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Review

Reviewed Work(s): INTELLECTUAL LIFE AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH, 1810-1860: An Abridged Edition of Conjectures of Order by Michael O'Brien

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Source: *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 2012), pp. 352-354

Published by: Louisiana Historical Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23266749>

Accessed: 24-10-2020 16:53 UTC

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Marianne Carbonnier-Burkard's classic account in French,<sup>1</sup> as well as to archives such as those mined by Ghislain Baur<sup>2</sup> and to the work in progress by Lionel Laborie on the deep sociocultural and even religious divisions between the Huguenots and the Camisards.<sup>3</sup>

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INTELLECTUAL LIFE AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH, 1810-1860: *An Abridged Edition of Conjectures of Order*. By Michael O'Brien. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. 176 pp. Introduction, conclusion, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth \$39.95, ISBN 978-0-8078-3400-8).

Michael O'Brien's *Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860* describes the tumultuous birth and patient, near-inevitable passing of Romanticism in the antebellum South. It was a time of paradox, of the recurring, continuous prime movers of assurance and doubt, and the uncomfortable mix of both led to a hypersensitivity about the South's place in the economic system, in the national discourse, and in the international realm.

Assurance—from white thinkers, at least—came from several realities, the most prominent being the southern dominance of American politics and the preponderance of lauded "founding fathers" hailing from below the boundaries of the nation's capital city. But the white South had also more broadly conquered the land on which it resided. It had pushed the natives to the edges of its own version of civilization; it had developed a feigned mastery of a foreign continent and its people to supply the necessary labor to bend the dark soil of the land to its will. It had created wealth. It had created democracy. And the modified Protestantism it had also created promised that God was behind

<sup>1</sup>Marianne Carbonnier-Burkard, *Comprendre la révolte des Camisards* (Rennes, France, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Ghislain Baur, *La Dynastie Rouvière de Fraissinet-de-Lozère: Les élites villageoises dans les Cévennes protestantes* (Sète, France, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Lionel Laborie, at the University of East Anglia, treats the French Prophets as a case study of religious enthusiasm in Enlightenment England and shows, through their prosecution as fanatics, the limits of English toleration.

the project at every turn. Such imperatives created a pragmatic faith in the validity of white southern actions based entirely on programmatic successes.

But that validity was tenuous at best, as the South existed in a constant state of flux. The reality and inevitability of change guided the thinking of southerners, even as the power of the will remained on their lips and pens. Southerners took their sensibility from Europe far more than they did the nationalist thought coming from the North. But while those Europeans provided a sense of cosmopolitan hierarchy and grounding in timeless ideals, they also seemed to call into doubt the common assumptions of assurance that the South expressed so publicly. If David Hume, for example, could mundanely shunt aside cause and effect, how could surety remain? And when the political realities of defending a slave system derided by those not referring to themselves as "southerners" continually made the existing social reality a variable in and of itself, could any control exist at all?

Romanticism said yes, validating the supremacy of the will. There was, to varying degrees, control in the face of an uncertain world, mastery in a state of eternal change. Racial classification helped, as did gender and class distinctions, as the white South picked and chose from biological and anthropological imperatives to develop a theory of the body that justified their harsher stances on the treatment of black slaves. The project of civilizing Africans through work not only made the crops grow, it provided a constant order in the variable world. Classification and hierarchical determinations became the order of the day, even as the days and the forces that shaped such an order continued to change. Of course, the problem here is that clinging to such paradigms only created more variables for the white South, more barricades upon which to fight, more inferiority complexes, more doubt.

Such was the nature of epitomizing paradox in a paradoxical system. O'Brien does a masterful job of demonstrating that paradox in a variety of frameworks in this abridgement of his massive 2004 *Conjectures of Order*. He spends a great deal of time placing southerners outside of their own region (and placing non-southerners in the South) to demonstrate such inferiority complexes, paranoia, and seeming lack of control. He examines the southern transition to Romantic thought and, later, into a modernist realism in all facets, describing not only the high-

minded considerations of thoughtful treatises, but also the meat of such inquiries as they were lived in letters and popular discourse. He adeptly includes race, class, and gender considerations, as well as the evolving religious impulse that grounded much of the region's thinking about both its fears and its justifications.

Interestingly, what one might perceive as more traditional intellectual history comprises a vast amount of the material that hit the cutting room floor in this abridgement. Much of the academic thought and philosophical tangents have been excised, but the thrust of those arguments in light of their broader impact does not get lost. Significantly, *Intellectual Life and the American South* still provides the same argument, the same pace, and the same all-encompassing portrait of the mind of the region as does *Conjectures of Order*, and with no new argumentation and a form that follows that of its longer predecessor, referring to the longer version for further explanations and examples, as well as in-depth historiographical debates and detailed notes, is both simple and rewarding.

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**FATHERS OF CONSCIENCE:** *Mixed-Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South*. By Bernie D. Jones. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. xiv, 197 pp. Preface, introduction, conclusion, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. Paper \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-8203-3251-2).

*Fathers of Conscience* contributes to the literature illuminating the complex and contradictory nature of antebellum southern society and law, slavery and freedom, marriage, property, and family. Bernie D. Jones, assistant professor of Legal Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, examines appellate court decisions in the antebellum South concerning wills by white male planters that granted property, freedom, or both to their slave partners and their mixed-race children. While southern society tolerated sexual relationships with enslaved women as long as they remained circumspect, the bequeathing of status, money, and/or material goods to people of color proved much more problematic. Frequently, white relatives sought to overturn decisions that elevated the status of the people of color over them.