

*The Political South in the Twentieth Century* by Monroe Lee Billington. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975.—xiii, 185 pp. Cloth, \$8.95; paper, \$3.95.

Merchandized as a supplementary text for United States history survey courses, Monroe Lee Billington's new "brief synthesis" (p. 186) summarizes part of the uneven secondary literature on twentieth-century southern politics. Billington has done no primary research: used no manuscript collections, analyzed no election or census returns, interviewed no one. His book has no coherent theme, no original analyses of important occurrences or trends, no striking portraits of colorful southern politicians, not even an adequate narrative of events. His bibliography is very sketchy, and he has relegated footnotes, not to the back of the book, but to the imagination. Frequently self-contradictory, often grossly exaggerated, sometimes incorrect, the book is consistently superficial and cliché-ridden. Its marketing virtues are that it is short, has a moral stance so vague and bland as to be inoffensive to anyone to the left of George Wallace, and requires neither sophistication nor thoughtful effort to read.

The book's tone and quality can be illustrated by the first chapter. Billington is content to present the glittery surface of the rhetoric of "reform" and he takes the "reformers" at their word. The "Progressives" believed, he claims, "that the government should act as an agency of human welfare," hoped "to root out graft and corruption," desired "to ensure a more healthy personal development," acted "with great sincerity" to "improve conditions in the South" (p. 2). Although he catalogs the laws these soldiers of the Lord favored and adverts to their heroic tilts against "the trusts" and other perpetrators of various alleged "corporate abuses," he never evaluates in any depth the effect of their political actions on the economy or the society. The "reformers," for example, increased funds for education, but these appropriations increasingly discriminated against both blacks and poor, rural whites. (Louis R. Harlan's *Separate and Unequal* does not appear in Billington's bibliography.) Billington does note that these Dixie liberals were usually strongly racist, and that they participated in the movement to disfranchise blacks (he almost entirely ignores white disfranchisement). Instead of seeking to explain how "Progressives" could be committed at the same time to racism and "human welfare" (a characterization not all historians would accept), Billington glosses over the philosophical contradiction by merely repeating Virginia Governor A. J. Montague's tortured rationalization of the "seeming paradox" (pp. 18-19).

Superficiality gives way to distortion when Billington turns to the political structure and voting behavior. After Reconstruction, blacks "usually supported the conservative office holders," and "there appears to be some truth to the charge that Bourbons wrote laws with loopholes so that some blacks

could vote and some whites could not" (p. 17). "One-party politics" was supplanted after 1900 by "a political factionalism that resembled two-party conditions" (p. xii). Proclaiming a "new era in southern politics," the "Progressives" were elected by "the poorer classes," "hill farmers," denizens of small towns, and the urban "poor whites," and opposed by "the delta and black-belt planters and their business allies" (pp. 7-9). Billington presents the merest shreds of evidence for any of these propositions, and, in fact, little evidence exists. The Bourbon-black coalition thesis is not firmly supported in the secondary sources he consulted and will not bear scrutiny; the claim about factionalism was disproved by V. O. Key in *Southern Politics*; the intraparty-class conflict hypothesis has been systematically analyzed only in Sheldon Hackney's *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (absent from Billington's bibliography), and Hackney rejected it rather unequivocally.

Or take Billington's treatment of social and political change. The Progressive class coalition undertook "to revolutionize southern state politics" (p. 9). The "revolutionary change" in race relations accomplished when the New Deal gave blacks some consideration in framing programs (p. 107) was followed by the 1938 court battle, which was a "turning point in southern political history" (p. 79), by the "veritable black revolution" of the early 1950s (p. 108), the "black revolution" of sit-ins (p. 112), the "social revolution" of the federal civil rights laws (p. 121), and the contemporaneous "economic revolution" of southern urbanization and industrialization (p. 121). The judicial ending of the county unit system in 1964 "revolutionized Georgia politics" (p. 174). One wonders what he would consider a moderate change.

Or consider Billington's sorting out of the causes of major trends: Religious fundamentalism grew in the 1920s because for many southerners, it represented "their only hope of stability in a constantly changing world" (p. 45). The Civil Rights Bill of 1957 passed because "In view of the events of the previous twenty years . . . the southern dam could not hold back the black rights movement much longer" (p. 111). The rise of Republicanism in the postwar South he attributes to "social, economic, demographic, and psychological factors" (p. 179), in no particular order of importance. If "there is a place for a brief, general, up-to-date, *interpretative* account of southern politics in the twentieth century" (p. ix, my italics), as Billington asserts, that place is still available.

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