

Wayne Flynt. *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. Pp. xvii, 602. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95. ISBN 0-8173-1430-X.)

The original version of this book review was published in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 90 (3).

Wayne Flynt has written an intensely personal account of his home state in Alabama in the Twentieth Century. Similar to C. Vann Woodward in his regional study *Origins of the New South* and W.J. Cash in *The Mind of the South*, Flynt is conflicted by the legions of inconsistencies, tragedies, and sins committed in the state where he has spent a career as a scholar and advocate for the state's underclass. Three paragraphs into this book, Flynt admits to being both "ashamed" and "proud" to be an Alabamian. This ability to see both the best and worst of the state has made much of Flynt's work--*Poor but Proud*, *Alabama Baptists*, *Dixie's Forgotten Peoples*, coauthor of *Alabama: History of a Deep South State*--required reading for any student of the state's eventful past. "To me," he concludes, "the fullness or emptiness is of less interest than the halfness. Why does a state with so much human and natural potential settle so often for mediocrity?" (p. xii).

Over the course of the last century, ordinary Alabamians--black and white--were poorer, less educated, less likely to be either literate or a high school graduate, less likely to eat anything resembling a nutritious diet, and more likely to die at work or of a preventable disease than just about any other group of Americans. Flynt painstakingly documents the state's incongruous history of producing citizens that attended church services in droves and yet lynched and terrorized their African-American neighbors. In the midst of the human tragedy of the state's past is another reality: Alabama produced countless artists, athletes, scientists, and writers who have left an indelible mark on the state, region, and country. Yet for every Harper Lee or Helen Keller or Hank Williams or Edgar Gardner Murphy that the state shaped, no significant political reformer was able to wrest control from the coalition of elites and interest groups that dominated the political economy.

Flynt begins his work by focusing on the state's 1901 constitution, a document that fostered a regressive tax code, prevented home rule by cities and counties, and locked the state's schools into a fiscal nightmare. "The 1901 constitution," Flynt summarizes, "set Alabama's course as a low-tax, low-service state that had not even enough money for essential state services much less enough left over for adequate state parks, theaters, museums, and other cultural amenities" (p. 26). Despite attempts to reform or replace it, the document survived. As a result, the rest of the century, Flynt argues, was something of a running loop of corruption and inefficiency. Reformers--including the Populists, various racial and economic liberals, federal judges, journalists and intellectuals--pushed change but saw their pleas for progress crushed by powerful interest groups like the Farm Bureau and the Alabama Education Association, religious conservatives, and governors like George Wallace. "Bothered by self-serving desire for power," Flynt declares, "by racial loyalties or religious agenda, by quixotic campaigns to restore a simpler time or place, politicians offered simplistic solutions for complex problems or denied the problems altogether" (p. 106).

The remainder of the book is organized thematically (society, culture, religion, women, African Americans, sports, Alabamians at war, education), which makes most of the chapters capable of standing alone as essays but also allows for some repetition. *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*

is written as much for general readers as specialists and is purposefully thin on endnotes and specific arguments supporting or challenging other scholars. Flynt's chapters about society and culture cross racial, class, and gender divides and are among the most thoughtful portions of the book. Individualism, isolation, a constructed memory of the past, and fatalism crossed all social boundaries, leaving many Alabamians suspicious of change, deeply ensconced in a culture of anti-intellectualism, and willing to apply situational ethics: "Certainly Alabamians believed Christianity contained universal ethical principles. They were even determined to post them in public buildings and schools. They just had lots of trouble applying them to college football" (p. 451). Flynt explodes the myth that Southern Baptist fundamentalism was monolithic in the state, citing thriving Jewish, Catholic, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, and sectarian influences. Evangelicals did pull together, however, to criticize school prayer rulings, feminism, homosexuality, and a state lottery for education. On balance these evangelicals rarely offered solutions to social problems, especially not ones that advocated higher property taxes. Even so, religion offered a sense of meaning and a source of comfort for many Alabamians whose lives seemed out of control.

Georgians have certainly experienced some of the same problems as Alabamians: pellagra, hookworm, racist politicians, and bad schools were not limited exclusively to the Peach State's western neighbor. But along the way, Alabama failed to take many of the proactive economic and political steps necessary to create a state that could move beyond its troubled past. Because of that historical reality, Georgians would be well served by reading Alabama in the Twentieth Century if for no other reason than to see the road not taken.

~~~~~

By Jeff Frederick, University of North Carolina at Pembroke