

AS IF NOTHING SHOULD BE LOST: MICHAEL O'BRIEN, THE AMERICAN SOUTH, AND THE COSMOPOLITAN IDEAL

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When groups of historians studying the American South got together in the late 1970s there was a clannish feel, mostly white, mostly male. Mostly southern, too, and while non-southerners were not unwelcome they were noticed. Why are you interested in studying us? was asked politely, with a hint of a hidden punchline, a question for outsiders. So it is a strange turn that an outsider, Michael O'Brien, a soft-spoken, level Englishman, began a career in that decade which would make him one of the leading historians of the South in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Maybe even stranger is that he did this as a historian of southern intellectual life.

O'Brien passed away in May of last year. Recently, he had begun to look away from southern life and thought toward American intellectual history seen less regionally. But O'Brien's scholarship had always reached beyond the clannishness of southern history, beyond simply accepting American sectional identities as a historical starting point—or an end point. He gave us southern thinkers and texts fiercely engaged with a larger world, a slippery, modern world born in the nineteenth century and marked by it. His major work, the two-volume, Bancroft-Prize-winning *Conjectures of Order*, was not subtitled “intellectual life in the American South,” but “intellectual life *and* the American South.” His choice captured a desire to open up and air out the intellectual history of this overheated, mythic region. Calculated or not, it was the deft move of an outsider.¹

¹ Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 2004). I am grateful to David Moltke-Hansen and Joel Isaac for the thorough and helpful reading each gave to this essay.

O'Brien was my friend and colleague in southern history for more than thirty years, and my aim in this essay is to use this relationship to shed light on his work as a historian of intellectual culture in the place he chose to study. Mine is a personal illumination, not an encyclopedic one. It is less an account of O'Brien's achievements (which will require more time to assess) than a story of his travels in the intellectual world where southern history is made and what they tell us about that world. So, best to get the joke out of the way now, the levity that southern intellectual history must be an oxymoron. O'Brien heard this one-liner so many times that he scarcely noticed it in conversation, and all of his work went against even the thought that it might be funny.²

I begin with a word about *Conjectures of Order*. The study draws its power as an intellectual history of the South, from 1810 to 1860, by reaching deeply into a great web of ideas and texts. But it truly convinces because these ideas and texts are seen growing from the lives of people—white and well-to-do—whose South, pre-Civil War and pre-Emancipation, was far from the static or dreamy-feeble place the term “Old South” might suggest. It was also far from being aberrant within the United States. It was a South that rode all of the currents of modernity and its discontents. Its intellectual temper was Romantic, caught up in the exalted aloneness of individuals, in the surprises and reconciliations of the imagination, and in the inevitability of movement and change. Its political face was a piecemeal but potent nationalism fueled by postcolonial doubts and imperial ambitions. Its preoccupations circled, time and again, back to the tensions, only partly grasped, which arose from a vision of gender and racial difference as natural and rank-ordered. In *Conjectures*, southern intellectuals imagine their world, the order they desire, and they grasp a will to power to make it real.

So, in his career-defining study, O'Brien's southern intellectuals are seen making an innovative, slavery-sunk place into a version of what a modern American nation might be and then failed to be in war. But it took time for O'Brien to see that he was headed for the antebellum years. The southern thinkers who first took hold of him did their work mostly in the 1920s and 1930s. They included the Regionalist Howard Odum and the better-known Agrarian writers, notably Allan Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and John Wade. These men saw big visions and new chances for the South, and they talked a lot about the Old South. In different ways, all of the writers who became the subjects of O'Brien's first

² The sober grandfather of the joke was often taken to be Henry Adams, a historian much admired by O'Brien, who famously wrote in 1918 that the southerner “had no mind; he had temperament.” As O'Brien went on to explore, however, Adams was far from either making a joke or dismissing the South. See Michael O'Brien, *Henry Adams and the Southern Question* (Athens, GA, 2005). Adams's observation is in his *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston and New York, 1918), 57–8.

book, *The Idea of the American South*, pointed to the ruins of the Old South but nimbly stepped around the dreary body of Lost Cause literature mourning the Confederacy. Instead, they fashioned a southern past as something with a future, a whole-cloth, rural alternative to the fast-paced, commercial America emerging in the 1930s. The Agrarians' South was not a backwater, but a place of vibrant local communities and the clarity of purpose that comes from being chastened by history. Though the Agrarians made their case by pointing to features of the southern past, it was this *idea* of a South that drove them.³

It was O'Brien's revisionist intervention to grasp and interpret the project of self-invention that occupied the Agrarians and Regionalists, and to understand these writers as selective users of the southern past. They often referred to the antebellum era, but their knowledge of antebellum sources was uneven, at best. And they were passionately moral in what they selected from them. In different ways, the Agrarians, especially, called upon the loyalty of the native sons and daughters of the South (meaning, but not directly saying, the white South), thus implicating the idea of the South in personal identity. O'Brien was wary of the moral energy wrapped up in this, but also compelled by it. The South was a place saturated with moral claims and moral transgressions arising from slavery and its history of suffering and injustice, and from civil war. It was a place made strikingly alive by what he would later call "centripetal" intellectual currents that both attracted and excluded outsiders. In all of this, the Agrarians treated antebellum southern thought as a kind of family attic, a private space for rummaging around. O'Brien wanted to find out for himself what was there, who the antebellum intellectuals were and what they wrote. He wanted to do the history the Agrarians had failed to do.

So *Idea* launched O'Brien on a contextualist way of thinking about the past, linking thought to shifts in the culture of thinking, to the social worlds in which texts are embedded, and in this way he broke free from the reifying approach of the "history-of-ideas" school as well as from the text-linking, symbol-finding approach of literary critics and American studies scholars still influential in the early 1970s. His curiosity about the social context for ideas helped shape what he was to embrace as a "cosmopolitan" vision for doing the work of intellectual history, one defined, first, by being grounded in archival work and, second, by being immersed in the particularities of people's lives, but not governed by them. Defined, too, by being an outsider, as any historian is to any past, but, for O'Brien, by being an outsider to the South, one moved by its past but unlikely to fall heedless into its fascinations. "[T]his is an outsider's book," he

³ Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920–1941*, paperback edition with new preface (Baltimore, 1990; first published 1979). The principal Agrarian work is Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York, 1930).

wrote, looking back on *Idea*. “The status is claimed and assumed on the very first page.” Rooted in texts, yet always a little apart, historians might develop a certain centripetal energy of their own, a shared commitment to discovering the “recondite things” that make up a people’s historical experience and in this way becoming a “cosmopolitan community” founded on knowledge and the love of learning.⁴

O’Brien first traveled to the United States and to the South in 1968, a young, working-class man from southwest England. He recalled taking a Greyhound bus to Alabama his first year in the US and feeling the electricity of being in the land of the civil rights struggle: “I had seen it on television in Devon.” He also encountered, in small ways, how the South, like England and unlike the rest of the US, had known the destruction of full-scale war on home ground. There was a certain historical heaviness in the air that accented the tensions of civil rights reform and the protests against the war in Vietnam. All of this was a new setting for the contemporary political and cultural world he had been drawn to in England, one “renouncing imperialism, mistrusting patriotism, choosing to subjugate nationality in a multinational project.” And, as he later remembered with a humorous touch, “to be interested in the South allowed one to be engaged by the United States but not implicated in its ideology, for Southerners themselves have been such vociferous critics of the Yankee. One might have one’s American cake and not eat it.” Around this time O’Brien was reading Thomas Wolfe, that restless icon of southern angst. Wolfe has only a walk-on role in *Idea*, but he was an electric discovery for the twenty-three-year-old O’Brien. Wolfe’s Romantic embrace of individualism and destiny would reveal to O’Brien what the Agrarians used to fashion themselves—the image of a southerner swept away by a vast “sense of time and history” that was somehow intimate. Wolfe was exile and insider at the same time, his South “as much, if not more, within him as without.”⁵

4 O’Brien, *The Idea of the American South*, xi; O’Brien, “Response to My Critics,” *Mississippi Quarterly*, 58/1–2 (2004–5), 205–13, at 208; O’Brien, “A Paradox of Intellectual Life since the 60’s: We Are Cosmopolitan; Our Scholarship Is Not,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 35 (21 Sept. 1988), B1–B2, at B2. An expanded version of the *Chronicle* essay, and his most passionate explication of the cosmopolitan ideal for doing history, is Michael O’Brien, “On Transcending the Mollusk: Cosmopolitanism and Historical Discourse,” *Gettysburg Review* 1/3 (1988), 457–68. The “mollusk” of the title is an ironic riff on Jules Michelet’s image of the corrupt wealthy, minds decayed, falling to “the level of a cosmopolitan, of just any man, and from there to the level of a mollusk!” For O’Brien, of course, the cosmopolitan is many levels above the mollusk. See O’Brien, “Transcending the Mollusk,” 457.

