

Humanities

The Uses of Adversity

There is some folks that if they don't know, you can't tell 'em.—Louis Armstrong.

The truth of human experience is a dark place. Meeting there, poets and historians have been known to quarrel. History, some poets say, is a tyranny over the souls of the dead.

The life and work of C. Vann Woodward is an eloquent, often witty refutation of such charges. He writes and teaches history, a somber trade. And he is of the American South, storied as a vale of sorrow. But he is deeply conscious of "the past in the present," having learned its force in Southern writers like Faulkner, Warren, and Welty. He believes, in a word, that history can offer guidance to the living. He has supplied historical contexts on the dangers of McCarthyism, and of backsliding in the civil rights movement. He has, literally, felt himself in step with history, in the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery—his elation dashed by later events, not least the death of Martin Luther King.

Vann Woodward is a white Southern liberal, a position often under fire from several quarters. It is not a political stance, but one dictated by history as he reads it. Fellow-historians, Southern and Northern, rank him with the greatest of their guild. At Yale since 1961 as Sterling Professor of History, he has been named to deliver the seventh Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, presented each year by the National Endowment for the Humanities. His friend Robert Penn Warren (who held the same honor in 1974) has hailed the choice: "his lectures, like his books, have a way of becoming important."

The impact of Woodward's teaching and writing cannot be surely weighed, honorary degrees notwithstanding. He has been heeded—and ignored. He has suffered disappointment, if not despair. He rallies faint-hearted colleagues, insisting that the historian is the indispensable mediator "between man's daydream of the future and his nightmare of the past, or, for that matter, between his nightmare of the future and his daydream of the past." But then irony creeps in. Bowing to the poets, he calls up Paul Valéry's melancholy dictum: "The future like everything else, is not what it used to be."

Woodward is a historian who has grown wise in irony. Born in Arkansas, schooled in Atlanta and Chapel Hill, he found the materials of irony thrust upon

him. He seized them, with a fervor both imaginative and analytical. His first book—*Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel*—established him as a master, age 29. Here, in Watson, was the very stuff of irony and tragedy, the rise and fall of a Populist hero who was both a manipulator and victim of the political passions of Georgia and the post-Reconstruction South, and of the nation. The author's sympathies are with the early Watson, but he does not scant his fall from grace. The book ends by recording that floral tributes at the Watson funeral were dominated by a cross of roses eight feet high, sent by the Ku Klux Klan.

Forty years after publication *Tom Watson* continues to enjoy a steady sale, as do six later books in which Woodward has forced a reordering of long-held historical concepts. Notably, he has "demolished the traditional Reconstruction melodrama," as the late David Potter wrote in *Pastmasters* (see bibliography). The demolition began with *Watson* (1938) and was essentially completed in *Reunion and Reaction* and *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, both published in 1951. (*Origins* was awarded the Bancroft Prize.) *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) introduced Woodward to a much wider public; it has sold more than a half-million copies. Based on lectures to a



Professor C. Vann Woodward, who will deliver the 1978 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities on May 3 in Washington, D.C. and on May 8 in Seattle, Washington



Drawing of Tom Watson,
"Agrarian Rebel," 1856-1922

The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive

Virginia audience, it pulled the props from under arguments that segregation had been an immutable Southern way of life. William Styron calls it "one of the most valuable works in the entire literature of the American racial dilemma."

All Woodward's writing (excepting *The Battle for Leyte Gulf*, which marks his service in the Navy), speaks to that dilemma. In the essays which make up *The Burden of Southern History* (1960) and *American Counterpoint* (1971) he shows how it has permeated the nation's history, North and South. There is the paradox of a New World and a Revolution whose noble protocols of freedom were drafted by a Virginia slaveholder. There is the sorry complicity of the North in the suppression of Negro rights at the turn of the Century. And there is the lesson of insurrectionary violence in the 1960s, when it was Northern cities that went up in flames. Woodward has not been alone in addressing these deep ironies; indeed, his friend John Hope Franklin did so in the 1976 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities. But no one has more tellingly held them up as a mirror to American moral pretensions.

