

Alistair Cooke and Other Southerners

Janet Welt Smith

There was a large, liberal, miseducated audience waiting for Alistair Cooke. It wasn't just that he was a delightful English-bred type who's been in the public eye for many years; it wasn't just the fact that he'd broadcast his version of American history to a national TV audience for weeks before he polished it up and published it as *Alistair Cooke's America*. No, his book swept the country (that is, if the country is buyers of \$15 books, all the book clubs in sight, and the critics) because for a hundred years a liberal audience had been miseducated to welcome *Alistair Cooke's America*, or at least to welcome its history of race relations, which is what I shall deal with here.

After hearing Mr. Cooke's TV-packaged version of four centuries of American race relations,^o I obtained a copy of the script in order to compare it with the book that followed. For the most part, the changes are consistent. On TV Cooke bowed to the ineradicable prejudices of a popular American audience: You don't badmouth Abraham Lincoln and you are careful about idealizing slavery. On one point, however, the change is the other way around. I suspect—I'm only guessing—that Cooke listened to cooler heads among his Knopf editors, who told him 1973 was not the year to call John Brown of Harper's Ferry a maniacal egotist. Before the black revolution such a characterization of Brown would have been thought unexceptionable enough. But by 1973 some things had changed.

In the book John Brown is no longer a "maniacal egotist" but a "strange, brave egotist." Other changes between TV script and book are merely verbal. Robert E. Lee is not described in print as "saintly," but Cooke's veritable idolatry of the man still comes through strongly. There are curious changes in

Cooke's handling of the Union marching song, "John Brown's body lies mouldering in his grave, but his soul goes marching on." In the broadcast John Brown was "caught, tried and hanged, but oddly, his name goes marching on." In the book, "He was caught, tried and hanged but his name, if not his soul, goes marching on in a song that was in its day a fearful battle cry."

The verbal play reflects Cooke's difficulty in coming to terms with one of the most important facts in the history of the Civil War; namely, that the fearful battle cry of Northern soldiers was indeed a celebration of that "maniacal egotist" who died on the gallows in an effort to overthrow slavery. The difficulty is not Cooke's alone. It is shared by most Southern historians. By "Southern historians" I mean to include Alistair Cooke, born and bred in England, as well as many Northerners, such as John Kennedy, Charles and Mary Beard, and Edmund Wilson.

Sometime in the twentieth century geography became meaningless in the writing of Civil War history. Southern historians are not necessarily "Southern" in viewpoint. One of the most scholarly and least prejudiced, for example, is C. Vann Woodward, a born Southerner. Nonetheless, due credit must be given the born Southerners of the last century and the first decades of this one. The distorted history started with them. ("Distorted" is an understatement; to a modern reader most of the old Southern writers sound demented.)

Geographical lines were first crossed in 1929 with Claude Bowers's *The Tragic Era*. He is, I suppose, the only born Northerner to sound really demented on the Civil War. Bowers is successor to the most violent and primitive of the old-time Southern his-

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^oOriginally broadcast on network TV, the series is currently being rerun by public broadcasting stations in twenty-six segments.

torians. Like them, and unlike the moderns, Bowers was an expert on rape. On the other hand, Claude Bowers may be more modern than I suggest if we are to believe the 1963 *Columbia Encyclopedia*, which describes his work as "vigorous, well written and deservedly popular."

Bowers on rape is modern in his assertion that the lust-maddened Negroes who raped white women on sight during Reconstruction did not really mean to rape—they were incited to it by the carpetbaggers. By contrast, the Negroes in Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* were simply brutes who raped for fun. But of course Dixon was a genuine, old-fashioned, born Southerner. This is the chief difference in content between Dixon, an historical novelist publishing in 1905, and Bowers, an historian, in 1929. However, Dixon too may not be as antique as I suggest. In 1962 one professor, writing in the *North Carolina Historical Review*, found that Dixon had written "the most valuable piece of dramatic property in the history of mankind."

A typical Bowers passage on rape begins with the carpetbaggers: "the scum of Northern society, emissaries of the politicians, soldiers of fortune, and not a few degenerates" who were "inflaming the negroes' egotism, and soon the lustful assaults began." He goes on: "Rape is the foul daughter of Reconstruction. . . . An English woman living on a Georgia plantation saw an amazing change in the manners of her servants. . . . They spoke to their employers with studied familiarity, treated the women with disrespect. . . . All over the South, white women armed themselves in self-defense. Before the Klan appeared . . . no respectable white woman dared to venture out in the black belt unprotected. . . . The spectacle of negro police leading white girls to jail was not unusual in Montgomery. Among the poor, the white women . . . traveled in large companies as a protection against rape. . . . Negroes who had criminally attacked white women, been tried and sent to the penitentiary, were turned loose after a few days' incarceration. It was not until the original Klan began to ride that white women felt some sense of security."

