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Editor's Introduction 55.2/3

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Editor's Introduction

PHILIP C. KOLIN

This issue re-examines one of the South's, and America's, most iconic films, *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel upon which the film was based. The twelve articles, interview, forum, and poems in this issue give us multiple, complex views of the South as represented in both the novel and Selznick's adaptation. Whether anchored in voluminous archival sources or in critical theory or both, the pieces in this issue emphasize the presence of vastly different Souths—an egregiously idyllic antebellum South, a South that is a target for the omissions and flaws underlying its fictions, and a South that has been appropriated by various groups to endorse political/sexual agendas. In fact, the opening essay by distinguished British scholar Helen Taylor not only reflects on the reception of the film in the U.K. but also raises an important question about how it comments on the Age of Trump.

Following Taylor's overview are four articles which, through archival records, shed light on the production and distribution of the film in the late 1930s and early 1940s. One of the foremost scholars/archivists on the film adaption of *Gone With the Wind*, Steve Wilson looks at the history of correspondence (letters, telegrams, memos, etc.) between Selznick and his agents, Selznick and various movie stars, and fan mail about casting, especially for Ashley Wilkes and Scarlett O'Hara. In the process, Wilson uncovers a plethora of information about Selznick's view of Mitchell's characters, the intense star rivalry for the coveted leading roles, and the fan mania that swept the country over the adaptation of Mitchell's blockbuster novel.

Next, musicologist Nathan Platte searches archival records to discover which scores and songs were left out of *Gone With the Wind* and what their exclusion or failure tell us about studio-era filmmaking and the contemporary (both in the 1940s and in 2018) understanding of the film. For instance,

Platte points out that Max Steiner originally scored music for Ashley and Scarlett that was never used and that initially there were plans for a racially mixed choir to be heard in the film but these voices again were excluded. Such omissions, Platte argues, run counter to what audiences expected when the film was released.

Michael Flannery then turns to health concerns in the film—the way doctors were presented and the treatments they prescribed in a nineteenth-century South. Meticulously tracing the history of the medical aspects of the film, and the novel as well, Flannery applauds Selznick, and his adviser Wilbur Kurtz, for their sincere efforts to achieve authentic realism. Yet even though Flannery concludes their attempts resulted in “a mixed success,” he nonetheless emphasizes that Selznick and Kurtz were way ahead of their time since “no professional historical work” had been done on Civil War-era medicine in the 1930s. In this regard, Dr. Meade can be hailed as the medical star of his time.

Cultural historian John Devanny then explores the influence of Roman Catholicism on the novel and the film, a much-neglected area of research. Though he stresses Mitchell’s devout Catholicism, Devanny finds that the impact of Catholicism on the novel and film was “indirect and subtle.” Still, most of Mitchell’s Catholic characters, notably Scarlett’s mother and youngest sister, were used as foils to the modern characterization of Scarlett herself. Devanny also searches through Selznick’s archival documents to see how Catholicism, through the Production or Breen Code, influenced the direction and distribution of the film. One of the most notable instances of film censorship dealt with omitting the word “damn” from Rhett Butler’s often-quoted line, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” which, thanks to diplomatic maneuvering on Selznick’s part, was allowed to stand. Devanny ends by contrasting Hollywood’s far more lenient censorship with that in Ireland, one of Europe’s most Catholic countries in the 1930s and 1940s.

Turning to Southern writers’ response to Mitchell’s novel, Joseph Millichap finds that the success of *Gone With the Wind* engaged several regional authors, but most intriguing were the Fugitives, Agrarians, and New Critics. Millichap maintains that some members of these all-male groupings, who called themselves Brethren in an ironic echo of Southern churchmen, produced varied responses to *Gone With the Wind* in critical and creative texts often intertextual with or even influenced by it, including John Crowe Ransom’s early review of the novel (1936), Allen Tate’s *The Fathers* (1938), and Robert Penn Warren’s fifth novel, *Band of Angels* (1955). According to Millichap, these works from the so-called Brethren aimed to correct Mitchell’s vision of Dixie; for, as Ransom remarked, her “point of view is intensely and sometimes a little painfully Southern.”

Taking issue with the Agrarian critics was Mitchell's long-time friend and popular reviewer Hershel Brickell. Exploring a "literary friendship lasting from the frenzy of the book's release to well past the film production," Jennifer Ford uncovers the many ways Brickell and Mitchell were kindred spirits. As he had done for many other Southern writers, Brickell endorsed Mitchell's work and positioned her "in the center of the new South's literary realism" and agreed with Mitchell that her novel did not "glorify" slavery, contrary to what many reviewers believed.

Gone With the Wind has had a long history of offending audiences. Ever since African American critics and newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s objected to the presentation of slavery in both the novel and film, *Gone With the Wind* has been embroiled in controversy. Doubtless among one of the most debated symbols/icons in the film today is the Confederate flag. Using a Lacanian theatrical framework adapted by Laura Mulvey and Tom Brown, Billy Middleton illustrates how the film applies "competing histories of Confederate iconography in multivalent ways." He argues that for the characters on screen the flag was a symbol of Southern pride but for viewers gazing back into the past with a contemporary understanding of Civil War history, the flag can be read, especially in the famous Atlanta train station scene, "as a source of subtle criticism of the Lost Cause." Forgivingly, Middleton concludes that under Selznick's well-documented direction there was a sincere desire to craft a film "with a conciliatory message."

