulminating jingoistic attacks on the Spanish.³⁹ For his own part Dixon explained that his decision to write a set of novels that would set the Civil War and Reconstruction in a true perspective had come to him when he saw a 1901 revival of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In his anger he restrained the impulse to jump up and denounce the play, but decided to "make a merciless record of the facts" instead.⁴⁰

In the first of the trilogy, *The Leopard's Spots*, Dixon called for complete separation of the races, or the expulsion of blacks from the country, claiming, in the words of one of his characters, "in a democracy you cannot build a nation inside a nation of two antagonistic races. . . ."⁴¹ Not so subtly Dixon introduced a few of the characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to make his argument. Now George Harris reappears, still a mulatto, still a well-educated one, but now he is in love with a daughter of a prominent Northern political leader, who instantly sees the error of his ways when Harris asks for her hand. This routine became a cliché in the language of racist argumentation for two generations. Dixon always denied having any but "the friendliest feelings and the profoundest pity" for blacks, and maintained that his book was "the most important moral deed of my life. There is not a bitter or malignant sentence in it." Dixon's brother, A. C. Dixon, who was also a minister, accused him of writing his book for profit, and the aging father once reproached his son for being too hard on the black man, who had too much to bear in any case.⁴²

The Clansman followed in 1905 and was used a decade later as the main plot for Griffith's famous film. This novel was openly aimed to redirect sympathies on the main events of the postwar Reconstruction, which it described in lurid detail. There were political aspects surrounding its appearance and reception that indicated the time was ripe for the North to take a more Southern

point of view. The central figure of the story is a Southern war hero named Ben Cameron, who has returned home to the Southern Piedmont after convalescing from a serious wound in a Washington, D.C., hospital. He has, of course, fallen madly in love with his attractive nurse, a Northern girl who happens to be the daughter of the United States senator Austin Stoneman. Stoneman is a very, very thinly veiled impersonation of Thaddeus Stevens, whose grim countenance has long graced the American-history textbooks with the appropriate indication beneath identifying him as the chief of the "Vindictives" in Congress, those who wished to impose a severe punishment on the South after the end of the war.

Few scholars today would accord Congressman Stevens that importance, and all would be aware that there was much more at stake in Reconstruction than punishing the South. But in Dixon's story the wicked forces of vengeance in Congress are released by the assassination of Lincoln, for Radical leaders are able to blame the South for this terrible deed, and they employ it to impose a reign of terror on the prostrate Southern states. This is accomplished by the simple expedient of disenfranchising all the white people who have had anything to do with the war, and enfranchising the slaves.

There are significant changes in the film version, but in both book and film black voters are manipulated by wicked Northerners who have come south to humiliate Southern whites, especially the old owners, who suffer many indignities before they resort to violence. Insults were endured by a law-abiding people, but once the safety of pure white womanhood was in danger they did not hesitate, and the hero of the action, Ben Cameron, becomes the leader of the Ku Klux Klan, organized to punish perpetrators of rape. This secret organization, the real centerpiece of Dixon's story, became in his hands the saving instrument of Southern civilization. That it was connected in some way with the rise in the 1920s of the modern Klan is hard to disprove, though Dixon tried to dissociate them altogether, and disapproved of the new Klan.³³ Throughout the story there are many history lessons. One is given by young Ben Cameron when he courts Senator Stoneman's daughter. Elsie Stoneman "began to understand why

the war, which had seemed to her a wicked, cruel, and causeless rebellion, was the one inevitable thing in our growth from a loose group of sovereign states to a United Nation. Love had given her his point of view."³⁴

Actually the nation itself was having a kind of love feast, celebrating over these years the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning and close of the Civil War. A new, highly symbolic interpretation of the conflict and its close was being worked out, not, of course, by Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman alone, but by serious scholars, including Woodrow Wilson, the future president. While ready to pay tribute to the heroism of the Confederate soldiers, and the sacrifices to the lost cause, the South should be glad that the North had won and ended slavery, he said, for its was "energizing our Southern society and exhausting our Southern energies."³⁵ This new view could arrange a classic historiographical quid pro quo between North and South on the basis of agreement on both sides that the North had been right about the Civil War, that secession had been wrong, and that through the suppression of secession had come the end of slavery, which was a good thing, especially for white people.

