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Big Muddy

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NOVELS

The Burning Season

Keepers of the Feast

NONFICTION

Judgment Day (with Bob Lancaster)

THE SOUTH

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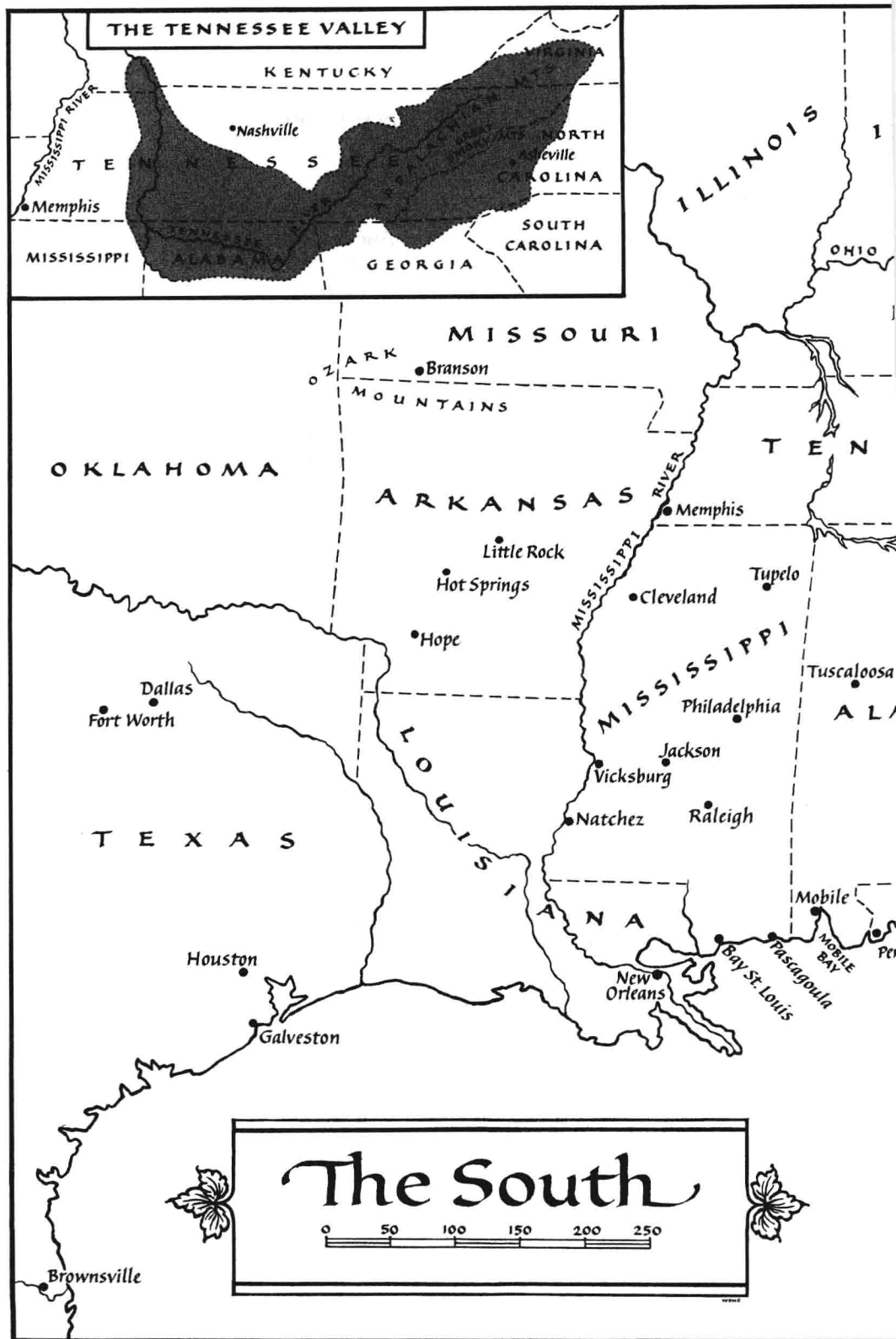
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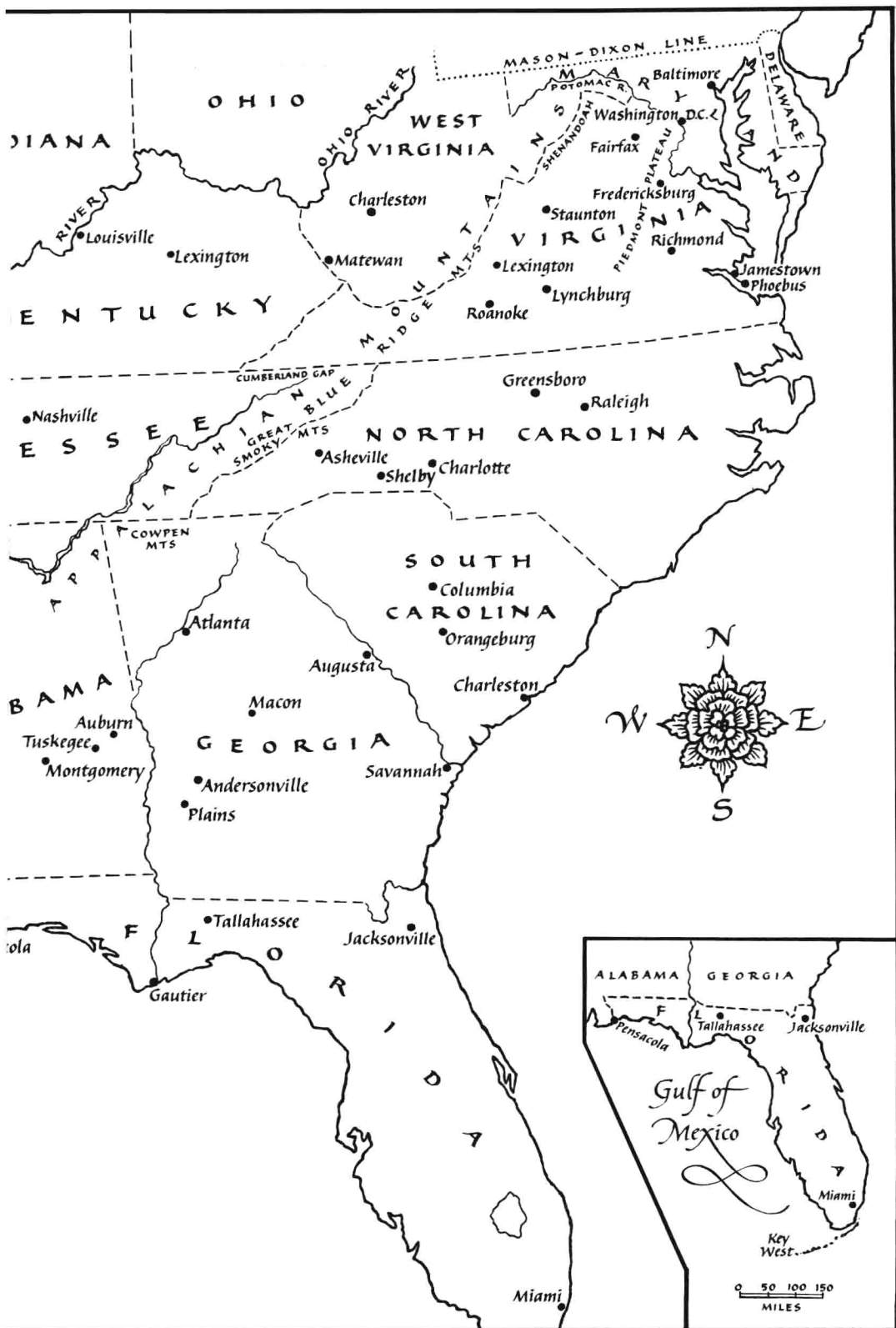
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INTRODUCTION

GATEWAYS TO THE SOUTH

AS TIME MOVES OVER the selvage of the millennium, America's South has had a life of some four centuries, and from the face of things—shining new cities, corporate fields, new social attitudes—the outside world may be thinking that the South is at last in the process of losing its identity as modernity imposes its will. Is the old sustaining, harrowing mythology about to give up the ghost?

