

American historian C. Vann Woodward dies: an interview with Civil War historian James McPherson on Woodward's contribution

By David Walsh
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The remarkable historian C. Vann Woodward, who contributed much to an understanding of the American South, died December 17 at his home in Connecticut at the age of 91. Woodward is perhaps best known for his work *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, published in 1955, which did a good deal to debunk the myth that segregation was the inevitable consequence of Southern culture, and pointed instead to its roots in social and political relations.

Woodward, some of whose ancestors had been slave-owners, was born in Vanndale, a small town in Arkansas named after his mother's family, in 1908. After attending high school in Morrilton, a town fifty miles northwest of Little Rock, Woodward enrolled at a small Methodist college in Arkadelphia, Ark. After two years he transferred to Emory College in Atlanta. By the time of his graduation from Emory, the Depression had hit, a development that radicalized the future historian, like a good many other American intellectuals.

He began taking graduate courses at Columbia University in New York City in 1931. While in New York he met Langston Hughes and other members of the Harlem Renaissance group, many of whom had left-wing sympathies. On a trip to Europe, according to the *New York Times*' obituary, he was given a tour of Berlin by a Communist Party member. In Atlanta in 1932 he associated himself with the defense of Angelo Hernandez, a young black man and CP member, who was accused of subversive activities.

Woodward's first major work, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (1938), examined the life of the Georgia Populist whose career in some ways exemplified the political contradictions of the post-Civil War South. Watson began his life as a radical who vigorously attacked the moneyed interests. As late as 1895 he denounced the legal disenfranchisement of blacks with the statement that "All this reactionary legislation is wrong" and that "Old fashioned democracy taught that a man who fought the battles of his country, and paid his taxes of his government, should have a vote."

By 1906, having concluded that populism would become a serious force only when blacks were excluded from political life, Watson had become an aggressive race-baiter, representing what Woodward called "the most ignorant, bigoted and reactionary forces in American life."

In his second major work, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1951), Woodward treated the events that led to the removal of federal troops from the South, the official end of Reconstruction, and their consequences. It provides an insightful account of the Populist movement, and in particular the complex relationship between the Colored Farmers Alliance and the Southern Alliance.

Without in any way idealizing or glossing over the contradictions of the Reconstruction era, Woodward demonstrated in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* that the systematic and officially-sanctioned segregation of

whites and blacks in the South came about not in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, but some 30 years later.

He wrote: "My only purpose has been to indicate that things have not always been the same in the South. In a time when the Negroes formed a much larger proportion of the population than they did later, when slavery was a live memory in the minds of both races, and when the memory of the hardships and bitterness of Reconstruction was still fresh, the race policies accepted and pursued in the South were sometimes milder than they became later. The policies of proscription, segregation, and disenfranchisement that are often described as the immutable 'folkways' of the South, impervious alike to legislative reform and armed intervention, are of a more recent origin. The effort to justify them as a consequence of Reconstruction and a necessity of the times is embarrassed by the fact that they did not originate in those times. And the belief that they are immutable and unchangeable is not supported by history."

He ascribed the emergence of the Jim Crow apartheid system to the collapse in their resistance to racism of various social forces. Woodward pointed to the acquiescence of the Northern liberals, who turned sharply to the right in the 1880s and 1890s as American capitalism consolidated itself. He notes that at "the very time that imperialism was sweeping the country, the doctrine of racism reached a crest of acceptability and popularity among respectable scholarly and intellectual circles."

Certain elements within the Southern ruling class had adopted a conciliatory attitude toward race relations and even counted on black votes to prevent poor whites from gaining power. The growth of the Populist movement, which began to cross racial lines and portended social upheaval, put an end to that. "Alarmed by the success that the Populists were enjoying with their appeal to the Negro voter, the conservatives themselves raised the cry of 'Negro domination' and white supremacy, and enlisted Negrophobe elements."

The white supremacists depended upon the capitulation of the old Populist leaders themselves to the concerted efforts to whip up racial hatred and backwardness, and they were not disappointed. Woodward notes that in North Carolina in 1899, where the Populists were still in control of the state government, the decision by several in their ranks to cast their votes for black disenfranchisement was met by deafening applause from a reactionary gallery. "The reported yells were probably of the well-known 'rebel' variety, for they hailed a closing of the white man's ranks—white solidarity again."

Woodward taught at a number of universities, most notably Johns Hopkins (1946-61) and Yale (1961-77). His other works include *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (1951, rev. ed. 1956), *The Burden of Southern History* (1960), and *American Counterpoint* (1971). He edited *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*

(1981; Pulitzer Prize, 1982), *The Oxford History of the Folkways and Customs of the South*. I think he did have a big impact, (1982-), and, with Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, *The Private Mary Chestnut* (1984), maybe not so much on professional academic history, as on the public discourse about segregation and race relations in the South.

DW: What was his most lasting contribution?

One of Woodward's last public acts was his co-sponsorship October 28, 1998, along with Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Sean Wilentz, of a statement by 400 historians deploring the attempt to impeach Bill Clinton.

James McPherson, distinguished historian of the Civil War era, was a student of Woodward's at Johns Hopkins. McPherson's award-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom: the Civil War Era* was published as one of the volumes of the *Oxford History of the United States*, edited by Woodward. I spoke to Professor McPherson by telephone about Woodward.