5 Michael O’Brien, “The South in the Modern World,” in O’Brien, *Placing the South* (Oxford, MS, 2007), 10–25, at 12 (this is a collection of O’Brien’s essays, his second; this

O'Brien's developing interest in the culture of thinking, and his interest in recent American history, gave him an odd profile among other graduate students at the University of Cambridge in 1973, where he had also been an undergraduate. The intellectual climate was traditional, emphasizing empiricism and political/constitutional history, and it was accented by social class. While a student, O'Brien wrote in the third-person of "working-class boys" who risked not only the "tenseness" at Cambridge, but also the dangers of "defying family precedent" to get a university education. His graduate studies were deeply European in direction and formed by intellectual channels that connected with ease the centuries from the ancient world to the nineteenth century. An approach to the past that looked "presentist" puzzled most mentors or made them uneasy, and any modern topic might well be presentist. But O'Brien found a supportive mentor in Jonathan Steinberg, and he read beyond Wolfe into the untold alienation of T. S. Eliot and other modernists. Then he found the Agrarians, and wrote about them for his 1976 Ph.D. Three years later, having chosen to live in the US, having received research fellowships first in Michigan and then South Carolina, and having met other scholars of the South and found them collegial, O'Brien published *Idea*. The year after, in 1980, he joined the history faculty at the University of Arkansas. There he resolved to make the move to the antebellum nineteenth century.⁶

There was not much scholarship already on the shelves in the 1970s if you were interested in antebellum southern intellectuals. People still read selectively in V. L. Parrington, and more recently there were Jay B. Hubbell and Richard Beale Davis on southern literature. There were literary critics, most prominently Louis Rubin and Lewis Simpson, who specialized in southern writers. But the

essay originally appeared in 1998); O'Brien, "Response to My Critics," 210; O'Brien, "The South in the Modern World," 14; O'Brien, "Thomas Wolfe and the Problem of Southern Identity: An English Perspective;" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 70/1 (1971), 102–11, at 104, 106.

⁶ O'Brien, "Thomas Wolfe," 103. My sketch of O'Brien's student days and his growing interest in the South draws on this essay; on O'Brien, "Response to My Critics," O'Brien, "The South in the Modern World"; and on my conversations with him over the years. For other of his brief written reflections on his personal history (he did not do this often), see Michael O'Brien, "Happy Endings," *Times Literary Supplement*, 5516–17 (19 Dec. 2008), 34; O'Brien, "Afterword: On the Irrelevance of Knights," in Joseph P. Ward, ed., *Britain and the American South: From Colonialism to Rock and Roll* (Jackson, MS, 2003), 215–27; O'Brien, "Autobiography," in O'Brien, *Placing the South*, esp. 79–80. As for Wolfe, O'Brien once recalled, as a student, telling a Cambridge don that he was interested in Thomas Wolfe and being corrected: "Not Thomas," said the don. "The name is Leonard, Leonard Woolf," about which O'Brien remarked, "Provincialities have a way of colliding." See O'Brien, "The Search for Southern Identity," in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1988), 207–18, at 209. This volume is O'Brien's first collection of his essays, with this essay dating from 1984.

exciting action in intellectual history was outside the South, notably in studies of eighteenth-century republicanism and revolution situated in a northeastern American, Atlantic context still in the glow of Perry Miller's New England mind. What there was of antebellum southern intellectual history was defined by the careful but rather complacent work of Clement Eaton on southern "civilization," and by a strangely persistent, psychologizing study of southern Romanticism by Rollin Osterweis. In different ways, both men looked at a doomed southern past from the secure moral high ground of the present. Although the nineteenth century was sometimes brilliantly called up by these works, their energy arose from the twentieth century and suggested a redemptive arc, from the depths of a slave society to the heights of the Southern Renaissance. There were recurring themes: southern intellectual life was defined by slavery's political repression of intellectual freedom and innovation, by the isolation of plantation life, and by the compensations of evangelical Christianity. Beginning to read widely among the antebellum intellectuals, O'Brien saw that there was much more to say.⁷

He was helped along by reading two interpreters of the South with generous and demanding visions, writers whose pre-1970s work on the South had made a

⁷ Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*, vol. 2, *The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800–1860* (New York, 1927); Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature, 1606–1900* (Durham, NC, 1954); Richard Beale Davis, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South* (Knoxville, 1978). The literary criticism of Lewis P. Simpson and Louis D. Rubin Jr was substantial even by the 1970s. See, e.g., Lewis P. Simpson, *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature* (Athens, GA, 1975); Louis D. Rubin Jr, *William Elliott Shoots a Bear: Essays in the Southern Literary Imagination* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1975). Clement Eaton, *The Mind of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1964); Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (New Haven, 1949). O'Brien comments on the received wisdom of southern intellectual life in need of revision in O'Brien, *All Clever Men, Who Make Their Way: Critical Discourse in the Old South* (Fayetteville, AR, 1982), 19–22. The excitement over the eighteenth century among many American intellectual historians was, of course, generated principally by Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); and by Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (New York, 1969). Perry Miller's work, older but still influential, included *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA, 1953); and *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1954). O'Brien wrote respectfully, but only briefly, about Miller as a founding practitioner of American intellectual history, and he had next to nothing to say about Miller's posthumous (and unfinished) *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York, 1965), in which the South is in no way featured and only a few southern thinkers make an appearance. Nor did O'Brien find reason to engage with another influential study on the historiographical landscape in the 1970s, Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York, 1962), which also scants the South when it does not simply identify it with the Confederacy.

mark among southernists but who were no longer producing new work on the South. Wilbur J. Cash's 1941 *The Mind of the South* was an attempt to conceptualize the South's zeitgeist in a bold and bitter way few academics risked. Cash was a newspaperman, often over-the-top in his reasoning and his rhetoric, not unlike fellow North Carolinian Thomas Wolfe. Cash saw the South and its history as driven by a culture-sized "mind" that the (white) southerner might learn to grapple with but could never escape. The South was a place of seductive beauty and social turmoil, a stage for an intellectual dance of denial and creativity which Cash described as a fully lived-in "unreality" soaking into all aspects of thought. He was a Romantic with the impulses of a modernist, a rough Hegelian who grasped the dialectic of southern self-referential thought, an insider yearning for the outside. O'Brien was taken with Cash's scope and his edginess, and moved by his boldness, saying, much later, that Cash's vision had served for a while as "a peg on which to hang my own thoughts" about anything as big as the idea of the South. But it was clear that Cash knew even less than the Agrarians about antebellum intellectual culture, and, unlike them, did not care to know.⁸

The other writer publishing before the 1970s who caught O'Brien's attention and stayed with him was William R. Taylor, an academic and non-southerner whose *Cavalier and Yankee* appeared in 1961 and, like Cash's book, has been read ever since. Taylor's search for the ingredients of an antebellum "American character" grew out of the first surge of myth-and-symbol American studies in the 1950s. O'Brien was attracted to the literary excitement of this body of work, though as scholarship it veered toward the fanciful and was, almost by its nature, uncommitted to archival research. Still, he was drawn to Taylor's view of the deepening differences inscribed by antebellum northern and southern writers, differences poignant and interlocked, a quarrel between brothers. He admired Taylor's book as "neo-abolitionist" and yet sympathetic toward white southern writers. Taylor's interest in fiction ignored certain key intellectuals whom O'Brien was reading, like Hugh Legaré and John Randolph, but Taylor's interest in *national* character shed new light on authors mostly neglected outside southern literary scholarship—William Gilmore Simms, John Pendleton Kennedy, Henry Timrod. And Taylor subtly inscribed himself as an intellectual at work. It was easy to see him "alone in a room with a small number of texts . . . and setting down relatively fresh, fairly unmediated readings of those texts." A commitment to particulars,

