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Journey Into Bitterness

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MISSISSIPPI: An American Journey, by Anthony Walton. Knopf, 279 pp., $ 24.

NO AMERICAN state has received more attention from historians and journalists in recent years than Mississippi, the one-time centerpiece of the "Old South." One reviewer, casting a long eye upon the ever-growing shelf of books that chronicle Mississippi's post-World War II civil-rights revolution, concluded that "It is difficult to believe that any previous social movement has been so fully recorded." Thus Anthony Walton's sometimes poignant meditation on the impact that Mississippi has had on his family and forebears runs some risk of getting lost amid this flood.

Walton is a 35-year-old African-American who was born and brought up in the Chicago suburbs. He graduated from Notre Dame, attended graduate school at Brown University and ended up in New York as a free-lance magazine writer whose most notable piece was a 1989 essay memorably titled "Willie Horton and Me." "Mississippi's" dust jacket characterizes him simply - and mysteriously - by saying only that "Anthony Walton lives in Maine," symbolically as far from Mississippi as one can get while still remaining in the United States.

Walton is connected to Mississippi through his parents, Claude and Dorothy, both of whom were born and grew up there before they migrated northward to escape the heavy-handed racism and rural poverty that led hundreds of thousands of black southerners to look for better homes and jobs elsewhere. Growing up in Illinois and then heading east, Anthony Walton professes to have known and thought little about his parents' and grandparents' earlier lives until he reached his own adulthood.

"Mississippi" leads a reader to think that Walton was drawn to visiting and exploring the Magnolia State out of a desire to "find" himself, and his descriptions of his early travels there - visiting antebellum mansions, Civil War battlefields and the picturesque Natchez Trace Parkway - are often beautifully and memorably rendered. Entering unfamiliar diners and coffee shops with a sense of racial trepidation, Walton always finds himself pleasantly received and realizes with some amazement that in many ways, "Mississippi was much like any other place in the United States."

After a while, Walton accompanies each of his parents on return visits to their earliest homes, and these segments of "Mississippi" - especially his father's powerful recollection of precisely how and where a young friend had been gunned down by a cruel white lawman half a century earlier - are far and away the book's most unforgettable passages.

The author has read widely in the recent scholarly and journalistic literature on Mississippi, although his book, lacking both source notes and bibliography, gives no credit to the works on which he has relied. Still, "Mississippi" offers a largely error-free secondary account of the state's 19thand 20th-Century racial history, marred only by a few modest missteps. "Mississippi" also features a number of poetic interludes; one of Walton's past credits, though "Mississippi" makes no mention of it, is coediting a widely-reviewed collection of African-American poetry.

Walton voices a number of useful observations on the present-day South, but as the book proceeds, his tone becomes more and more despondent, reflecting a personal melancholy that appears to have predated his Mississippi explorations. Admitting to what he calls "a steady darkening of my outlook," Walton professes that the more he learned about Mississippi's pre-1970s treatment of black people, the more he came to see that history as "a net of ironies and sorrow from which I could not free myself." Turning away from the polite welcomes he received at Mississippi restaurants and tourist sights, Walton instead emphasizes how "there was too much that was unforgettable, unforgivable, for it ever to be a comfortable, 'normal' place."

Looking back with appropriate appreciation at how much each of his parents had overcome, he expresses shame at having known so little about their early lives. And thinking of himself, he rightly comments that "a person is infinitely more than what happens to him or her, the specific events and places of one lifetime."

But Walton's pose - "When I went to Mississippi, I was an American innocent" - is not only insufficient preparation for his book's bleak and occasionally overwrought closing epilogue; it also appears to contradict his self-presentation in his 1989 "Willie Horton" essay. There, he cited his own examples of the New York racial rebuffs thousands of black men regularly endure. Then he expressed how, his childhood and education notwithstanding, "I can see that racism has always been with me" and that because of it "I am often treated the same as a thug." As a result, he wrote, he is "dangerously disgruntled, perhaps irrevocably alienated from the country." Indeed, Walton confessed, he now believed he had been deceived by the "hoax" that America is "built upon the fundamentals of liberty and justice for all."

Last June, it was reported that a quarter-million-dollar advance had been paid for the forthcoming "autobiography" of Al Sharpton; Reverend Sharpton's coauthor, or ghostwriter, was announced as Anthony Walton. If so ("Mississippi" makes no mention of such a role), Walton's 1989 understanding of the concept of "hoax" ought to stand him in very good stead indeed.

Mississippians who encounter "Mississippi" might justifiably wonder whether Walton is attributing to his experiences in their state a world view that he may quite understandably have acquired in New York rather than in the South. Blacks and whites in today's America may indeed be "permanent strangers, doomed to gape and stare but not see, blind to each other as siblings, humans, Americans." Nevertheless, Walton's closing call to "embrace the ghosts and cradle the bones" of America's racial past would leave everyone - like Walton - focused more on the past than the present and the future.

GRAPHIC: Photo by Marion Post Wolcott / Library of Congress - Chopping cotton on a Mississippi plantation in 1940