

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY

BOOK REVIEW

Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

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C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* is an insightful look into the evolution of racial segregation in the United States from the end of the Civil War through the 1960s. Originally published in 1955, with updated editions in 1966 and 1974, this work draws on primary and secondary sources combined with the author's contemporary observations of twentieth century race relations through the early Civil Rights movement. Contradicting traditionally held views on race and society in the post-Civil War South, this book has been a source of controversy, inspiration, and understanding to many readers since its original publication.

The focus of the book centers on the emergence of several forms of *de facto* and *de jure* segregation in the American South. Woodward puts forth the thesis that systematic, legalized separation of the races was not an ongoing extension of southern slave culture, but a delayed phenomenon that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. He suggests that the maintenance and supervision of slaves "necessitated many contacts and encouraged a degree of intimacy between the races unequalled, and often held distasteful, in other parts of the country" (12). The theory is also put forth that racial isolation was not only a southern institution, but that it was "born in the North and reached an advanced age before moving South in force" (17). Contrary to the widely accepted view that strict separation of the races was an enduring element of antebellum southern society, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* proposes that segregation was both recent and national, not just "the way things are" in the South.

Woodward organized the book into six chronological chapters coinciding with distinct eras in segregation history from that of the antebellum South to the Watts Riots and Black Power movements of the nineteen sixties and seventies. The heart of the

book's thesis is supported in the second and third chapters, which focus on the legalization of segregation through Jim Crow laws, and why this occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. Among the major arguments are the decline of both radicalism in the North and conservatism in the South, and the effect of U.S. imperialism on racism throughout the country. Unlike his prior statements supporting the earlier existence of segregation in the North, here Woodward suggests that by 1898, "As America shouldered the White Man's Burden, she took up at the same time, many southern attitudes toward race" (72).

The final three chapters deal with the racial issues and tensions in the middle of the twentieth century. These include life under Jim Crow, the public school desegregation movement, race riots around the country in the nineteen sixties, and the increasingly militant black separatist movements. Throughout the work, Woodward refers the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties as the "Second Reconstruction," comparing and contrasting it to that of a century before. He finally concludes that the "first" Reconstruction "ended the legal status of slavery, the second the legal system of segregation" (220).

*The Strange Career of Jim Crow* is written in an analytical style that not only tracks the history of segregation, but clearly explains Woodward's interpretations of the various phases. Brief and to the point, the book is easy to read and understand. Though it is not written as a novel or using popular language, the fact that there is no specific documentation of sources used tends to reduce its persuasiveness as compared to other scholarly works.

Although writing without formal citations, Woodward frequently refers to a variety of primary and secondary sources in the book. Among the former are Colonel Thomas Higginson and T. McCants Stewart, two northerners traveling separately through the southeast in the mid 1880s, within ten years of Compromise of 1877 which signaled the end of Republican Reconstruction. According to their accounts, race relations in the South were in many ways better than those in the North during this period. McCants, an African American newspaperman, wrote that southern whites “are really less afraid to [have] contact with colored people than the whites of the North” (39). One of the limitations of these sources is that their exposure was limited to railroads and urban areas of the “Old South,” those states along the Atlantic coast. Frequently the economic and political centers, these cities would naturally tend to be somewhat cosmopolitan, much more influenced by carpetbaggers and other Republicans than the rural areas of the South. By Woodward’s own admission, treatment of the freedmen in the newer states of the Deep South tended to be more harsh and restrictive, “It is clear at least that the newer states were inclined to resort to Jim Crow laws earlier than the commonwealths of the seaboard” (41). The author supplements the personal accounts of Stewart and Higginson with several contemporary editorials from newspapers in Charleston and Atlanta, most arguing against the necessity of Jim Crow legislation. This adds some strength to Woodward’s statements on the subject.

The secondary sources referred to in the book are primarily studies of specific geographical areas or political movements in the South. Most of these can be found in the first three chapters. Lacking the particular citations of these works, it is difficult to assess their quality and validity without significant outside research. Although an extensive list

of further readings is included, a work making such controversial claims about racial, political, and regional issues, would benefit from more specific documentation to back up the author's theses.

The last two chapters, covering a period in which Woodward was actively engaged as an historian and professor, include few references to other works. The reader can only conclude that the information herein is based primarily on the observations and assumptions of the author. Once again, although Woodward's vast experiences and research related to this subject lend credence to his arguments, documentation to support those theories would give them much more credibility.

Woodward's background could be a possible source for some partiality, but only in relation to the second portion of the book's thesis. Born and raised in rural Arkansas during the heyday of Jim Crowism, his southern roots manifest themselves in the chosen topics of his many works. From *The Origins of the New South* (1951) to *The Burden of Southern History* (1993), the author's regional focus is undeniable. However, unlike the vast majority of white southerners of his era, Woodward was reared and educated in a liberal climate. His involvement on the winning side of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and his straightforward treatment of racism and segregation throughout southern history would negate any suggestion of racial bias. Accusations of a pro-southern favoritism, suggested by the claims of Jim Crow laws in the North predating those of the southern states would be more plausible, but still lack validity given the availability of evidence to support his claims and the common acceptance of this theory. Although Woodward's extensive body of work has a decidedly southern focus, the candor with which he treats both the North and South casts serious doubt on any regional prejudice.

*The Strange Career of Jim Crow* has had a long strange journey of its own. Since the first publication in 1955, Woodward has received widespread praise from both historians and civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. Critics including Ira Berlin and Howard Rabinowitz have found fault with his claims that southern segregation did not exist on any large scale until the 1890s. The suggestion that the period between the conclusion of Radical Republican Reconstruction and the end of the nineteenth century was one of relative racial harmony in the South is also quite a stretch. The widespread introduction of black codes in the 1860s and the lack of African American political participation in the South after 1877 imply just the opposite. These shortcomings notwithstanding, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* is still regarded by many as a work of major significance in American Historiography.