

COMER VANN WOODWARD

C. Vann Woodward, dean of American historians, died on December 17, 1999, at home in Hamden, Connecticut. The Sterling professor emeritus of history at Yale was ninety-one. Woodward, who was president of all three of the major American organizations of historians, came to Yale in the early 1960s from Johns Hopkins. He had done his graduate work at the University of North Carolina; the acclaimed biography, *Tom Watson*, originated as his dissertation. After serving in the U.S. Navy in World War II he wrote *The Battle of Leyte Gulf*. His *Reunion and Reaction* was a revisionist analysis of the controversial settling of the contested election of 1876. This book was followed by *Origins of the New South*, his masterful study of the period from 1876 to 1913. Influencing all students of the South was his *Burden of Southern History*. Woodward won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for his edition of the rich account of the Civil War, *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*.

Critics don't often note specific examples of skilled writing in history books, but there were many such in Woodward's work. One acute observer traced the Chaucerian imagery in *Tom Watson*. A deliberately mixed metaphor in the title 'Mudsills and Bottom Rails,' a chapter that detailed the terrible poverty endured similarly and yet differently by black and white farmers in the post-Reconstruction South, brilliantly hints at the fate of the two groups. By far his most influential book, one that reached far beyond the academy, was *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, which Woodward, on the march to Selma, heard described by Martin Luther King, Jr., as the 'Bible of the Civil Rights Movement.'

Although he lived in Connecticut for nearly forty years, Woodward remained staunchly a Southerner. He once confessed to me that, though he was honored to have been elected a member of the American Antiquarian Society (in 1976), he had never darkened the door of our rather resolutely New England institution. But, as we dig into our sources, we honor a fellow historian who so much loved the craft wherever it is practiced.

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