

APRIL 1971

REVIEWS

The Myths of 'The New South'

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The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking. By Paul M. Gaston. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1970, 246 pp., \$6.95.

AS A REACTION to the crushing defeat sustained by the South in the Civil War, a doctrine arose there in the latter part of the 19th Century known as the New South creed to contrast it with that which existed in antebellum days. Paul Gaston, an associate professor and director of graduate studies in history at the University of Virginia, in a scholarly but very readable book, exposes many of the myths which underlay that credo.

What was it? One of its enthusiasts claimed that "at its core were the ideas of economic regeneration, national reconciliation and adjustment of the race question." Its promoters advanced views approved by many people. For instance, they preached the gospel of hard work, and gloried in the abolition of slavery. They asserted that businessmen rather than politicians would rejuvenate the South, and pleaded for the adoption of new ideas to insure progress.

But, therein lay one of the principal myths. Progress was equated with a crass materialism; for they despised many of the amenities of life. They felt such were debilitating aspects of the Old South. In his evaluation of the New South spokesmen, Mark Twain summed up the true nature of the creed succinctly. "Brisk men, energetic of movement and speech; the dollar their god, how to get it their religion."

One of the more persistent myths was that industrialization would conjure up prosperity. The notion was initially proclaimed as one of the keys to revival. Repetition of the wonders which would ensue mesmerized many of its zealots into believing the day of resurrection had arrived. Henry Grady, the most articulate prophet, thundered "the day of the mighty harvest is here!" Naturally, there was some rebuilding, just sufficient to afford some grounds for declaring that El Dorado was at hand. But, overall, the facts were otherwise. Gaston states that in 1880 the South's per capita income was 49.7 per cent below the national

average. Two decades later, it was still below by almost the same percentage (49.8 per cent).

Possibly the most pernicious myth propagated was that the South, if left alone, would solve the racial issue with due regard for the rights of all. The myth's unmasking was not long in coming. Gaston notes that before the turn of the century "lynchings and other forms of violence directed at the Negro increased sharply: . . . the movement to disfranchise all Negroes had succeeded in two states, Mississippi and South Carolina, and was gaining momentum in the others."

Loud were the hosannas for the tremendous natural resources of the South. Ignored was the question whether or not property relationships inhibited their efficient utilization. As Gaston observed, "much more important are institutional and human factors." It turned out that whatever exploitation there was in the South was not so much of natural resources as it was of the black man and his poor white compeer.

Not all Southerners were bewitched by the New South rhetoric. George Washington Cable, a distinguished author, in analyzing the race problem in 1885, argued that at the heart of the issue of black and white rights was "whether the eternal principles of justice are violated."

In keying his criticism to justice, Cable pinpointed the central defect of the New South creed. Justice was given short shrift, when actually it was the *sine qua non* for the solution not only of the race problem, but of the South's other grave troubles. For example, it could hardly be said that the opportunities of the land were available to all on an equitable basis, regardless of race. Gaston notes that "in 1900 three out of every four (black men) who farmed were cropper or tenants whose livelihood was determined by white men." He shows quite clearly that belief in the credo so conditioned the thinking and actions of Southerners that justice had hard sledding.

The author writes interestingly and well. His study deserves a wide audience. In its perceptive analysis of the legacy bequeathed to the South's present generation—racism and a mythic view of reality—he affords some insight into the reasons for the actions today of Southerners toward attempts at reform. But it does more than that. As myths are not indigenous to any region, it also delineates many of those which confounded the nation, as a whole, then and to this very day.

New York