⁸ Michael O'Brien, "A Private Passion: W. J. Cash," in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 179–89, at 179; this 1988 essay had origins ten years earlier when O'Brien was working on the Agrarians. For a 1992 assessment see Michael O'Brien, "W. J. Cash," in O'Brien, *Placing the South*, 197–204, where he had cooled somewhat on Cash, seeing him as more Victorian than modern, and likening his book to a "tear-jerker" (201). See W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941).

the foundation of the scholar's cosmopolitan ideal, made all the more satisfying by the personal style Taylor brought to his writing, "an anxious, musing force . . . [and an] intelligence, sometimes tumbling over itself."⁹

Both Taylor and Cash were tied to American Romanticism, broadly conceived, Taylor by his subjects and his eye for individual style, Cash by temperament and pure inspiration. That O'Brien was drawn in the 1970s to their older work and not to work in, say, eighteenth-century republicanism speaks to the strength of his long-time attraction to the Romantic roots of modernity. The 1980s brought a cascade of fresh work on southern thought and authorship that explored these roots, in one way or another, which impressed O'Brien that he was not alone. Between 1977 and 1987, there were new histories on important pro-slavery thinkers, antebellum fiction, political culture, theology, the culture of honor, family and gender. Younger literary critics, working mostly with twentieth-century fiction, shook the entire southern canon with new visions of post-Victorian southern thought, the Southern Renaissance, women writers in the South, and southern narrative and its "rage to explain."¹⁰

⁹ Michael O'Brien, "William R. Taylor," in O'Brien, *Placing the South*, 213–21, at 214, 215, 219. See also, on Taylor, O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 29, 51, 208; and O'Brien's characterization of Taylor as "hanging between the literary critic and the political historian . . . His achievement and limitation was to ask the historian's question of the literary critic's agenda of texts." O'Brien, *All Clever Men*, 14. See William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York, 1961). The model American studies work, acknowledged as such by Taylor on page 2 of his introduction, is Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 1950). Other works contemporary to Taylor's that also became stars in the American studies sky are Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912–1917* (New York, 1959); and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, 1964).

¹⁰ Included in the wave of new antebellum histories were Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840–1860* (Baltimore, 1977); J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1978); Robert J. Brugger, *Beverly Tucker: Heart over Head in the Old South* (Baltimore, 1978); E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795–1860* (Durham, NC, 1978); Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, *Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography* (Baton Rouge, 1981); Dickson D. Bruce Jr, *The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829–30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South* (San Marino, CA, 1982); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); James Oscar Farmer Jr, *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA, 1986); Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1987); Lacy K. Ford Jr, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860* (New York, 1988). Interestingly, the new literary criticism in these years focused almost entirely on the twentieth century: Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The*

It was a heady time which took shape as O'Brien conceived and finished his second monograph (on the antebellum South Carolinian writer and statesman Hugh Legaré), a book in which he worked out some of his approach to doing intellectual history of the pre-Civil War South—how to identify intellectuals, integrate biography and thought, and relate individual thinkers to genres; how to critically grasp thought in the social places where it grew: universities, library societies, literary publications, correspondence. The influences and changes that shaped Legaré's intellectual life also gave O'Brien the opportunity to truly engage (following Legaré, a child of the eighteenth century) with the nineteenth-century shift from Enlightenment thought, from classicism, toward the Romantic embrace of individual variety, emotional depth, and a historicist celebration of human cultures changing over time. For O'Brien, these aspects of Romanticism were keys to modernity, and in Legaré he found a kindred spirit for his own fascination with the counterpoint of Romantic excess (self-absorbing passions, particularly those of nationalism, for which he faulted Legaré) and Romantic opportunity (delight in intellectual curiosity, a preference for practice over theory, a taste for melancholy).¹¹

Texts were fundamental in all of this. In 1982, as an opening move to bring largely inaccessible antebellum primary sources into circulation, O'Brien published the first collection in decades of primary texts by white southern thinkers that was *not* a collection of pro-slavery writing. A sophisticated critical discourse by antebellum intellectuals, he argued, had been ignored by the cadres of social historians (mostly interested in the polemics surrounding slavery) and literary critics (mostly interested in imaginative literature). As a result, "most of the agenda of the intellectual historian has been absent: theology, philosophy, political theory, social criticism, history, classical scholarship, rhetoric." His volume was a small step toward a remedy. So was a 1982 conference and subsequent volume on antebellum Charleston and its floating group of intellectuals as a context for defining the character of southern thought, writing, and publishing.¹²

Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930–1955 (New York, 1980); Ann Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1981); Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1982); Fred Hobson, *Tell about the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1983); Michael Kreyling, *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1987). For other reading that engaged O'Brien around this time, see his notes in O'Brien, *Conjectures*, esp. 12–17, and in O'Brien, "The Endeavor of Southern Intellectual History," in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 1–15.

¹¹ Michael O'Brien, *A Character of Hugh Legaré* (Knoxville, TN, 1985), esp. 54–5, 74–90.

¹² O'Brien, *All Clever Men*, 13. The 1982 Charleston conference resulted in a volume, coedited with fellow conference organizer David Moltke-Hansen, later director of the

By the mid-1980s O'Brien stood on the rim of the larger American group of historians interested in cultures of intellectual life and more or less associated with the Wingspread Conference of 1977 and the exciting prospect of intellectual history's "new directions." He was attracted to the excitement, and yet my sense is that he was uneasy about southern history being seen as exotic or marginal, and concerned that it would be, perhaps, a tall order to try to change this view on a national scale. So, buoyed by the growing number of younger scholars at work on the South, he chose a local setting in which to bring them together. In 1987, he had moved to a faculty position at Miami University, Ohio, and the following year he hosted a small group of historians (including myself) and literary critics who met for a few days to talk about the lay of the intellectual land in southern studies. O'Brien recalled that "I was bluntly interested in encouraging the Young Turks," revisionists in one way or another who were responding to the disciplinary tremors occasioned by the new political history, feminism, post-structuralism, and discourse theory. The gathering also underscored the fact that southern history and criticism were now in many hands, not only those of southerners. Outsiders were built into the origins of the group, and so as he was working out his understanding of the ripe polyphony of antebellum southern intellectuals, O'Brien brought together a polyphonic group in his own intellectual life. It was an experiment in whether a disparate-seeming group in southern studies could become a truly cosmopolitan one. Intellectuals in modern academe, he thought and hoped, could make an intellectual culture founded on the particulars of text and historical time that also "by its nature steps beyond particularity" toward unity and coherence.¹³

Although the Ohio group had no clear future in 1988, the scholars stayed in touch and met the following year at Emory University as the Southern Intellectual History Circle (SIHC). Expanding in number, SIHC has met each year since, relying on minimal structure and generous hosts. No dues, no officer corps. Which is to say, O'Brien was the linchpin of the group well into the twenty-first century, coming up with themes and direction, conceptualizing and then cajoling and persuading. From SIHC emerged the Southern Texts Society, which O'Brien

South Carolina Historical Society, *Intellectual Life in Antebellum Charleston* (Knoxville, TN, 1986).

¹³ Michael O'Brien, "A Retrospective on the Southern Intellectual History Circle, 1988–2013," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Southern Intellectual History Circle, Mercer University, Macon, GA, 21 Feb. 2013 (typescript), 4; O'Brien, "Paradox of Intellectual Life," B2. The initial meeting in Oxford, OH included historians Eugene D. Genovese, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Drew Gilpin Faust, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, James Turner, Daniel Singal, and Steven Stowe. Literary critics attending were Richard King, Anne Goodwyn Jones, and Michael Kreyling.

headed for most of the 1990s and which has published dozens of primary texts in southern intellectual history.¹⁴

From its beginning, SIHC was a place for people and topics that enacted ways to make southern studies cosmopolitan. There were tensions creative and vexing. SIHC brought together literary critics and historians to be challenged and perplexed—the historians by critics’ free play with texts across time, unbound and alive among present-day readers, and the critics by historians’ insistence on the text-in-its-time and the contingencies of authorship. The political spectrum was unusually wide and out in the open. Scholars on the left always outnumbered those on the right, but the span was there, refreshingly so, as feminists shared the platform with neo-Agrarians. SIHC also mingled southerners and non-southerners, and the cosmopolitan ideal was challenged by the roguish aspects of particularity and regional identity. There was a moral edge to many encounters, almost always by happenstance rather than by design. SIHC meetings implicated white southerners in questions of being responsible for the enormities of the past, and implicated non-southerners in questions of being purist and judgmental. O’Brien was characteristically cautious of the moral friction, and recalled that “we [non-southerners] tended to be fastidiously wary about singling out the South’s moral and intellectual atrocities, because that would have been tediously to play the old role of the scolding abolitionist or Yankee schoolmarm.” But he worried whether this maneuver by non-southerners was simply evasive, and whether it encouraged an “agnosticism about morality—the historian’s morality, as well as that of the historical actors.”¹⁵