If one reads Claude Bowers long enough—for hours a day, which nobody should do—the mind begins to go. You may have spent years studying the facts of Reconstruction and know, as you know your own name, that all this is simply imaginary. Although in fact there is not a particle of evidence that rape was even a problem during Reconstruction, you begin to wonder whether all this could be just made up. The temptation is to stop reading Bowers. The alternative is to read him more carefully. In the paragraph above, for example, you discover Bowers sees little or no difference between servants who speak to their employers "with studied familiarity" or "Negro police leading white girls to jail" and an orgy of rape. With apologies to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, "demented" is not too strong a term.

The best antidote to Southern historians is to read the opposite kind of historian; C. Vann Woodward, Ralph Kornbold, Fawn Brodie, John Hope Franklin, Lerone Bennett, Kenneth Stampp, and Lawrence Lader, for examples. Some were born in the South, some in the North; some are black, some white. What they have in common is that they are conscientious scholars who have, among them, studied the Civil War and Reconstruction in minutest detail. Their facts are undisputed. With the arrival of Alistair Cooke, however, it would seem they have all labored in vain.

Cooke may seem like tame stuff compared with his old-fashioned Southern predecessors. But when placed in context, Cooke need take a back seat to no one. After all, he is writing in 1973; after the Civil War but after the black revolution. And, not so incidentally, he is writing for a very special audience. Cooke is selling neither to Southern crackers nor to Northern working people. His audience is the educated and enlightened community in the United States—liberals, college students, and *New York Times* readers. His reviews have not disappointed. *Newsweek* rejoiced that Cooke had given "the first, and perhaps the finest, gift to the nation for its 200th birthday." The *New York Times* reviewer liked especially Cooke's "warm and upbeat note," which, he thought, was just the antidote to Watergate.

Cooke's success is not unprecedented.

Claude Bowers was a bestseller also among educated Northerners and Southerners. Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* is more than an obscure historical novel. In 1915 David Wark Griffith—quite as ardent a Southerner as Dixon—turned *The Clansman* into the film *The Birth of a Nation*. The film can occasionally be seen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and turns up from time to time in campus film festivals. It faithfully preserves the lurid fantasies of *The Clansman* and is—or so Griffith's admirers tell us—a work of the "utmost possible artistry."

The audience for *The Birth of a Nation* was, in 1915, almost everybody—rich and poor, Northern and Southern. It is among the most profitable movies ever made and was ecstatically reviewed. The only objections came from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, blacks who threw eggs at the screen, and a few—a very few—educated whites.

In time, by the grace of God—and I intend no irreverence—*The Birth of a Nation* began to lose its popular audience. It was banned in a few Northern cities. (As a restriction on free expression the banning is adequately justified by Justice Holmes's objection to crying "Fire!" in a crowded theatre. When it was first shown in New York City, to hysterical audiences, one white man walked out vowing he'd

never shake hands with a black man again.) For a long time it continued to play well in the South, until Southern audiences finally found it too old-fashioned. Then too, the film itself was becoming scratched and creaky. It did not, however, become too old-fashioned or scratched or creaky for many intellectuals. *The Birth of a Nation* lived on for many decades as a deeply respected art film, and continued to do so right through the 1960's.

Two recurring themes in the film, as in all the modern Southern historians, including Alistair Cooke, are: Northerners were money-hungry and profit-minded, they were really fighting for the textile mills of New England or, sometimes, the whole Northern profit system. Second, if those Northerners were really fighting for any principle at all, the principle was not slavery but only to preserve the Union.

The mercenary motif arises first in Cooke's treatment of the Western pioneers. At first it seems they had their principles, for they were "soundly against slavery." However, "with them it was not simply a matter of principle. They had gone West to work free land for their own prosperity." Now we learn they are motivated by the fear of having to compete with slave labor. Thus Cooke has Western farmers and hard-boiled emissaries of the slaveholders meeting to make a shambles of "bleeding Kansas." This miniature civil war (John Brown was there) was fought—take your choice—either over principles or over money. Except when Cooke comes to what others might call Northern principles, his word is "prejudices": "The new Westerners in the North were confirmed in their prejudices, many of them gross and bigoted, about the brutality and peonage of the South." We have not yet reached the big Civil War, but, according to Cooke, the seed is being sown by some very mercenary, gross, and bigoted people.

