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I'll Take My Stand: The South And The Agrarian Tradition (Library Of Southern Civilization)



Synopsis

First published in 1930, the essays in this manifesto constitute one of the outstanding cultural documents in the history of the South. In it, twelve southerners—Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, Henry Blue Kline, Lyle H. Lanier, Stark Young, Allen Tate, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Herman Clarence Nixon, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Crowe Ransom, John Donald Wade, and Robert Penn Warren—defended individualism against the trend of baseless conformity in an increasingly mechanized and dehumanized society. In her new introduction, Susan V. Donaldson shows that the Southern Agrarians might have ultimately failed in their efforts to revive the South they saw as traditional, stable, and unified, but they nonetheless sparked debates and quarrels about history, literature, race, gender, and regional identity that are still being waged today over Confederate flags, monuments, slavery, and public memory.

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Customer Reviews

Susan V. Donaldson is National Endowment for the Humanities Professor of English at the College of William and Mary. She is the author of *Competing Voices: The American Novel, 1865--1914*, selected as a Choice Outstanding Academic Book, and coeditor of *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*.

American intellectual history is full of great movements and schools. There were the

transcendentalists, the pragmaticists, and the post-moderns to name but a few. There's the Chicago school of economics. There were also the Nashville Agrarians, sometimes referred to as the Fugitives. This book is their message. This group of twelve Southern writers (and their students) strove to preserve the central ideas of Jeffersonian republicanism in the 20th-century South. When this book, a collection of 12 essays, was first published in 1930, it was already considered reactionary. The authors desired to protect a Romantic image of the agricultural South against encroaching industrialism, mass consumerism, and the centralization of wealth. Really, it sounds like something right out of Philadelphia in 1787, between the Federalists and the Republicans and, in a way, it is. Because the ideas proposed here are so rooted in a political dialog which is both fundamentally American and enduring, this book remains popular and important. Many people read and study the Agrarians today because Jeffersonian republicanism has a sympathetic ear. Its political arguments are particularly applicable as our society contemplates mass consumerism and the concept that economic expansion is always an ends in itself. There's also the simple fact that these intellectuals were great writers and profound thinkers. Many were distinguished men of letters independent of their association with the Agrarians. In many cases, their work is a pleasure to read for its rhetorical lyricism alone. Some of those big, round sentences from Donald Davidson and Robert Penn Warren are just amazing! As for the new Introduction by Susan Davidson, the fact that it doesn't make a single reference to Jefferson or Jefferson's republican ideas and makes not the slightest deference to Louis Rubin's previous introductions shows, I believe, how out of touch it is. Buy the second edition with an Introduction by Rubin and biographical essays of the 12 contributors. Prospective readers beware: The politics of this book are profoundly conservative and deeply unfashionable. They have the ability to offend. Keep an open mind and you'll enjoy a passionate and powerful argument for humankind remaining tied to the land.

These essays could have been written today because they speak to the very concerns we feel about the great industrial machine that America has become. A more current writer, Wendell Berry, expresses these concerns so eloquently in his *LIFE IS A MIRACLE*. These self-described "fugitives" were attempting to make the case for bringing back to the South the agrarian life that had been lost after the war and "reconstruction." So much myth surrounds the story of the Civil War. Slavery was an important part of the controversy, but not how we often believe. In the South, beginning with Jefferson, there was the belief that only the few areas given to the central government, such as national security, in the Constitution, returning the rest to the states to decide for themselves. Many southerners were abolitionists at the time of the ratification of the Constitution, and many

northerners were involved in the slave trade. The question was-- on both sides-- what to do about the Negro when he was freed. Even Abraham Lincoln felt they should not be left in the United States, but given their own place to emigrate. Another man in Washington's Cabinet, Alexander Hamilton, led the believers in a strong central government, who were located mostly in the North. Northern industrialists thought they needed a strong central government that would support their needs, and subsidize the infrastructure that promoted industrialism. Most southerners felt that farming, and occupations related to farming provided the best kind of life, and by the early Nineteenth Century, resented the high tariffs that helped the industries, but crippled the farmers in the South. These twelve "fugitives" were once again trying to show that the agrarian life was best for the development of the arts, and for the "good life" that all men and women sought. It allowed for leisure needed for developing the arts, and the slower pace definitely not found in the hectic, even chaotic industrial North. It is this Agrarian Civilization and the Liberal Arts that the writers wanted to bring back to the South. Even then they saw the encroachment of industrialism moving South, and along with it the Progressive political machine. Today we see that the Fugitives were right in many ways, and everyone, even the Progressives, want to see a return to a calmer, less stressful style of life. The same Progressives who preached "progress in science and industrialism," are the same ones who want the government to make stronger environmental laws, and complain of those "greedy corporations." Families of all faiths and political persuasions are wanting to go "back to the land," and be independent by having more control over their lives. The agrarian life may never be the dominant way of life, but more and more people are moving in that direction, and are running into some of the same problems the southerners had in dealing with a big central government which favors the corporations. It has not been the small independent farmers, but the huge corporate farms that have polluted the streams and land with run-off from dairy farms, and pesticides and fertilizers, yet is the FDA and other government agencies who favor these large corporate farms. The writer of the Introduction to this new edition of I'LL TAKE MY STAND, Susan V. Donaldson, has much positive to say about these essays, but confuses the issues by trying to impose her values of today on women's issues and race on the writers whose values were not different from most anyone who lived in the 1920's and 30's. Beyond this they have much to say to us about how best to live on this earth, about the value of having enough, but not being greedy, and taking the time to build community that works together and takes care of its own.

A good book in light of issues facing the nation today, and a good way of learning what Southerners were worried about in the 1920's. Some of the essays are pretty dense, and you can sense that

while they want to retain the simpler mode of life, they knew it was fast slipping away. It left me with a distinct nostalgia because the South has changed significantly just since I was a kid. We've lost most of our distinctiveness.

A scholar's view, poetically given, of what "Subsidiarity" and G.K.Chesterton earlier called "Distributism." At the essence of it is the romantic idea of the Jeffersonian "yeoman farmer" and what it means to have citizens tied to the land - their land - and the social and political consequences of such things in America. Likely, this book will be studied over a hundred years from now. So will the sole companion book later published, *Beyond Capitalism & Socialism: A New Statement of an Old Ideal* by Kirkpatrick Sale.

Bought this for a class on Faulkner and O'Connor. It's easy to forget that there was once a distinguishable South that had a character separate from the racism often associated with it.

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