

*Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960*, by Jack Temple Kirby. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987. xix, 390 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliographical essay, index. \$40.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY M. PHILIP LUCAS, CORNELL COLLEGE

The southern experience after the Civil War, many scholars agree, is unique. Like the Midwest, the region was overwhelmingly rural, but its economic and social behavior and its pattern of change were far different. Jack Temple Kirby emphasizes the distinctive history of the South, but argues that its course in the twentieth century is far more complicated than what many have described. Perhaps the key to Kirby's approach is illustrated by his depiction of the South as "not a separate nation, but a collection of colonies inside the United States" (228-29). Different crops, geographical areas, labor systems, and race relations distinguished one "colony" from the others. They held in common their experience with severe poverty and the dramatic modernization they all underwent in the era from 1920 to 1960. How the South with its many components changed in these decades is the focus of Kirby's effort.

To capture the essence of this modernization Kirby looks first at the "structural change in agriculture" (xv). The South of 1900 suffered from an unhealthy economy no matter what section one examines. The rich flatlands not only overproduced cotton, but also relied on a debased labor force of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Falling prices and the encroaching boll weevil spelled doom for many southerners living on the edge. Residents of the hillier sections relied on cotton or tobacco for cash while their less fertile soil was gradually bleached by this intensive agriculture. The mountain regions witnessed a shift from self-sufficiency to dependence on coal and timber extraction. The vicissitudes and demise of those industries left the mountain folk in increasing poverty. Ironically, the creation of national parks to protect the remaining resources completed the process of alienating those southerners from the land. Scientific agriculture, middle-class growth, mechanization, and urbanization, which characterized the Midwest, were absent in the South in the early twentieth century.

The New Deal provoked needed changes in the management of southern plantations and smaller farms of the piedmont, but at a great social price. Federal subsidies led to widespread evictions of sharecroppers and tenants and to the increased use of hired labor. The post-World War II era witnessed greater mechanization and use of

chemicals and less dependence on hired labor. The rate of change varied according to the specific crop and region.

Structural change dramatically influenced the southern culture which is the focus of the second part of the book. With great skill Kirby gives a sense of the rhythm of life in various regions of the South and how it dissolved in the face of massive changes. The ugly but very complex relationship between whites and blacks varied from one section of the South to another. The New Deal, migration, and other forces, however, helped to undermine racial standards to the point that by the late 1940s "the continuance of traditional white dominion was no longer possible" (233). Cultural traditions encompassing the role of men and women (black and white), music, religion, childcare, diet, and work routines were all challenged and reassessed in the period between 1920 and 1960.

Modernization also meant the migration of large numbers of southerners from rural areas to cities north and south. In the third section Kirby documents the unprecedented, "intense and traumatic . . . social disruption of the rural South" (276). He not only tries to get an accurate count of the migrants, but also the motivations that underlay the movement of so many.

Kirby is heavily indebted to many recent, more narrowly focused studies of the South. It is to his credit that he has synthesized these elements into a coherent and fascinating whole. Secondary literature is adeptly melded with government statistics and with numerous firsthand accounts from those decades. Recent oral histories and interviews from the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s provide rich sources of the less articulate, often forgotten masses.

Kirby does not duplicate Gavin Wright's sophisticated economic analysis in *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (1986), and he is only tangentially concerned with the distinctive southern politics of the era. Instead Kirby is interested in sketching the pattern of economic and social turmoil in these decades as well as capturing the human dimension. He does this in a very readable and compelling fashion. Midwesterners will be struck by the contrasts between the transformation of the southern rural society and economy and their own experience.

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