On the other hand, the Northern leaders had been much mistaken in their Reconstruction policy—"damnable cruelty and folly," Woodrow Wilson had called it—and their attempt to enforce equal rights for the former slave had been a grave injustice to Southern white people. The sensationalism of Dixon's demonology cast a lurid glare over his fictional history, but many respectable persons, some of them scholars of repute, shared his views if not his style. The images of besial sexuality and yellow eyes gleaming in the jungle, and the aplike characterizations in the picture seared themselves into the minds of the thousands who saw the film. That these parts were played by whites blacked up with burnt cork completed the irony.³⁶

After Dixon's books and the Griffith film the South commanded center court on Reconstruction history for many years. One of the early reviewers of *The Clansman* asked why this should be. There were some questionable matters of historical detail, but more significant was "the apparent ease with which the author makes a decidedly plausible presentation of his defense of the

Southern attitude, and the apparent readiness of the Northern mind to receive that defense in unruffled patience, if not with positive favor." He commented that only a few years earlier such ideas would have been rejected instantly, for American orators were praising political equality as "the immediate jewel of our national soul."³⁷ The reviewer saw the answer: it was that the idea of political equality was "dangerous and ill-defined," and that "whether it was formerly so or not, the North must now bear with the South its equal share of responsibility for those dangers."³⁸

The author might have added that the increased immigration from southern Europe caused many old friends of freedom in the North to wonder if the South hadn't been right in opposing equal franchise. The growth of urban political machines and the power of political bosses over these people whose appearance and language were strange seemed to threaten the world they had understood. And so the steady march of segregation in the South went largely unopposed. With *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 the Supreme Court gave approval to the doctrine of separate but equal. Only one dissenter, the Kentucky-born John Marshall Harlan, reasoned that separate facilities were inherently unequal and designed to fill the excluded with self-contempt; it would be fifty years before a new Supreme Court would see that he was right.

The dominant view of the Civil War epoch popularized at the turn of the century remained powerful down to World War II, when it was at last challenged to its roots by the Nazi holocaust. Then the hypocrisy of maintaining so great a struggle in the name of democracy so badly abused at home smote the consciences of thoughtful citizens. But even before that time the Dixon demology was much abated, almost directly in proportion to the degree to which the black man was rendered insignificant in the ballot box and invisible at the soda fountains.

After World War I the black image in books and plays is muted and more often assumed than it is explained and illustrated. Dixon's success is registered in this quiet acceptance. The classic example of this tendency was Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, which appeared in 1936, and launched the greatest publishing-viewing extravaganza of all time.³⁹

The point to remember about this work was that it had the same power to sweep its readers and audiences into the state Henry James described in the *Uncle Tom* experience. It became a state of mind and as much a part of the late years of the Depression as *Uncle Tom* had been in the 1850s. On June 30, 1936, the day of publication, 100 thousand copies were in print; in three months the figure had nearly quadrupled, and within six months the then unheard-of figure of one million had been sold. The naughty heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, has had the international appeal of Uncle Tom, and as soon as the David O. Selznick movie plans became known, casting the main characters of the story became a favorite parlor game. There were important differences between the book and the play, but together they registered completely the national state of mind about race and region.

Margaret Mitchell had read Dixon's books early in life, and had as a girl-playwright actually adapted one of them for a neighborhood theatrical for her playmates to enact. Miss Mitchell acknowledged this influence in a graceful letter thanking the aging Dixon for writing her a fan letter. She acknowledged Dixon further, and less directly, by using his view of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan to explain the phenomenon in her book.⁴⁰ But on the whole the picture of race relations in Margaret Mitchell's work is more paternalistic, and the "good darkies" are highly significant elements of the plot. It is the reverse of the case in *The Clansman*, where the "bad niggers" are important to the action, and the good ones merely background. Mammy is essential to *Gone With the Wind*, and Hattie McDaniel's grand execution of her role in the movie won her an Oscar. She made even more of "Mammy" in the film than Miss Mitchell had in her book, and in doing so disarmed much black criticism that might otherwise have come upon the plantation stereotypes the modern Negro had begun so much to hate.⁴¹

It was a step forward, if a very small one, to see what a great black actress could make of the stock figure of the plantation mammy. For the most part the rendering of blacks as the happy, carefree plantation darkies was the natural consequence of Mitchell's celebration of the romantic plantation legend. Until the image of black as beast was thrust aside it made no sense to

paint a picture of a period of peace and plenty, white columns and peacocks, cotton and serenity back before the war. Dixon had not tried it, and contented himself with some rather simple conclusions about the affectionate, God-fearing life pursued by his Scots-Irish ancestors in the Upcountry of the western Carolinas.

