

Lincoln Lore

The Bulletin of THE LINCOLN MUSEUM

GONE WITH THE WIND

Myths and Memories of the Old South

October 5, 2002 – February 17, 2003



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by **Gerald J. Prokopowicz**

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Lincoln Lore

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The mission of The Lincoln Museum is to interpret and preserve the history and legacy of Abraham Lincoln through research, conservation, exhibitry, and education.

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Gone With The Wind: Myths and Memories of the Old South

An Exhibit at The Lincoln Museum

October 5, 2002 – February 17, 2003

Sweet magnolias in bloom, cool mint juleps under a spreading oak tree, tall white plantation houses.... for many people, the Old South is the land portrayed in the book and movie versions of *Gone With The Wind*, a land destroyed by the firestorm of Civil War and Reconstruction.

But not all Americans remember it that way. When the Civil War ended in 1865, a new battle began over identity and memory. Was the Old South really a lost paradise of pastoral beauty and social harmony?

The Lincoln Museum wishes to thank the following for making this temporary exhibit possible:

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Replica of the "Curtain Dress" from *Gone With The Wind*, part of the temporary exhibit "Gone With The Wind: Myths and Memories of the Old South," at The Lincoln Museum. (Photo courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center)

*In 1986, curators of the David O. Selznick archive at the University of Texas, Austin, determined that the original costumes from *Gone With The Wind* in their collection had become too fragile to exhibit. To make these dresses accessible to the public, they spent a year creating exact replicas of four of the most famous dresses worn by Vivian Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara. These dresses, now on loan to The Lincoln Museum, are normally kept with the originals, preserved from light and dust in the archive's controlled storage area.*

(On the cover: The Louisiana plantation Oak Alley represents the Old South as it lives in popular memory.)

Gone With The Wind: Myths and Memories of the Old South

by Gerald J. Prokopowicz

If the ratio of Confederate to Union Civil War re-enactors were an accurate reflection of the war itself, history might have turned out very differently. Between 1861 and 1865, the population of the Union states was about 21 million people, more than double that of the Confederacy. Counting only males liable for military service (which excludes nearly 2 million men of African descent in the South), the North's manpower advantage was closer to three to one. Not surprisingly, on many Civil War battlefields the Union had superior numbers, although the advantage was often offset by other factors, like superior Southern generalship. At Civil War battle re-enactments today, on the other hand, it is common to find that the ersatz Rebels outnumber the pseudo-Yanks, requiring some Confederate units to serve as Northerners in order to put on a balanced show for the spectators. There are relatively few Union re-enactment units in the states of the former Confederacy, but plenty of Southern ones in the North.

What is the appeal of imagining oneself a soldier of the Lost Cause? Why is *Gone With The Wind*, in book and movie form, the most popular piece of historical fiction ever produced? What is it about the Old South, or the way most Americans imagine the Old South to have been, that appeals to people so much that they are willing (even eager) to overlook the existence of human slavery in that society, and to view it instead through a warm haze of affectionate nostalgia?

The lure of the Old South, indeed the Old South itself, is a historical construct. The Old South as we know it is the product of generations of historians, novelists, memoirists, artists, musicians, filmmakers, and advertisers, who have created a sense of an elegant, harmonious, gentlemanly society that vanished in the flames of Civil War and Reconstruction. To assert that our vision of the Old South is a figment of historical memory, created by the

act of historical presentation, is not to say that it is necessarily wrong, or even unusual, because all history consists of constructed memory. Our ideas of the Great Depression, the Founding Fathers, or the first Thanksgiving are equally the products of the limited materials that history allows us to keep: physical evidence, written words, and oral traditions.

When our ideas of history coincide with and are supported by these materials, we easily overlook the fact that what we think of as "real" history is not the reality of the past, but simply our view of it. In other cases, however, an idea of the past takes hold that is based, explicitly or implicitly, on political or social imperatives rather than historical evidence. If these imperatives are strong enough, the idea will survive and even thrive, despite the direct contradiction of the historical record. This has been the experience of the Old South, as it has been presented in American popular culture.