Woodward's demeanor is deceptively mild. Tall, white-haired, strongly built, he is the soul of reserve. Faculty colleagues appraise him as "a Southern gentleman . . . very principled . . . a scholar's scholar." His books eschew the first person singular, and little has been written about the man as distinct from the historian. The black writer Albert Murray, for whom Woodward is "the very embodiment of Southern memory," went to call on him: he was "the spitting image

of the old Life and Casualty Insurance man" Murray remembers from early years in Alabama. Yale Professor Robin Winks confirms that "he hates to talk about himself" and "has no hyperbole." Winks, who got his doctorate at Johns Hopkins when Woodward taught there, testifies that a "not bad" from him is the highest praise for students' papers.

This all fits neatly with a Robert Coles observation that Woodward is "really a rather old-fashioned historian." He has not been flurried into schools of the Right or Left, nor into reliance on "related disciplines" or computer analysis of historical data (whose results he has sometimes praised). Coles used "old-fashioned" admiringly in a 1972 *New Yorker* essay, in which he pointed to the historian's "instinctive identification with the yearnings and struggles of the South's poor of both races."

Woodward's literary and research skills have been widely remarked. He writes with "the native genius for the American language of the creative artist" (Willie Morris); and he has done "the kind of detective work historians dream about" (David Potter). With these qualities, two others are notably present—pessimism, and wit.

The pessimism is bound up with the Southerner's awareness of defeat and guilt. As Sir Denis Brogan put it, Woodward is "burdened with the *damnosa hereditas* of the South." Like Reinhold Niebuhr, he argues that American mythologies of innocence and invincibility are delusive. His pessimism puts one in mind of Mark Twain, who came late to history and found its revelations appalling. Long a student of life's tragic aspects, his later years (again like Twain's) have been marked by personal loss. Eight years ago, within a twelve-month span, cancer claimed the lives of his two closest intellectual friends, the historians David Potter and Richard Hofstadter, and of the Woodward's only son, Peter.

The element of wit comes through in genial or sardonic metaphors. He once chided his profession for excessive claims, in this image: "Half scientist, half artist, the historian was a sort of centaur among the disciplines, a centaur with wings some would have it, the only academic discipline endowed with an authentic muse." He wrings irony from paradox, using it as a mask for the passions that move him. It enables him to point a sharp-honed moral, without moralizing. The irony and pessimism are, obviously, related. They are the twin lenses through which he refracts the human condition. Wit is the portion of hope retained.

Comer Vann Woodward was born in 1908 in Vann-dale, Arkansas, "a village of no more than 500 people—souls, we would say." Vann-dale was named for a great-grandfather who came to the territory circa 1850. The Confederate defeat was still a presence in Woodward's boyhood. Grandfather John Vann had served four years in the rebel army, emerging unscathed—at age 19. The names of 26 slaves had been recorded in the family Bible, some still living and known to the young Vann.

Comer is a name from the family tree, the surname of a Methodist preacher. Woodward's mother was Bess Vann, whose ancestors came from England to North Carolina before the Revolution. The Woodward branch ("English, from 'warden of the wood'") traces to the early 1800s in America; his father, Hugh Allison Woodward, was a schoolteacher originally from Tennessee. There are boyhood memories of two uncles who took him hunting on their nearby farms. A sister is still living, in Key West.

Becoming a historian was "rather accidental," Woodward recalls. From a small college in Arkansas he transferred to Emory University in Atlanta, graduating with a Ph.B. in 1930. ("I took one stab at history and found it boring.") His first job was teaching English at Georgia Tech, yearly salary \$1,800. He was there two years, with a year out to take an M.A. at Columbia—in political science.

"I wanted to try the big city," he says. "I'd really been out of the South only once, hitchhiked to New York one summer and shipped out as an ordinary seaman to Rotterdam. After Columbia, I shipped out again, but as a tourist—France, Germany, and the USSR. We'd been told the Soviet Union was the wave of the future, so I went to have a look. The great famine was on and rebellion was just below the surface. The experience didn't put me in the fellow-travelers' camp, although in those Depression years one had friends who landed there."

