



1985

Coming of Age in the Progressive South

John T. Kneebone

Virginia Commonwealth University, jtkneebone@vcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/hist_pubs



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Copyright © 1985 by the University of North Carolina Press

Recommended Citation

Kneebone, John. "Coming of Age in the Progressive South." In *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, Available from VCU Scholars Compass, http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/hist_pubs/2.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Dept. of History at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Publications by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

John T. Kneebone

*John T. Kneebone
20 August 1987*



Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920–1944

The University of North Carolina Press
Chapel Hill & London

Spec Coll

PN4893

K58

1985

c. 2

© 1985 The University of North Carolina Press

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kneebone, John T.

Southern liberal journalists and the issue of race, 1920–1944.

(Fred W. Morrison series in Southern studies)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Race relations and the press—Southern States—
History—20th century. 2. Southern States—Race
relations. 3. Liberalism—Southern States—History—
20th century. I. Title. II. Series.

PN4893.K58 1985 302.2'322'0975 85-1104

ISBN 0-8078-1660-4

1 Coming of Age in the Progressive South

The South's leading liberal journalists came from various backgrounds and lived in different regions of the South. All had one common characteristic: as public advocates of southern liberalism, each of them spoke as a southerner. Each of them had learned of his region's past in childhood and built his ideas on this foundation.

They could—and did—trace their ancestry back through southern history. John Temple Graves II, for instance, proudly acknowledged his blood connection to William Calhoun, the brother of John C. Calhoun. George Fort Milton's great-grandfather, Dr. Tomlinson Fort, helped bring the Western and Atlantic Railroad to the settlement at Moccasin Bend on the Tennessee River that became Milton's home of Chattanooga. In the ancestry-conscious Old Dominion, Virginius Dabney could claim the finest of family trees: among others, he counted as one of his forebears that powerful and protean symbol of the South and the nation, Thomas Jefferson. Not long after Jefferson had concluded its purchase from France, Hodding Carter's great-great-grandfather came to Louisiana from Kentucky and soon became a wealthy New Orleanian. In order to have a retreat from recurrent outbreaks of yellow fever, he bought vast tracts of land north of the Crescent City in Tangipahoa Parish. Although the family holdings had diminished to some three hundred acres by the time of Carter's birth in 1907, his father was still one of the parish's most substantial landholders. These men, then, grew up with what Carter once called "the assurance of belonging to a past that had antedated the community's."¹

Such assurance did not require ancestors of prominence. Harry S. Ashmore, who received the Pulitzer Prize in 1958 as editor of the *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, explained this best in describing his own South Carolina childhood. After recounting the Confederate service of his grandfathers and the ties of kinship he shared throughout the state, Ashmore concluded: "I grew up, then, in a place my own

people, for better or worse, had helped create; if we actually owned very little of it (there were Ashmores of varying kind and condition, but I never met a rich one) it was nevertheless in a larger sense mine.”² Family heritage bound these men to the South’s past and, as southern liberals, they would seek precedent and justification in the region’s history.

William Faulkner once declared that “for every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it’s not yet two o’clock on that July afternoon in 1863 . . . and Pickett himself . . . waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it’s all in the balance.” Although he described this adolescent’s daydream in 1948, it perhaps had its greatest appeal for his own generation of white southerners, those born in the decades on either side of 1900. Jonathan Daniels, born in 1902, declared, “Mine, I suppose, was the last Southern generation reared in a combination of indignation and despair.”³ Yet Daniels described his generation’s rearing in terms too narrow, for he and his fellows came of age during a rare period in their region’s history when young white southerners could remain loyal to the peculiar acts and heritage of their ancestors without considering themselves any the less American as a result.

This was the era of Progressivism, when southern reformers addressed social and economic problems with language and methods similar to their nonsouthern counterparts, an era climaxed by the election of Woodrow Wilson, a southern-born Democrat, to the presidency.⁴ This was also the era when southern whites disfranchised black voters and elaborated the legal system of racial segregation. Northern opinion acquiesced in the racial settlement. To the future southern liberals who grew to adulthood during these years, the Progressive Era gave a powerful legacy in race relations. In the years to come, even as they gradually abandoned the racist doctrines that justified segregation, they would still strive to reform the Jim Crow system, not to overthrow it.

Children born in the South at the turn of the century first learned their history from those who witnessed it: their grandparents. For example, while George Fort Milton’s father concentrated his attention on Tennessee’s contemporary political battles, Milton’s grandmother related to him his family history. She told him of her childhood in Milledgeville, Georgia’s antebellum capital, and of visits that leaders such

as Alexander H. Stephens, Howell Cobb, and Robert Toombs made there. She had watched from the gallery as the state's secession convention voted to leave the Union, and she described to the boy the scene that night when former governor Herschel V. Johnson, a friend of her father, came to their home and wept as he spoke of the state's decision. In 1865 Sarah Fort married Dr. Harvey Oliver Milton, returned from his war service as a surgeon with Alabama troops. Their son, Milton's father, was born in 1869, as the family struggled in the difficult years after the war. Milton long remembered his grandmother's tales of life "in a cabin in a corn patch in Reconstruction."⁵

In 1877, the Miltons abandoned farm life and moved to Chattanooga where Sarah's brother, Tomlinson Fort, lived. This man perhaps did even more than his sister to make the Civil War a vivid memory for young Milton. In 1907, he took his thirteen-year-old great-nephew to Richmond for that year's Confederate Reunion. From there they headed north, through the battlefields of Fort's military service. Tracing the path of the Confederate army, they ended their northward journey at Gettysburg, where Milton's great-uncle had been severely wounded.⁶