The idealization of the Old South began before the South was even old. In the last

half of the 17th century, Virginia received a wave of English immigrants, many of them aristocrats displaced by the defeat of the monarchy in the English Civil War. They brought with them the culture and values of the English countryside, and sought to transplant those values in the New World. Tradition and stability were the cornerstones of their former society, and they attempted to impose those qualities on a raw new land where neither existed. In contrast to their fellow colonists to the north, who emphasized the novelty of their experiment in self-government by calling it "New England," the first Europeans in Virginia quickly nicknamed their land the "Old Dominion." Those who could afford to do so established large plantations, but even the richest Virginians lacked the resources to recreate the stately manor homes of the country that they had left behind. Washington's Mount Vernon looks from a distance like an ancient stone dwelling (as it was meant to when first built), but there were neither quarries nor masons available to construct such a house, and on closer inspection visitors



George Washington's Mount Vernon. (TLM #3994)



Ashland was the home of Kentucky Senator Henry Clay. Like other Southern manor homes, it gave an illusion of stability and permanence. Built in 1805, it was near collapse when demolished in 1856. (TLM #926)

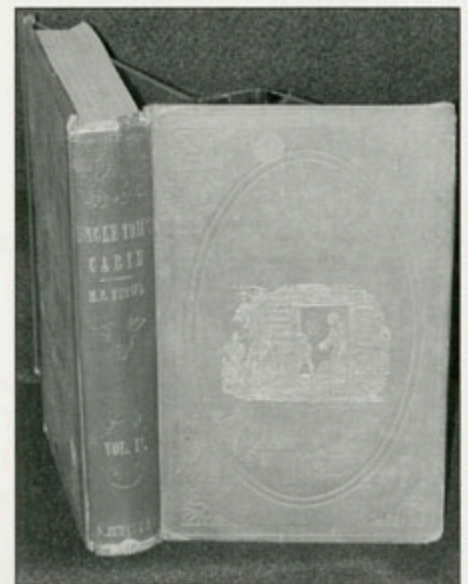
find that it is made of wood covered with a textured paint that resembles stone. Like Mount Vernon, many of the plantation houses built in the first century of the Old South looked imposing in their rustic settings, but were in fact tiny by European standards, often small enough to fit inside the drawing room of Blenheim Palace.

By 1793, the year that Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, the coastal states of Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas could legitimately think of themselves as the "Old South," having been in existence more than a century. Age, however, was not a requirement for joining the Old South. Over the next fifty years a string of new states to the west (Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas) were settled by pioneers eager to profit from the great boom in cotton planting made possible by Whitney's invention. Cotton used up the soil quickly, which led many planters to wear out their land in only a few years, then abandon it and move further west to start new plantations. Yet wherever slave-based plantation agriculture spread, the land it absorbed became part of the "Old South," no matter how recently settled. It was the culture of its residents, not their longevity, which made the South "old."

Literature played a major role in developing the identity of the Old South. Next to the Bible, no book was more influential than Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe*, published in 1820. This tale of medieval romance, peopled with gallant knights and beautiful maidens, captured the imagination of Southerners who saw themselves as the defenders of chivalry and tradition. The values of *Ivanhoe* were imported into a new literary sub-genre, the plantation novel, which invariably featured a planter as noble as any prince, presiding over a kingdom populated by the adoring and dependent members of his extended family, including his loyal, happy slaves. A prototypical example was John P. Kennedy's *Swallow Barn; or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (1832), written in the form of a series of letters by a Northern visitor to a Southern plantation. Edgar Allan Poe, the South's greatest literary voice, praised *Swallow Barn* for "the rich simplicity of diction – the manliness of tone – the admirable traits of Virginian manners, and the striking pictures of still life" that Kennedy offered. Although he also injected a certain amount of satire into his sketches of the Virginia gentry, Kennedy suffused his work with affection for the world that he portrayed as an idyllic community of changeless tradition.

When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in 1852, one reason that it aroused such emotional opposition in the South was Harriet Beecher Stowe's skill in whole-heartedly adopting almost all the clichés of the plantation novel. Like the other works of fiction by which white Southerners had come to define their society, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* begins by portraying a decent, kindly master, presiding over a happy family of white relatives and black slaves. But economic misfortune strikes, and the kindly master must, against his desire, sell an enslaved man away from his wife and child. Stowe thus highlighted one of the ugliest internal contradictions of the Old South: if masters and slaves lived together as happy "families," what kind of a system would allow (or even require) a man to sell a family member? This was a sore point for slavery's defenders, as Abraham Lincoln noted in 1854, when he commented on the low regard in which even slave owners held slave dealers:

He watches your necessities, and crawls up to buy your slave, at a speculating price. If you cannot help it, you sell to him; but if you can help it, you drive him from your door. You despise him utterly. You do not recognize him as a friend, or even as an honest man. Your children must not play with his; they may rollick freely



This first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* belonged to Hannibal Hamlin, later Lincoln's first vice-president. (TLM #4571)



Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America. (TLM #3457)

with the little negroes, but not with the "slave-dealers" children. If you are obliged to deal with him, you try to get through the job without so much as touching him. It is common with you to join hands with the men you meet; but with the slave dealer you avoid the ceremony—instinctively shrinking from the snaky contact.