The Depression quickly affected the returning scholar. Back at Georgia Tech, he was dismissed in a budgetary cutback, and went to work for the WPA on a farm survey. Casting about for a literary subject, he began making notes on the life of Tom Watson. The Watson papers were lodged at the University of North Carolina, and he was able to secure a fellowship to study there. "It was a history project, so that decided matters. *Watson* was my dissertation." When Allan Nevins praised the book in a *New York Times Book*

Review front-page article, "it gave me, naturally, a tremendous lift."

At Chapel Hill, Woodward met and married Glenn Boyd MacLeod, a North Carolinian. He went on to teach at the Universities of Florida and Virginia, at Scripps College, and (after the Navy) at Johns Hopkins. He spent 14 years at Hopkins, broken by a year as Harmsworth Professor of American History at Oxford, then yielded to the blandishments of George Pierson at Yale. Warren, already in New Haven, helped persuade him in this—but only after he had obtained assurances from Robin Winks that Yale's history department was "not just a school for dabblers." Speaking of his arrival there, he says "Yale gave the impression of being organized to save the South. And that included one's best friends. I loved them for their zeal, though I thought some were misguided."

The young Woodward, his roots in Arkansas rather than Cavalier country, wasted no time with the gallantries and lamentations of the Lost Cause. Just out of Emory, he signed a civil libertarians' declaration protesting the arrest of labor organizers, two of them Negroes, charged with "insurrection" under a Georgia statute of Civil War vintage. In 1932 he joined and briefly chaired a committee for the defense of Angelo Herndon, a young Negro Communist and spokesman for Atlanta's unemployed blacks, who was prosecuted under the same law. Woodward had just returned from Europe and the USSR, where he had felt the scorn heaped on Southern justice over the Scottsboro case. The committee drew fire from white supremacists on the one side, and Communist propagandists on the other. "It was quite an initiation," he recalls, although soon interrupted by his departure for Chapel Hill. (Herndon was freed in 1937, when the Supreme Court ruled the "insurrection" statute unconstitutional.)

The years in Atlanta and Chapel Hill were immensely cheered by the Southern literary renaissance. H. L. Mencken had been riding high as leader of "a whole

View of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March in which Woodward participated

Photo: Morton Broffman



tribe of South-baiters," declaring the region a cultural Sahara. Then in 1929 Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* appeared, shortly followed by *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*. Katherine Anne Porter's *Flowering Judas* and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* came out at this time. Other writers figured in the 1930 Nashville manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, breathing defiance of the North's crass industrialism.

The result, recorded by Woodward in *The Burden of Southern History*, was "a new mood of release and autonomy." He entered a "new world . . . in which the historical imagination played a supreme part." It was a world quite unlike that of Dreiser, Anderson, and Lewis, whose "characters . . . appear on the scene from nowhere, trailing no clouds of history." Or of Hemingway: "A Hemingway hero with a grandfather is inconceivable." Here was "the past in the present," as Allen Tate saw it. Here was Gavin Stevens in *Intruder in the Dust*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Here were writers who "proved able to confront the chaos and irony of history" without falling back on the Great Alibi, Reconstruction.

In short, Woodward threw off the "provincial inferiority complex" of a denigrated region, ready to carry over into history the sense of tragedy and dignity that Southern writers had evoked, and that fit not only the experience of the South but of most other peoples of the world. The emotional cost of his chosen course is reflected in a letter to a friend soon after publication of *Origins*:

What was most gratifying about your reaction was that you felt behind my savage exposures an underlying pity and sympathy. That was what I was most concerned about—that the compassion that motivated me would be smothered in the irony with which I wrote. It was, after all, such a beastly, sordid, unheroic period. . . . (Cited by Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*.)

As tensions mounted on civil rights, Woodward was sought out for contributions to national magazines. He was in touch with black leaders, and with be-

leaguered liberals, white and black, in Southern universities. He was called to head the Southern Historical Association, then the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association. Many of the resulting articles and addresses are included in *The Burden of Southern History* and *American Counterpoint*. He also edited several books, including *Responses of the Presidents to Charges of Misconduct* (1974). This he took on at the request of John Doar, counsel for the House Judiciary Committee, then investigating the grounds for possible impeachment of Richard Nixon. The book's publication coincided with Nixon's resignation—but it stands handy for future reference.