These tensions were not resolved in SIHC, and the group had other limits, too. Looking back, O’Brien admitted that he had hoped SIHC would open up a way to do “‘pure’ intellectual history” with like-minded colleagues, founded on the close reading of important texts. But “there was never a sufficient critical mass of pure intellectual historians” for this to happen. “Intellectual historians like groups that stand for something and have a doctrine. So they write about the Transcendentalists, the pragmatists, the Agrarians, and so forth. Individuals at the Circle have not lacked for standpoints or doctrines, but the Circle as a collectivity has stood for little except conversation.” But

¹⁴ The group being called a “circle” was not O’Brien’s doing, but Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s, who started using the term (“without asking anyone,” O’Brien observed) when she hosted the group with Eugene Genovese in 1989. O’Brien did not particularly like the word “circle” as it “smacked of religion and of circles being unbroken and the like,” but the name stuck; O’Brien, “Retrospective,” 10. The Southern Texts Society first published its volumes with the University of Virginia Press and then, after 2001, with its current publisher, the University of Georgia Press.

¹⁵ O’Brien, “Retrospective,” 23–4.

conversation, over time, did its modest work. If not cleanly cosmopolitan in its goals, SIHC was a means for sorting out and sifting through a rough cosmopolitan exchange. SIHC impressed O'Brien with the difference between "what I needed to know . . . [and] what there was to know and the many ways it might be fashioned." So he used SIHC "fairly shamelessly as a way to educate myself, mostly about the South, but also about, for example, print culture, literary criticism, African-American writing, postcolonialism, theology, and much else." He learned that "an intellectual historian can benefit from being more than an intellectual historian," which sounds ironic but maybe was not.¹⁶

The cosmopolitan spirit of the Southern Intellectual History Circle in O'Brien's career throughout the 1990s was accented by his intellectual relationship with two individual historians who frequented SIHC meetings and whose work in particular helped him fashion his own, C. Vann Woodward and Eugene D. Genovese. O'Brien's relationship with both men was personal as well as professional, and he counted both as friends even as their friendship with each other became strained. Both historians were senior to him, too, pathbreakers in southern history, which says something about O'Brien's sure hand in questions of influence. He was remarkably uncompetitive and only episodically deferential. He was ready to be influenced and to influence.¹⁷

Eugene Genovese had been a provocative figure in the study of southern slavery since the mid-1960s, the years when O'Brien was just discovering the South. A Marxist with an appetite for intellectual combat, Genovese did early work focused on the South's political economy and on the white South's vision of an alternate America built on the "premodern" social relations of slavery that ran counter to the American fetish of individualism. As his own career developed, Genovese modified his sense of what counted as premodern, but his view of southern elites as living a vision of a distinctively interdependent, "organic," society remained constant even as it became pugnaciously conservative and religiously inflected during the 1990s. The antebellum South, though crushed by the northern capitalist state in 1865, stood as a rebuke to the acquisitive individualism and self-indulgent identity politics of the present day. Even slavery did not divert Genovese's admiration.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11, 25, 26.

¹⁷ C. Vann Woodward (1908–99) was, after his early years at Johns Hopkins University, at Yale University and authored, among other, later works, *The Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1951); and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1955). Eugene D. Genovese (1930–2012) taught at several universities and was the author of, among other studies, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); and (with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese) *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (New York, 2005).

O'Brien took up Genovese's interpretation as a whetstone for his own very different view of antebellum intellectuals as fully implicated in modernity and markedly warped by their allegiance to slavery. Genovese as a social historian morphing into an intellectual historian interested O'Brien, too, and Genovese, like O'Brien, was a working-class outsider. Though the Bronx was far from Devon, Genovese "knew what it meant to be a wanderer in the curious world of the middle and upper classes" in the South or elsewhere, past or present. Genovese's political instincts drew him to individual thinkers and their arguments. He had the energy to dig deeply and incisively into the thought of those intellectuals who charmed him—George Fitzhugh, the proslavery critic of capitalist market relations; James Henley Thornwell, the uncompromising theologian of hierarchy and order. Genovese spoke and wrote as if in a face-to-face debate with his sources, as if they were participants in his seminar. He praised and critiqued them, was sarcastic and generous, and he was the one with the right answer. "Genovese's world is not one in which meaning is problematical," as O'Brien once wrote. If this was the shortcoming of Genovese's dogmatic temperament, the upside was his boldness. Genovese "gets down to writing the history, rather than worrying about whether the history can or should be written. His briskness might usefully be imitated by the Hamlets of our intellectual history." And Genovese stressed something O'Brien thought essential: southern thinkers wrote much on many topics; they wrote for each other, they read each other, and they knew the northern and European thought. They had an eye for the wider world.¹⁸

By the later 1990s, O'Brien had gained much from Genovese, and he had refined his critique as well. He understood that Genovese's very cogency narrowed his vision of antebellum intellectual life. Genovese followed the dialectic turns of thought, but not the waywardness—the pleasures—of thinking. He understood thought mostly in terms of ideology, conservative ideology, and he viewed intellectuals as ideologues bent on securing the power of the master class. To arrive at this interpretation, Genovese performed "small acts of exclusion" all along its trajectory, eliminating from the class of "intellectuals" democrats, dissenters, and men and women who were opposed to, undecided, or simply unengaged by the conservative push for southern autonomy. He ignored or downplayed genres, especially poetry, rhetoric, and liberal theology, central to southern thought. Genovese's southern thinkers were altogether too prescient, too keenly defensive, rather than, as O'Brien was coming to see them, riding along the century's powerful but conflicted surge toward Romantic subjectivity in realist clothing—toward modernity.¹⁹

¹⁸ O'Brien, "Retrospective," 14; O'Brien, "Eugene Genovese," in O'Brien, *Placing the South*, 222–33, at 226. This latter is a reprint of a 1992 review.

¹⁹ O'Brien, "Eugene Genovese," 227.

C. Vann Woodward's influence on O'Brien took a different arc. Woodward's was not as focused an influence as Genovese's, but it ran deeper over a longer span of time. The scholarship of Genovese and Woodward triangulated interestingly with O'Brien's. Genovese placed himself firmly in the Old South with little interest in, and only glancing knowledge of, the nineteenth-century South after the Civil War. Woodward stood squarely postwar, and his fleeting accounts of the antebellum years were a backdrop for the vastly different South that came after.²⁰

By the mid-1970s, Woodward was the leading figure in the history of the South, having written about post-Civil War reform and about the origins of racial segregation. He was not an intellectual historian, though his interest in political thought had resonance for O'Brien. Woodward's work stressed change and possibility in the southern past. At the same time, his career stood for the continuity of doing southern history. For both reasons, O'Brien adopted Woodward as a kind of living ancestor, an interpreter of southern history but also a witness to a great deal of it. He was a primary source and a secondary source rolled into one. O'Brien did not interview Woodward for *The Idea of the American South*, though he might have done so. Woodward had known several of the key figures in and around the Agrarians and had matured as a southern historian in their shadow. Woodward, like the Agrarians, believed that history demonstrated "the inherent rationality of the Southern people," as O'Brien put it, but he departed from them by being "deeply interested in the utility of class analyses" that drew on Marx and American Populism. He had also written sensitively, and famously, on southern identity, long interesting to O'Brien, and on how the question of that identity had persisted over time (and whether it would, or should, continue).²¹

Woodward had inherited a historiography that understood the post-Civil War South as tragically shattered by war and climbing out of the destruction against all odds. The key actors were white, male, conservative. African Americans were invisible or understood as in need of watchful guidance or of careful policing; Yankees were troublemakers misguided by their power. Woodward challenged all of this and was a central figure in overturning it in the 1950s and 1960s, arguing that Radical Reconstruction of the South after the war had been harsh

²⁰ On Woodward see the introduction to *The Letters of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. Michael O'Brien (New Haven, 2013), ix–xliv; O'Brien, "C. Vann Woodward," in O'Brien, *Placing the South*, 205–12 (an assessment written upon Woodward's death which draws on essays published in 1990 and 2000); O'Brien, "From a Chase to a View: C. Vann Woodward," in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 190–206, based in part on an essay first published in 1973.