Although Virginius Dabney's paternal grandfather had died in 1895, six years before his birth, there was a special bond between them: his name, too, had been Virginius Dabney. The first Virginius Dabney served the Confederacy on the staff of General John B. Gordon, but left the South after the war and made his career as master of the New York Latin School and as an author. In 1886, he published a popular novel of life in the Old Dominion before the war, *The Story of Don Miff*. Writing with wit and sentiment, he told the story of the happy days of aristocratic Virginia that the Civil War had swept "into the abyss of the past." Dabney intended his book to stand as a monument to his father's memory but willingly conceded the clearer picture and finer eulogy to his sister's *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, first published in 1887. Susan Dabney Smedes wrote her father's history for the enlightenment of his descendants. "They will hear much of the wickedness of slavery and of slaveowners," she feared. "I wish them to know of a good master."⁷

Young Virginius Dabney thus could read two compelling accounts of his family and the South in which they lived. His great-grandfather, Thomas Smith Gregory Dabney, had embodied the highest ideals of the planter class, earning the respect of neighbors, the loyalty of his

slaves, and the love of his children. When the war came it devastated his land and changed his life; he moved to Baltimore after the war, far from the old plantation and the antebellum South. As did George Fort Milton, Virginius Dabney inherited a family history broken by war.⁸

Indeed, the war's omnipresence in the lives of grandparents made it, through family stories, the central event in southern history for their grandchildren. Hodding Carter, born more than four decades after Appomattox, listened to his grandmother's tales of the Reconstruction years when she sewed her husband's Ku Klux Klan robes and he went out with his fellows and, Carter affectionately recalled, "saved a large section of the South through some well-timed night riding and an unerring aim." Perhaps his grandmother exaggerated, but she also showed him evidence in the pardon that President Andrew Johnson had granted to her mother after the war: this pardon, necessary in order to retain the family holdings, had required the woman, a widow since the fighting at Shiloh, to travel to Washington and swear her allegiance to the South's conquerors. Aunt Rachel, who lived with the Carters, told the boy of life in Union-occupied New Orleans under General Ben Butler, whose memory "she hated." And, outside the home, there were the aging veterans of whom young Carter and his playmates "were so proud and not a little afraid," telling stories that made the Civil War and Reconstruction "a personal, bitter, and sacred reality." To question the veracity of this history seemed not only a heresy, but also an act of disloyalty to one's family. As Carter said, "Did we not have our grandfathers and grandmothers as proofs?"⁹

One could repeat the outlines of Carter's experience from the boyhood recollections of any of these men. They learned of the past from family members—John Temple Graves declared that his grandmother's narratives of life in Yankee-occupied Georgia were "the first dramas" that he knew—and they learned simply by virtue of their existence in the turn-of-the-century South. Even Ralph McGill, whose East Tennessee heritage provided him with grandfathers who had fought on each side during the war, thrilled to the romance of the Lost Cause and fought "bloody-nosed fist fights" in defense of the Confederacy. The South's many memorial rituals to the veterans of the conflict added an almost religious quality to the child's discovery of his tradition. When McGill served as a guide to veterans in Chattanooga for the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Chattanooga, in

1913, it seemed no less appropriate than a Catholic boy's service as an acolyte.¹⁰

Although the daydream of a different Gettysburg must have occupied the occasional thoughts of these boys, almost all learned at an early age that they could honor the heroes of the Confederacy without feeling bound to defend the South's secession from the Union. A remarkable number of the South's liberal journalists identified themselves with the tradition of antebellum Unionism, which some had learned of in the stories of their ancestors. Milton's great-grandfather, Tomlinson Fort, represented Georgia in Congress from 1827 to 1831. These were the years of national battles over tariff policy that led in 1832 to South Carolina's effort to nullify the impost within its borders, an act that historians have described as the "prelude to civil war." Although he had voted against the offending tariff, Fort did not condone nullification. In the summer of 1831 he wrote to his friend John C. Calhoun, unaware of the South Carolinian's central role in the state's action, and petitioned him to speak out against the proposed policy. Fort retired from Congress that year and delivered a farewell address to his constituents expressing his "great regret" that many Georgians supported South Carolina's rebellious course. Although Fort died in 1859, Sarah Milton's story of Herschel Johnson's visit to her father's home for commiseration after Georgia left the Union suggests that had he lived, Fort would have also opposed secession.¹¹

Thomas Smith Gregory Dabney admired Henry Clay and voted with Clay's Whig party. As civil war loomed, Dabney stood by his "Old-Line Whig" principles, "and that," Susan Dabney Smedes wrote, "is as much as to say he was a Union man." For Dabney, the first lost cause was the unsuccessful fight he and other Mississippi Unionists waged to prevent their state from leaving the Union.¹²

Others learned, if not ancestral Unionism, at least a view that—with hindsight—described the decision at Gettysburg and Appomattox as for the best. Jonathan Daniels wrote that his paternal grandfather "had been a protesting non-combatant in the divided Union"; his death from wounds received when irregulars fired upon a passenger ship, leaving a widow and three sons to struggle in poverty, seemed to Daniels to symbolize the tragedy of the Civil War for the South. Gerald W. Johnson recalled an uncle, a Confederate veteran, who insisted to his nephew: "Yes, they had more men, and more artillery, and more rations, and everything else, but, boy, don't you ever

believe that that was what whipped us. We lost that war because God Almighty had decreed that slavery had to go." Johnson heeded these words. A novel he published in 1930 tells the story of a Scottish family in North Carolina before 1865. The novel's heroine, family matriarch Catherine Campbell Whyte, counseled her legislator son-in-law to vote against secession, and even in the midst of the war-wrought devastation of her family she damned the war as "the Devil's work" for which both North and South deserved blame. Ralph McGill could easily reach a similar conclusion, for he grew up in East Tennessee, a stronghold of Unionism.¹³

This Unionist aspect to their understanding of the South's past carried important implications for their thinking as writers and editors. Knowing their ancestors as good and honorable people, they could never accept any sweeping condemnation of the South and its past. Nor could they see secession as anything other than a decision reached in political controversy, never as the inevitable expression of southern destiny. Combining this with their knowledge from family experience that the war had brought reversals in the South's fortunes, they saw the surrender at Appomattox as the beginning of a new era in southern history.

