

## Review: *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture*

By Anthony Wilson

Reviewed by Kathy Piselli

*Atlanta-Fulton Public Library, USA*

Anthony Wilson. *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. 232 pp. ISBN: 1-57806-804-5 (cloth) \$US45.00

*Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* mixes literary history, folk history and popular culture with literary analysis. If you can get past the academic tone you will find fun material as author Anthony Wilson, Assistant Professor of English at LaGrange College and self-described "conservationist and cultural critic," travels through time to illustrate the changing meaning of the swamp in American culture. His focus is literature, but he covers film and broader cultural and political issues as well. He looks at the swamp from the point of view of different populations: the southern white aristocracy, southern African-Americans, Creoles, Cajuns, and southern Native Americans.

Early attitudes toward swamps were colored by what can only be called regional chauvinism. There are many swampy places along the Atlantic seaboard, but while a northern swamp might be a pretty cranberry bog, southern swamps were thought of as malarial and frightening. The same negative viewpoint, though, meant different things to different people: wealthy opportunists sought to buy low, then drain swamps for economic benefit, while the dispossessed - slaves, Indians, and poor whites - sought to hide in them.

Four literary periods are considered, starting from the dawn of the southern U.S. identity, to the "Postmodern" at the dawn of the modern environmental movement. The reader finds that attitudes toward the swamp continue through history to follow or shape southern culture. To illustrate the colonial/antebellum period, Wilson uses both southern and non-southern writers, both fiction and

expository writers. Because some of his examples are obscure, this will be a fascinating chapter for anyone interested in the shaping of early southern identity.

For the Civil War period, Wilson includes many war testimonies, including those from the prisoner of war camp at Andersonville, Georgia. The south becomes romanticized, as the noble savage did in the colonial period - admired in defeat. Wilson also devotes some time here to the New Orleans literary scene and to the important southern writer Sidney Lanier.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the swamp is still a refuge, but not a place of exile. Indeed, writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Lillian Smith, and William Faulkner are proud of their swamps as places to express their own rejection of the dominant American culture.

Finally, in the postmodern period, "Bubba" environmentalists seeking to save the wetlands also seek in their way to save a unique culture, and the author traces this angle through some modern writings as well as cultural phenomena like swamp tours. There are many illustrative articles that could follow from that last chapter. Recommended for academic and larger public libraries.

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