²¹ O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South*, 200. On southern identity see C. Vann Woodward, "The Search for Southern Identity," in Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (New York, 1960), 3–25.

but had generated long-needed opportunities for reform. The South was not best understood in terms of white elites, but rather in terms of other southerners, black and white, who had been systematically disenfranchised by elites. He showed that the forces of reaction had been challenged by these other southerners and that usable traditions were still available for southern social reform. More, which particularly struck O'Brien (and many others interested in the South), Woodward put forward the idea that southerners in their struggles over race, democracy, and a *new* South, had achieved a kind of wisdom in the face of the drastic change—cautious but open-eyed, tempered but hopeful. It was a stance—a posture of moral possibility—very like the one Woodward himself adopted toward knowing and doing history.²²

It suited O'Brien as well in *Conjectures of Order*. Linked to the appeal of Woodward's expansive view of southern change over a century was a mingling of temperament and conviction that sketched a moral view of doing history, but very lightly. The moral atmosphere that surrounds *Conjectures* often calls up O'Brien's sense of Woodward's stoic realism—a "voice which says: we have seen this disaster before, calm down, we may just scrape by, damaged but wiser." This is also the voice of the wisest among the antebellum intellectuals, who were, O'Brien shows, citizens of the world as well as of the South. *Conjectures* draws upon the writings of hundreds of these southerners—women and men, slaveholders and non-slaveholders, urban sophisticates and rural savants. O'Brien read them, and read what *they* read. His viewpoint shifts over the course of the two volumes "from society to thought, from the empirical to the abstract." The first volume concerns the social and cultural setting for intellectuals' lives—where and how they lived, traveled, and gathered. Volume 2 takes up genres, modes of thought, and particular texts. O'Brien listens to these thinkers, asks questions skeptical and empathetic, takes an occasional lyric side road, and never loses sight of the shared vision running through their idiosyncrasies.²³

In essence, *Conjectures* argues that in the years between 1810 and 1860, southern thought made the modernist transition from "a late Enlightenment, to a Romantic, then to an early realist sensibility." O'Brien puts most weight on the Romantic as the antebellum era's richest trove of modernity, but it is the quality of southerners' realism that catches at him. By the 1850s, the realists grasped how southern thought had turned away from its eighteenth-century cosmopolitan roots to embrace the fearsome power of nationalism. Behind this turn was the increasing influence of slavery. For all of their diversity and their quite different engagements with the South's system of human enslavement, intellectuals could

²² Woodward argues these points most fully in *Origins of the New South* and throughout the essays in *Burden of Southern History*.

²³ O'Brien, "C. Vann Woodward," 205; O'Brien, *Conjectures*, 7.

not escape its power to shape a collective consciousness. Indeed, many southern thinkers were drawn to the intellectual world of Europe largely because they saw the South as “among the custodians of empire” in a European tradition dating to ancient times. The southern incarnation of empire was a full, modern heir to this tradition, but, because of slavery, the “margins were thinner” than in Europe or elsewhere in the US, the risks greater, and southern intellectuals “opted for a cautious version of Romanticism, less receptive to disorder, more interested in hierarchy.” On the eve of the war, intellectuals “had reasoned and felt their way” to certain convictions shaping a sensibility on the Romantic–realist divide:

that mind helped to form reality, but dialectically; that blending mind and emotion was of the essence of life; that society and government organically emerged from the interaction of individuals and the community; that freedom was insecure and that mastery was incomplete, but necessary; that God was real, but difficult to comprehend; that the world moved and, to survive, Southerners needed to move with it; that much depended on keeping your nerve, on the adequacy of the will.²⁴

No one could have said with certainty before 1860 that making choices with these precepts in mind would not enhance the South’s continued intellectual vibrancy. But nationalism and war was the choice in 1860, and the realism that intellectuals seized was war-inflected and bleak. Not cynical, not without energy for the future; but, as O’Brien paraphrases one of his subjects, William Henry Trescot, it was a realism that said, “Put away your dreams, look steadily on yourself, and you will have, if not happiness, then at least a better chance of survival.” It was a realism that did not suffice, or was grasped too late by too few, and O’Brien brings his study to a close with the view of southern intellectuals as a privileged class fully connected to the world, intimate with the era’s richness of thought, and still choosing war, rampant nationalism, and the brutal slave society both aimed to preserve:

They had been intelligent, learned, creative, even self-aware, but they had gambled to sustain their own power which, they had carefully explained to themselves and the world, needed to be exercised at someone else’s expense. For playing the game of power and losing, they do not invite pity. For replaying the game in 1875 and 1900 with equal brutality, still less do they invite sympathy.

A realistic judgment, one with heat. And in his conclusion, O’Brien turns it sharply upon a much broader historiography of the American past where the South has stood for the great American sin, the evil “down South.” If the slave

²⁴ O’Brien, *Conjectures*, 7, 24, 1161. For a post-*Conjectures* observation on the style of southern modernity see Michael O’Brien, “The Proslavery Argument and Nazi Ideology,” in Raymond Arsenault and Orville Vernon Burton, eds., *Dixie Redux: Essays in Honor of Sheldon Hackney* (Montgomery, AL, 2013), 3–14.

South is seen as uniquely guilty, then the American republic as a whole can sail on with the self-flattering and morally blinkered view that “aristocracy, illiberalism, and rapacity had died in 1865.” Seeing the South in this way, as the sole region of American wrongdoing, can no longer stand.²⁵

So in these final passages of *Conjectures*, O’Brien took hold of the moral dimensions of southern history. That he expressed himself so directly is, I think, something of a surprise, given his outsider’s circumspection in the face of the South’s moral heat, and given his skeptical view of historians who have drawn on it. Indeed, his practice of history had showed him that “moral philosophers tend to be bad historians, and historians bad moral philosophers,” as he wrote in taking issue with the claim that current intellectual history is taking a “moral turn.” The cosmopolitan work of the historian is not to prescribe behavior or principles for behavior. In saying this he seemed to grasp morality largely as a set of rules, a means of exercising power: “morality is precisely a thing imposed.” And imposing morality did not reveal much at all, save that “one is enabled . . . to know where one stands, to conform or rebel.” Morality was authority made transparent. Beneath it was raw power and the impetus to possess it, and “I mistrust power [and] those who seek and use it.” There is such a thing as human nature, O’Brien felt, and if anything is clear about human nature it is that “humans have an almost infinite capacity for tolerating injustice, that evil is, indeed, banal.” To desire power is to tempt this human nature.²⁶

It is a fortunate thing, in O’Brien’s view, that the practice of history does not tap into this malevolence, because, in the main, “I do not believe that history and criticism have such power,” and he was skeptical of the historian or critic who “ascribes to literary texts an implausible social power” to effect moral ends. Doing the work of intellectual history should make such limits clear, and relying on mind to explain the past was, in O’Brien’s view, essentially conservative in the sense that the European philosophers who interested him—Hume, Carlyle, Michelet, Hegel—maintained that mind held the world together and he was very interested in the world holding together. About radical reformers, from Rousseau to Marx, O’Brien had less to say. Nor did he often integrate his opinions on contemporary politics into his writing (except, occasionally, in his reviews), and colleagues who did not know him well sometimes concluded that his elite subjects of study must signify his own conservative bent. But this was not the case; he described himself as “an English Fabian Socialist,” which does not seem extravagant. The conservative aspect of studying the history of thought went deeper than politics, having more to do with his native modesty married to his skepticism. Southern historians have

²⁵ O’Brien, *Conjectures*, 1183, 1199, 1202.