Out of the Unionist tradition, then, they put their historical focus on the war's aftermath, Reconstruction, as the main determinant of the South's history since the war. In this view external factors, specifically the actions of the victorious North, were the shaping forces in the region's new age. In the early twentieth century, however, the nation was nearing its destination on the road to reunion between North and South, as nationalism overwhelmed sectionalism. With their Unionist sympathies, these young men found it easy to accept the contemporary national popular and scholarly interpretations of the Civil War and its aftermath without questioning the teachings of their forebears.

The most powerful statement of this nationalist interpretation was D. W. Griffith's magnificent film "Birth of a Nation," which appeared in 1915. Griffith presented the Civil War as a battle between honorable, heroic men, who fought on both sides for valid reasons. The North's victory marked a triumph for the nation, a triumph that the South accepted so long as it remained expressed in the nobility and mercy of Abraham Lincoln, a truly national figure. But the Emancipator fell to an assassin, and vengeful northern partisans grasped the reins of the

government, perverting the national victory into triumph of a single section. These bitter men, the Radical Republicans, imposed on the defeated white South the horrors of Negro rule, which Griffith exemplified in scenes of comically inept black legislators and in the attempted rape of an innocent white girl by a dissolute black brute. Desperation inspired the film's southern protagonist to conceive a patriotic white organization, the Ku Klux Klan, which raced across the countryside to redeem the black-besieged South. Austin Stoneman, the film's leading Radical Republican, happened to be present when the Klansmen saved his daughter from the foul embrace of a lust-maddened Negro politician. Finally seeing the error of his ways, Stoneman repented his Reconstruction policies. The film ended with North and South now standing together as a single great nation.

"Birth of a Nation" cost more to make than had any previous film, and ticket prices reflected this. Robert Sklar suggests that Griffith made the high cost of admission a virtue and purposely sought to attract an audience of "community leaders and opinion makers" to his cinematic epic. Indeed, President Woodrow Wilson—no ordinary community leader and opinion maker—saw the film at a special White House performance and, according to legend, endorsed it as "like writing history with lightning." The film more accurately deserved the description of history written with license, but the phrase well characterized its impact on American audiences.¹⁴

A young southerner in those days could hardly avoid the movie. Ralph McGill recalled posters on display at Chattanooga's Lyric Theatre depicting "a rearing, pawing, hooded sheet-covered horse, bearing on its back a man similarly garbed. The film *Birth of a Nation* was coming to town. It played night after night to a packed house." W. J. Cash saw the film in 1916 and remembered "alternately bawling hysterically and shouting my fool head off." Hodding Carter never forgot the night he saw the movie. He was on a family visit to New Orleans in 1916, and his parents took him to the theater. As it turned out, this was the night that the residents of the Confederate Veterans Home at Beauvoir attended as special guests of the management. Rebel yells filled the auditorium with noise from the opening scene and, Carter remembered, set him "to trembling." Caught up in emotion, his father yelled, too, and as the Klan galloped to the rescue, he threw his hat in the air, never to see it again.¹⁵

The movie treated the South's opposition to the Reconstruction

policies that granted political equality to blacks as heroic action in the national interest. According to the film, the North squandered whatever virtue it had acquired through the war for the Union in its misguided Reconstruction policies. The white South, through the Ku Klux Klan, had won the final battle and gained reunion on its own terms, terms that brought the national unity of white Americans acting "in common defense of their Aryan birthright," as one screen title had it.¹⁶

The lasting message of "Birth of a Nation" for these future southern liberals was its historical sanction for the conviction that the white South, not the federal government, should determine the status of blacks in the South. With its melodrama and visual impact the film made a powerful statement of this thesis, but D. W. Griffith had hardly climbed out on a historiographical limb in making his movie: professional historians, who wrote sober monographs on the Reconstruction period, had already reached similar conclusions. Led by William Archibald Dunning and his talented students, scholars developed a nationalist interpretation of the then recent past of Civil War and Reconstruction in accord with their assumption of the natural dominance of the "Teutonic" or "Anglo-Saxon" people. Their nationalism, however, was that of blood and attitudes rather than that of governmental policy. Indeed, the political moral of Reconstruction was the virtue of local self-government. Through this interpretation of history, which depended on race consciousness, a young white southerner could feel fully part of the nation without sacrificing to the federal government control over the region's affairs.¹⁷

The racist interpretation of the nation's recent history coincided with the reformist activity of the Progressive Era, a national phenomenon in which many southerners joined with enthusiasm. As in the rest of the country, Progressivism in the South reflected perceptions of disorder in an urbanizing and industrializing society, and a variety of reformers set out to regulate business activity, expand public education, make government more responsive to public opinion, and otherwise employ governmental power for what they perceived as social benefit. In the South, disfranchisement of black voters and enactment of a formal system of racial segregation were fundamental to the reform movement.¹⁸

In Virginia, for example, Progressive Era reform looked for political leadership to Andrew J. Montague and Carter Glass. Both these men advocated a convention to revise the state's constitution, the main purpose of which, said Glass, was to disfranchise black voters. The reformers believed—wrongly, as it turned out—that the elimination of black voters and of the fear of black domination, which the conservative Democratic organization cited to justify its high-handed and fraudulent political methods, would enable them to obtain office and put their reforms into effect. The convention met in 1901–1902, and delegates wrote into the new constitution measures typical of the southern Progressive Era: direct election of state officials, state regulation of railroads and other corporations, and disfranchisement of all those who could not meet new voting requirements designed to eliminate black voters.¹⁹

Richard Heath Dabney, professor of history at the University of Virginia and father of Virginius Dabney, agreed that black voting had no place in Virginia politics. In a lengthy letter to the *Richmond Times* while the convention was in session, he argued that prejudice was natural and that when blacks and whites competed, only hatred and violence could result. He proposed not only disfranchisement but an end to Negro education as well. Education merely prepared blacks to vote and to compete with whites, leading to increased conflict.²⁰

The elder Dabney's advocacy of the exclusion of blacks and his fears of race war represented a conservative position in the Progressive Era's debate over the place of blacks in southern society. In fact, his letter expressed most of all concern for maintenance of the social order that race hatred and violence threatened. Subordination of blacks was a means to this end, not an end in itself.

