
Books

American culture's original sin

Sarah Churchwell's new book is a 458-page indictment of *Gone with the Wind*. Frankly, should we give a damn?

By Adam Hochschild

Spend time talking with enough white American Southerners and you will soon hear that yes, slavery was regrettable, but the Civil War wasn't really about slavery; it was about states' rights and preserving a way of life. After all, did you know that many black troops fought for the South?

Travel through the former Confederacy and you will find restored plantation mansions – usually museums or resorts now – their magnolias, ballrooms, and white-pillared porticos conjuring up gracious women in long dresses and gallant men on horseback, peaceful stewards of a gentle, pastoral, now-vanished world. Republican politicians also speak of the old South in these terms. The former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley, now a presidential or vice-presidential hopeful, has declared that before white supremacists “hijacked” it, the Confederate flag was a noble symbol of “service, and sacrifice and heritage”.

The classic thousand-page expression of that imagined heritage is Margaret Mitchell's 1936 *Gone with the Wind*. According to a new study by the cultural historian Sarah Churchwell, it is the best-selling American novel of all time: more than 30 million copies in print, with 300,000 more still pouring out each year in many languages. The film adapted from it has reached even more people, and, taking inflation into account, is the highest-grossing movie of all time. At its 1939 premiere in Atlanta, the state of Georgia declared a



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holiday and 300,000 people watched the cast and crew – minus black members – parade down Peachtree Street.

“If *Gone with the Wind* is one of the most popular stories America has ever told about itself,” Churchwell writes, “then it matters that it is profoundly anti-democratic, and a moral horror show.” For her, the novel “provides a kind of skeleton key, unlocking America’s illusions”. The society whose destruction the story chronicles was, of course, based on slavery. At the novel’s end, the dream of its heroine, Scarlett O’Hara, to restore her plantation to its former grandeur certainly does not include sharing its ownership with the former slaves who will still presumably be needed to till the fields. “Ah done had nuff freedom,” one of them tells her. “Ah wants somebody ter feed me good vittles reg’lar, and tell me whut ter do an’ whut not ter do, an’ look affer me w’en Ah gits sick.”

Churchwell’s book-length prosecutorial brief against a novel more than 80 years old sometimes seems like a matter of beating a dead horse. But, she reminds us, the horse is not so dead, for a deep sense of white grievance is a driving force in the nation’s politics today. The battle over taking down statues of Confederate heroes during the last few years has been a bitter one. Many such memorials are still in place, and one of the invaders of the Capitol on 6 January 2021 paraded a Confederate flag through the building.

Gone with the Wind, Churchwell says, “records the creation myth of white victimhood in America”. It is no wonder that Donald Trump is a fan of the movie. (When, to his annoyance, the South Korean film *Parasite* won the Oscar for best picture, he asked, “Can we get, like, *Gone with the Wind* back, please?”) And even though Churchwell’s rage at the novel sometimes feels excessive, she is right to point out how significant it is that its principal characters “burn with hatred for the United States, and despise its government”.

Mitchell’s tale has long been a battleground. The novel, appallingly, won her the Pulitzer Prize in May 1937, but many black critics attacked it. Another round of controversy greeted the film two and a half years later, even though the producers built up the slave roles enough so that Hattie McDaniel, playing Mammy, Scarlett’s nurse, became the first black actor to win an Academy Award. (That evening, she was forced to sit at a table against the wall, away from the other cast members, because LA’s Ambassador Hotel, site of the ceremony, was segregated.) Attacks on *Gone with the Wind* over the years include the bestselling 2001 *The Wind Done Gone*, by the black novelist Alice Randall. It imagines some of the same events as seen through the eyes of a young slave woman who is the daughter, out of wedlock, of course, of Scarlett’s father and Mammy. Even though Randall did not use the names of Mitchell’s characters, the Mitchell estate sued her publisher.

Churchwell pores through the story of *Gone with the Wind*, pointing out the real history that Mitchell mythologised. For example, in one scene, Scarlett is assaulted by two men – one white, one black, but with the black man leading the attack – outside Atlanta’s sinister “Shantytown”, described by Mitchell as a “dirty, sordid cluster of discarded army tents and

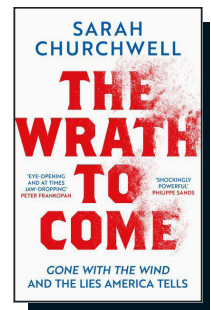
slave cabins”. Scarlett’s male friends form a lynch mob to dispose of the assailants, reinforcing the legend that black rapes of white women were common and had to be combatted. In the film, the principal attacker was the white man – one of many ways in which the novel’s blatant racism was sanitised. But neither novel nor movie explains that these shanty towns grew up in Southern cities after the Civil War because former slaves were searching for housing and work – and for protection by federal troops against the Ku Klux Klan.