The Civil War brought a violent end to the institution of slavery, and to Southern dreams of creating a separate nation. The concept of the Old South, however, proved more durable. The cannon smoke had scarcely cleared at Appomattox before ex-Confederates began writing books and magazines dedicated to showing that their rebellion had been animated by their desire to preserve the traditional values of their society, not to protect slavery. This was not an easy task, for as Lincoln said about slavery in his Second Inaugural Address, "all knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war." Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens, who would later write a complex constitutional justification of secession, had given a very different explanation of the matter in 1861, when he rejected Jefferson's statement that "all men are created equal":

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that

the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition.

Stephens boasted of the Confederacy as "the first [government], in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth." When the first Southern states seceded in the winter of 1860-61, the commissioners they sent to convince other states to join them presented the case for secession in the same terms, as the last best hope for the preservation of slavery; issues like states' rights or tariff rates were conspicuously absent.

This did not prevent some Southerners from trying to write slavery out of the history of the Confederacy and the Old South. Stephens's *Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States* (1868-70), and former Confederate President Jefferson Davis's *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (1881), defended the legality of secession without much reference to the role of slavery as the "corner-stone" of the Confederacy. In 1866 former Confederate general D.H. Hill began publishing *The Land We Love*, a magazine dedicated to defending the Southern cause. In 1869 the Southern Historical Society was founded, with the goal of rewriting the "unjust and unreasonable history of the late war as compiled by Northern writers," who presumably dared to mention slavery as a cause of the war.

These efforts eventually bore fruit, as memories of the war's passions dimmed. After two decades of nursing the pangs of defeat, in the 1880s the survivors of the South's armies began to join organizations like the United Confederate Veterans and read *Confederate Veteran* magazine. By the 1890s, reunions of former rebels were drawing thousands of cheering spectators, from the North as well as the South. The bitterness of the Civil War faded into a general reconciliation between the regions, in which both sides appeared eager to forget the issues that had once divided them, in particular the issue of slavery.

White Southerners had a vested interest in putting the stigma of slavery behind them, but why were Northerners equally willing to forget the cause of a war that had cost so much blood and treasure? At

first, they were not. Between 1865 and 1870, Congress passed and the states ratified three amendments to the Constitution: the 13th (ending slavery permanently); the 14th (guaranteeing civil rights); and the 15th (giving the right to vote to all adult males). The war had overturned Southern society and disrupted its slavery-based racial hierarchy, and these amendments were designed to preserve that result and prevent the re-establishment of white political supremacy in the South. For ten years after Appomattox, federal troops fought a guerrilla war in the South against local rifle clubs, militias, and other paramilitary organizations (of which the Ku Klux Klan was the best known) that resisted the new order. By 1876, with white Southerners showing no sign of weakening in their opposition to political and civil rights for African Americans, Northern political will faltered. Federal troops withdrew, and the South was left to go its own way. Within a few years, black Southerners found themselves disenfranchised by poll taxes, tied



The program for Paul Philippoteaux's panoramic painting of the Battle of Gettysburg, which opened to the public in Chicago in 1882, reflected the reconciliation of North and South. The opposing soldiers are pictured as equals; a stranger could not even tell which side had won the battle from the cover illustration. (TLM #4572)



Celebration of the Fifteenth Amendment (ratified in 1870) proved premature, as the end of Reconstruction in 1876 was followed by the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South. (TLM #3883)



A chromolithograph print memorializing the heroes of the Confederacy, printed in New York in 1896. (TLM #2936)

to the land by sharecropping, and con- signed to second-class social status by "Jim Crow" segregation laws.

Literature and art that portrayed the Old South in a favorable light helped Northerners to forget why they had gone to war against Dixie. Civil War monuments in towns and cities throughout the South portrayed Confederate leaders in the same artistic terms as other American heroes. The "Uncle Remus" stories of Joel Chandler Harris and the plantation novels of Thomas Nelson Page made the antebellum South into a rustic paradise, full of contented slaves and kind masters. At the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a milling company hired ex-slave Nancy Green to pose as "Aunt Jemima," who stood in front of a giant flour barrel, making pancakes

and telling happy stories of life in the Old South, reinforcing Northern notions that slavery had not been all that bad.