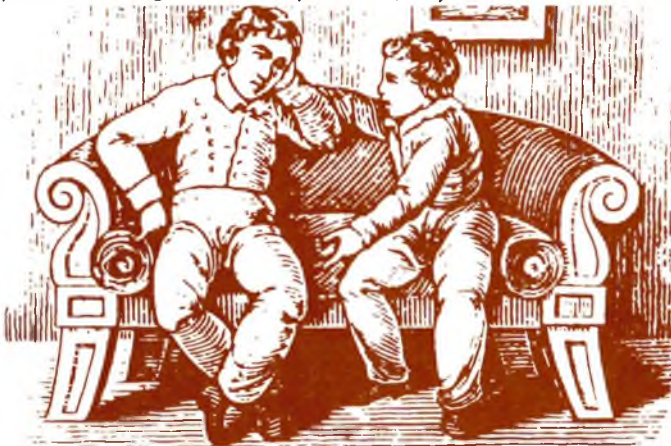
A principal aim of Woodward's later works has been to relate Southern history to larger concerns, national and international. He emphasizes especially that history is a study in fateful choices—in alternatives, wrong turnings, opportunities—sometimes instructive for present-day society (and sometimes misleading). For Americans outside the South, history has often been regarded as "something that happens to other people," in Toynbee's phrase. Woodward, from his region's knowledge of hardship and fallibility, sent up warning flags against the national complacency. Vietnam and black revolt showed how right he'd been: history had at last caught up with Americans, to be greeted by hysteria on the Right and Left. But "it would seem," he confessed, "that the irony of history had caught up with the ironist. For in this fateful hour of opportunity, history had ironically placed men of presumably authentic Southern heritage in the supreme seats of national power."



Now 69, Woodward retired from teaching last year. He continues as emeritus professor, presiding over doctoral dissertations and working on two big projects. One is to rescue from bowdlerization the Civil War diaries of Mary Boykin Chesnut, a vivid South Carolinian who was close to the Jefferson Davis family. The other finds him the editor of a new, 11-volume Oxford

History: The Dramatic Potentials

(From "The Age of Reinterpretation," by C. Vann Woodward)



The historian sometimes forgets that he has professional problems in common with all storytellers. Of late he has tended to forget the most essential one of these—the problem of keeping his audience interested. So long as the story he had to tell contained no surprises, no unexpected turn of events, and lacked the elemental quality of suspense, the historian found his audience limited mainly to other historians, or captive students. While the newly dawned era adds new problems of its own to the historian's burden, it is lavish with its gifts of surprise and suspense for the use of the storyteller. If there are any readily recognizable characteristics of the new era, they are the fortuitous, the unpredictable, the adventitious, and the dynamic—all of them charged with surprise.

The new age bears another and more ominous gift for the historian, one that has not been conspicuous in historical writings since the works of the Christian

History of the United States, the first volume due out next year.

There is really no time for regrets. "I had the usual dreams of finding King Philip's tomb or becoming an astounding philosopher, but the world's no poorer for my frustrations. I go on working." For relaxation, having given up hunting and fishing, he plays some tennis and enjoys "short bursts" of travel. Last summer the Woodwards and Warrens sailed the Aegean in a chartered boat; "I took 200 pictures, all ruined by Turkish security x-rays of my luggage." A year earlier he had visited South Africa, in the company of Yale Professor Leonard Thompson, an authority on southern African history. He felt "vibrations" in Johannesburg, reminiscent of "Atlanta in the 1930's—or was it the 1850's?" The Soweto riots broke out within a day or two of his departure.

Living at the end of a wooded lane, the Woodwards pay for the leafy privacy of summer by shoveling snow all winter. The commodious old-fashioned house has a library of several thousand volumes, including rare editions picked up in England. "I read a lot of history," he says, "but also fiction—Bellow, Cheever, Updike, and presently Henry James." In one of his essays, Woodward points out that Melville, Henry Adams, and James each introduced a sympathetic Southerner into their fictions, put there to voice the writers' despair over the crudeness of Yankee materialism. He enjoys especially the oddity of James's long attachment to an imaginary Carolina, and his visit to the real thing near the end of his life. Captivated by Charleston's tranquility, "one sacrificed the North on the spot," James wrote.