Similarly, some of the plot turns on Scarlett’s struggle to pay what she sees as unfair taxes on the plantation. But what were these taxes? “Property taxes were raised on white Southerners after the war,” Churchwell writes, “partly to fund social programmes, including free education, but also as a means of weakening the white hold on the land and furthering black ownership. Poorer citizens, white and black, hoped that taxation would force white property onto the market and enable redistribution.” The Union general William Sherman had even promised freed slaves “forty acres and a mule” as his forces swept through Georgia.

Sadly, in one of America’s many betrayals of the newly liberated slaves, his promise was not kept. The short-lived Reconstruction period immediately after the war saw the beginnings of schooling for blacks, and black men elected to municipal, state and federal office (something which in the novel greatly appals Scarlett and her friends). But the Klan soon put an end to such office-holding, and the Compromise of 1877 – which settled the disputed 1876 presidential election – removed federal troops from the South and with them what remained of protection for black advances. White vigilantes murdered thousands of blacks – often around election day. They codified segregation with Jim Crow laws and for decades maintained a terrifying, steady drumbeat of lynchings, whose total often surpassed 100 a year. Few Southern blacks could go to the polls again until Congress passed the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

Significantly, the plot of *Gone with the Wind* ends in 1873, a mere eight years after the close of the Civil War. Those few years, when many Southern whites smarted both from losing the war and losing their slaves, saw the peak of their sense of victimhood. After that, in what they called “the Redemption”, they succeeded in pushing blacks back, not into outright slavery, but to the humiliating second-class citizenship whose heritage lingers so tenaciously today. *Gone with the Wind*, Churchwell writes, “endlessly transforms black suffering into white martyrdom”.

Her zeal to condemn the racism of the novel and of American society today is understandable, but sometimes careless. The country’s sins do not include “the perpetual imprisonment of a huge majority of America’s black male population”. Did she mean to say “huge proportion”? Nor was “the most famous fascist in America” in the 1930s the writer Lawrence Dennis; surely that dubious honour goes to Father Charles Coughlin with his vast radio audience. And, in preacher-like tones, she declares that for our racist sins, “a reckoning looms, at a scale we can’t assimilate”. One would hope so – but a definitive judgement day on this score seems far off. ▶



The Wrath to Come: *Gone with the Wind* and the Lies America Tells
Sarah Churchwell
Head of Zeus/
Bloomsbury,
458pp, £27.99

Hattie McDaniel, the first black actor to win an Academy Award, sat at her own table, because the Oscars ceremony was segregated

Why is the myth of the Lost Cause, the vision of the old South, so appealing, not just to white Southerners, but to other white Americans? And, judging from the novel's translation into everything from Latvian to Japanese, and the film's even larger global audience, to people in many other countries as well?

We feel loss keenly – more keenly, psychologists tell us, than never having had the lost thing in the first place. *Gone with the Wind*, both novel and film, arrived in a decade ravaged by the Great Depression and filled with people who had lost jobs, farms, businesses and a sense of a secure place in the world. The villains in the story – carpetbaggers, “uppity” blacks, Union soldiers – were safely distant in time but could easily be emotional stand-ins for ill-understood forces closer to home.

We live in a world today where some people are still losing: jobs disappear to automation or globalisation, women and people of colour compete for positions once effectively reserved for white men. Politicians are always eager to declare that your fall, or apparent fall, is someone else's fault. In the US, they used to do it in a coded way, like Ronald Reagan with his talk of “welfare queens”, and Bill Clinton with his “war on crime”. Now, with Trump and his blatant dislike of people with dark skin – and we Americans are still living in his era, even with him out of office – they do so more openly.

Such scapegoating has a long and sordid history. Hitler built his movement on the myth that Jews, pacifists and communists had stabbed Germany in the back in the First World War, depriving the nation of victory. It is surely no coincidence that he is reported to have watched the film of *Gone with the Wind* three times.

He is far from the only demagogue who has gained power by rallying his people behind the idea of what the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński called “the Great Yesterday”. Trump's slogan was “Make America Great Again”. The “again” is crucial. When examined carefully, of course, yesterday often turns out not to be so great. But for anyone living in a grubby and unstable present, the idea of a glorious past has enormous appeal. People of a different colour are moving into your neighbourhood, your son is gay, your daughter is non-binary and dyes her hair green, your wife earns more than you do, and your job itself is about to be offshored – but, by God, before all this happened there was once a time when the US was strong, and won its wars, and nobody pushed us around. Why can't things be like that again?

This is the grievance that Trump spoke to so brilliantly. We can hear similar echoes in Viktor Orbán's talk of a “Greater Hungary” and in Narendra Modi's evocation of an India before the Muslim invaders. And, in justifying his attempt to conquer Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has evoked Great Yesterdays from Kyivan Rus' to the empire of the Romanovs to the Stalin-era Soviet Union. One wonders if he, like Hitler, hasn't ordered up a few private screenings of *Gone with the Wind*. ●

Adam Hochschild's next book, “*American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis*”, will be published in October by Mariner Books

