

A Representative Man

by Eugene D. Genovese

"A well-written life is almost as rare as a well-spent one."

—Thomas Carlyle

Carolina Cavalier: The Life and Mind of James Johnston Pettigrew
by Clyde N. Wilson
Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press; 303 pp., \$35.00

Even in these dreariest of days in academia, when American history has largely become a plaything for canting ideologues, the Old South continues to attract outstanding talent. Fine books and articles continue to appear, as Clyde Wilson's *Carolina Cavalier* attests, notwithstanding the pressure from a kind of Gresham's Law. The times call for adherence to the correct ideological line, which at its increasingly popular extreme regards the Old South as a rehearsal for Nazi Germany and demands for the eradication of all traces of the conservative voices that have loomed so large in Southern history. And in our leading professional associations, their journals, and college classrooms the correct line prevails.

The continued interest in the Old South proceeds from the worst and best of reasons. The worst includes the step-by-step domination of departments of history in our Southern as well as northern universities by those for whom the Southern Tradition, as Richard Weaver aptly called it, and all its works represent an evil past to be exorcised by all means, fair and foul. It is no longer enough to reject slavery, segregation, and racism. Virtually every positive feature of the mainstream Southern experience must be rejected as well in order to avoid charges of indulging in racist and pro-slavery apologetics. We are being lavishly entertained by a new philosophy of history that has the supreme merit of reducibility to four words: "Black, good; white, bad."

The prevalence of this view in the

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north need not agitate us, for it has ever been thus. Its prevalence in the South is another matter, about which prudence dictates silence from carpetbaggers like myself. Prudence never having been my strongest suit, however, I shall risk the suggestion that my fellow carpetbaggers, who today inundate Southern universities with generally unfortunate consequences, have

much less to answer for than do the scalawags who seem to think that a search for identity requires total repudiation of a great and noble, if deeply flawed, regional culture. That such a total repudiation could only flow from transparent self-hatred does not seem to deter them. Nor do they seem to understand that self-hatred is no more attractive in white Southerners than it is in Jews, blacks, Sicilian-Americans, or anyone else.

The best reasons for the continued interest in the Old South include not only a perennial quest for the origins of the War that remains our greatest national trauma, but a strong sense that there is much to be learned here about the tragic nature of the historical dimension of the human condition. Honest historians, whatever their specific viewpoint, cannot avoid a confrontation with that tragic dimension, for there is abundant evidence of a hegemonic slaveholding class (and a yeomanry) that, notwithstanding its full share of ogres and timeservers, boasted a host of extraordinary men and women: God-fearing, courageous, socially and morally responsible, and tough. Such historians cannot avoid a confrontation with the lives of the slaveholders who embodied those qualities and yet proved to be the agents of the greatest enormity of the age—men and women who, whatever their virtues, were periodically, if not daily, driven to the acts of savagery toward black people that their very survival as owners of human flesh required.

The coexistence of these qualities, which defined the slaveholders—and even many of the yeomen—who accepted the slave society into which they were born, manifested itself differently in accordance with region, income, social status, personal temperament, and much else; still, in one manifestation or another, those qualities constantly recurred. The elite slaveholders of the Virginia tidewater or the Carolina low country might not qualify as "typical," but they did em-

body the best and worst characteristics of the Southern slaveholders as a social class. And notwithstanding the gross categories that currently obsess social historians, certain figures emerge as representative — as worthy of study both as impressive individuals and as men whose lives illuminate the course of Southern civilization.

James Johnston Pettigrew, born into the elite of the North Carolina low country and subsequently a resident of Charleston, was one of those representative men. Remembered primarily, if at all, as a minor Confederate military commander, he displayed exemplary courage at Gettysburg and elsewhere, only to have his reputation posthumously sullied by unfair criticism. He deserves to be remembered for much more, including his marvelous (if virtually unread) book *Notes on Spain and the Spaniards in the Summer of 1859, with a Glance at Sardinia* (1861). He was barely 35 when he fell during a skirmish on the Potomac in 1863, but during his short life he made a decisive

impact on the lives of all who knew him, including his kinsman James L. Petigru, the celebrated intransigent Unionist, who, as perhaps South Carolina's greatest lawyer, sponsored Pettigrew's own legal career in Charleston.