While some forms of popular culture justi- fied the Old South by implying that slavery was acceptable, or even beneficial, for those who lived under it, others took the harsher tack of defending slavery by imply- ing that African Americans didn't deserve anything better. The era between the end of the Civil War and the 20th century saw the rise of "Jim Crow," a phrase that describes both a system of legal, political and social segregation, and the set of demeaning stereotypes that backed it up. Printmakers, cartoonists, and advertisers produced images of African Americans as unintelligent, lazy, irresponsible, childlike, violent, or some combination of these



Some forms of “Jim Crow” stereotyping, such as the classic “Mammy,” presented African Americans as happy to be servants (or slaves). This 20th century painting by J. C. Leyendecker features a devoted “mammy” who seems content to be ignored by the others in the scene. (TLM #1615)

unflattering traits. Others simply used race as a badge of inferiority, knowing that their audiences would understand what they meant.

Throughout the North as well as the South, racial stereotyping was ingrained in American popular culture by 1900. Even professional historians accepted the view that the South had fought a noble struggle for abstract political reasons, that slavery was not the underlying cause of the Civil War, and that the attempt to overturn white supremacy in the South afterward had been a terrible mistake. Professor William A. Dunning at Columbia University was the foremost proponent of what came to be known as the Dunning school of Reconstruction studies, which portrayed the era as one of tragedy for the white South, largely because of Northern attempts to transfer political power to the for-

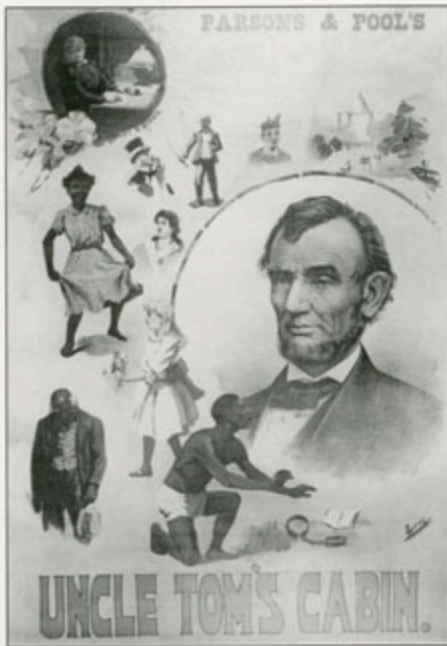
mer slaves. Dunning’s students went on to write numerous monographs on Reconstruction that followed this approach; one of them, Ulrich B. Phillips, wrote *American Negro Slavery* (1918), for many years the standard history of its subject, which presented slavery as an institution that benefited African heathens by bringing them civilization and Christianity.

The classic “Old South” appeared in various media. On stage, vaudeville shows followed the minstrel tradition of using white performers in blackface to caricature African Americans. Theatrical presentations of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” continued to be popular well into the 20th century, but with a storyline that had evolved far from the original novel. Where Mrs. Stowe’s Uncle Tom was a courageous paragon of non-violent resistance who defied his mas-

ter at the cost of giving up his life, the stage version was a weak, subservient slave whose behavior led to the epithet “Uncle Tom” coming to mean an African American who was willing to sacrifice his



Other “Jim Crow” images were vicious and demeaning. (Artifacts courtesy of the Jim Crow Museum)



Theatrical versions of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" retained the pathos of the original but without its antislavery message. (TLM #3833)

dignity in order to please white people. Most significantly, when the dynamic new medium of motion pictures first began to challenge live theater as a form of popular entertainment, it was quick to adopt the mythology of the Old South as the subject of the first great screen epic.

Birth of a Nation appeared in the nation's movie theaters in 1915. It was a film adaptation of Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905) and his play of the same name (1906), which described the Civil War and Reconstruction through the eyes of two families, one from the North and one from the South. The beginning of the movie included a depiction of the Old South in its glory, a place "where life runs in a quaint way that is to be no more," according to the film's titles. The Northern and Southern families are friends, with romances blooming between the young men and women of each, but before long, the Civil War erupts and separates them.

The most dramatic part of the story takes place after the war, when director D.W. Griffith focused explicitly on racial conflict within the South. In his version of history, most black Southerners were loyal to their former masters until evil Northerners cor-

