

'Border South States': important commentary

With a dash of history, a smattering of sociology and psychology and a hint of political science, an author-analyst can convert common sense, personal impressions, research and a personal tour of an area into a highly credible and authoritative study of American politics and culture.

Neil Peirce, a Washington-based political writer and fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, combines these ingredients to produce *The Border South States*. This is a mammoth and captivating chronicle of the history, culture, and wheelings and dealings of Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee.

The Border South States is the latest in Peirce's series of books describing the states of the Union according to geographic and size groupings. Begun as a one-volume update and improvement of John Gunter's *Inside U.S.A.* (1947), the project has grown to include six published volumes and three more on the way.

Like Gunter, Peirce has toured every state to interview prominent and not-so-prominent citizens, to witness governments and individuals in action and to research extensively background material.

In *The Border South States*, he packs seven chapters (one for each state, plus an introductory overview to the entire region and a final chapter on the Tennessee Valley Authority) with minutiae, anecdote, public record, published accounts, interviews, innuendo, bibliographic references and personal impressions to create an authoritative and entertaining source-book on this buffer region between the Deep South and the industrialized North.

Peirce's treatment of North Carolina is both exciting and frustrating. It is exciting because, for an outsider, he shows much insight into Tar Heel politics and political trends. The Old North State is a land of paradox, he says; because it is the twelfth largest state in the Union in population, yet it lacks any major metropolitan development; because conservative Robert Morgan can be elected a U.S. Senator on his reputation as a consumer advocate and friend of blacks despite his speaker-ban and segregationist history; because North Carolina is a leader among Southern states in educational support while failing to provide adequate programs in health and welfare.

Peirce seems to understand the conservative posture of eastern North Carolina and the Leo Jenkins crowd, the fatherly yet progressive administrations of Luther Hodges and Terry Sanford, the death kiss of Nick Galifianakis's liberalism and the rise of Sen. Jesse Helms.

The frustrating part of his treatment is that the chapter on the Tar Heel state is the shortest of any chapter dealing with the individual states. And he allots only eleven pages to North Carolina politics—especially irritating because

books

by Cole C. Campbell
Editor

'The Border South States,' by Neal R. Peirce. W.W. Norton & C. (415 pages, \$12.95)

political analysis is one of his most obvious strengths.

The problems of Appalachia are at the heart of Peirce's book. Bound together by the mountains, the five states all suffer from the isolation-exploitation dilemma threatening both mountain and mountaineer. Isolation has kept intermarriage and interaction with "outlanders" low, so that certain backward traditions and widespread inadequacies in social welfare conditions persist.

Yet, as out-of-state companies and interstate highways have reduced the isolation of the area, the consequent exploitation of mineral resources and upsurge in tourism have left the mountains scarred and thousands of the inhabitants displaced.

Peirce's poignant quotations, anecdotes and statistics of social and environmental havoc dramatize the difficulty of improving conditions in a culturally and geographically remote region without diluting the culture and destroying the land. He points to some encouraging trends, such as the activism

of mountain groups dedicated to the preservation of mountain life and the economic stimulation (with some unfortunate environmental degradation) of the TVA. But it will take more than these tentative influences to salvage the stripped and scarred hill country.

Until the border south states tackle the problems of the mountains wholeheartedly, little optimism about the fate of the mountains and the mountain people can be justified. Peirce's illumination of the tragic dimensions of Appalachia's plight makes *The Border South States* an important commentary. It may well prove to be a decisive work if there is some constructive reaction from the leaders of the region.

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