If the Confederate ensign raised a red flag, the depiction of slavery clearly stands out as the most controversial issue in the film. Most recently, the Orpheum Theatre in Memphis banned a thirty-four-year history of showing the film. Over the years, too, the film evoked several major satires, among them Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, giving African American characters a voice denied them in the novel and the film. Relatedly, Matthew Smith argues that plantation tourism has perpetuated an unrealistically idyllic South represented in *Gone With the Wind*. A former Louisiana plantation guide, Smith points out that museum directors and plantation tourism evoke romanticized memories of a beautiful but white antebellum South but they wrongly leave out the fact that chattel slavery and racial violence were an inescapable and ugly part of that history. Smith pleads for a much more honest and nuanced tour experience incorporating an accurate appraisal and depiction of slavery.

Focusing on the novel's metafictional theme that involves the ideology of the plantation class and the industrial capitalism that overtakes it, Terence Hoagwood believes Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* to be less about its memorable characters than about social and historical illusions. Hoagwood insists that the romance and adventures of Scarlett, Ashley, Rhett, and the

other characters are examples in a large critique of the system of illusion that decorates the Confederacy in the course of its demise. But he notes that the film also develops the theme of illusion and deception, but differently, shifting the meaning in the direction of cinematic spectacle. Selznick's adaptation thematizes simulation in the terms and form of its own commercial form. Hoagwood concludes that the violence of the novel's racial and class politics, which are part of the infrastructure of historical change, disappear in the carefully crafted display and critique of artifice itself.

Two articles focus intensely on Scarlett. Toward the end of Mitchell's novel, John Clum reminds readers that Rhett Butler compares Scarlett, the wife he is leaving, to the madam he has set up in business, Belle Watling: "You both are hard-headed business women and both successful. Belle's got the edge on you, of course, because she's a kind-hearted, good-natured soul." While most filmgoers and readers see the noble, loving Melanie Wilkes as the foil to the self-centered and mercenary Scarlett O'Hara, Clum claims that a strong argument can be made for regarding Belle Watling as a crucial counterweight to Scarlett. He insightfully pinpoints comparisons between Scarlett and Belle, especially in Scarlett's attitude toward sex and materialism.

Following Clum's assessment of Scarlett, Deborah Barker studies *Gone With the Wind's* influence on "two contemporary white female-centered films," *Southern Belles* (2005) and *Southern Belle* (2010). Despite the similarity of the titles, the films represent two very different reactions to negotiating Old South nostalgia: one is an indie comedy/spoof about two girls named Bell/e, who live in a trailer park and base their future on *Gone With the Wind*, and the other is a documentary about a "camp" in Tennessee that trains young women to be "Mellys," not "Scarletts." However, in placing *Gone With the Wind* in a contemporary setting, both works struggle with how to "contextualize" the politics of race, gender, and class that the iconic film promoted. In one film Scarlett is a positive role model; in the other, a negative one.

This issue also includes a spirited new interview conducted by Randall Kenan with Alice Randall whose novel *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) satirizes Mitchell's fiction and provides an alternative black account of slavery and the Old South. In the interview with Randall, Kenan explores her overall fiction as well as *The Wind Done Gone*. He finds that Randall intended "to create a hybrid novel form that combined the traditions of European novels . . . with the African American tradition of coded parody embodied in the cake walk." Doing so, she raises questions about the political text of *Gone With the Wind* and how it influences an audience's response to the novel and film and boldly declares "I decided I could not allow that book to

sit unrebuked and unscorned on a bookshelf with my daughter coming of age as a reader.”

Concluding the critical discourse on *Gone With the Wind* is a forum, “A Convergence of Voices,” conducted by film historian Phil Gentile. Each of the five participants, including film critic Molly Haskell, reflects on how and why the novel/film influences them and American culture. Melanie Sumner’s revelation may be the most personal: “One of my friends lost her virginity while watching *Gone With the Wind*.” This issue also features three very different poems influenced by *Gone With the Wind*—on Scarlett’s indomitable will, on the black presence silenced in the film, and on the use of artifice in the film.

Sadly, my editorship of *The Southern Quarterly* ends with this issue. For over forty-three years, the span of my career at Southern Miss, I have been variously connected to the journal. In 1974, I published one of my first scholarly articles—on John Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harrington”—when the *Quarterly* was an omnibus journal devoted to presenting research by the USM faculty. I eventually joined the Editorial Board and guest-edited two special issues, one on the Legacy of Emmett Till and the other on Tennessee Williams. In 2011, following Douglas Chambers’s tenure as editor, I was asked to edit the journal and was pleased to bring out a series of special issues, among them honoring the fiftieth anniversary of *The Southern Quarterly* in 2012, another commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration in 2014, and one on the history of Southern health. It is ironic that my last issue focuses on *Gone With the Wind*. As Tennessee Williams’s motto has it, “En avant.”