

The University of North Carolina Press

A Conversation with Charles Reagan Wilson

Series editor of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*

And editor of *Volume 3: History* and *Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*

Both published September 18, 2006 by the University of North Carolina Press

Q: The *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* was published as a single volume in 1989 and to great acclaim. Why did the Center for the Study of Southern Culture decide to publish the New Encyclopedia as a series of 24 separate volumes instead of one big hardback?

A: In planning *The New Encyclopedia*, it became clear that many new topics needed to be added to the original material, but there were too many new articles to fit comfortably in a one-volume hardback. Publishing a series of paperbacks enables us to cover our broad topics well, target some books for individuals and special groups especially interested in the topics of individual volumes, and address the opportunity for easily accessible volumes for classroom use.

Q: Have you expanded the coverage of individual topics? If so, how?

A: We have kept the original 24 thematic categories, but we have re-conceptualized some of them. Women's Life will be *Gender*, and Black Life will be *Race*. These new titles reflect the new scholarship on these topics and how they are conceptualized now by most scholars. When the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* came out, it was important to recognize the achievements of women and African Americans in the South at a time when they had been studied too little. We will continue to do that in *The New Encyclopedia*. The new category titles, though, will also enable us to deal with the fluidity and multiplicity of gender and race as contested categories. We have two new volumes that were not originally thematic sections: *Foodways* and *Folklife*.

In virtually every volume we are expanding thematic articles that address new scholarly concerns. In addition, the original volume had limited room for biographical entries, and we tried to only cover the truly iconic figures. *The New Encyclopedia* will dramatically expand entries on individuals; the Literature volume will probably triple the number of entries, with the goal of being more comprehensive and covering not just the literary importance of writers but their cultural significance as well.

Q: What kinds of changes in the South do the new volumes reflect?

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Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 966.3561, ext. 234

Fax [919] 966.3829 | E-mail: Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu

A: There have been dramatic changes in the South since the publication of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* in 1989. The South has become a center for new immigration, with the growth of Hispanic population especially dramatic. The late 1990s saw a large increase in the African American return migration to the South, extending the region's role as the hearth of much African American culture. The region experienced unprecedented prosperity and continued growth of the middle class, while social problems for the underclass worsened. New industries have appeared within the South; for example, becoming a new center for automobile production. Politically, southerners from both major parties have played crucial leadership roles in national politics. Fundamentalists have expanded their political and social roles, working especially through the Republican party and the New Christian Right. Meanwhile, new forms of cultural expression have appeared, such as hip hop music, which has emerged with distinctive southern variants that have even produced a genre called The Dirty South. *The New Encyclopedia* has added topics in many volumes that will analyze the meanings of these developments.

Q: These volumes place more emphasis on the South's international role. Why?

A: One of the important developments in the recent South has been recognition of its global role. One could argue that globalization goes back to the early South, a place that developed as part of the Atlantic World that included Europe and Africa and came to base much of its economy on cotton—a crop of international significance. More recently, the transnational migration of populations that have settled in the South, the international role of regionally based businesses like Federal Express and Coca-Cola, and the growth of international investments in the South and the southern recruitment of global businesses have all made clear that the South is a global player. Any understanding of the contemporary South needs to grapple with the historical meanings of these developments, and *The New Encyclopedia* has added much coverage of these topics.

Q: The *Religion* and *Geography* volumes were the first to be published in the spring of 2006, followed by *History* and *Myth, Manners, and Memory* in the fall of 2006. Why did you choose to publish these topics in this order?

A: We knew that *History* and *Geography* needed to be among the earliest volumes because they provide a time and space foundation for later topics. The overviews in those two volumes provide a spine, giving a historical narrative based in cultural history and a geographical assessment of the regions that make up the broader South. Religion has long been recognized as one of the key factors that made the South an identifiable place, and the field of southern religious history has experienced a renaissance recently of scholarship that provided a foundation of contributors for preparing this volume expeditiously. The *Myth, Manners, and Memory* volume reflects the importance of

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images and representations in understanding the South. The region was constructed by both southerners themselves and outside observers, creating a rich imaginative structure of social types, stories, behavioral expectations, and memories, and this volume offers fresh insight on this topic.

