

**THE CRUCIBLE OF RACE: BLACK-WHITE RELATIONS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH SINCE EMANCIPATION.** By Joel Williamson.<sup>1</sup> New York: Oxford University Press. 1984. Pp. xviii, 561. \$25.00.

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This wide-ranging study examines the changing perceptions of blacks held by Southern whites and the consequences that those shifts had on the region's race relations. Joel Williamson, a native southerner and a historian whose career has been devoted to questions of race, focuses on the years from 1877 to 1915. At the start of this period, says Williamson, a paternalistic, "conservative" mentality was the dominant white racial view. A holdover from the era of slavery, conservatism posited a hierarchical social order in which everyone, white as well as black, had a defined place. Conservatives viewed blacks as inherently inferior to whites and their place as subordinate to whites. But they regarded blacks as human and saw a role for them in the South. In 1877, at the end of Reconstruction, Southern blacks were in fact subordinate to whites politically, economically, and socially. Conservatives were largely content with that status quo and had no desire to push blacks further down than they already were.

Beginning in 1889, however, a "radical" racism emerged and flourished among Southern whites, and it represented a major turn for the worse in racial thought. To the radical mind, blacks were essentially bestial. Slavery had had a civilizing influence on the race, radicals believed, but with emancipation blacks had begun retreating to their natural state of savagery. The single most awful evidence of this decline for the radicals was a supposed increase in rapes of white women by black men. The black "beast" was a menace who had no place in the South, radicals argued, and at some undetermined future time the race would be eliminated from the region.

Racial radicalism swept through the turn-of-the-century South with tremendous force, reaching its height between 1897 and 1907. In the grip of radical fear, whites became very aggressively antiblack, seeking ways to control the race as it "deteriorated." The South witnessed a dramatic upsurge in the lynching of blacks, a

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string of race riots, the total disfranchisement of blacks, and the adoption of segregation laws that made explicit the power and dominance of whites. In all areas of Southern life, radicalism sharply reduced the status of blacks.

The conservatives who did not succumb to radicalism largely abandoned the field of race relations to the radicals. They turned their paternalism away from blacks, and in education, religion, medicine, economics, and politics, took up the far less controversial task of improving the lot of their fellow whites. That shift was justified by a new branch of conservative thought that Williamson labels "Volksgeistian." The Volksgeistians maintained that each race has its own inherent genius that develops dialectically over time. The white elite should occupy itself laboring among its own, striving to develop the true "spirit" of Southern white people. Blacks, meanwhile, should be left to themselves to evolve their own racial soul.

The era of radicalism's zenith was, Williamson argues, the crucible of twentieth-century race relations in the South. The radicals forged a new racial system, one that was far more repressive for blacks than that which had preceded it. They also deepened and solidified a separation of black and white cultures that had begun to develop in the South even before the 1890's. The Volksgeistians then legitimized that separation by promoting a sense of white community that excluded blacks. When radical thought waned and conservatism reemerged as the principal racial view of the white South, blacks were once again accepted as having a place there. But their place was now the very low one that radicalism had created. Meanwhile, Southern whites, preoccupied with themselves, developed no knowledge of the black world around them. In their ignorance, they honestly believed, for much of the century, that there was no race problem in the South.

Perhaps the most original feature of Williamson's analysis is the firm link he establishes between radical thought and the decline in race relations at the turn of the century. Other historians have regarded the extreme racial views of the radicals as a lower-class phenomenon, or, when espoused by the upper classes, as an aberration or demagoguery. Williamson disputes those notions, and, in a series of biographical portraits, he demonstrates that a part of the South's white elite sincerely embraced radicalism. However horrifying their racial attitudes, the radicals were, Williamson insists, an integral part of Southern culture, and they profoundly influenced the course of black-white relations. "To dismiss these people or that aspect of their lives as atypical is to miss a necessary key to understanding race relations in twentieth-century America."

Williamson fails to explain adequately either the rise or the decline of radicalism. He contends that among the elite psychology and temperament determined who became radical and who remained conservative. The radicals were "philosophical realists, who were willful, crisis-oriented, combative, simplex, prone to seek popularity, and who were always moved by basic feelings of insecurity that led them into hard drives for power." That may be so, but Williamson offers too few examples of the phenomenon to make this argument convincing for an entire class of people.

At the mass level, Williamson again relies heavily on psychology. During the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century, he maintains, Southern white men were unable to control their situation by either economic or political means.

The result was that Southern whites in the mass were unable to play the role of protector-as-breadwinner with the satisfaction to which they always aspired and had sometimes achieved. Embattled, white men picked up and emphasized another part of the role, the protector-as-defender of the purity of their women, in this instance against the imagined threat from the black beast rapist. Lynching and rioting, total disfranchisement, and blatant segregation formed satisfying displays of power in one area of their lives when they could no longer display power in another.

This single quote oversimplifies Williamson's complex analysis of the intermingling of race with Southern white attitudes toward sexuality and gender. But whether in abbreviated or elaborate form, the discussion is too conjectural to be fully persuasive. As for radicalism's demise, Williamson says little more than that the mentality had virtually disappeared by 1915. The reasons for that go largely unexplored.

Despite these flaws, the book has an impressive breadth. Williamson's main story is told in rich detail, and it is surrounded by information and insights on an array of related topics. The detail is sometimes excessive, obscuring rather than enlivening the principal arguments. For the period after 1915, Williamson has an opposite problem; his analysis of race relations in these years is suggestive but superficial. For the era from emancipation through 1915, however, he achieves his goal of providing a full and fresh overview of black-white relations in the South.