As for the Southerners, the slaveholders lived in a "graceful feudal kingdom," feeling deeply "ashamed, humiliated by their ownership of slaves." (Of the slaves' humiliation there is no mention.) The Southerners, it seems, were not mercenary, they were simply human. All of them, rich and poor alike, were fighting for the same simple reason: "All they wanted was to prove that their homeland was unconquerable." Certainly the South wasn't fighting for slavery. Admittedly, the slaveholders had special problems. It appears they had been thinking about giving up slavery altogether at the end of the eighteenth century. Then the cotton gin was invented, and what could a poor planter do? For the cotton gin "made slaves more desirable than ever." And that's that. Others may detect a mercenary motive here, but Cooke is above using such nasty words about planters. It does not even appear they were thinking about "their own prosperity." The trouble facing

these Southerners was simply that the cotton gin made slavery so profitable.

In deference to his 1974 audience Mr. Cooke begins his discussion of race relations with some very proper remarks on our oppressed black citizens. Indeed, he seems to go a little overboard here, for I do feel that in the last hundred and ninety years there has been some improvement in the position of black Americans. Cooke, however, who is far more fashionable on every point than I, isn't so sure. In a despondent mood, he says that "sometimes, and in some places, [a Negro] is not much better off today than he was [in Thomas Jefferson's day]." This sort of nonsense, together with standard references to "the Negro at the bottom of the heap," may prevent some white liberal readers from even noticing what Cooke is saying about Negroes at other periods, especially during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The fact is the incredible gallantry of the black regiments at Fort Wagner, during the Civil War, was such that it was then said that those deeds could never be forgotten (see Lawrence Lader's *The Bold Brahmins*). That was rhetoric, of course, but their reckless courage was unbelievable (no white troops could even follow them). Yet Alistair Cooke has



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more than forgotten. The only black soldiers in *Alistair Cooke's America* are loyally serving the Confederate Army.

The carpetbaggers of Reconstruction have become more refined in Cooke. There are even some "idealists" among them. They are far from "the lowest types of the abandoned whites" who, in Claude Bowers, were being "sent into the South to arouse the passions of the negroes." They are still recognizable, however, and the result of their activities is the same. The difference is that Cooke covers in a single paragraph what Dixon and Bowers write books about. The paragraph is not without interest:

Throughout the South both the blacks and the whites were manipulated by Northern businessmen and salesmen, who descended on the conquered province like locusts. When the reaction came—and it came swiftly—the Negroes were brutally swept from such power as they had and from all voting booths—and they didn't enter them again for many decades. . . . These memories [of the carpetbaggers] were kept fresh in the South for many generations and planted the trauma from which we are only now painfully beginning to recover.

The above paragraph is the entirety of Cooke's attempt to account for all that happened to Southern blacks from Reconstruction to very recent times. Those carpetbaggers must have inflicted a very considerable "trauma" indeed. By their actions Southern blacks were deprived of the vote for a hundred years. At least that is how it appears in Cooke. Just *how* the Negro was deprived of his vote—how he was whipped, cheated, and lynched for that and other ends—does not appear at all. I think we can safely assume that if any of these unhappy facts had been noted, they too Cooke would have attributed to the "trauma" inflicted by the carpetbaggers.

In short, Cooke is a quite conventional Southern historian on Reconstruction, except for one omission. In Claude Bowers and Thomas Dixon the Ku Klux Klan is the hero of the whole tale, the cleansing force which saved white womanhood and the South. In *Alistair Cooke's America* there simply was no Ku Klux Klan—at least not until the 1920's, when the modern Klan appears lynching, evenhandedly, Catholics, Jews, and Negroes. Cooke's failure to mention the real thing seems a large omission.

I referred earlier to the differences between Cooke's broadcast and his book. There is an interesting change with regard to Abraham Lincoln, for whom Cooke clearly does not care. "It is . . . in some quarters thought to be tasteless to talk sense about Lincoln." After admonishing that "the debunking tendency must be resisted," he clearly fails to take his own advice. The result is a good deal of strange material about Lincoln. In the book

Cooke says the Gettysburg address is full of "very dubious logic"—so full indeed that "we have all been bedazzled by it." On TV he simply notes that Lincoln was at his best in Gettysburg. In the book Cooke says of Lincoln's remark in favor of government "of the people by the people for the people" that there is "anarchy implied in any government 'by the people.'" This pessimistic estimate of popular government was omitted on TV. There Cooke handled Lincoln's phrase (which is, in the book, "very close to political nonsense") this way: "By a tragic irony [Lee] came to believe in a principle that Lincoln, later, was to attribute solely to the Northern cause: the right of a people—in this case, the people of Virginia—to govern themselves, so that 'government of the people by the people for the people shall not perish from the earth.'"

