
Fortunately it is rare that such a troubled text as *Honor and Violence* appears in print. Nevertheless, there are exceptions; this one lives in re-print. Professor Emeritus Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s *Honor and Violence* is a 1986 abridgement of his 1982 tome, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South.* In 1983, the reviews for *Southern Honor* offered enough criticism to strike fear into the heartiest writer.

Professor Wyatt-Brown, a native Pennsylvanian, was fifty when his *Southern Honor* was released and fifty-four when *Honor and Violence* was published. He is the product of a high academic pedigree including undergraduate work at Sewanee and King’s College of Cambridge with a Ph.D. from John’s Hopkins. As a native Pennsylvanian, one can only speculate that he bristled at the deeply southern collegiate experience of Sewanee in the 1950s. From the text of *Honor and Violence*, and the benefit of the twenty-four years since its publication, it is clear that this text is an example of 1980s aggressive revisionist history with post-1970s influences of anthropological history infused in a tale of a complex, dualistic society living largely by mob rule. Wyatt-Brown explores the meaning and expression of honor as southern whites applied it to their lives. He views southern ethical habits as the basis of regional distinctiveness and that helped justify slavery. Further he suggests the honor of the society was held up by the society and it was community rule that dominated individual and collective decision-making.

The text is broken into two parts, the first establishing the foundations of the honor culture and the latter the collective southern ethic. To foretell his turbid methodology, he opens with a discussion of the literary influences on culture and society writ large. To do so, his first chapter recounts a New England story of a man ridden out of town on a rail. It is
disappointing Wyatt-Brown did not attempt to draw from the southern panoply of literature to set the stage for his discussion.

Professor Wyatt-Brown’s following discussion over what he terms the “Primal Nature of Honor” is, however, more effectively constructed and fundamental to the cause of his thesis. He describes honor as an all-encompassing element of life and thought in the antebellum South. Honor was immortal and derived its value from the opinions of others through a complex but well-understood, and apparently, well-adhered social hierarchy. Of the notions of honor, gentility, family, and sexual honor, he delves deeply into notions of sexual honor as “the most curiously ambiguous aspect of [honor] in the American South” (p.35). He is particularly challenged by the ideal of a southern woman who is to be “not only ethereal but also hardworking, politically aware (though never ‘to mingle in discussion’), and prudent in household management” (p.35). As he is the son of an Episcopal bishop, it is ironic that he is deeply troubled over this complex description of a woman. This notion has Old Testament biblical roots in Proverbs 31: 10-31 and is distinctly not southern in origin.

Regardless, he builds a convincing case that honor provides structure and implicit discipline for an ordered and hierarchical society. The details of this ubiquitous southern society of honor are exposed through dualistic and conflicting expressions of gentility, the absolute order of the family, and expansive discourse on sexual honor. Gentility was sought as a measure of worth derived from a requirement to be sociable, learned, and pious. Sociability is at once a function of the dispersed geography with sparse accommodations for entertainment and refuge from the dangers of travel. As such, southerners were expected to be consummate hosts at all times to all peoples – with exceptions. Wyatt-Brown says
southerners were so hospitable that it became a deep competition for the notional title of most hospitable. This, he argues, drove the conspicuous consumption on the surface of southern society. Wyatt-Brown then points out that this was a façade; that the tropical climate drove any sense of order or purpose out of the culture and therefore the picture of superb hospitality was a mirage and that there was a rotten core of filthy living and begrudging grace of hosts. Wyatt-Brown argues that the wayward traveler would find no warmth of southern hospitality without detailed letters of introduction and a complex set of favors owed to someone on the traveler’s behalf.

Family honor, however, was the backbone of southern society. Highlighted by the ritual of passing names from generation to generation, he argues that the value of family bloodline was unquestioned. As the bloodline is passed through the children, they are raised in a conflicting world of violence and neglect compared with motherly affection and overindulgence. What is least convincing about this argument is his implication that southerners are unique in this expression of child-rearing.

The largest of his foundational chapters deals with sexual honor. Wyatt-Brown paints a picture of a singularly depraved and sordid society. The essence of his argument centers on the dichotomy between women’s weakness and power. It would have been better argued from a Foucaultian point of view about power and points of leverage instead of a stale discussion of women’s matriarchal power over hen-pecked husbands balanced against the abject dependency of women and their requirement to marry to avoid barrenness and shame. The same Foucaultian point of view could better describe the black-white sexual relations as well
while highlighting the differences and the social preeminence of the white classes over the black.

Wyatt-Brown’s second half builds on the foundations to paint a more complete picture of the composite society. Honor fueled the seemingly opposed inclinations of hospitality and competition which played out to predictable, and, according to Wyatt-Brown, entirely southern responses in the arenas of hospitality, gambling, and duels. All are intertwined he argues with some collective social sense of who was whom and their respective status on the social ladder. Hospitality, gambling, or even dueling could serve as the steps on the social ladder insomuch as one did not attempt to climb too far too fast.

The society that is compulsively focused on the social strata was therefore beholden to the social, collective conscience. Wyatt-Brown suggests the official southern legal system was so broken it was only natural for southerners to rely on the strength and authority of their social system of elite leaders who represented the collective conscience. As a result of reliance on the un-official societal authority, slave revolts and rumors therein led to a cycle of panics and violent quells. With tacit official sanction, the perverse system of justice led to a society built not on law but on the balance of lynching and charivaris. In melodramatic form, Wyatt-Brown relates the story of fifteen year old Susan Foster’s murder by her husband James Foster, Jr. as the quintessential example of southern justice. James Foster, Jr. was clearly guilty, freed by the legal system, whipped, tarred and feathered to an inch of his life, stripped of rank and possessions, and set free to disappear in to history.

The book told a tale of a depraved, mob-ruled, singular society rivaling the worst of the Celtic hordes and bacchanalian Roman orgies. In 1984, University of Arkansas professor
Michael O’Brien described *Southern Honor* as an especially difficult and slow book to read. He concludes, “What made it painful was the spectacle of an author, writing *in extensor* about a culture he so obviously despises. His Old South is a unrelievably miserable place.”

The arguments were not well woven and relied of erratic logical and rhetorical evidence from the Celts, ancient Germans, Romans, to New England literature. That southern society was built on notions of honor is reasonable, but it is arguable that most societies are built on the same fashion, be they Western, Eastern, or Tribal. *Honor and Violence* stripped out the necessary footnotes or endnotes that would enable a critique of the sources and leads one to conclude that this text’s intended audience was that of a more general reader. In an era of aggressive revisionism and accelerating racial changes in the United States, it is easy to assume this text was written for an emerging class of well-educated, semi-academic liberals looking to atone for the crimes of the American past. This text provides a damning, and not entirely believable, argument that the South alone existed in such a depraved state exerting overwhelming force through societal constructs over any element of discord, be they slave, female, aristocratic, or common.

Twenty-four years later, there is little to recommend this text. While written in a rolling and entertaining style with engrossing tales of cultural depravity, it offers a very one-dimensional study of a complex society. Professor Wyatt-Brown’s thesis is generally upheld by his rhetoric and logic and is therefore plausible if not believable. In the midst of the revisionist movement in the early 1980s it is somewhat understandable how the original version of this book, *Southern Honor* would be a finalist for the Pulitzer and American Book Awards. In 2010, the author’s failure to write objectively fails to illuminate academic discourse.

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