An essay by George Fort Milton, Sr., much more the Progressive-style reformer than Dabney, illustrates a different contemporary justification for racial segregation. In 1894, the year of his son's birth, Milton published an essay on the Negro and the South in the *Sewanee Review*. He said that the common existence in the South of blacks, who were "the lowest order of mankind," and "the Southern people," who were "a branch of the highest development of the Aryan Family," constituted the "negro problem." In contrast to Dabney's call for exclusion, Milton contended that the "great task" before the South was "the elevation, mental, moral, and industrial, of this antithesis of hu-

man development, and its final assimilation into the body politic without injury to that organism." Quickly, he assured his readers that the word "assimilation" did not mean "amalgamation," which was "horrible and repugnant in its contemplation."²¹ Obviously, though, to avoid biological amalgamation, some controls over human behavior must exist. These might range from inculcated inhibitions to public pressure, from the terror-tactics of lynching to the legally enforced separation of the races, but Milton's insistence on racial purity required that society control individual behavior.

To understand the power that racial segregation came to hold over the minds of southern liberals, it is necessary to recognize that, as John W. Cell points out, "segregation was by no means the harshest, most draconian solution to the Negro Question of which white Americans were capable." Set against a background of lynchings and race riots, the Jim Crow system takes on the aspect of moderation. Indeed, Howard N. Rabinowitz observes that some southern blacks, too, put forward the doctrine of separate-but-equal as a preferable alternative to exclusion. The arguments of Dabney and Milton help to explain why white southerners quickly came to view segregation as an absolute social necessity: with race war and amalgamation set as the opposing nightmarish potential outcomes to the natural, un-directed development of race relations, the Jim Crow system ascended between them as the protector of social order and the white South.²²

The Progressive Era bequeathed to the following generation of southern liberals a potent intellectual legacy on the subject of race relations. The definition of "good" race relations was order; its measure, an absence of conflict and violence. This helps to explain the liberals' wholehearted participation in campaigns against such manifestations of brutality as lynching. It also suggests a reason why they worked for their reforms for so long within the system of segregation. The alternative to racial separation, their Progressive predecessors had taught them, was conflict and chaos—a situation in which both blacks and the South as a whole would suffer. These lessons, acquired in childhood, bore a potent and hidden emotional content, difficult to overcome with reason alone.

Childhood lessons in race relations also influenced the interpretation that Milton, Dabney, and other liberal journalists would give to

post-Civil War southern history. As Jack Temple Kirby points out, the historical interpretations of the Reconstruction era that came from Dunning and his students, and that of the film "Birth of a Nation," were "both a cause and an effect" of the enactment of the Jim Crow system.²³ While these historians studied the Reconstruction period, they reached conclusions that justified the racial "reforms" of their own time and encouraged a foreshortened and distorted view of the region's history. The Dunning school and "Birth of a Nation" implied that the triumph of the southern whites that overthrew Radical Reconstruction led directly to the Jim Crow laws. For southern reformers, this interpretation had a positive appeal. At last, the historians seemed to say, the South had settled the issues of the Civil War, and it now could get on with more important matters of regional reform and improvement. Segregation, however, did not come in systematic form until twenty years after the end of Reconstruction, years that the historians did not discuss. The period between the end of Reconstruction and the early twentieth century tended to disappear from southern history because of this focus on the ordering of race relations.

Their heritage as southerners was but part of the education that the liberal journalists obtained during the Progressive Era. For their time and place, in fact, they were highly educated, and all brought to southern journalism a breadth of interests and knowledge. Over the years, the South has produced a remarkable number of talented newspapermen. Pat Watters, a modern southern journalist, suggests in explanation that a limited range of professional opportunities combined with "the Southern penchant for action" to make newspaper work attractive to young southerners of an intellectual bent. This seems to have been the case with the liberal journalists.²⁴

After George Fort Milton's mother died in 1897, father and son drew closer together. The senior George Fort Milton, then editor of the *Knoxville Sentinel*, attracted a circle of intellectually inclined persons who gathered at his home for conversation on the topics of the day. In a letter to one of his father's friends, Milton recalled those days when, he said, "I would sit admiringly by and listen to your conversation and hope that someday I would be able to talk that way or understand your words."²⁵

Milton attended the Baker-Himel School in Knoxville and showed his intention of following his father into journalism by founding and editing the school's monthly newspaper. From there he went to the University of Tennessee and then to the University of Virginia, where he took his degree in 1916. As an undergraduate, he continued his training in journalism by working as a local "stringer" for the *Washington Times* and even tried his hand, unsuccessfully, at light fiction for the popular magazines. But he believed that his education at home had made the difference in his life.²⁶

Virginus Dabney, too, credited his family, and especially his father, with the formative influence on his educational development. He received his early education at home under his father's direction and quickly advanced far beyond the level of knowledge expected of boys his age. Dabney graduated from Episcopal High School in Alexandria, one of Virginia's leading private schools, at the age of sixteen, and then attended the University of Virginia where he again studied under his father, "with a combination of awe, apprehension, and affection," in three of the elder Dabney's courses in history. He later said that his interest in history was "inherited."²⁷