It appears that what the South fought the Civil War over was summed up in Lincoln's phrase. While not the same things as people who just "wanted to prove that their homeland was unconquerable," it still isn't the defense of slavery. It never is in Southern historians. When Cooke lets himself go on government by the people, the aristocratic sentiments which he shares with other Southern historians come into full flower in a way that was thought to have gone out of fashion with the defenders of George III. The modern "Southern historians" are as aristocratic as their mentors.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, for example, *Profiles in Courage* generously acknowledges Kennedy's debt to many professional historians, especially to Allan Nevins, and reflects precisely the position Southern historians were taking in 1956. Part of that position was that the abolitionists were very lawless characters. Of course the abolitionists have never really been in style, except among the Northern generation immediately following the Civil War. But they were thoroughly out of style in 1956 and—at least in Alistair Cooke—weren't doing much better in 1973. The abolitionists get little mention in Cooke. There are a few references to the "boiling sea of rhetoric and propaganda" by which they confused the issues, and one reference to some lawless types who operated "a secret highway . . . in defiance of the Federal law" (the underground railroad).

Kennedy has much more on the abolitionists, but the conclusions to be drawn are not much different from Cooke's. One of Kennedy's villains, the Reverend Theodore Parker, was a famous clergyman of the time. For a real advertisement for the clergy—especially for the Methodists—one must read Claude Bowers's description of all these religious people invading the South and inciting blacks by night and by day. The clergy are hardly to be distinguished from the carpetbaggers themselves. (Of course Bowers is exaggerating. Clergymen, including Methodists,

also staunchly supported slavery. Nonetheless, his tribute is impressive.)

Here is Kennedy's summary of the Reverend Theodore Parker: "The Rev. Theodore Parker, heedless of the dangers of secession, who had boasted of harboring a fugitive slave in his cellar and writing his sermons with a sword over his ink stand and a pistol in his desk, 'loaded and ready for defense,' denounced Webster in merciless fashion from his pulpit. . . ."

Now Daniel Webster of Massachusetts was considered the most vile of traitors to the anti-slavery cause. On that all the anti-slavery people—Thaddeus Stevens, Horace Mann, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Sumner, John Greenleaf Whittier—agreed. Indeed, Whittier wrote his poem, "Ichabod," to celebrate the infamy of Daniel Webster. In *Profiles in Courage* the same Daniel Webster is such a hero that for the Reverend Parker even to denounce him is quite of a piece with that "sword over his ink stand" and that loaded pistol in his desk.

Lawrence Lader's *The Boston Brahmins* describes Parker helping two escaped slaves, William and Ellen Crafts, to break the law. The law Parker is breaking, in 1850, is the Fugitive Slave Act, which Daniel Webster has just strongly endorsed. (Technically, Parker will soon be law-abiding, for Massachusetts soon passed a law making it a crime for anyone to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act.) *Profiles in Courage* is, upon examination, a complicated book. While Parker was endangering the Union by going on "heedless of the dangers of secession," Alexander Stephens of Georgia—soon to be Vice President of the Confederacy—was very "anxious to preserve the Union." Sophisticated Southern historians become very complicated.

Kennedy is especially interesting when it comes to that artificial problem so much discussed by Southern historians: Was the North fighting against slavery or for the Union? Of course nobody then could really separate the two issues, and the effort to do so now may seem like a play with abstractions. It is important, however. Southern historians almost invariably find that Northerners were quite callous about the slaves; rather, they were interested in the Union, and, of course, in "their own prosperity."

In Kennedy there is an odd variation on the union-or-slavery theme. All the good guys, Southerners included, are interested in saving the Union, while the bad guys are the abolitionists who are endangering it. The two heroes in this part of *Profiles* are Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay of Kentucky, and both are interested exclusively in the Union. That in fact appears to have been the only real issue involved. Webster's glory lies in expressing "the latent sense of oneness, of Union, that all Americans felt but which few could express." The implication is that if the abolitionists had only stopped carrying

on, there would not have been a Civil War. And if there had not been a Civil War . . . but, then, all you really find in Kennedy is that Southern historians are very complicated, and we already knew that.

Theodore Parker was indeed sheltering fugitive slaves, and he did keep a loaded pistol in his desk (some abolitionists kept bombs to blow up their houses rather than surrender their fugitive slaves). Parker writes in his journal: "This is a pretty state of things that I am liable to be fined 1000 dollars and gaoled for six months for sheltering one of my own parishioners who has violated no law of God and only took possession of herself."