One reason for *Gone With the Wind's* success was that it became the first fully realized film version of the traditional plantation romance. But it had enough realism, just enough, to make it credible. There is a recognition of economic force in historical explanation totally absent from Dixon. The renegade aristocrat Rhett Butler is Scarlett's supremely realistic romantic foil; he tells the young Southern cavaliers so anxious to get into war that they cannot win. Why not? Not enough munitions plants and woolen mills. What if there should be a blockade, as there surely would be?⁴² It was quite as though Miss Mitchell had been reading Charles Beard's economic interpretation of American history. After the heroine returns to the ruined plantation near the end of the war and faces starvation, she becomes frenetic in her pursuit of security. Her trouble has been great, to be sure, and after a dramatic gesture choking on a raw turnip she has devoured to assuage her great hunger, outlined against a red sky, she pledges that she will never be hungry again.

Scarlett solves her problems, essentially by doing what her folks would have called "outyankeeing the Yankees." She goes into trade, and gets for herself a store in booming postwar Atlanta, and then a lumber mill. Her search for security becomes sheer greed, and her shabby dealings in business are meant as a personal characterization of the city of Atlanta itself, and by extension the New South. This is what Margaret Mitchell contributed to the growing legend. Here was a brash young city, burned out in war, rising from its ashes, a country-cousin kind of town when compared with stately, refined places like Charleston and Savannah. By implication these gentle old cities could no more cope with the crude necessities of the postwar world than Scarlett's more aristocratic friends and relatives. "Atlanta," on the other hand, it seemed, "must always be hurrying, no matter what its circumstances might be." Of course, "it was ill-bred and

Yankeefied to hurry. But Atlanta was more ill-bred and Yankeefied (after the war) than it had ever been before or would ever be again." The identification of Scarlett's character and the city is quite explicit: "Atlanta was of her own generation, crude with the crudities of youth and as headstrong and impetuous as herself."⁴³

What that city became was what Scarlett herself became, and the cost of success to character in overcoming defeat is Miss Mitchell's second important theme. Atlanta celebrates the vulgarity of new wealth in the accumulation of ugly mansions with massive furniture in the dark, rich, and cloying interiors rendered so faithfully in the Selznick film. In character Scarlett is a match for this crass materialism, fulfilling her pledge that she'll never go hungry again by laying up treasures on earth through the exploitation of convict labor and many other shabby, immoral acts. Her character is meant to illustrate the cost of survival. Gentle people who represent the best of the past fare poorly, and are like Ashley Wilkes, in Ehett Butler's description of him. Such people "have neither cunning nor strength, or having them scruple to use them. And so they go under. . . ."⁴⁴ The New South creed was torn between the realism of facing the future with the spirit of Yankee enterprise and comforting its sense of loss with a new devotion to the myth of the lost world of serenity, peace, and plenty.

Therefore Margaret Mitchell was of two minds about the capacity of old aristocrats to endure. For all the Ashley Wilkeses who are going down because they lack some vital force, there are others like his wife, Melanie, who derive strength from the traditional past, who are ready to pay the price in contemporary terms for maintaining the standards of decency and honorable relations that they learned in happier times. They do not go under, but they do not get rich either. The author is almost dividing the personality of the New South between Scarlett and Melanie, for there were both aspects to the face of survival. The value the author assigns to family loyalty and the abiding devotion to land and place and people is important not only in explaining Melanie Wilkes, but also in explaining how Scarlett began her sordid life in commerce. Whatever she is, or is to become, Scarlett

holds the family together; forces all to work as hard as she does, and does not scruple to lie or steal, even to sell herself, in order to raise the money that will save her father's plantation from the tax collectors.

Margaret Mitchell's fictional New South of the 1870s was influenced to a considerable degree by the experience of the 1930s' Depression. Themes of hardship and survival had special appeal to the Depression generation, who could understand without prompting how it was to be penniless and confused in the middle of a rich and fallow land. There had to be a little bit of Scarlett and a little bit of Melanie in those who came through that troubled time. Margaret Mitchell had worried ahead of publication that the South would reject the materialism of her work; indeed, Scarlett's survival owes nothing to religion, however much nostalgia she may feel for that lost religion of her good mother. But Miss Mitchell need not have concerned herself. There was the comforting image of what people liked to think their world had once been, in a time of peace and plenty, and any good Southerner could see what a great impression the work was making north of the Mason-Dixon line.