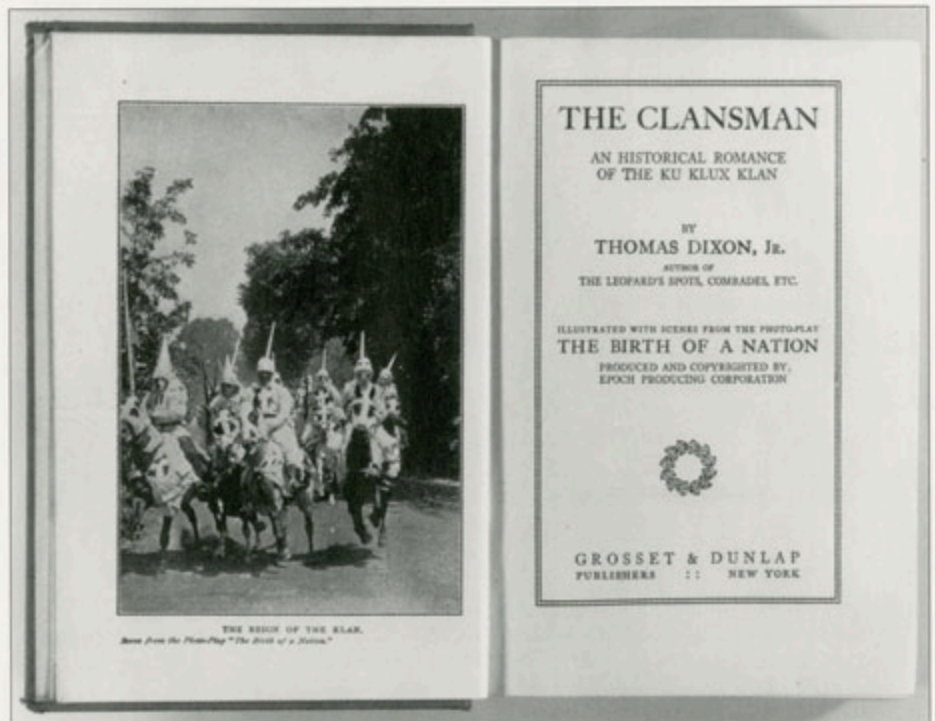
rupted them by offering political power and access to white women, and it was only the dramatic rise of the heroic Ku Klux Klan that rescued the South and allowed the restoration of white supremacy. Even at the time of its release, many Americans objected to the film's overt racism, and some changes were made: its original title "The Clansman" was dropped, and a scene involving the castration of an African American as punishment for accosting a white woman was modified (if not necessarily improved) to show a lynching instead. Despite pickets and protests in several cities, *Birth of a Nation* became the biggest money maker of its time. President Woodrow Wilson, a Southerner who oversaw the segregation of federal offices in Washington, DC, described it enthusiastically as "writing history with lightning."

Another Southerner who was impressed by the story of *Birth of a Nation* was Margaret Mitchell, who would one day create an even more influential and dramatic presentation of the mythology of the Old South, in both book and movie form. Born in Atlanta in 1900, Mitchell grew up listening to the colorful reminiscences of elderly Confederate veterans. At the age of 11 she wrote a skit for her neighborhood friends to perform,

based on one of her favorite novels, Dixon's *The Clansman*. The death of her fiancé at the front in World War I and the loss of her mother to the Spanish flu epidemic of 1919 heightened her attachment to and identification with the tragedy of Southern defeat in the Civil War. From 1926 to 1933, she put her experiences and emotions into the writing of a long romantic novel, which was published in 1936 under the title *Gone With The Wind*.

In the twenty-one years since the appearance of *Birth of a Nation*, America had changed considerably. In 1915, the idea of war still conjured up thoughts of gallantry at Shiloh and Gettysburg, or even of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders charging up San Juan Hill in 1898. The stirring battle scenes of *Birth of a Nation* thus reflected war's glory as well as its pathos. By the 1930s, the utter futility of the First World War had driven the romance out of war, so that in *Gone With The Wind* the main characters share a cynical view of the wastefulness and pointlessness of the Civil War and its aftermath, which are ever-present in the background.

An even more significant change from 1915 to 1930 was the "Great Migration" that brought millions of black people north, to



Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*, illustrated with still photos from the movie it inspired, *Birth of a Nation*. (TLM #2569)

escape from sharecropping and find work in the booming factories of Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and other cities. The racial conflict that lay at the heart of *Birth of a Nation* was essentially a regional phenomenon. When *Gone With The Wind* was published, large black populations were well established in Northern cities, and so were Jim Crow customs. Although Northern states did not generally impose legal segregation, the development of separate (and unequal) societies was no less real in the North than in the South. Race was now a national issue.

A third development was economic. In 1915, the nation was girding for war. By 1936, the wartime expansion and the boom that followed in the Roaring 20s were only fond memories. *Gone With The Wind* was published at the height of the Great Depression, when the public was starving for escapism.