After the abolitionists have seen the fugitive Crafts off to England, Parker writes President Fillmore: "I must say I would rather lie all my life in jail, and starve there, than refuse to protect one of these parishioners of mine. Do not call me a fanatic; I am a cool and sober man; but I must reverence the laws of God, come of that what will come. . . ." Whether or not Parker was a fanatic is a fine point. If people are going to throw around words like "saintly," however, he probably has as much right to the title as Cooke's Robert E. Lee. Moreover, in the strictest sense Parker was religious rather than political, for, although a practical man on the issues of the anti-slavery fight, he based his activity and thinking on what he simply called "higher law."

There are different versions of higher laws, of course. One version of higher laws is at the heart of the "Southern history" written by Charles and Mary Beard. The Beards were Marxists who enraptured a large educated audience in the 1930's. Their work has been summarized by historiographer Thomas Pressly: "Beard's criticism of Northern 'capitalism' was so unrelieved and this theme so dominated his pages that the Southern planters very nearly become the heroes of the narrative. . . . [His work] was to be used by some Southern-born historians to vindicate the Confederacy." Mr. Pressly is being very cautious. Actually the Beards were extreme Southern historians even on Parker's "higher law." Lader writes: "Many historians have ridiculed this doctrine [of a higher moral law], Charles and Mary Beard, for example, calling it one of 'the prime curiosities in the history of logic.'" The real curiosity, of course, is how any doctrine as simple as Parker's could have become, in the complicated hands of the Beards, illogical and ridiculous. By their higher laws of economic determinism the appeal to morality comes out looking like an obstacle to human progress.

The most important Southern historian of the 1960's was Edmund Wilson. In his *Patriotic Gore*, a collection of essays on Civil War figures, Wilson seems to have set out with the idea of dealing quite evenhandedly with both sides in the conflict. To the extent he succeeds *Patriotic Gore* reads like erudite

comment on ancient Egypt. Such superhuman detachment may be variously viewed. Wilson attempts to sustain it by seeing all relations between North and South as a matter of American foreign policy: "The reluctance of the Washington government to allow the South to secede was partly due to the same sort of fear of the possible intervention of other powers . . . as was involved in . . . our uneasiness about the French in Mexico and . . . about the Nazis in South America." All this is described as "jockeying for position" and "competition for power for its own sake." Wilson says he is not "making a moral criticism" of any of this but simply trying to "remove the whole subject from the plane of morality."

That, I suppose, sums it up. Unfortunately, when you try to remove the enslavement of blacks in America and what the Nazis stood for "from the plane of morality," you end up with rather strange results. This is where Wilson ends up: "It is important, if we would understand the Civil War, to know that the Southerners have a very good case for regarding the Northerners as treacherous aggressors." At this point Wilson is dealing with his favorite Confederate, Alexander Stephens (who, in Kennedy, was so anxious to preserve the Union). He continues: "Given the Southerners' conviction of their right to withdraw from the Union, they could claim, as Stephens does, that they had been attacked. . . ." One begins to believe that Edmund Wilson was open to the proposition that the North attacked Fort Sumter—and treacherously at that.

More Wilson: "The institution of slavery . . . supplied the militant Union North with a rabble-rousing moral issue. . . ." Again, "We have tried to forget

the Civil War but we have had the defeated enemy on the premises, and he will not allow us to forget it. We continue, nevertheless, to make him as much the villain as we dare to. . . ." And finally, "There are moments when one may wonder today—as one's living becomes more and more hampered by the exactions of centralized bureaucracies of both the state and the federal authorities—whether it may not be true, as Stephens said, that the cause of the South is the cause of us all."

Wilson is full of distinctions. He distinguishes, for example, between an "extreme" Southern position and a "moderate" one. His idea of a moderate Southerner is William John Grayson, who does "not say that slavery is the best system of labor, but only that it is best for the Negro in this country." An extreme Southerner is an obscure Confederate general, George Fitzhugh, whose thinking Wilson summarizes: "Even, as Fitzhugh says, when slavery . . . had been justified by people of education, it had been usually as 'an exceptional institution,' with the admission . . . that 'slavery, in the general and in the abstract, is morally wrong and against common right.' Yet Fitzhugh [said] . . . 'if we mean not to repudiate all divine, and almost all human authority in favor of slavery, we must vindicate that institution in the abstract.'"

I once thought that, with Wilson, the Southern historians had become so rarefied they would never again have a wide audience. I had supposed that, with the Negro revolution of recent years, a mis-educated public had lost its taste for aristocratic fairy tales about slavery. But now we have Alistair Cooke, and I have decided to give up on prophecy and stick to history.