

*North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era.* By Susan-Mary Grant (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. Pp XIII, 250 Cloth, \$35.00)

Susan-Mary Grant, a lecturer in U.S. history at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, has addressed the perplexing question of why a society engaged in the ongoing search for a national identity would splinter and, in effect, wage a war against itself: *North Over South* provides an intriguing and persuasive answer to that question.

The author argues that, consistent with what we know about the development of a sense of nationalism in other societies, Americans built their sense of national identity, at least in part, by contrasting their society to others. Americans defined who they were by establishing who they were not. Initially the foil for American nationalism was Britain, and more generally old world nationalities. By the 1850's the contrast that seemed to have captured the imaginations of many northerners, and this is a book about the northern invention of an American identity, was that of northern as opposed to southern society. Grant argues that "Via its image of the Antebellum South, the North increasingly came to regard the South as a world apart from but not necessarily a threat to its own. The North's attempt to define a national ideal was not, in and of itself, a destructive or wholly exclusive impulse but over time it became so." In effect the North defined an American civic religion, to use a well-worn but still useful term, in which initially the South stood as excep-

tion but not threat to the American imagined community. Events in the 1850's changed that northern view of the South from different but benign to different and dangerous. Northerners came to portray Southerners as betrayers of the heritage of the Revolutionary War generation and, as such, enemies of the nation's future growth consistent with the ideals of its founders.

In making her case for the development of a northern definition of American nationalism using southern society as the foil, the author draws on the writing and rhetoric of a group of northern intellectuals, among them Horace Mann, Theodore Parker, Frederick Law Olmsted, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Cullen Bryant. She also makes use of some of the increasingly widely read and influential northern newspapers of the time. Taken together these sources provide a rich and persuasive body of evidence to support the author's thesis. These were the definers of a northern version of an American identity.

This reviewer finds much to applaud in *North Over South*. Her argument that, in effect, at least by the mid-1850's, northerners wrote southerners out of the nation is a strong argument. My own recent research in newspaper sources led me to a very similar conclusion. Had Grant also wanted to examine the southern side of the case she might have concluded that southerners did the same thing to northerners, but she should not be criticized for not writing a different book. That northerners' treatment of the South, northern claims to defining American goals and values, may have forced southerners to become enemies of the Union, is a conclusion that may trouble historians who in recent decades have focused attention on southern commitment to slavery as the cause of what they insist was an inevitable conflict. Grant does not challenge that interpretation directly, but her conclusions suggest a different answer to why, in the midst of a wave of nationalism, a civil war should occur.

The methodology employed in this book may also trouble some historians, especially those who practice what they have termed "the new social history." While the author focuses on an American society divided into two communities, their differences are defined by region and she presumes consensus within each region. Grant writes

about many northerners without attempting to break down that aggregate into its presumably separate and conflicting elements.

The issues and conflicts found when studying society as divided by class, status, race, gender, ethnicity and more, are ignored. The author assumes a unity of northern thought – a northern culture – which may exist without denying the presence of conflicting elements within it. We learned much about American culture from the work, published from thirty to fifty years ago, by such luminaries as Henry Nash Smith, David Potter, and Michael Kammen. Studies that work from the premise of cultural oneness existing alongside those that stress cultural diversity, if well done as this book is, can help us better understand the dynamic of American historical development. Cultural history and the new social history, while different approaches, need not be contradictory approaches, but some of the latter persuasion may disagree with that assumption and so will question the methodology employed in this book. Whatever one's approach, this is an important book, well worth reading.

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