²⁶ Michael O’Brien, “Amoralities Not for Turning: Response to Cotkin,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69/2 (2008), 323–6, at 325; O’Brien, “Response to My Critics,” 209, 212.

had many opportunities to debate a “central theme” of southern history—race, slavery, rurality, populist republicanism—but O’Brien mistrusted central themes as grandiose, their pursuit echoing the pursuit of power. He preferred inquiry that was searching and provisional, a cosmopolitan way. Among fellow historians, he wrote, as among his subjects of study, he tended “to like those who are a little lost, but struggling to understand, without seeing understanding as a means to achieve control over others.”²⁷

Doing history, the pleasure of it, was about being “a little lost” and yet working to bring a past time into the present with something of its own texture and tone. This was the pleasure of solitary work among selected texts, and earlier in his career O’Brien had sometimes felt embattled by crowds of social historians who seemed indifferent to such work. Later, having made ties to many social historians, and having social history change, too, by flowing into the study of culture, he saw the enemy of intellectual history for what it had always been, the relentless preoccupations of the present day which were (here with a good trope from the Sunbelt South) “a great bulldozer of the past, and I do not like bulldozers.” The historian’s contrary desire, the cosmopolitan’s pleasure, was to work always as if “nothing should be lost.” His account of one of his intellectuals, James Pettigrew, suits himself and the intellectual historian’s work, “to make the idiosyncratic intelligible” and place it where it belongs in the continuity of time and the unity of narrative.²⁸

In these ways, history in a cosmopolitan key also yielded the satisfactions to be found in what he once called historians’ “knack of self-awareness.” O’Brien sought such satisfaction by writing commentary on the profession, state-of-the-field overviews, and a great many book reviews. His British style of brisk, confrontational criticism seemed harsh to some American colleagues, but he adapted—a bit—to Americans’ more oblique style. He liked the conversational confines of a book review, the intellectual energy in it, though he thought the book itself was not a place for conversation. O’Brien did not engage in discursive footnotes in his books, for example. He did not make them a place for orphaned thoughts or historiographical debate. Some colleagues faulted him for this, disappointed at not finding themselves discussed, or simply wanting the

²⁷ O’Brien, “Response to My Critics,” 211; O’Brien, “Our South or Theirs?” *Southern Literary Journal*, 44/1 (2012), 144–50, at 147; O’Brien, “Retrospective,” 10; O’Brien, “Response to My Critics,” 209. Southern historians’ preoccupation with a central theme can be traced to historian Ulrich Phillips’s work, especially to “The Central Theme of Southern History,” *American Historical Review*, 34/1 (1928), 30–43, at 31, in which, after discounting cotton farming and states’ rights, Phillips pointed to race—to white southerners’ determination that the South “shall be and remain a white man’s country.”

²⁸ O’Brien, “Response to My Critics,” 209; O’Brien, *Conjectures*, 1172.

play-within-a-play that footnotes can be. But in O'Brien's view, such things, in a book, were distracting. A book-length study is "a conversation between the past and the historian, to which the reader is invited to listen." A footnote style packed with references to colleagues' work "introduces another conversation . . . and . . . talks over the reader's head."²⁹

The satisfactions of practicing history joined him to intellectuals of other times as well as his own. Thus the cosmopolitan ideal became an abiding "place of intellect" with "its own folk customs and with seasonal rhythms as inexorable as the harvest," one of the last unifying places remaining in a modern world now tilted into the postmodern. Historians who work to uncover "the many acts of definition" through which a culture takes shape over time are working for this cosmopolitan vision, uncovering particulars but transcending any one particularist view, all the while looking chaos in the face. Doing history makes a "still point," O'Brien wrote, quoting "that attenuated Southerner" T. S. Eliot: "Except for the point, the still point / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance."³⁰

O'Brien's passion for cosmopolitan history led him into uneasy if fruitful encounters with larger intellectual trends of the 1980s and 1990s. Post-structuralism and the "linguistic turn" did not much engage him. The study of the South, like the study of the idea of it, was an "irremediably contextual notion, and hence incompatible with poststructuralism" and its fascination with what he saw as essentially metaphysical questions, certainly metahistorical ones. He was interested in texts, their producers and readers, and only in limited ways

²⁹ Michael O'Brien, "Afterword," in James T. Kloppenberg, Joel Isaac, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, eds., *The Worlds of American Intellectual History* (New York, forthcoming 2016), typescript, 1 (I am grateful to the editors for making this essay available to me); O'Brien, "Response to My Critics," 206. In the latter essay, O'Brien expressed his dislike for long footnotes with specific reference to *Conjectures*, maintaining that a lengthy book was no place for discursive notes. Truth be told, though, O'Brien did not write expansive historiographical notes in any of his books. To the reasons he gives here for eschewing them can be added another he mentions: that detailed references to debates among historians quickly become dated and tiresome. About all of these reasons it can be pointed out (if I may risk a discursive note of my own) that he enjoyed such commentary when he found it in his primary sources and valued it for its evidence of intellectual nuance, networking, and references. For O'Brien's state-of-the-field commentary see Michael O'Brien, "Southern Intellectual History," in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 647–50; O'Brien, "Orpheus Turning: The Present State of Southern History," in Melvyn Stokes, ed., *The State of U.S. History* (Oxford, 2002), 307–24; O'Brien, "Historians," in Charles Reagan Wilson, James G. Thomas Jr and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, vol. 3, *History* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 115–18.

³⁰ O'Brien, "Transcending the Mollusk," 467; O'Brien, "Search for Southern Identity," 218.

in how texts produce writers and readers. He was interested in writing narrative history, not in examining narrative form. For the intellectual historian, “the relevant issue seems to be what minds might be used for, not whether minds can be used.”³¹

The rise of multiculturalism and its focus on difference, diversity, and inclusion presented problems not so briskly avoided. Feminist history and African American history aside for the moment, the turn toward recognizing multicultural diversity in the American past more generally at first struck O’Brien as an invasive form of presentism fatal to a cosmopolitan view. Partisans for historically neglected groups pushed aside careful historical work. Multicultural passions pulled attention away from the pastness of particular places and times. Writing from the “present” is unavoidable, but “the trouble with presentism is that it tends to kill those pasts which cannot be seen as contributory to the present.” Prizing cultural diversity and inclusion in scholarship quickly morphed into a kind of sentimental partisanship that impressed him in 1988 as akin to the crushing “vice-grip” of Romantic nationalism. Fifteen years later, he still was “dubious of the intellectual cogency of multiculturalism,” understanding it as “a bastard form of cultural nationalism, which I see as authoritarian, while masquerading as descriptive.” Within the drive for autonomy and inclusion on the part of peoples long excluded he found an alarming, “centrifugal” will to power.³²

Here, O’Brien’s cosmopolitan ideal of disinterested historians working together in various fields and times can seem blind to partisan power in the name of opposing it. He did not fully confront the possibility that “disinterested” history might be, even in well-meaning hands, a way of evading important questions about whether *anyone* can be disinterested, or whether the value placed on disinterestedness is itself a mark of privilege. In a sense, he dehistoricized the academic politics that over time establish certain groups as “deserving” of study while others are not. In more recent years he came to understand multicultural perspectives as challenging power as well as seeking it. But he came to this view sideways. He sometimes poked the multicultural to see if it had a sense of humor (this could seem merely dismissive) or saw it as a feature of American democracy’s great show-and-tell, part of the “necessary white noise” of living here. He could enjoy the multicultural critique as a rebuke of old-line southern historians like Donald Davidson, who wrote in all seriousness in 1957 of seeing the “naked legs

³¹ O’Brien, “The South in the Modern World,” 18; O’Brien, “Victorian Piety Practiced,” *Modern Intellectual History*, 5/1 (2008), 153–63, at 159.

³² O’Brien, “Response to My Critics,” 208; O’Brien, “Transcending the Mollusk,” 460; O’Brien, “Response to My Critics,” 211; O’Brien, “Intellectual History,” in O’Brien, *Placing the South*, 100–22, at 114. This last essay was originally a 1993 keynote address to the annual meeting of the Southern Intellectual History Circle.

of drum majorettes” and knowing from that moment how far (white southern) civilization had fallen. O’Brien was delighted that Davidson and his successors had to come to terms with drum majorettes and with the fact that “Mississippi towns have Vietnamese migrants, black gays and Chickasaws write novels, and even suburbanites have a voice.” Davidson had been wrong: “this new, streaming world” was not appalling, but “fascinating in its incoherence,” a performative southernness in which anyone who wanted a role in the South had one.³³

In this way, O’Brien began to appreciate multiculturalism as a disrupter of old pieties, and—maybe—not unfriendly to the cosmopolitan mode of finding and preserving the particular. In his last published essay, on new directions in transatlantic intellectual history, O’Brien reflected on recent interest in “global” history and wondered whether “its dizzying movements of people, ideas, texts, hypertexts, and images have made us all citizens of the world and glad to be so, or at least fascinated to be so.” He seemed open to this, though he remained dubious that this new global multiculturalism would suffice as a cosmopolitan place. It might pivot away from raw power, still embodied for him by nationalism, but not far enough. “[N]ation states are still too much with us and are too notable for their murderous drones, their self-righteous invasions, their brutal settler colonies, their petty exclusions.” And, unexpectedly, this doubt led O’Brien to wonder whether the cosmopolitan ideal itself might be questioned. Even if globalism’s appetite for particularities in fact created a new forum for the cosmopolitan imagination, it might well reveal that “cosmopolitanism comes at a price.” He feared that the global perspective had “the effect of diminishing an awareness of the internal differentiations of American culture,” among which were the distinctions of class and gender, two navigational points of multiculturalism he had earlier seen as largely detracting from the cosmopolitan ideal. Now he thought that perhaps the “cosmopolitan imagination, because it is implicitly comparative, has a way of reifying the particularist cultures it wishes to transcend.” In seeking to step around “brutal” partisan power, we may be fooled by another kind of power, the power of our own stories.³⁴

The history of African Americans in the South presented some of the same issues of defining and doing intellectual history, though the growth, influence,

³³ O’Brien, “Amoralities,” 324; O’Brien, book review, *Journal of Southern History*, 70/2 (2004), 485–6, at 485.