Q: The original *Encyclopedia* was a pioneering work, serving as a model for other regional and state reference works. What effect(s) do you think *The New Encyclopedia* might have on other regional reference works?

A: The scale of *The New Encyclopedia* is vast. By the time all the volumes are published, the entire set will demonstrate how dynamic regional studies are, which we hope will suggest the continued need throughout the nation for reference works that provide information on regions reflecting the best scholarship in ways that are accessible to broad audiences. We also believe *The New Encyclopedia* will show the need to keep reference works current in order to make them of continued usefulness to readers.

Q: In what ways are the scope, organization, and style of the original volume reflected in the new ones?

A: We have kept the original qualities of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* that made it distinctive. We divided subject material into 24 sections, instead of arranging information in an A to Z format, and we have kept that division, reflected now in an entire volume being devoted to a subject. We arranged material originally in three categories: long overview essays, substantial thematic articles, and short topics entries, all of which remain. We think this way of organizing knowledge is useful in suggesting the significance of different kinds of articles and in providing a breadth and depth of coverage. We worked to make the writing of the *Encyclopedia* clear and accessible to many audiences, and we remain committed to that goal. I don't want to forget the importance of illustrations here, either. The South has a distinguished photographic history, and we have always tried to provide interesting and, when possible, artful illustrations for our entries.

Q: *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* is more than a revision of the original. How much of the material is new?

A: When we began, we aimed for at least 20% new material, but we find that it varies by volume. We are adding many more illustrations and entries everywhere. Some sections have been virtually redone with totally new entries, and we have two new subject areas (foodways and folk art) that are entirely new. And we are looking at every entry to see if it needs to be updated, either because of new factual information, new interpretations that

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have appeared, or new bibliography. We will have far more than the 20% that seemed necessary for a new edition.

Q: The unpredictability of the South, its rapid changes, its evolving identity, seems to generate original thinking by original thinkers. How do the various editors of *The New Encyclopedia* reflect the changing South?

A: Dick Pillsbury was consulting editor for the *Geography* section of the original encyclopedia. When we told him of *The New Encyclopedia* he was quite excited to work with us again. As a geographer he was quite aware of the changes in the region, and his own scholarship had been charting those changes, positioning him perfectly to supervise a thorough revision of that subject.

When our original contributing editor for the Women's Life section was unable to continue work on *The New Encyclopedia*, we paired two young scholars of gender, Ted Ownby and Nancy Bercaw, who redrew the framework of the original section to include issues of masculinity as well as women's life and to utilize the interdisciplinary work on that topic.

John T. Edge has become a key figure in the study of southern foodways through his work as director of the Southern Foodways Alliance. The author of seven books in the area and coordinator of conferences, publications, and research projects on southern foodways, he was the ideal person to oversee our volume on foodways, studying those culinary customs as one would other features of the culture of the American South.

Q: What kind of response have you received to the revised and updated volumes?

A: The first volumes have only recently appeared so the word is just getting out. Because we will be publishing *The New Encyclopedia* over four years, we believe the attention to it will grow as people begin to see the scale of what we are doing—charting the cultural landscape of the American South at a time of dramatic and compelling transformation.

The South has experienced such deep transformations in the last two decades that it has created a new context for *The New Encyclopedia*.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: An interview with Charles Reagan Wilson, Series editor of THE NEW ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SOUTHERN CULTURE and editor of VOLUME 3: HISTORY and VOLUME 4: MYTH, MANNERS, AND MEMORY (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2006). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/wilson.

The University of North Carolina Press
116 South Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3808
919-966-3561 (office) 1-800-848-6224 (orders) Fax: 919-966-3829

CONTACTS

Publicity: Gina Mahalek, ext. 234; gina_mahalek@unc.edu

Sales: Michael Donatelli, ext. 232; michael_donatelli@unc.edu

Rights: Vicky Wells, ext. 225; vicky_wells@unc.edu

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