The book became a worldwide sensation. It sold over 200,000 copies in its first month in print, and over a million copies by the end of 1936. In 1937, it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Over the next twenty years, more than eight million copies were sold. Even German dictator Adolph Hitler was reported to have read the book aloud to his generals for relaxation. When David O. Selznick obtained the movie rights for the bestseller, intense publicity focused on the selection of a cast (Mitchell herself once said that she imagined Rhett Butler's lines spoken by Groucho Marx, but her advice was not sought). It took almost four years and more than four million dollars to complete the film, which premiered in Atlanta in December 1939.

The movie faithfully echoed the book's vision of an idyllic, languid Old South, an image that was embraced by readers and viewers eager to escape to a happier era. Like *Birth of a Nation*, the movie version of *Gone With The Wind* presented the Old South as most white Americans of the time imagined it: a land of romance populated by charming belles and dashing cavaliers, living in harmony with their happy slaves, until the Civil War and Reconstruction shattered their world. In contrast to the earlier movie, which openly endorsed white political and social supremacy, *Gone With The Wind* featured a toned-down racial subtext. Walter White and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP had negotiated with



Although popular imagery of African Americans in the first half of the 20th century was dominated by negative "Jim Crow" stereotypes, there were some positive alternatives, like this print of a veteran returning from service in World War I. (TLM #3843)

David O. Selznick to remove some material, including the use of offensive racial terms that appeared in early versions of the script. Selznick, who was Jewish, was particularly sensitive to editorials like "Hollywood Goes Hitler One Better" in the black-owned *Los Angeles Sentinel* that compared his movie's treatment of African Americans to the oppression of Jews in Germany.

Although some African American newspapers denounced the movie as another setback for race relations, and some viewers were repelled by its demeaning portrayals of black characters, most moviegoers loved *Gone With The Wind*. More than 100 million people around the world would ultimately see the movie. Together with

the book, it would imprint the traditional story of the Old South in America's historical consciousness.

While the facts of history remain immutable, historical interpretation tends to change as society changes, and the interpretation of the Old South proved no exception. The fifty years following the publication of *Gone With The Wind* saw a revolution in American race relations. During World War II, the United States declared that it was fighting for freedom and human rights against its Fascist opponents, who tried to undercut American claims to the moral high ground by pointing out the existence of Jim Crow *apartheid*. Incidents where black American soldiers were denied access to services available to

He retired on the eve of the dedication of the new Los Angeles Union Passenger terminal. He began his service when Central station was first opened.

EDITORIAL

Hollywood Goes Hitler One Better

Hollywood is hard at work making one of the most vicious anti-Negro pictures of its long, and as far as Negroes are concerned, dishonorable career. David Selznick is the producer.

The picture is "Gone With the Wind," a movie version of a novel that stinks with the preaching of racial inferiority. In its pages are found the usual age-old slanders: that Negroes did not want their freedom and that it had to be forced upon them; that all except a few Uncle Tom Negroes were rapists and murderers; that Negro legislators of Reconstruction were corrupt and dishonest; that the Civil War was all a mistake and that Negroes are inferiors, a little less than brutes.

Suppose, for example, that Hollywood was preparing to make a picture about the Jewish people repeating all of Hitler's lies about Jews as "Gone With the Wind" repeats the Klux Klan slanders against Negroes. We'll venture the opinion that there would be mass meetings everywhere and frantic appeals to the rest of us to help in stopping the picture. We would certainly enlist in that campaign, too.

But how about a little help from the liberals to squash this anti-Negro monstrosity? Where are the 55 Hollywood progressives who recently put their name to a resounding Declaration of Independence protesting against Nazism?

Where are those who, justifiably, seek the aid of the Negro people to fight the rising tide of Fascism everywhere?

The saddest part of the Selznick production of "Gone With the Wind" is the fact that it is being produced by a Jewish producer, a man who ought to be the last person to help give currency to race baiting—a man who ought to know, from the German example, that race baiting threatens not only the group attacked and lied about, but the liberty of every other person.

It is about time that self-righteous Americans who can shudder so loudly about racial persecution abroad turned their gaze toward home.

The Sentinel is all for protesting against Fascist injustice; we've done it consistently and we're going to continue to do it but we want something done about race prejudice at home.

Here's something that can be done about "Gone With the Wind": let's boycott it ourselves and every other Selznick picture, present and future. What's more, let's start a campaign and find out whether or not some of those who oppose Hitler from a safe distance have courage enough to oppose race prejudice when it may hit them in their careers and in their pocketbooks.

BAD MISTAKE

The appointment of Arlen E. Stockburger by the city is a bad mistake.