Southern historians can take pride in their field, Woodward thinks. In a recent essay, "The Future of Southern History," he said that even "scholar carpet-baggers" are welcome to this "most active frontier of American historical scholarship." As for the nation's future, he is uneasy. He agrees with Gunnar Myrdal that American affluence is heavily mortgaged; that as the world's rich man, the U.S. "carries a tremendous bur-

Woodward to Give Jefferson Lecture

C. Vann Woodward, Sterling Professor Emeritus of American History at Yale University, has been elected by the National Council on the Humanities to give the seventh annual Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities on May 3 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., with a second lecture to be delivered at the University of Washington in Seattle on May 8.

The theme of Professor Woodward's lecture, inspired by the events of the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976, is the European Vision of America. His work over the past 40 years has been devoted to the history of the American South and the betterment of race relations. Among his books are *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (1938); *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955); *The Burden of Southern History* (1960); and *American Counterpoint* (1971).

The Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities is an annual event sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in order that "thinkers of international reputation might have a forum for their ideas, that humanistic insights of importance might reach the public, and that living issues might be the test of humane learning."

Previous Jefferson Lecturers have been Lionel Trilling, Erik Erikson, Robert Penn Warren, Paul Freund, John Hope Franklin, and Saul Bellow. The lectures are customarily broadcast by National Public Radio and published subsequent to delivery.

den of debt to its poor people."

And Jimmy Carter? In *The New Republic* during election year, Robert Coles invoked the early Tom Watson to help explain Carter's candidacy, noting his deep familiarity with Watson's career—thanks to the Woodward biography and to Lillian Carter's father's having been a friend of Watson's. Any predictions on the Carter Presidency?

No, Vann Woodward laughs: "I failed the earlier test. A Georgia farmer, in the White House . . . and owing to black voters . . . ? I'd have got that all wrong. You can see the limits of pessimism!"

—Patrick O'Sheel

fathers. This gift is the element of the catastrophic. The Church fathers, with their apocalyptic historiography, understood the dramatic advantage possessed by the storyteller who can keep his audience sitting on the edge of eternity. The modern secular historian, after submitting to a long cycle of historicism, has at last had this dramatic advantage restored. The restoration, to be sure, arrived under scientific rather than apocalyptic auspices. But the dramatic potentials were scarcely diminished by placing in human hands at one and the same time the Promethean fire as well as the divine prerogative of putting an end to the whole drama of human history.

Of one thing we may be sure. We come of an age that demands a great deal of historians. Of such a time Jacob Burckhardt once wrote, "The historical process is suddenly accelerated in terrifying fashion. Developments which otherwise take centuries seem to

flit by like phantoms in months or weeks, and are fulfilled." He could hardly have phrased a more apt description of our own time. It is doubtful that any age has manifested a greater thirst for historical meaning and historical interpretation and therefore made greater demands upon the historian. What is required is an answer to the questions about the past and its relation to the present and future that the accelerated process of history raises. If historians evade such questions, people will turn elsewhere for the answers, and modern historians will qualify for the definition that Tolstoy once formulated for academic historians of his own day. He called them deaf men replying to questions that nobody puts to them. If on the other hand they do address themselves seriously to the historical questions for which the new age demands answers, the period might justly come to be known in historiography as the age of reinterpretation.



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WILL ROGERS: The Thinking Man's Cowboy



During the turbulence of the Watergate era, an opinion poll showed that Walter Cronkite was the public figure most trusted by Americans. He was perceived to be an island of stability in the midst of a maelstrom. In the 1920s, Will Rogers occupied a similar position of public trust. Rogers appealed to his audiences' sense of humor as well as to their sense of decency. As one observer said, "Everything was moving at a wild pace, changing very fast, and I think when Rogers came on the screen, there was a marvelous sense of peace that came into the audiences' hearts . . . he was gentle and warm and full-hearted."