³⁴ O’Brien, “Afterword,” 3–4. Even in the issue of *Modern Intellectual History* you are presently reading, O’Brien continued to recommend the cosmopolitan ideal, though sounding a little less certain, by praising James Turner’s new book for being “alert to national idiosyncrasies, whilst also giving the impression that scholarship should be seen as a cosmopolitan enterprise, such that the logic of ideas has its own force, which somehow transcends particularisms.” See “Where Have You Gone, Joseph Scaliger?” *Modern Intellectual History*, 13/1 (2016), 261–171.

and moral weight of black history in the 1980s and 1990s was a unique challenge for O'Brien. Aside from a few book reviews, he did not write much about the African American past until *Conjectures*. Here his treatment of slavery and race as topics of white discourse is incisive and unsparing. The rampant will to power underlying pro-slavery thought and the poisonous reasoning of racial theory get their due. But African American writers are scarce in *Conjectures*. Alexander Crummell, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown get the most attention, but they appear at the edges of white thought, their standing as intellectuals defined by their marginality.

Behind this were the "brutal exclusions" of slavery. The life of the mind as O'Brien understood it required a body of thinkers who had the freedom and resources to imagine a public realm and then make it, and to develop over time a far-reaching sense of thought, place, and identity. Enslavement crushed all opportunities for this among antebellum African Americans and prevented what supported it: travel, publishing, autonomous fellowship, and exchange. As a result, the African American thinkers who emerged were expatriates not interested in "the South" or in an identity that would keep them there. The South "was a place to leave." Even autobiography, which O'Brien sees as African Americans' richest genre, had an enforced narrowness. Black autobiography "existed mostly in the specialized form of the emancipated or fugitive slave narrative," often written in collaboration with white ghostwriters. It was politically empowered but intellectually constrained by the moral and sensational conventions that shaped abolitionist goals.³⁵

O'Brien was aware of scholarship that explored various kinds of African American narrative beyond abolitionist writing—folk stories, for example, and the rich variations played on the themes of black Christianity. But he chose in *Conjectures* not to expand his definition of intellectual history to include these. Moreover, he saw the world of slavery in the light of whites belonging to the South and blacks not belonging, though it is far from clear that African American writers like Douglass and Brown, or even the less didactic Jacobs, were intent on simply leaving the South. It is possible to read all three as *claiming* a South, a free South, as their own. Their voices are persuasive because they write about home. O'Brien glimpsed some of this, but, in *Conjectures*, pursued his sense that intellectual history worked with texts, institutions, and ideas that reached a critical mass only among the well-to-do in white antebellum society. As he said in the first pages of *Conjectures*, "an intellectual history is not a democratic venture," and the intellectual historian should make this clear and move on without apology. This he did.³⁶

³⁵ O'Brien, *Conjectures*, 13, 52, 677.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

More broadly, O'Brien's view of the project of African American history was marked by doubts similar to his skeptical take on multiculturalism: black history appeared, sometimes, as a kind of special pleading that concealed a deeper self-absorption cutting against the cosmopolitan ideal. In reviews, especially, this approach could make O'Brien seem tone-deaf to the sustained impulse toward justice underlying much of African American history. For example, he might put slaveholders' abuses into a larger frame of "the world's cruelties," which made those abuses seem timeless and took the edge off slave-owners' responsibility. He also read much of African American historiography in the 1980s and well into the 1990s as mostly about power, an endless-loop view of history where some people dominated, others were dominated, and questions of power defined everything that mattered. The power to define academic fields played around the edges of this as well. O'Brien understood African American history as growing largely from southern history and then crowding it out. "Southern history begins to be a subset of black history," he wrote in an overview of the field of southern history in 2002. Given the important findings of black history, and its long neglect, "this is a promising development," yet promising only "for the moment." He was concerned that the trend would "make much of Southern history (the part remote from the black experience) marginal and unintelligible."³⁷

In all, antebellum African American history posed an intellectual problem for O'Brien that left him tentative and a little baffled. It was not a lack of things to know that muted his approach to black experience, but rather an uncertainty about what to say. He sought depth by reading certain modern works of African American cultural criticism. And while he was made restless by reading William Henry Gates Jr, for example, who brought too much of the personal into the historical, he was intellectually drawn to the work of scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah on Africa, family, and identity. At the same time that O'Brien worried about black history marginalizing southern history, he knew that southern history was the smaller of the two, and that "the African American experience is too large a topic with too weighty a moral authority to be contained within a narrative of Southern history."³⁸

Women's history (and the history of gender) was, of course, another powerful register of intellectual critique during the course of O'Brien's career, and his engagement with it was more complete. In *Conjectures* he spends a full chapter on antebellum understandings of sex and gender, using them as a key example (he

³⁷ O'Brien, "Finding the Outfield: Subregionalism and the American South," *Historical Journal*, 38/4 (1995), 1047–56, at 1053; O'Brien, "Southern History," in O'Brien, *Placing the South*, 123–41, at 130. For an earlier expression of concern for the field of southern history, see O'Brien, "Search for Southern Identity," 210–11.

³⁸ O'Brien, "Southern History," 130; his reading of Gates and Appiah at 130–31.

does the same with race) of how Enlightenment ideas about the unity of human experience were transformed by Romantic discoveries of human variety—the “types of mankind” that characterized the era’s thought concerning everything from emotion to biology. The transformation was fiercely creative, he argues, and yet Romantic ascendancy had a cost: the world had become “a harder place, full of unyielding forms, peopled with tribes which demanded a fierce allegiance, delimited by barriers.”³⁹

This is close to O’Brien’s sense of how the cosmopolitan ideal might collapse in his own time, with unifying intellectual aims giving way to the centrifugal energies of partisanship. Women’s history tapped into such energies, and yet historical issues in sex and gender did not lead him to feel as skeptical as he did with regard to African American history. It is hard to say why it worked this way. Perhaps in the bailiwick of southern history the moral weight of women’s past was less obviously compelling than that of the history of race. Still, O’Brien was enough prompted in 1990 by feminist critique to address (in his new preface to *The Idea of the American South*) why he had included no women in the book. He noted that he had thought about including one or two women—Caroline Gordon, Lillian Smith—but decided they were not close enough to his core group. He also saw that there was more to it than this. In the mid-1970s, he admitted, choosing to write women’s history “frankly . . . never occurred to me,” and “gender I had never heard of.” He now doubted that his exclusion of women was “innocent and accidental”; like most male historians he had doubtless “fashioned . . . a male discourse” unawares.⁴⁰

Other aspects of his career and research drew him further into thinking about intellectual women. For one, there were several female colleagues who regularly participated in SIHC meetings who challenged and inspired him to think about gender interpretively. As important, there were women among the class of southerners he studied who were clearly intellectuals in their terms and in O’Brien’s, too. Very few of them wrote for a public readership, but they wrote and read widely about society and politics; they produced novels and poetry and held complex, critical views about genre and creativity. They wrote diaries that were fuller and went deeper than men’s, and they made an art of epistolary writing. Such women intrigued O’Brien as a certain kind of outsider who yet shaped intellectual culture. Women shared in the privileges of the white elite but did not possess men’s worldly power. They were uniquely placed to criticize men, but faced the abyss if they pushed too far or too strongly. They belonged, and they didn’t, and they wrote in ways men did not. All of this, O’Brien came to

³⁹ O’Brien, *Conjectures*, 252.

