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We tried in the last issue to see if North Carolina has an identification of its own, whether there is a story of our region and our people that we tell our children in order that they will know where they are in a succession, and what their connection is to their geography, to the soil and water and trees and hills and meadows; to give them models for emulation and heroes to wonder at. The fact seems to be that as North Carolinians we don't seem to have such a story and that is very sad both for the children and for the geography.

We read with envy of the Indians investing the forest and the rivers with a numinous divine spirit and we know that such investment protects nature against misuse and not only that, preserves it for continuing life support, according to nature's own laws of renewal. We know that our own failure to be reverent before a forest is a failure of religion even more than it is a failure of economic farsightedness, which it surely is.

Our history perhaps can explain our callousness and our irreligion. If it can, let us be students of history. Perhaps if we know what our sins are we can confess them and resolve firmly to sin no more. The faculty for self criticism is a priceless human faculty whose exercise is the absolute sine qua non for survival. The human reluctance to review behaviour critically may be even more characteristic than the compulsion to do it. But, as someone has said, when you find yourself at the edge of an abyss a step backward is the only sensible thing to do. And if we today find ourselves destroying nature in an uncritical drive to convert every resource into an object of consumption intended to wear out quickly and go to the junkpile; if that is where we are, a step backward toward sanity, toward religious regard for the unmodified, unexploited wilderness is the next step.

Maybe W. J. Cash in The Mind of the South is a good place to start looking at ourselves. The most striking thing about this book is that Mr. Cash, a North Carolinian, did not feel required to portray the South as a region filled with heroes and saints, with aristocrats and fine ladies constantly visiting munificence and kindness in all directions, full of charity and love on the part of all for all. Nor was it true that any Southerner at random was equal to whipping a whole squad of Yankees because the purity of Southern Christianity made him more than a match for the blackhearted atheistic cur his preachers railed against. (It ought to be said though, that the Southern charges at Gettysburg and Chickamauga and the Bloody Angle were demonstrations of a bravery the world hardly knew of.)

One considers whether Southern losses on these mournful battle grounds did not leave the best of Southern manhood uselessly dead in a cause no one could rightly boast of. Cash writes of that large section of the white population saved from economic disaster by the explosion of the cotton mill economy in the late 1800's.

Men and women and children were cooped up for most of their waking lives in the grey light of glazed windows, and in rooms which were never effectively ventilated, since cotton yarns will break in the slightest draft, in rooms which, because of the use of artificial humidification, were hardly less than perpetual steam baths.

The harvest was soon at hand. By 1900 the cotton mill worker was a pretty distinct physical type in the South; a type in some respects perhaps inferior to even that of the old poor white, which in general had been his to begin with. A dead-white skin, a sunken chest, and stooping shoulders were the earmarks of the breed. Chinless faces, microcephalic foreheads, rabbit teeth rickety limbs and stunted bodies abounded.

This is surely harsh but nonetheless it has to be true that the loss of so many in the 1860's resulted in a lesser people forty years later.

There was a curious quality about the South that also needs to be looked at — the tendency on the part of the mass of the white population to regard their leaders with trust and affection. It seems to have come out of the shared experiences on the battlefield which carried over into the plantation economy and the mill economy which followed. The same captains held the same relative places and so did the troops.

The mills were established with the enthusiastic support of all levels of society. Cash believes that a major reason was that it rescued the mass of the poor white population from competing with the black population for subsistence as tenants and sharecroppers and that this separation was considered to be an essential goal by the whole of the white population. Optimism and enthusiasm buoyed the spirits and brought hope to a demoralized region. That the profits were to be enjoyed by the few while the many put in seventy-two hour work weeks for a pittance was not foreseen.

Following on the coming of the mill economy came the idea of progress and the launch of the South on the pathway to modernity and the Yankee ideal. The New South began to emerge even as early as the turn of the century. It meant the turning away from agriculture to manufacture, from the farm to the town and from the town to the city. As much as anything it meant the arrival of Yankee ingenuity, and the Yankee philosophy of the early bird, of the go-getter, of the nose to the grindstone, of the supremacy of technology, of the pressure for productivity, of efficiency, of the primacy of money, of labor as commodity, the loss of personal involvement, of the absentee landlord. The South whose reaction to plunder and cheating and humiliation by the carpet baggers had been sheer white flaming hatred for the Yankee somehow came to sublimate all that. Cash thinks the hatred was transferred in large part to the negro and accounts for the dark history of race relations for a hundred years, after the War Between the States.

Not all Southerners embraced Progress as the best road for the South to take. There were The New Agrarians, a group which in 1930 came together by reason of their connections with Vanderbilt University and their shared view that the South ought to continue to be an agrarian society. They put together a book called I'll Take My Stand, twelve of them, novelists and essayists of the first order of excellence. They liked the idea of a South devoted to agriculture and good manners and courtesy and gentility and high regard for a relaxed and gracious life harmonized with the land and devoted to the arts. It all sounds sort of nutty when you say it like that. It even sounds nutty to us dedicated Southerners who want to see the Neuse and the Cape Fear and the Tar and the Yadkin healthy rivers again.

But why can one not think of a society of easy accomodation with the earth, just as sanely as one can think of a society that comes out to look like Youngstown?

February 24th - Peter Batchelor: The Future City

March 31st - Progress