

**Book Reviews:  
Farmers, Plumbers, and Lovers  
at Work in America and Britain**

***Reading Southern Poverty between the Wars, 1918-1939.*** Edited by Richard Godden and Martin Crawford. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2006. xvi + 247 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

The editors of *Reading Southern Poverty between the Wars* introduce their volume by citing the work of Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen on global poverty in the twentieth century, and this brief reference resonates throughout the essays. Readers will be familiar, after all, with the interwar penury of the US South, which was rendered notorious in part through images and narratives discussed in this collection. But these material circumstances have often been understood as the product of contained or intrinsic regional traits—a stagnant culture, for example, or economic relationships that were uncondusive to modernization. In contrast, Richard Godden and Martin Crawford consider how southern “immiseration” was shaped by the region’s role in a broader, national context (x). Following the premise that southern labor relations provided an “extractive opportunity . . . for northern capital,” they have assembled essays that explore how both societal institutions and cultural representations served to “manage” and (sometimes paradoxically) “hide” regional poverty (xiii). Thus, while these essays may be most striking for their detailed information concerning the interwar South—as they present extensive archival research, for example, or note shared trends among numerous writers of the era—they seek not to articulate a distinct regional experience (the focus of southern studies in a previous era) but rather to understand how severe disparities in wealth and power are produced and perpetuated.

Perhaps because these essays do seek new understandings of southern poverty, they focus less on southern conservatism and paternalism—proverbial tropes in southern studies—than on the failures of progressivism. As several contributors note, would-be reformers often misunderstood the circumstances of the poor, whether intranational or international, and these errors had damaging consequences. Clive Webb observes how the interwar US prohibition of child labor was guided by “naïve humanitarianism” and resulted in devastating income loss for families that were already poor, an error repeated in the contemporary era by the international child labor reform movement (120). Where Webb focuses on policy and its effects, James Giesen observes similar dynamics in scholarship and stereotype; he describes how reviewers of Theodore Rosengarten’s *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (1974) eagerly configured activist Ned Cobb as an exotic “foreign creature,” a response that both limited comprehension of his narrative and translated him into “the archetypical southern black man” (173, 165). Other essays also underscore how the assumptions and desires of liberal elites tend to exacerbate precisely the social divisions said liberals claim to abhor.

Indeed, this volume repeatedly raises questions concerning the relationship between sympathy and social action, an inquiry that emerges in part from the social structures of the racially segregated South. Robert Brinkmeyer explains that the South’s spatial segregation and its ideologies insisted that black and white laborers stay “in their place”—both naturalizing poverty and precluding political alliance among the economically disfranchised—and in

such a context, the ability to recognize commonality across barriers of class or race might seem “subversive if not revolutionary” (226, 236). He demonstrates, however, how rare such insight was in interwar southern writing: even the most concerned writers described by Brinkmeyer portray poor whites as “degenera[te]” and “primitive” (229, 232). And while these writers at least acknowledge a link between social marginalization and material deprivation, John Inscocoe’s study of interwar autobiographies by white southern liberals argues that, despite their “heightened sensitivity to racial inequities and injustice,” they “only rarely . . . acknowledge[d] any causal link between Jim Crow and black poverty” (156). But while commiseration may provide, in many cases, only limited or distorted understanding, it nonetheless constitutes a vital dynamic in representation: interwar efforts to publicize and protest the plight of the poor vigorously sought to elicit compassion, and given the predominance of this strategy, the inability to overcome stereotypes could limit activism. In her detailed study of exposés concerning the abuse of prisoners in labor camps (who were often forced to “work off” fees or debts), for example, Vivien Miller argues that such protests were most successful when focused on “respectable white prisoners” who were killed by practices that were “designed to control the African American labor force” (87, 89).

Where some ideologies of the period held that the southern poor constituted an “underclass” that did not merit social action (Miller 88), others claimed that, in Ted Ownby’s words, “farming people could never truly be poor” (1). Ownby argues that, in both conservative and leftist southern writing, agrarian life was characterized by communal values, social supports, and nutritionally diverse home-grown meals; before the region was incorporated into the federal New Deal, few observers or state agencies dealt seriously with the circumstances of agricultural laborers. But publicity for the New Deal also embraced conventional ideas about rural life: Siobhan Davis maintains that Resettlement Administration photographs were often used to promote “restoration” rather than restructuring of southern agriculture, a project that would also maintain traditional gender roles (57). Peter Nicolaisen demonstrates that this “glorification of . . . a life close to the soil” shapes novels—such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man* (1926) and Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925)—that are in other respects critical of southern agricultural structures and practices.

To explore the various ways in which representations served to legitimate and occasionally decry southern poverty, the editors juxtapose analyses emerging from multiple disciplines—predominantly history and literary criticism, but also art history. The result is chiefly synergetic: for example, Stuart Kidd’s efforts to uncover the ways in which actual tenant farmers and sharecroppers challenged and otherwise interacted with FSA photographers appear all the more bracing amid essays that describe how agricultural workers were, in Kidd’s terms, “co-opted” and “identified . . . as ‘types’” (30). Similarly, as John T. Matthews illuminates the “schizophrenic nature” of Erskine Caldwell’s fiction through theoretical accounts

of “capitalist deterritorialization,” including those of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as Guy Debord, he adds an incisive energy to other accounts of economic change found in the volume, even as his essay receives support from them (206, 207). But in this volume, as ever, interdisciplinary analysis can be difficult as well as rewarding; as Andrew Warnes probes the relationship between “hunger” in social science writing and in the literary work of Richard Wright, he reveals that this term—which names a shattering experience but also provides a labile metaphor—proves elusive even in works dedicated to the topic.

Richard Gray’s contribution, while focusing on the fiction of Grace Lumpkin, suggests that “we are perhaps still trapped in a version of southern literary history that was first sketched out by the Vanderbilt Agrarians,” who were adamantly (if paradoxically, given their own conservative activism) opposed to any aesthetic project that manifested overt concern with social or political issues (186). Contemporary scholars in southern studies are quick to challenge the Agrarians’ account of the region, but Gray’s observation led this reader to wonder whether these scholars’ understanding of the relationship between art and society may have also inhibited development of more vigorous interaction between, in the editors’ words, “the disciplines of literature, history, and cultural history” as they approach the US South (xii). For while each field has long acknowledged the centrality of poverty in southern experience, this volume’s insistence on how that poverty was produced, managed, and justified seems unique in my reading as a literary scholar; I suspect that researchers from other backgrounds will also find new and energizing perspectives gathered here. For scholars of the interwar period, then, this volume will provide both insight into US southern poverty and a useful model for collaboration.

—Leigh Anne Duck, University of Memphis