While at Virginia, Dabney showed no special interest in journalism, although, like Milton, he served on the staff of the college annual. After his graduation in 1920, uncertain of his future career, he remained another year for his Master's degree in French. The following year was spent teaching algebra at his high school alma mater. Then his father suggested newspaper work. Dabney later recalled that the idea had appealed to him immediately; through his father's agency, he came to Richmond as a cub reporter with the afternoon *News-Leader*.²⁸

Hodding Carter also began his education early, entering school as a seven-year-old advanced to the fourth grade. This he modestly ascribed to his mother's "perseverance and thoroughness" as a teacher rather than to his own precocity. He built well on her foundation, though, and graduated as valedictorian of his class. Later, during his studies at Maine's Bowdoin College, he made his talents more obvious as editor of the annual *Bugle* and winner of the Forbes-Rickard Prize in Poetry.²⁹

These fortunate educational experiences were more the rule than the exception for the South's liberal journalists. Parents and home atmosphere had much to do with their deciding on careers in writing and journalism. Mark Ethridge, who gained a liberal reputation with

the *Macon Telegraph* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, described his parents as “voracious readers” and gave them credit for his intellectual interests. On the other hand, Ralph McGill’s parents had little formal learning. For this reason, however, they gladly sacrificed to give their son the education they had not enjoyed. He enthusiastically seized the opportunity and, he recalled, at an early age “was drunk with books.” Of course, sons of journalists, such as Jonathan Daniels and John Temple Graves, found their proud fathers happy to encourage their preparation for newspaper careers of their own.³⁰

Several of these men gained practical experience in journalism while attending college. Daniels edited the student newspaper at the University of North Carolina, and Louis I. Jaffé, later of the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, held a similar post on the Trinity College weekly. Students at Wake Forest College knew W. J. Cash’s brash and iconoclastic editorial style long before he gained a national audience with his book, *The Mind of the South*. Gerald W. Johnson, whose father and uncle published North Carolina’s two major Baptist journals, gained invaluable experience after his graduation from Wake Forest College when he became the twenty-year-old operator of a paper in Thomasville, North Carolina. He abandoned proprietorship after a year, and two years later, in 1913, joined the staff of the *Greensboro Daily News*, where his talented writing soon gained wider recognition.³¹

Even those men who did not earn a college degree showed their respect for academia and their desire for knowledge. Ralph McGill attended Vanderbilt University after World War I, but official displeasure with a college prank forced him to depart before graduation. He moved to a reporting job with the *Nashville Banner*. For the next few years he covered everything from state politics to the sensationalized death of Floyd Collins trapped in a Kentucky cave before he established a reputation as a sports writer, the position that brought him to the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1929. Throughout his life, though, McGill delighted in reciting lines of poetry first memorized in Professor Edwin Mims’s English class at Vanderbilt. Mark Ethridge had to abandon higher education after a year at the University of Mississippi for the greater security of paying employment as a reporter with the *Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer-Sun*. Two years later, in 1916, he moved to the *Macon Telegraph* and returned to formal education in his spare time at the local Mercer University.³²

Of course, advanced education was no prerequisite for skilled jour-

nalism, as the story of the *Montgomery Advertiser's* Grover C. Hall indicates. Hall grew up in an isolated part of rural Alabama, an isolation he enjoyed exaggerating in his declaration that "there was never a Roman Catholic, a Harvard graduate, or a football in Henry County" during his youth there. In 1905, at the age of seventeen, Hall left the local country school and continued his education as a printer's devil on his brother's newspaper, the *Dothan Eagle*. After several years of practical experience on small journals, he came to Montgomery as the *Advertiser's* associate editor in 1910. During his years with the *Advertiser*, Hall demonstrated through his erudite and cogent editorials that the lack of a college education did not necessarily prevent one from becoming an editor of distinction.³³

By the second decade of the twentieth century, when the older of these journalists were beginning to write for newspapers, the campaign for disfranchisement and segregation had triumphed. As a result, Dewey W. Grantham says, "the 'race problem' began to assume a somewhat less somber prospect in the minds of many white southerners." One of the factors behind this change, and certainly the climax to the Progressive Era in the South, was Woodrow Wilson's election to the presidency in 1912. The national victory of this southern-born Democrat symbolized what C. Vann Woodward describes as "the return of the South."³⁴

Virginius Dabney had good reason avidly to follow Wilson's career because his father was a close friend of the educator-politician. When Wilson determined to run for president, Richard Heath Dabney helped organize Virginian sentiment for Wilson before the Democratic party's convention. Despite his distaste for reform, the elder Dabney's activity brought him into the company of Virginia's political Progressives and against the conservative Democratic organization, which opposed the New Jersey leader.³⁵ Wilson's victory, then, was a very personal triumph for Dabney and his son. For Virginius Dabney, this return of the Democratic party to national power, with a southerner and a friend at the helm, undoubtedly also emphasized the South's potential for self-respecting participation in national affairs.

Dabney was not the only young southerner to thrill to Wilson's success. Ralph McGill recalled, "Woodrow Wilson won me completely

and I became an almost fanatical follower of the Princeton leader.” Because his father was a Republican, McGill supported Wilson “secretly” in 1912, but he campaigned openly for him in 1916 even though he was not yet old enough to vote himself. Years later, he suggested the appeal Wilson had for educated young southerners: “He was the first Democrat to take the oath since Grover Cleveland in 1893. He was the first native Virginian to repeat the solemn obligations since Zachary Taylor; the first Southerner since Andrew Johnson. He was the first scholar, student of government and intellectual since Thomas Jefferson.”³⁶ A Democrat, a southerner, and a scholar. Wilson not only symbolized regional self-respect for these young men, but also evidenced that they, too, could aspire to great things.