⁴⁰ O’Brien, *The Idea of the American South*, xi.

understand, did not put women on the margins of intellectual history, but rather expanded our sense of where and how intellectuals work.⁴¹

On his way to *Conjectures*, O'Brien had formulated some of the meaning he found in women's writing with the publication of his second volume of primary sources, *An Evening When Alone*, comprising the diaries of four unmarried southern women. These women were not all from his usual crowd of antebellum thinkers. Only two of them were from the upper classes, and one's identity is unknown even today. O'Brien frankly acknowledged that he had been uncertain what women's diaries would yield intellectually, but it turned out to be something too fundamental to find out without having engaged with them: "that thoughts exist in more than books, that there are more thinkers than those who claim the title, that much of value can be caught in fragments of diaries, letters, and bits of fugitive paper. A certain skepticism is lost, a certain directness gained." He matched the diarists' directness with his own: "I came to like these diarists, to sympathize with their lives, and to feel their predicaments. I do not know that any act in my scholarly life has given me greater pleasure than editing these pages."⁴²

Two women he studied over many years, Mary Boykin Chesnut and Louisa S. McCord, contemporaries who knew one another, suggest the textual dimensions of his discovery of women intellectuals. He lived longest with McCord, who is one of the writers included in his 1982 anthology *All Clever Men* and who receives considerable attention in *Conjectures* two decades later. As a woman whose social and political criticism was published in major literary journals in the South, McCord was obviously an anomaly in a male world. Her views were not: she wrote to defend the slave system, oppose women's rights, uphold a dour Christianity, and voice a deep mistrust of flawed human nature and all attempts to reform it. This is the McCord O'Brien featured in *All Clever Men* by publishing her signature essay debunking women's suffrage. In passing, and while assuring readers that McCord "did not lack for certainty, seriousness, or vigor," O'Brien made some fun of her poetry and imaginative writing, especially the play *Caius Gracchus*, which brought to mind the parodies of Max Beerbohm.⁴³

⁴¹ There were several female colleagues of O'Brien's in SIHC who over the years engaged him on issues of gender. Those who did so in the earlier years included Drew Gilpin Faust, Ann Goodwyn Jones, Susan Donaldson, and Patricia Yaeger.

⁴² Michael O'Brien, *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827–1867* (Charlottesville, VA, 1993), xv–xvi.

⁴³ O'Brien, *All Clever Men*, 337. O'Brien did not comment in 1982 on the irony of including McCord in a volume he described (borrowing a line from Lord Byron for his title) as being about *men*. Many years later, I recall him publically apologizing for his levity at McCord's expense, probably at a SIHC meeting. Daughter of a former South Carolina Congressman and president of the Bank of the United States, Louisa McCord (1810–1879) lived with wealth and influence until the Civil War. In the antebellum years, she had made

Twenty years later, in *Conjectures*, McCord's political writing and social commentary get their due, and there are no jokes. Her poetry comes forward as seriously, O'Brien interpreting it as the expression of a Romantic sensibility curdled by the irony McCord had imbibed as a southerner but also as a woman. McCord was no modernist, and yet she wrote tellingly of an intellectual world in which she was both inhabitant and alien. Strikingly, O'Brien gives attention to McCord's *unpublished* texts—a fragment of a memoir and some letters—that he uses to explore her creative impulse beyond her more settled views. In the end, he sees beneath McCord's unshaken belief in the rightness of gendered inequalities an apprehension (almost modern) that differences between women and men were, like all of culture, a “concocted falsehood,” to use her phrase, necessary to keep chaos at bay.⁴⁴

Mary Chesnut saw a farther distance than McCord, crossing over into the modern, and she did this not in the arena of public intellectual life but by way of a personal diary (or, if not quite that, a fluid text of sketches and observations) she began writing as the Confederacy went down. She is a touchstone for O'Brien, one of the two or three intellectuals to whom he turns time and again in *Conjectures* for interpretive depth and resonance. This could not have been predicted from *All Clever Men*, where Chesnut makes a brief appearance as “[Louisa] McCord's friend,” a “lighter spirit” than McCord. What O'Brien later came to see was Chesnut's gift as a writer for capturing the wild swings of elite southern self-regard during the war, her text moving through a Romantic landscape in modern narrative dress, intense and intimate. “Her voices were artful,” he wrote of her many mercurial scenes, “their incoherence intended.” Unlike McCord, Chesnut did not let her “skepticisms . . . disavow the vitality of life,” and it was Chesnut's talent to see that “life and art might persist, even when power and philosophy failed.” Chesnut's realism enabled her to step into a modern future by writing the unfolding present, and she pulled from the South's defeat words for a new reality more difficult than cynicism and more lasting even than elegy.⁴⁵

the unusual (for a female author) transition from poet published anonymously, as befitted a lady, to social critic writing under her own name.

⁴⁴ O'Brien, *Conjectures*, 284; on McCord as thinker and writer see esp., 274–84, and on her poetry see 714–17.

⁴⁵ O'Brien, *All Clever Men*, 19, 339; O'Brien, *Conjectures*, 1196, 1197; see the entire discussion of Chesnut at 1185–98. Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823–86), like Louisa McCord, was among the South Carolina elite by birth and marriage. The definitive edition of her Civil War diary is *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven, 1981).

* * *

In 2013, at the close of his retrospective remarks on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Southern Intellectual History Circle, O'Brien remarked that he was no longer a historian of the South. He did not pause for emphasis and no one commented on it, though some in the audience may have thought that they had misheard him. Yet we should not have been surprised. It had been nine years since *Conjectures*, clearly his closing word on the antebellum South. He was finishing up an edited volume of C. Vann Woodward's letters, another way of saying goodbye. He had moved to the University of Cambridge faculty in 2002 and began framing the new projects that would overflow old regional boundaries, and his shedding of his identity as a southern historian was couched in terms of moving to other stations of his intellectual life as well. His "no longer being a Southern historian," he said, was linked to his returning, in his new projects, to "the core activity of an intellectual historian, the close reading of intricate texts." No one commented on this, either. But it seems he was declaring the renewal of his first love as a historian and an end to his wandering into texts of other kinds taken up in *Conjectures*, "fugitive" or otherwise. He may have been thinking, too, of his most recent work, a tale of adventure surrounding Henry Adams's grandmother Louisa and her dramatic journey across Russia in 1815. The book was a "literary experiment," he wrote, where a woman writes her story that is also written by people and places met along the way; not a book based on close readings, but a book about how histories play along the border of things that "certainly or probably happened."⁴⁶

So these other ways of writing and thinking had been achieved or tested, and he was free to return to intricate texts. Or at least I read him this way, and in the light, too, of his 2005 reflections on Henry Adams, whom he called, with an unusual absence of reserve, a "great historian and autobiographer." Adams was both mentor and alter ego, a powerful combination, and a sometimes student of the South who had once written, almost in passing, that the southerner "had no mind; he had temperament." These words stuck unpleasantly in the minds of many southerners and stayed also with O'Brien, who followed the South through Adams's thought to show how he had, at different times, reduced the South to an essence and expanded it as an alternative, savored it as exotic and

⁴⁶ O'Brien, "Retrospective," 26; O'Brien, *Mrs. Adams in Winter: A Journey in the Last Days of Napoleon* (New York, 2010), xvi. For O'Brien's edition of Woodward's letters, see n. 20 above. O'Brien identified with Henry Adams as an outsider in a number of ways, and although O'Brien did not frequently put it into words, that Adams was an alter ego was clear. O'Brien once related being introduced by Woodward as "the South's Perry Miller" and thinking that if Woodward must exaggerate it would be preferable to be introduced as the South's Adams. See O'Brien, "Retrospective," 22.

pigeonholed it as familiar. Then, moving into the twentieth century, a century where what was merely modern would become, Adams thought, a stunning and perhaps dangerous “supersensual multiverse,” he gave the South up. I read O’Brien reading Adams to say a true thing, that there will be an idea of the South as long as it is needed, and there will come a time when it is not needed anymore.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ O’Brien, *Mrs. Adams*, xiv; O’Brien, *Henry Adams and the Southern Question*, 115. For the Henry Adams quotation see n. 2 above.