The North was going to adopt the plantation South before the war as *own* Garden of Eden, and if Atlanta looked and behaved a lot like many New England towns and cities in the Gilded Age and after, then why not regard these qualities at a safe distance? A fully romantic vision of the Old South *and* the New served emotional appeals in both sections. The critics, like Malcolm Cowley and Bernard DeVoto, might rail to their heart's content against the false vision, and they could assail the damaging effects of a belief in the plantation myth as much as they liked, but Miss Mitchell and her friends professed themselves to be amused, and, like Haley later on, could see from the sales that there was a good market for myths, of however recent vintage.⁴⁵

How good are these works? It would not surprise me greatly if *Gone With the Wind* eventually arrives with its strong survival credentials and wins the respect of the more discriminating critics, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has long shown signs of doing. *The Clansman* never will, and it is too soon to predict anything about *Roots*. There is good writing and bad in it. But it seems beside

the point to assess these works as high culture, as *art*, for they do not need to be. They serve as vehicles for celebrations of shared convictions, the public vehicle of new agreements on what to believe, at the growing point of American myth. It doesn't really matter whether some of us like it and some of us do not.

In conclusion may I say that I have seriously searched for other such popular reading-viewing successes that have sustained themselves for so long, and contributed to the shorthand visual images and vocabulary of the American experience in section and race as these have done. I cannot find them. It seems there must therefore be certain characteristics that have marked these books-turned-drama for special favor from the time of their initial appearance. High inspiration, didactic purpose (in all save *Gone With the Wind*): these, plus the shared theme, pull them together. The major setting of each is the South, except for the African parts of *Roots*. Celebratory effects, mass participation, an *insistence* on sharing the experience, these are the universal style of these events. Each in its own way has positive things to say about family and affirms the force of cultural continuity. Each has appeared at just the moment when a new synthesis was forming concerning the American Civil War and race in America.

This combination of circumstances emboldens me to suppose that somewhere around the year 2000 some such thing may occur again. Whether it will be a good thing or a bad thing I do not feel obliged to guess, but that there are cautionary signals against too free a use of history as national or sectional or ethnic therapy ought to be plain enough. Popular culture, as distinguished from high culture, is widely accessible at some level to a multitude who may or may not be equipped to place what is seen in a perspective. The modern pop culture relies more on pictures than on words, and ambiguities may be lost in the impact of living color and violent action. The advent of television has opened potential problems undreamed-of in Harriet Beecher Stowe's time, when literacy first began to outstrip real education. Reading is in some degree an arranged match between reader and book; if he doesn't understand the words the reader will discard the book.

Thomas Ryan Dixon, in a successful ploy to defuse criticism of his controversial film, invited a very distinguished company of senators, congressmen, and the Supreme Court to a private

viewing; and while they watched *Birth of a Nation*, he watched them: "that we had not only discovered a new universal language of man, but that an appeal to the human will through this tongue would be equally resistless [irresistible] to an audience of chaufeurs or a gathering of a thousand college professors."⁴⁶ There were few even then who could be at once as appreciative and objective as the poet Vachel Lindsay, who wrote of the film that it was a "picture of crowd splendor" in which the "Ku Klux Klan dashes down the road as powerfully as Niagara pours over the cliff" with "mobs splendidly handled, tossing wildly and rhythmically like the sea." Alas, thought Lindsay, that D. W. Griffith had put this art in service to "the Reverend Thomas Dixon's poisonous hatred of the Negro."⁴⁷

Dixon's father and brother had more detachment than most, when they criticized him for inciting hatred for personal gain. President Woodrow Wilson called it "history written in lightning," and thought it "all too true." He had been a college professor, it is worth remembering, and had picked up some Aryan notions of his own in the same school where Dixon studied briefly.⁴⁸ If the college professors of tomorrow are to prove Dixon wrong about their own inability to resist the blandishments of "history written in lightning" they have a very large order; if they are to help others to bring a detached capacity to discern, the order is much larger. It will involve at the very least teaching more history more effectively to more students. The good teacher will be suspicious of the trendy, but sufficiently modest to recognize that what is apparent may also be real. Modesty is the appropriate reading-viewing style.

IV Reviews of a Generation's Views

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