Much more so than Virginius Dabney, whose father followed his personal convictions into occasional coalition with reformers, it was George Fort Milton who identified himself through his father with the Progressive Era’s reforms. As owner and editor of the *Knoxville Sentinel* and, after 1909, of the *Chattanooga News*, the senior Milton became a weighty figure in the state’s Democratic party by virtue of his journalistic prominence. In 1908, his by-line appeared in *The North American Review* over an essay endorsing Edward Ward Carmack’s candidacy for governor of Tennessee. Carmack was the candidate of the state’s Progressives and favored a “long list of reforms,” the most controversial of which was a state-wide ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages. In Virginia, on the other hand, the Prohibitionists had formed an effective coalition with the state’s conservative Democratic organization. Richard Heath Dabney excoriated them for their efforts to expand government at the expense of personal liberties, and again stood with the state’s political reformers.³⁷

George Fort Milton, Sr., however, was a Prohibitionist and had nothing but praise for Carmack, whom he described as an exponent of “the fundamental principles of Democratic faith.” By 1908, Prohibition had become the “chief bone of contention” in Tennessee politics. The warfare, however, took place largely within a single party, the dominant Democrats, as that year’s bitter gubernatorial primary indicated. Despite Milton’s efforts on his behalf, Edward Carmack lost to the incumbent, Malcolm Patterson, whose continued opposition to a

Prohibition law produced a split in Democratic party ranks. Anti-Patterson Democrats organized under the name of Independents and gave their support in the 1910 governor's race to Ben W. Hooper, the dry candidate of the Republican party, who was victorious.³⁸

The elder Milton was in the thick of the intraparty battle. He helped organize the Independent Democrats, and his newspapers endorsed Hooper in 1910. He also gave early and enthusiastic support to Woodrow Wilson's 1912 presidential candidacy—in fact, he was one of the two Wilson delegates in the state's divided delegation to the party's national convention in Baltimore. The younger Milton grew to adulthood during these turbulent years, and his visit with his father to the Baltimore convention gave him his first taste of national politics and made him a fervent Wilson man.³⁹

The younger Milton's own political activities in the 1920s reflected his earlier experiences. His father's views, he claimed, laid "the foundation" for his own independent course in 1928 when he supported Republican Herbert Hoover for the presidency.⁴⁰ His support for Prohibition, too, isolated him from the other journalists. Rather than a measure identified with social progress, after World War I Prohibition came to symbolize in the minds of southern liberals the intolerance and backwardness of the South.

The First World War was a watershed in southern history. Gerald W. Johnson wrote a decade later that while the "call to arms" had naturally aroused the South's "martial spirit," it also "strengthened the self-confidence of the section and put it in the mood to attempt great things." Whether the South was ready for it or not, the war did bring changes to the region. In fact, historian George B. Tindall argues that the war's greatest effect was simply the creation of "situations of dynamic change in an essentially static society."⁴¹

Several of the journalists traveled from the South to serve in Europe with the American Expeditionary Force. However inconvenient soldiering made it, they now had the opportunity to experience at first hand something of that western civilization which had hitherto been a matter of books and classrooms. Although too young for service in the war, Virginius Dabney had already visited France with his father in 1912; it was, Dabney declared, "a liberal education for an eleven-year-old boy." Despite the lack of such a knowledgeable guide as Richard Heath Dabney, George Fort Milton did take advantage of a

short leave to wander the streets of Paris. Before returning to the *Greensboro News*, Gerald W. Johnson spent several months studying at the University of Toulouse. Louis I. Jaffé mustered out of the military in March 1919, and then spent four months in the Balkans with the Red Cross before serving in Paris as director of the health agency's news service; in November he returned to Virginia to become the editor of the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*. While in Europe these newsmen encountered new sets of values and behaviors that they inevitably compared with those of their South. At the beginning of their careers, then, they had gained an awareness of alternatives to the southern way of life.⁴²

The primary response to serving in the Great War, however, was the discovery that wars involve waste and suffering. Milton declared that the war "was a drab, unpleasant, tiresome business, with little of panoply, glory or song," and worst of all, in his opinion, was the too-frequent sight of "blood-spattered, water-soaked human bodies." Even though Johnson's behind-the-lines duties meant that he saw only "the lighter side of war," he insisted that he had seen enough to know that the true victims of war were the noncombatants who found their homes transformed into battlefields. When the military figures had "almost faded" from memory, Johnson still recalled the luckless refugees.⁴³

After the Armistice, these young men joined the majority of Americans in swearing eternal opposition to future wars. Johnson said that he now understood why the Confederate veterans he knew in North Carolina had remained "snorting pacifists" in 1917, and he announced that in the event of another war it would require at least "a corporal and seven strong men" to force him into a uniform. More sedately, Milton expressed his belief that the "real 'pacifists' of the world today are the soldiers who know what it all means and who do not see how it can aid the world to have such slaughter again."⁴⁴ This antiwar stance would contribute importantly to their conclusion that the Civil War was a needless war, the conviction that guided their thinking as southern liberals.

For many American intellectuals, the war's unexpectedly bitter fruits—violations of civil liberties at home and a vindictive peace in Paris—contributed to a deep disillusionment with human nature and with the prospects for social reform.⁴⁵ Dabney, Johnson, and the

others shared these attitudes, but they expressed them more in response to developments in the South, especially the pressure politics of the Anti-Saloon League and the Ku Klux Klan, than out of disgust over the war. They gained their initial reputations as southern liberals through criticism of a South that seemed blindly devoted to the past and resistant to change; they sought to illuminate the “benighted South.”

