

review essays

the highlander school

HIGHLANDER: NO ORDINARY SCHOOL, 1932-1962. By John M. Glen. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988. \$30.00.

The South is an enigma in the annals of American radicalism. Antebellum pro-slavery exegetes like J. H. Thornwell and Thornton Stringfellow cast their defense of the institution in a scathing attack against northern industrial conditions and against capitalist economic relations in general, in comparison with which the South's slave system was humane and progressive, a "protective philosophy" flowing over with the milk of human kindness. Diehard southern populist leaders Tom Watson and James H. "Cyclone" Davis resisted fusion and in the end were able to preserve Alliance radicalism only by returning to "the party of the fathers" and joining the growing crusade against non-white, non-Protestant America. Black civic and religious leaders in the South from Booker T. Washington to Martin Luther King, Jr. walked a narrow line between biblical injunctions to accommodation and deference and their demands for racial equality. Itself a strange combination of progress and tradition, the South has been (and, as historians like C. Vann Woodward argue, still is today) at the center of a cultural civil war between traditionalists and modernizers, one that compounds the difficulty of trying to assess the impact of radical movements and ideas on the area.

The bitterly divisive Scopes trial during the 1920s; the populist crusades of Father Coughlin, Dr. Townshend and Huey Long in the 1930s and their safe absorption into the second New Deal; the Chambers-Hiss case and the battle for ascendancy in the new, politically charged field of anti-Communism; and, in our own time, the rise of the Moral Majority—these are only the most visible examples of a cultural divide that first began as the expression of regional differences between north and south. The conditions underlying cultural fratricide, when added to the post-War liberal disillusionment not only with the Stalinism but also with all forms of social solidarity, have made it difficult for radical reform movements to flourish in either region. Those that have survived have tended to conform to the local landscape, in the case of the South to a recidivistic individualism and to

racial terror and in the north to a consumption ethic emphasizing the glories not of work, but of leisure. These are formidable obstacles to any genuinely democratic grass-roots movement aimed at improving the social conditions of average Americans. They are what make the Highlander Folk School, a labor college established in Monteagle, Tennessee in 1932 and lasting a full thirty years, in the words of its most recent chronicler, "no ordinary school."

John M. Glen has set for himself a twofold task in *Highlander*: to provide an objective account of the school's often controversial history and to place it within the larger context of southern trade unionism and civil rights, examining the work of southern radicals since the 1930s. Throughout this rewarding, often exhilarating account of the Highlander Folk School and its changing fortunes, Glen is too ready however to rob Peter to pay Paul, telling and retelling a good story at the expense of the kind of curricular details and broad historical analysis that help weight it down. By his own admission, "much of the story of organized labor in the South has not yet been written." "The record of union activities in the individual states, particularly Tennessee, is even smaller" (295).

Perhaps the most significant limiting factor and one that Glen grapples with bravely is the nature of the school itself. Highlander was conceived in the broadest, loosest possible terms by its co-founders, Miles Horton and Don West, who as good Christian socialists were anxious to adopt the ideas and techniques of the Danish folk school movement to America's saddest rural substratum, the working poor of southern Appalachia. With "no attempt to glorify rural life," the school, according to Horton, would engage in the direct education of adult farmers and workers, introducing them to cooperative principles and teaching them organizing techniques; its staff at times providing leadership and counsel in local strikes and disputes. Its twin objectives, emblazoned across its early letterhead, were "to educate rural and industrial leaders for a new social order" and "to conserve and enrich the indigenous cultural values of the mountains," the former through non-credit classes and workshops, the latter through a program of folk songs and dances all led and developed by school staff members (21).

Although its critics were sure it was a "Communist training school," Highlander was never committed to any one ideology or party line, a policy that, as Glen rightly points out, was at once its greatest strength and weakness. The school's Executive Council instead spoke of "broadening the scope of democracy to include everyone," of "deepening the concept to include every relationship," and of an "army of democracy . . . so vast and so determined that nothing undemocratic could stand in its path" (225). The universalism of Highlander's mission statement seemed to work against it. Over the years, the school's educational program lapsed increasingly into a series of expedient measures and ad hoc responses to changing local and national conditions.

Thus, for example, between 1942 and 1947 the Highlander Folk School (HFS) worked closely with the newly formed CIO "to build a broad-based, racially integrated and politically active southern labor movement, and to foster a greater appreciation for the contributions workers' education could make to it," by 1944 becoming "the most important labor education center in the South" (88), Nineteen forty-five signalled the beginning of a retreat from this position. The new more cautious policy of the CIO leadership toward independent union activity and the post-War backlash of employers and employees alike against socialism and espe-

cially communism cut off the HFS from its earlier sources of influence. Excluded from CIO involvement, the school spent a fitful ten years attempting unsuccessfully to build a coalition of "all branches of organized labor, farmers and sympathetic non-labor groups" that its leaders hoped would supercede the CIO itself (106). By the end of 1945, when it was clear that such a coalition was not going to materialize, HFS staff came to the convenient solution that unions were "reactionary" and "complacent," that they had "lost their ideals" and with them their revolutionary potential (127).

Fortunately for Highlander, new substitutes for the proletariat were ready to leap into the breach—in particular blacks and students. Between 1953 and its closing in 1962, HFS devoted itself to training and educating southern blacks and whites as well as a new generation of college students in the politics of civil rights. Its two major civil rights projects in the 1960s—the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project and the Southwide Voter Education Internship Project—and its college workshop, "The New Generation Fights for Equality," made important contributions to the struggle for school desegregation.

Its new emphasis on civil rights reflected the growing conviction at Highlander that the real challenge was "not the problem of conquering poverty, but conquering meanness, prejudice and tradition." In thirty years, the HFS had moved from its initial determination to provide the poverty-stricken people of Appalachia with "a sound economic foundation" to broad quality of life issues increasingly removed from the rank and file worker or from a critical analysis of the work process itself (19).

While Glen's account purports to be balanced and while he is very careful not to overdraw the school's many positive accomplishments, it is clear where his sympathies lie. Those sympathies blind him to the broader implications not so much of the school's successes and failures, which are transparent, but to its inner-workings and the educational philosophy guiding them. A more searching inquiry into the actual curriculum of the school and its changes over the years might have helped solve this problem. Nevertheless, on the ground he has chosen, Glen has produced an ambitious, highly readable account of a school that deserves all the attention we can give it.

State University of New York

Jay M. Heffron