JM: I think his most lasting contribution was to reshape the way we looked at Southern history, away from the manner in which W. J. Cash had portrayed it in *The Mind of the South* [1941] to an emphasis on the contingent, on the way in which particular interests in the South manipulated development in a self-serving way, with an emphasis on class and race. Away from the cultural folkways emphasis that Cash advanced. That really established the paradigm in the second half of the twentieth century for looking at Southern history, and the impact spilled over beyond Southern history into other areas as well, but especially Southern history.

David Walsh: What was he like as a person?

James McPherson: Very soft-spoken, almost shy, socially. With a very dry wit, an ironic sense of humor, some of which comes through in his writings. With strong commitments to what he believed in, which grew more conservative over time. Very much concerned about civil rights, race relations. As you know, in his historical works, especially his early historical work, he was a sort of champion of the downtrodden, the farmers, workers. I think the student unrest and all that went along with it in the late 1960s soured him a bit.

DW: Does that paradigm still hold? Are there anti-Woodward revisionists?

DW: He had a brush with left-wing politics in the 1930s.

JM: I don't know from his own mouth much about that period, but I've heard about it from others.

JM: Just as with [historian Richard] Hofstadter, even those who disagree with his interpretation of the Populists or the Progressive movement still have to start with him. The same thing with Woodward. People may disagree or challenge his interpretations, but they still have to start with him.

DW: You studied with him as a graduate student?

JM: Yes. I took three seminars, actually two seminars and what they called courses, lecture courses open to both graduate and undergraduate students. I took Southern History from him, two semesters. I also took the Gilded Age-Progressive period, basically 1877 to the 1920s. And there was the usual graduate introductory seminar that he taught, along with others. And then there was what was called "the seminar," before which students presented papers, and sometimes faculty members. This was from 1958 to 1960.

DW: You say he became more conservative. Did you maintain relations with him?

He was not a particularly good lecturer, he was so soft-spoken. As a teacher he was more effective as an example, his books, his ideas. He was also a very good critic of what his students wrote. A sympathetic, but constructive and tough critic. In all those respects he was helpful to me and to all of his students.

JM: Yes, I continued to know him and interact with him, see him perhaps two or three times a year. He was the general editor of the *Oxford History of the United States*, so we had that relationship too.

DW: Did he have a particular influence on your life?

JM: I think it would be more of a general influence, not particular. There is one thing that I remember pretty clearly from the very beginning of our contact. I came to Baltimore fresh out of college in September 1958. This was the time of the school desegregation crisis. At some point Woodward was called down to Washington to testify. That made a big impression on me. Here was a historian who had written about history of race relations, being called on for policy issues by the government. That sort of example of the interaction between past and present was not lost on me and taught me an early lesson about just how contemporary history is, even history of many hundreds of years ago.

DW: His views in general became more conservative?

And that may be the first time I thought about looking at an event in the American past that had that kind of direct relationship to the present, that is, what I wound up doing my doctoral dissertation on, what I called the first civil rights act, the act of abolishing of slavery. It might well have been traceable to that particular incident.

JM: I think he grew more skeptical about the possibility of bringing about a utopia in race relations, class relations in this country. I don't think he ever believed in it totally, but I think he began to wonder whether Progress with a capital "P" and Improvement with a capital "I" were really going to happen, or if they did come, what sort of downside they would have. Like the violence and so on in the late 1960s. That had a kind of shock effect on a lot of the faculty.

DW: Had you read *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*?

JM: I had read it the summer before I came to Johns Hopkins. I tried to read a bunch of Woodward's writings before I got there so that I had a better idea of what to expect. I think I read that and *Origins of the New South*. I don't think I read his book on Tom Watson until a little later.

DW: Did the fate of the Soviet Union have an impact on him too?

DW: Did these books represent a significant shift in American history writing?

JM: Well, Woodward's main argument in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* is that racial patterns of segregation in the South were not rooted in

JM: I don't know when and to what degree he would have become disillusioned with the Soviet Union, like so many people on the left did, whether it was the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 which turned a lot of people off or... To tell the truth, I never heard him speak about it. He believed in reform where reform was necessary, but he regarded all reformers, whether they be radical, socialist, left, liberal, moderate, he regarded them with a kind of sense of irony and detachment, even when he believed in the basic point. It's kind of hard to describe. That skeptical streak in him grew stronger after the late 60s.

DW: Did he have an influence on the writing of history? Has there been a general improvement or decline since his work?

JM: I think he's had an influence, but I'm not sure the writing of history has improved. A lot of people in the profession pay lip service to the importance of effective communication in writing narrative history, but at the same time the reward system in academia often rewards cutting-edge methodologies at the expense of accessibility. He was interested in presenting new ideas in a way that was broadly accessible beyond the academy. He did it with a kind of elegance and simplicity that everybody could understand, but the ideas themselves were substantial.

DW: Is there anything else you would like to say about him?

JM: Like everybody who knew him, we much regret his passing. But he was 91, so he wasn't going to be with us much longer. There is something fitting about the timing of his death, because I think he dominated historical writing in the second half of the twentieth century. He's probably the major figure during that period in American history, so it's kind of appropriate that he would die in the last weeks of the century.

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