Notes

Introduction

1. Alexander (unpub.), "Reminiscences," pp. 201–206; the quotation appears on pp. 205–206.
2. W. C. Johnson and Robb, *South and Its Newspapers*, p. 128.
3. Dykeman and Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change*; the quotation is from p. xiii.
4. Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, pp. 470–73.
5. Eagles, *Jonathan Daniels*, pp. x, xiv.
6. Sosna, *Silent South*, pp. 37–38, 206, 174.
7. *Ibid.*, p. viii; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*.
8. Sosna, *Silent South*, p. viii; Phillips, "Southern History."
9. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, p. 305.
10. Gaston, *New South Creed*, p. 32; "The Emperor's New Clothes" is the title to his Chapter 6.
11. O'Brien, *American South*; R. King, *Southern Renaissance*; Singal, *War Within*. The quoted phrase is from King's subtitle.
12. Singal, *War Within*, pp. xii, 8–10.

Chapter 1

1. Graves, *Fighting South*, p. 206; George Fort Milton to Ralph Snow, 3 May 1939, Milton Papers; Govan and Livingood, *Chattanooga Country*, pp. 111–13; *Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography*, 2:508; Virginius Dabney to Warren Chapell, 13 Apr. 1954, Dabney Papers; Fletcher M. Green, "Editor's Introduction," to Smedes, *Memorials*, pp. xi–xii; Carter, *First Person Rural*, p. 12; Carter, *Where Main Street Meets the River*, p. 6.
2. Ashmore, *Epitaph*, p. 175.
3. Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*, p. 194, as quoted in Davenport, *Myth of Southern History*, p. 104; Daniels, *Southerner Discovers*, p. 335.
4. For a recent discussion of southern Progressivism, see Grantham, "Contours," pp. 1035–1058.
5. "Mrs. Sarah Fort Milton Dies After Short Illness," *Chattanooga News*, 4 May 1932, p. 2; Milton to Kathryn Milton, 6 Sept. 1934, Milton Papers. Of his grandmother, Milton later declared that she "did more probably to stimulate and strengthen whatever of good and merit I have had, than any other person throughout my life" (Milton to Edward E. Hunt, 5 May 1943, Milton Papers).
6. Milton to Porter Warner, Jr., 13 Apr. 1942, Milton Papers. For biographical in-

formation on Tomlinson Fort, one of Chattanooga's leading citizens in the late nineteenth century, see Armstrong, *History of Hamilton County*, 1:411–12.

7. Dabney, *Story of Don Miff*, p. 9; Smedes, *Memorials*, p. lvii. For biographical information on the first Virginius Dabney, see *Dictionary of American Biography*, 5:22. Many years later, the younger Virginius Dabney unsuccessfully tried to convince the Lippincott Company to reissue *The Story of Don Miff* (author's interview with Virginius Dabney, 6 Aug. 1982).

8. For biographical information on Thomas Smith Gregory Dabney, see Smedes, *Memorials*, and *Dictionary of American Biography*, 5:21–22.

9. Carter, *Southern Legacy*, pp. 17, 19, 71; Carter, *First Person Rural*, p. 86. Carter reproduced his great-grandmother's presidential pardon in his history of Reconstruction, *The Angry Scar*, pp. 65–66.

10. Graves, *Fighting South*, p. 27; McGill, *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 Sept. 1947, p. 8; Martin, *Ralph McGill*, p. 10.

11. Freehling, *Prelude*; Tomlinson Fort to John C. Calhoun, 15 July 1831, and speech of Tomlinson Fort to "Fellow Citizens," 1831, copies in Milton Papers, Box 28.

12. Smedes, *Memorials*, pp. 105, 172.

13. Daniels, *End of Innocence*, p. 33; G. W. Johnson, "To Live and Die," p. 31; G. W. Johnson, *By Reason of Strength*, pp. 149, 151, 191–92; McGill, *South and the Southerner*, p. 53. In *Tar Heels*, Jonathan Daniels described *By Reason of Strength* as Johnson's "almost homesick novel about the beginnings of his own North Carolina people" (p. 68).

14. Mast, *History of the Movies*, p. 80; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 58; C. Higham, *American Film*, p. 11; Cripps, "Reaction of Negro," pp. 344–62.

15. McGill, *South and the Southerner*, p. 129; Morrison, *W. J. Cash*, p. 13; Carter, "Furl That Banner," p. 13. In his *Born to Rebel*, Benjamin Mays, a Negro, recalled seeing the film while a student at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, and fearing for his safety in the aroused audience (p. 60). See also Lumpkin, *Making of a Southerner*, p. 200.

16. Screentitle from "Birth of a Nation," quoted in Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 58.

17. William Archibald Dunning's best-known work is *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907). The literature on Reconstruction historiography is vast. See, for instance, Vernon L. Wharton, "Reconstruction," in *Writing Southern History*, ed. Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), pp. 295–315.

18. Grantham, "Southern Progressives," p. 78; Grantham discusses the varieties of southern Progressivism in this essay, but see also Bailey, *Liberalism*.

19. Dabney, *Virginia*, pp. 429–41; Moger, *Virginia*, pp. 192–94; Link, "Progressive Movement," pp. 179, 183–92. Also see Woodward's general discussion of disfranchisement in the south, *Origins of the New South*, pp. 321–49.

20. "Two Southern Views," pp. 810–12.