Yet, as Clyde Wilson demonstrates in this first-rate study of the man, his world, and his times, Pettigrew's influence far transcended his efforts on the battlefield, in the courts and state legislature, and as a writer. One of the more curious, telling, and little appreciated aspects of life in the Old South was the intellectual vigor displayed by a generally well-educated slaveholding class. A surprising number of the most impressive members of that class scorned the limelight and the lure of fame, which, to be sure, attracted many others. Pettigrew, like no few of his peers, restricted his sphere of influence to those privy to the example set by his everyday life. William H. Trescot, another largely forgotten man, though he is the father of American diplomatic history and a brilliant scholar and theorist, said in his eulogy that Pettigrew's achievements could not begin to reveal the depth and breadth of his influence on his contemporaries: "The influence was in himself. . . . He was a man who desired to be, and not to seem." Trescot could easily have been describing Langdon Cheves or any number of other Carolinians of the day.

Pettigrew has had to wait a long time for a biographer, but he could not have hoped to find a better one than Clyde Wilson. A professor of history at the University of South Carolina, Wilson is best known to historians as the superb editor of the *Papers of John C. Calhoun* (University of South Carolina Press: 18 volumes, more coming) and to the general public as a contributor to *Chronicles* and other journals, and as editor of that stimulating manifesto of Southern conservatism *Why the South Will Survive* (University of Georgia Press, 1981). A careful scholar who has thought hard and deep about his beloved South, he displays an unusually strong feel for the society of the Old South as it existed rather than as it is presented by historians who read the conditions and perspectives of the late 19th and 20th centuries backwards into it. Wilson is, in short, an exemplary historian who, in this book, displays his formidable talent.

Wilson writes gracefully and well, unfolding, so far as possible, his narrative in a manner that carries its own interpretation. But when, as happens from time to time, an interpretive set-piece is required, he rises to the challenge, as in his brief but strong discussions of the Southern concepts of chivalry and the gentleman, the nature of the much misunderstood Southern Unionism, and the relations of planters to yeomen. For good measure, he provides an incisive analysis of the psyche of this fascinating man. In all, Wilson tells the story of an arresting life and, in so doing, offers the public an invaluable introduction to essential aspects of life in the Old South and offers specialists a no less invaluable consideration of long disputed topics.

Wilson recounts Pettigrew's active if sadly foreshortened life as a product of one of North Carolina's prominent families; as a young resident on a particularly interesting plantation; as a gifted student at the justly celebrated Bingham Academy and at the University of North Carolina; as an observer of Charleston, where he practiced law; as a state legislator who helped lead the fight against the movement to reopen the African slave trade; as a critic of Robert Barnwell Rhett and the fire-eaters and of the political legacy of the great Calhoun; as a Unionist who finally crossed over and supported secession; and as a student, traveler, and penetrating observer in Europe. In each case Wilson unobtrusively delineates Pettigrew's unique qualities and individual performance in a manner that reveals the ways in which—and the extent to which—he deserves to rank as a representative man. And in each case Wilson sheds light on the society and the times: on education and religion, on ideological currents and political battles, on the legal profession and the literary life.

As a bonus, Wilson provides a well-crafted examination of *Spain and the Spaniards*, a book that ought to be republished and studied carefully as well as read for pleasure. As Wilson shows, Pettigrew not only wrote a splendid travelogue; he seized the opportunity to reflect, more deeply than most men were capable of doing, on the strengths and weaknesses of Southern civilization in relation to the diver-

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gent tendencies of various European peoples. Reading that book, we may only lament that Pettigrew did not live to write his projected history of the Moors in Spain for which he, a talented linguist, had prepared himself by adding Arabic and Hebrew to his knowledge of French, German, Italian, and Spanish, as well as Greek and Latin. In the end, Wilson's account of *Spain and the Spaniards* provides, as does the book itself, a picture of a man and a Southern people who saw themselves as the heirs of a great Western Christian civilization, and yet who found themselves in opposition to the "progressive," secular, industrializing, and philosophically and politically radical turn it was taking.

On one issue I must part company with Wilson. I refer to a big quarrel not only with him but with an outstanding coterie of Southern conservative interpreters of the Old South—with Allen Tate, Richard Weaver, and M.E. Bradford, to name only some of the most illustrious. Wilson is here defending the Southern Tradition in politics and social theory: its critique of egalitarianism and radical democracy; its defense of family-based social order; its commitment to a classical republican polity. His account of Pettigrew's biting criticism of industrial capitalism and devotion to Southern—and southern European—traditionalism makes especially thought-provoking reading.