Professor Peter C. Rollins, of Oklahoma State University, became interested in making a film relating Rogers to the 1920s while serving as the Assistant Director of OSU's Will Rogers research and publication project. Aided by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Rollins joined Cadre Films (Professor Patrick Griffin, California State University, Long Beach; Professor Richard Raack, California State University, Hayward; and William Malloch) to produce a film study entitled *Will Rogers' 1920s: A Cowboy's Guide to the Times*. In their efforts to write an essay in celluloid, the academic filmmakers painstakingly researched each aspect of the film in order to insure historical accuracy. Still photos, tapes of Rogers' voice, footage from his films, and authentic film clips and music from the 1920s were used. Rollins was primarily interested in the film as an educational tool, and a workbook was printed for discussion purposes. Since the film's completion, it has been viewed by a variety of audiences—high school and university students, professional associations, and special interest groups. *Will Rogers' 1920s* was awarded a CINE 'Golden Eagle' as one of the foremost examples of American cinematography for 1976, and will be shown under CINE sponsorship to audiences around the world.

Will Rogers, Symbol for Americans in the Twenties



Historical Pictures Service, Chicago

As Rollins shows in the film, Americans were going through a time of dislocation in the 1920s. Will Rogers' audience consisted of many newly urbanized people of rural background. Rapid industrialization created great stresses, and Rogers helped to alleviate those stresses. Throughout his many-faceted career, Rogers touched on a wide range of social and political issues—Prohibition, female suffrage, industry, Congress, and the Depression. Regarding Congress he remarked, "They ask me where I get my jokes. I just watch Congress and report the facts, and I never find it necessary to exaggerate." He became a serious spokesman to aid victims of the Depression, and to press for New Deal reforms: "Prohibition, you hear a lot about that. That's nothing compared to your neighbor's children that are hungry. Here a few years ago we were so afraid that the poor people was liable to take a drink, that now we're fixed so they can't even get something to eat."

Will Rogers was born in 1879 in Oologah, Indian Territory (which later became Oklahoma), and was part Cherokee. When asked about his background, he once replied, "No, my ancestors didn't come over on the Mayflower. In fact you might say they met the boat." He grew up in a ranching and farming community, and his career as an entertainer began when he joined a touring rodeo as a cowboy who specialized in lasso tricks. Rogers went on to be a vaudeville performer, joined Ziegfeld's Follies, and got into silent films. In the early 1930s, he became a star of talking pictures, a lecturer, a syndicated newspaper commentator, and the author of several volumes of humorous stories.

Will Rogers' simple human dignity and respect for his fellow men was transmitted to audiences through his humor, and allowed people to think that not only was Rogers worthy of their love and respect, but they themselves might be worthy. His death in an airplane accident in 1935 was a shock to the entire nation. He had an effect on his times as a person and as a public figure, but his most important legacy was as a symbol. Will Rogers was the archetypical American—a cowboy, a country boy with strong traditional values looking at a chaotic world with clear eyes, able to discern the good and the evil and to confront them both with dignity and humor. Professor Rollins' film does well to remind us of the positive side of the American character as it was embodied in Will Rogers.

—Priscilla Smith

1978 NEH Application Deadlines

May 1	State Programs—Projects beginning after October 1, 1978
May 26	Public Programs—Projects beginning after October 1, 1978
June 1	Fellowships—Fellowships for Independent Study and Research Grants, 1979-80
	Research Grants—Research Collections Grants, beginning after December 1978
June 15	Education Programs—Consultant Grants, beginning after September 1978
July 1	State Programs—Projects beginning after January 1, 1979
	Education Programs—Development Grants, beginning after April 1979
	Education Programs—Higher Education Humanities Institutes Grants, beginning summer and fall 1979
	Research Grants—Research Materials, Translations, beginning after April 1, 1979
	Fellowships—Summer Seminars for College Teachers (Seminar Directors), 1979
August 25	Public Programs—Projects beginning after January 1, 1979
September 1	Education Programs—College Library Grants, beginning after April 1979
	Research Grants—General Research Grants, beginning after March 1, 1979
September 15	Education Programs—Consultant Grants, beginning after December 1978

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