

Book Reviews

Cumming, Doug. *The Southern Press: Literary Legacies and the Challenge of Modernity*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009. 316 pp. \$24.95.

In this beautifully written book, Doug Cumming roams across the landscape of southern press history, tracking the glow of its leading literary lights. It is a good strategy for understanding southern journalism, he argues, because the superstars of the southern press often cared more about literary expression than anything else. Throughout history, he tells us, the southern newspaper job has often been “a disguised opportunity to be a professional writer.” And to become a writer “means to acquire the shaman’s status, the secret skill of the storyteller, the magic power of persuasion, self-expression and emotional release.” Yes, but what sort of journalism does a shaman produce? And what can it tell us about southern history? Cumming goes in search of answers.

His journey begins in Richmond in 1835, when a brilliant but difficult son of the South returns home. Edgar Allan Poe always wanted to edit a magazine, but his *Southern Literary Messenger* had been planted in less than fertile soil. The agrarian South had been a graveyard for new magazines, and his journal struggled to find an audience. He used his new platform to support fresh voices and condemn the stale and sentimental, but his acerbic reviews and raging literary feuds frightened the magazine’s timid owner. Within a year, he was canned, but he had planted the seeds of a homegrown literary journalism that, Cumming argues, would eventually take root in the South.

From Poe’s departure, Cumming traces the slow development of the Southern press from the Civil War through Reconstruction and the so-called Redemption years. As expected, we meet *Atlanta Constitution* editor Henry Grady in the 1880s and later hear him

trumpet his vision of a “New South.” Cumming misses an opportunity, however, to add an African-American voice during this period of brutal white supremacy. The story of Ida B. Wells and her anti-lynching editorials in the *Memphis Free Speech* would have fit nicely. He does pause to focus on two white southern writers, who investigated race relations and rural poverty—issues that boosters such as Grady avoided.

George Washington Cable of New Orleans and Walter Hines Page of North Carolina represented the early stirrings of Progressive Era reform. Cable embraced what came to be known as southern liberalism, an elusive, shape-shifting ideology whose evolution Cumming tracks through much of the rest of his book. Cable is best known for a collection of essays, *The Silent South*, in which he argued that most white Southerners were reasonable moderates who only needed the right leadership to throw off the wild-eyed demagogues of white supremacy. The book would become the holy grail of southern liberalism. As historian Morton Sosna has argued, the past century is filled with stories of optimistic southern liberals marching off “in search of the Silent South.”

Cumming devotes a thoughtful chapter to the man whose sharp pen helped nurture southern reformers in the 1920s. H.L. Mencken’s famous broadside against the South, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” angered the self-satisfied aristocracy of the day, but it found an audience among a new sort of southern rebels eager to shed the old orthodoxies. Cumming follows members of “The Mencken Club” and their heirs as they struggled to make sense of a changing world over the next four decades.

He offers a moving portrait of W.J. Cash, a Mencken protégé who wrote *The Mind of South*, which was a landmark piece of literary sociology that both explained and indicted the white southerner’s racial obsessions.

Cumming’s book carries the reader through the New Journalism of the late 1960s and up to the present, but the richest material comes from the two decades after World War II, when the white southern press passed through its own version of what historian Joel Williamson has called “the crucible of race.” Cumming captures the poignancy of the time through a series of short sketches: eloquent moderates such as Harry Ashmore; the staunch resistance leader James J. Kilpatrick; and one tragic casualty, Grover C. Hall, Jr., a once promising editor whose career was cut short by illness and his anger. This chapter would benefit, however, from more African-American voices, either from the activist southern black press of the day or from a national literary voice. James Baldwin’s powerful essays of the early 1960s, collected in the book *The Fire Next Time*, could have provided a counterpoint to the gradualism espoused by most southern liberals.

Nonetheless, Cumming has written a rich and thoughtful book, which is deeply researched and delivered with a graceful literary touch. He makes a persuasive case that the storytelling tradition of southern journalism has produced a literary output worthy of deeper study; this is an output that, at its best, offers fresh insights into a South that always seems to be at war with change.

*Sid Bedingfield
University of South Carolina*

Copyright of Journalism History is the property of E.W. Scripps School of Journalism and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.