In the first place Mr. Stockburger is a relic of the discredited and neglected Merriam administration and has no place in an honest and pro-

N.A.A.C.P. Will Meet Sunday

The local branch of the N.A.A.C.P. invites members and friends of the Association to a luncheon at the Hotel... (text is partially obscured)

Editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 9, 1939 by Leon H. Washington, Jr., during the production of *Gone With The Wind*. (Photo courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center)

Nazi prisoners of war highlighted the injustice of legal segregation. After the war, President Truman ended the segregation of the armed forces. Legal challenges to segregation, culminating in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and social activism, from sit-ins to freedom rides, eventually led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the end of Jim Crow as an open and accepted system of race-based separation.

With these changes, a new view of the Old South emerged. Historians in the 1930s could accept the traditional view that American slavery had certain benefits as well as costs for those who were subjected to it, in part because so many of the slaves' descendants seemed to be even worse off as starving sharecroppers. Historians in the 1950s and 1960s, in contrast, saw the break-

down of artificial legal and social barriers that confined African Americans to second-class status, and re-evaluated slavery as the prototypical artificial racial barrier.

Kenneth Stampp, in *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (1956), tried to express his sympathy for the victims of slavery by describing them as "after all, only white men with black skins." Paternalism aside, Stampp took a hard look at the reality of slavery, describing its long hours, brutal punishments, and family separations in a way far removed from the traditional view expressed in Phillips's *American Negro Slavery*. Stanley Elkins, in *Slavery* (1959), drew on the experience of the Third Reich to compare slave plantations to concentration camps, and speculated that black men who embodied the slow-moving, dependent "Sambo" caricature were manifesting a traumatic reaction to the horrors of slavery, much like the hollow-eyed, pajama-clad Jews of Europe in 1945. Comparing Tara to Auschwitz was a serious blow to the rose-colored vision of *Gone With The Wind*, but more was to follow. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), Eugene Genovese pointed the way for a new generation of scholars to explore the history of slavery as more than simply a story of victimization, and to see how enslaved Americans struggled to retain their humanity under dire circumstances.

Popular culture gradually began to catch up. In the 1970s, mainstream fiction, television and movies began to reflect new views of the Old South. The publication of *Roots* by Alex Haley in 1976, and the television miniseries that appeared the following year, were seminal events, giving many Americans their first exposure to a history

of the Old South as told from the slaves' perspective. Critics who pointed out that *Roots* was not a historically accurate account of Haley's ancestors missed the point; like *Gone With The Wind*, *Roots* was a work of historical fiction that created a mythology. Those who wanted authentic voices from Haley's version of the Old South could find them elsewhere, for example in the narratives of elderly ex-slaves recorded by WPA field workers in the 1930s (published forty years later in works like *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1980) by Leon Litwack) or later in the extensive documentary history of slavery and emancipation compiled by a team of researchers led by Ira Berlin. More important, in terms of the image of the Old South, was the public's acceptance of new versions of the old story, in novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a complex tale based in part on historical accounts of an enslaved woman who killed her daughter rather than see her subjected to the torments of slavery.

With the publication of *The Wind Done Gone* in 2001, the story came full circle. The novel, written by Alice Randall, recreated the world of *Gone With The Wind* from the perspective of one of the slaves of Scarlett O'Hara's family. It became the center of a controversial court battle, as the estate of Margaret Mitchell attempted to halt its publication as an infringement of copyright. Had *The Wind Done Gone* been no more than the parody it was promoted to be, it is hard to believe that it would have raised the ire of the Mitchell estate, the fans of the original book, or the federal judge who astonishingly agreed with the plaintiff and banned publication of the novel (until the injunction was lifted by a higher court).



General Lee, from "Marble Man" to Dodge Charger: the decline of an Old South icon. (TLM #3607)

The Wind Done Gone, however, was hardly a parody in the “Saturday Night Live” sense. It offered not gentle satire but rather the most direct assault yet on the mythology of *Gone With The Wind*. It focused on the tangle of sexual and emotional relationships between masters and slaves at Tara (and by implication, throughout the Old South), exposing behavior that made a mockery of such traditional white Southern values as honesty, loyalty, and chastity. Where the original Tara was set in “a land of Cavaliers and cotton fields called the old South...[where] gallantry took its last bow,” *The Wind Done Gone* reveals a world of oppression, violence, duplicity, lust, mistaken identity, and self-hatred.