21. G. F. Milton, Sr., "Material Advancement," p. 39.

22. Cell, *White Supremacy*, pp. 172, 171–80 passim; Rabinowitz, *Race Relations*, pp. 331–32.

23. Kirby, *Darkness*, p. 95.
24. Watters, *South and Nation*, p. 186.
25. Milton to Charles T. Cates, Jan. 1931, Milton Papers.
26. Milton to Charles E. Clarke, 28 Apr. 1936, Milton Papers.
27. Dabney, "Richard Heath Dabney," pp. 93–94; Dabney, "History as Avocation," p. 136.
28. Dabney to H. Turner Jones, 22 Jan. 1957, Dabney Papers; Dabney, "Journalism as Career," 27 June 1957, Dabney Papers.
29. Carter, *Southern Legacy*, p. 75; Robinson (unpub.), "Hodding Carter," pp. 8–9.
30. "Mark Foster Ethridge," in *Current Biography*, 1946, p. 186; McGill, *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 Sept. 1947, p. 8; "Jonathan Daniels," in *Current Biography*, 1942, pp. 172–73; Graves, *Fighting South*, p. 24.
31. "Jonathan Daniels," in *Current Biography*, 1942, p. 173; "Louis I. Jaffé, 62, Editor of Virginian Pilot Dies," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, 13 Mar. 1950, p. 1; Cash, "Possibilities," reprinted in Morrison, *W. J. Cash*, p. 13; G. W. Johnson et al., *Sunpapers*, p. 385. Johnson's father, Archibald Johnson, edited *Charity and Children* and his uncle, Livingston Johnson, edited the *Biblical Recorder* (see Gatewood, *Preachers*, p. 36).
32. McGill, *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 July 1938, p. 6; Logue, *Ralph McGill*, 1: 35–36; "Mark Foster Ethridge," in *Current Biography*, 1946, p. 186.
33. Giddens, "Grover C. Hall," p. 14; Hollis, "Hall Family," p. 121.
34. Grantham, "Southern Progressives," p. 98. Woodward employs the phrase as the title of the final chapter in *Origins of the New South*.
35. Dabney, "Richard Heath Dabney," p. 98; Moger, *Virginia*, p. 276.
36. Logue, *Ralph McGill*, 1: 18; McGill, *South and the Southerner*, pp. 55, 104–5; "The President," in Alsop, *Greatness of Woodrow Wilson*, p. 82. See also Graves, *Shaft in the Sky*, pp. 274–75; G. W. Johnson, "Since Wilson," pp. 321–23, 336.
37. Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, p. 265; Moger, *Virginia*, pp. 218, 304, 318; Dabney, "Richard Heath Dabney," p. 115.
38. G. F. Milton, Sr., "Edward Ward Carmack," p. 811; Link, "Democratic Politics," pp. 107, 108, 109–10; Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, pp. 152, 191.
39. Link, "Democratic Politics," pp. 118–21, 122; *Chattanooga News*, 11 Apr. 1936, p. 4.
40. Milton to Joseph Pulitzer, 2 June 1944, Milton Papers.
41. Johnson, *Undefeated*, p. 58; Tindall, *Emergence*, p. 53. One likely source for this awareness of change was the newspaper. As did all Americans, southerners hungered for news from the war fronts and this resulted in a sharp increase in newspaper sales. Gerald W. Johnson said in *Number Thirty-Six* that the war made the people of the South "a newspaper reading public" (p. 190).
42. Dabney to Mrs. D. M. Roderick, 5 Apr. 1954, Dabney Papers; "Richard Heath Dabney," p. 96; G. W. Johnson et al., *Sunpapers*, pp. 385–86n; Chambers and Shank, *Salt Water*, p. 313.
43. Milton, "With the Guns of the Rainbow," pp. 5, 67, ms. in Milton Papers, Box 32. (He wrote these war memoirs in 1920, but never found a publisher for them; see

Milton to Thomas R. Coward, 29 Oct. 1929, and to Monte F. Bourjaily, 29 Mar. 1930, Milton Papers); G. W. Johnson, "For Ignoble Pacifism," p. 727; G. W. Johnson, "Religious Refugee," pp. 399–400.

44. Johnson, "For Ignoble Pacifism," p. 727; Milton, "Guns of the Rainbow," p. 67 (see n. 43 above). See also Jonathan Daniels to Josephus Daniels, 24 Feb. 1923, Josephus Daniels Papers, Reel 17, Container 30.

45. On the war's effect on Progressive intellectuals, see Rochester, *American Liberal Disillusionment*.

Chapter 2

1. Dabney, *Across the Years*, p. 122; G. W. Johnson, "Woodrow Wilson," p. 41. Hobson, *Serpent in Eden*, provides an account of those southern critics, like Johnson, who came under Mencken's influence. However, see also the more general discussion of southern writing during the 1920s in Tindall's *Emergence*, pp. 285–317.

2. Dabney, *Liberalism*, p. 412.

3. Tindall, *Emergence*, p. 215; Mencken, "South Rebels Again," p. 249. The essay originally appeared on 7 Dec. 1924.

4. Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, pp. 11, 97–100, 42, 21.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 11. With their reportorial methods and their illusionless attitude toward society, newspapermen would find this approach and outlook congenial. Dabney's description of his swift education as an innocent new reporter suggests as much: "In six months, I learned more about actually what was going on and what made things tick and who was what, than I learned in the previous six years" (Dabney interview, 16 Aug. 1982; see also Dabney, *Across the Years*, p. 106).

6. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, pp. 13, 25. In 1922 also, Gerald W. Johnson proposed to Howard Odum an essay—Odum published it as "Mr. Babbitt Arrives at Erzerum"—that had "to do with Lippmann's notion of the pseudo-environment and the process of its modification by intelligent publicity—in other words, the creation of public opinion" (Johnson to Odum, 18 May 1922, Odum Papers).

7. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, pp. 248–49, 378, 313, 123, 234, 358, 365.

8. Lippmann, "H. L. Mencken," p. 413; Hobson, *Serpent in Eden*, p. 50; Mencken, "Sahara," pp. 136–54.

9. Nathan and Mencken, *American Credo*, p. 103.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 73, 8–9, 39, 91, 95.

11. In "The Sahara of the Bozart," for example, Mencken described the Old South as "a civilization of manifold excellences—perhaps the best that the Western Hemisphere has ever seen—undoubtedly the best that these states have ever seen" (p. 137). Then the Civil War came and "left the land to the harsh mercies of the poor white trash, now its masters" (p. 143).

12. Waskow, *From Race Riot*, pp. 1–60.

13. M. A. Jones, "Interracial Commission," p. 1. On the origins of the CIC, see Burrows (unpub.), "Commission on Interracial Cooperation," pp. 49–72; Dykeman