But Wilson, like his fellow Southern conservatives, pays dearly for his philosophical idealism. Hostile to slavery and racism, he seeks to root the positive qualities he finds in the life of the Old South in an older Christian civilization and trans-Atlantic republicanism. Too good a historian to treat slavery as a *bagatelle*, he nonetheless underestimates its effect on the formation of Southern culture, ideals, and character.

Lurking beneath the surface is an interpretation that stresses the yeomanry and that thereby implicitly treats the slaveholders as, as it were, wealthy and privileged extensions of yeomen and as men for whom slaveholding proved a disagreeable necessity. This will not do. Europeans spread the kind of Christian culture and conservative values that Wilson champions to all parts of North America, but they sank deep

roots only in the South and at the very moment when they were, on Wilson's own showing, striking bedrock in the North. How, then, could we explain the dogged resistance to the kind of modernity that the trans-Atlantic bourgeoisie was vigorously promoting if we discount the organic, rather than the cash-nexus, basis of Southern social relations? I do not believe that we

could, and, if I read Pettigrew and his compeers correctly, they did not, either.

This is a big subject for another day, properly pursued in a full discussion of what is living and what is dead in the Southern Tradition. For the moment, however disconcerting Wilson's questionable judgment on this matter, it detracts little from an admirable book. ◊

BRIEF MENTIONS

WOMEN AND LAW IN CLASSICAL GREECE by Raphael Sealey
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; 202 pp., \$24.95 (cloth), \$10.95 (paper)

"Feminist indignation is out of place in the study of ancient Greece," comments Raphael Sealey at the end of an appendix to his very sensible book. Rather than give way to his own indignation, Sealey, professor of history at Berkeley, has wisely chosen to omit from his bibliography nearly the whole of recent feminist scholarship. Avoiding polemics, he has concentrated on the legal position of women in ancient Greece. By comparing what is known of Athens, Gortyn, Sparta, and a sampling of Hellenistic law codes, Sealey concludes that underlying the variety of legal terms and customs was a set of common assumptions.

Specifically, a Greek woman was subject to the power of a *kurios*, a master, usually her father or, if he were dead, her nearest male relative. Upon marriage, she was given with her dowry to her husband, who became her master; the dowry, however, while passing out of her control, remained in an important sense hers and, if the marriage were dissolved, went with the wife. Greek law was also particularly concerned with two other questions concerning women: first, what to do about an heiress, i.e., an unmarried woman without father or brothers; and second, what to do in cases of intestate succession, that is, when a man dies without leaving descendants. Both were concerned primarily with preserving the integrity and existence of a family from which both men and women drew their identity.

These are thorny subjects that cannot be easily explained even to scholars, if they lack the requisite background. Sealey has done, however, a superb job of clarifying these issues, and anyone interested in questions of family history will benefit from a close reading of his book. His discussions of Athenian law and the laws of Gortyn are particularly illuminating. He is less successful in discussing Homer—his chapter reads like an outline of 20th-century Homeric scholarship—the Roman parallels, where he does not avail himself of the abundant evidence on Roman social life, and in his treatment of Aristotle.

More than once Sealey claims that "Aristotle thought that women were children who never grew up." He deduces this from a famous passage in the *Politics*, where the philosopher distinguishes among types of rule: of a free man over a slave, of a husband over a wife, and of a father over his children. Slaves, in his view, are too irrational to be independent, while children are only potentially rational. Women, on the other hand, obviously possess reason but not in a decisive form, that is, they are like Euripides' Phaedra, who knew what was right but surrendered to passion. But weakness is not identical with immaturity, and it is important to note that Aristotle said that while a man ruled as a king over his children, a husband's regime was constitutional. It is something like the difference between absolutism and representative government—a key distinction for any interpretation of Aristotle's view of sex roles.

As Sealey elsewhere observes, Athens tended to be less doctrinaire in its patriarchy than Republican Rome, and Aristotle continues to be the best source for our understanding of Greek political life as well as the best guide for improving our own. Despite these shortcomings, *Women and Law* is one of the best contributions made to women's studies and is sure to outrage the "women's caucus" of the American Philological Association.

—Thomas Fleming