Even as books like *Roots* and *The Wind Done Gone* were providing an alternative view of the Old South, the homogenization of American culture was weakening the traditional image of the region. By the last quarter of the 20th century, much that was unique about the South had been lost. The mass migrations of African Americans out of the South meant that the rest of the country could no longer view racial issues as a regional problem. The invention of air conditioning made possible a counter migration of Northerners (white and black) whose presence diluted the South’s cultural integrity. Where the name of General Lee was once held sacred by white Southerners, by 1980 it was nothing but the nickname of a Dodge Charger driven by some good ol’ boys on “The Dukes of Hazzard” TV show. Where a Kentucky colonel was once a feared fighting man, drawing on the legacy of Dan’l Boone and the “Dark and Bloody Ground,” by the 1970s he was a fried chicken salesman. Had the original Colonel Sanders lived to see it, he would no doubt have been further saddened when in the late 1990s his stores even dropped the name “Kentucky” as too regional, in favor of the soulless corporate moniker “KFC.” If anyone was creating effective parodies of Tara by the year 2000, it was not the author of *The Wind Done Gone* so much as the developers of suburban housing additions in every state coast to coast, who seemingly could not build a street without at least one house ornamented by Tara-like columns, no matter how inappropriate in their new setting.

Yet despite the trivialization of tradition by mass-market forces, and the counter-



Although American society has changed enormously since 1936, the popularity of *Gone With The Wind* remains undiminished. (TLM #4573)

mythology of the slaves’ stories, the romantic vision of the Old South retains power. Emotions run high whenever the Old South is explicitly attacked, most notably in the recent debates over the meaning of the Confederate battle flag, and the propriety of flying it over South Carolina’s state capitol. *Gone With The Wind* continues to be enormously popular, the subject of numerous websites, fan magazines, collectible cards,

and all manner of kitsch. To anyone who looks hard at the Old South, its sunny, idyllic image is indeed “gone with the wind.” But there are many others who don’t look hard, who choose still to see only “a land of Cavaliers and cotton fields,” and who, if confronted with the difference between the historical record and the myth they love, would surely reply, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

For further reading:

The raw material of popular historical memory can be found in the novels mentioned in the article, including *Gone With The Wind*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Roots*, *Beloved*, and *The Wind Done Gone*; more readers have gained their sense of the past from these than from any number of historical monographs. For a historical analysis of the subject, the classic study of the literary origins of the Old South is Walter Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (1957). A new classic that shows how the North and South reconciled by agreeing to forget about slavery is David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001). A number of authors have looked specifically at the impact of *Gone With The Wind* on America’s vision of the Old South, including Jim Cullen, *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past* (1995). Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend* (1995) is an accessible look at the reality of women’s wartime experiences in the South, as contrasted with the legend of Tara. “I Didn’t Want to Get Caught Out”: or, *Gone With The Wind* as History,” in *Winning and Losing in the Civil War: Essays and Stories* (1996) by Albert Castel, is a close and sympathetic look at the historical details of Mitchell’s novel. Finally, Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (1987) relates the story of how Southerners came to accept, interpret, commemorate, and finally celebrate their defeat in the Civil War.

At The Lincoln Museum

Special Events

The 23rd Annual R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture

Saturday, September 21, 2002 7:30 p.m.



Michael Beschloss has been described by *Newsweek* magazine as "the nation's leading presidential historian." He is the author of the *American Heritage Illustrated History of the Presidents*, two volumes (with a third projected) on the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, and books about Eisenhower and Kennedy. As a regular commentator on television news shows, he has brought historical perspective on current events to millions of

Americans. Mr. Beschloss is currently working on a history of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Admission to the lecture and reception that follows is \$15 (\$25 for non-members); please call (260) 455-6087 for reservations.

This year's McMurtry Lecture is dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Florence McMurtry. Mrs. McMurtry was the widow of former Lincoln Museum director R. Gerald McMurtry, for whom the Lecture is named. She was a strong supporter of The Lincoln Museum, and a loved and respected member of the Museum family.

Erratum

The previous issue, Number 1868, was incorrectly dated "Winter 2002" rather than Spring 2002.

Exhibit Opening

Gone With The Wind: Myths and Memories of the Old South

Friday, October 4, 2002 7:30 p.m. Doors open at 7 p.m.

Alice Randall, author of *The Wind Done Gone*, will be the featured speaker at the grand opening of The Lincoln Museum's new temporary exhibit, "Gone With The Wind: Myths and Memories of the Old South." Randall, a native of Detroit and graduate of Harvard University, is a successful country songwriter and screenwriter as well as a bestselling novelist, and has lectured, researched, consulted, and written extensively on the lives of enslaved people and their descendants.

A dessert reception and book signing will follow the program. Admission to the opening is \$35 (\$45 for non-members); please call (260) 455-6087 for reservations.

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