The South has been such a stout entity in the world's imagination that any consideration of things "Southern" must begin with the question "What is the true nature of the South and does that nature still have a palpable existence?" To say that the South no longer exists would be to deny a cultural phenomenon that has been building up for twenty generations, and an influence that reaches now beyond the vague boundaries of the South into a good many parts of the American scene: transplanted Southerners still speak with syrupy drawls and practice Southern ways in parts of Delaware and Maryland; in the border regions of Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri; in the projects of most major cities; and even as far away as Brazil, where thousands of descendants of Civil War refugees still hold on to their Southern allegiance (even though they speak hardly a word of English). Therefore, telling people in Dixie today that there is no South would be tantamount to having them believe they don't love their mothers or indeed don't have mothers to love.

In understanding the South, it would be well to remember that *Gone With the Wind* is no more relevant than *Birth of a Nation* or *Cool*

Hand Luke. In the same vein, the works of William Faulkner are no more relevant than those of Shelby Foote or James Dickey. Each face of the South provides no more than a random piece of the jigsaw puzzle that is the South.

As travelers pass through any one of the many gateways into the South, they begin to encounter a flood of thoughts, ideas, passions, peculiarities, angles, emotions, all streaming from the Southern consciousness in no particular order. It's as if a magic dust has been thrown into their eyes, obscuring the true character of the Southern psyche. They are bombarded with themes that live in the same shadow of a blessed or blighted lineage. Their senses are flayed by the reverence for loyalty, by the power of evangelical hokum, by the irony of the white man's world still holding on in a world ever more populated by people of color, by the ever-waving banner of Southern pride. They won't have traveled far at all into the South before they discover firsthand that definitions here are hard to come by.

With the modern world's tendency to label, it may be that the real voice of the South is that of the singer. After all of the historians, sociologists, and ethnologists have had their say, perhaps the final say-so comes from arguably the South's finest muse, Thomas Wolfe, who, like many another distinct voice of the South, drew his inspiration from the old songs and anthems of the common folk that best reveal the nature of the land and its people: ". . . We seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When? O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again." The songs coming to the ears of those who travel through the gateways into the South form a bond, a linkage between the traveler and the South, its history, its people, its dreams. For the South is a concatenation of the souls of men and the land.

The first bonding was the most violent, the collision of continents some 600 million years ago when the present-day South was ocean floor. Not yet formed, the boundaries of the Deep South, of Virginia and the Carolinas, lay mired in troughs of mud and sand and fishy mass thousands of leagues deep. Florida was as sunken as Atlantis, as were Alabama and Georgia and even Tennessee. But nature was about to metamorphose up the Piedmont, the Blue Ridge, the Ozarks, the coasts, the Gulf, and dry out the Great Smokies, the Cumberlands, and the Appalachians, leaving the marshy Tidewater and letting nascent rivers fall down through borning plateaus to

push out embayments with the richest soil on earth. The frangible linkage of the South had commenced, but the concatenation would have to wait longer, until European civilization had pushed its precincts into the primitive tropical zones of America.

The gateways to the South today are as metaphoric as they are geographic, for the South was born of myth. This myth is embodied within the illusions of Sir Walter Scott, D. W. Griffith, and Margaret Mitchell, entrenched in the enigmatic and complex panorama of the modern South. One might compare the character of the South to random pointillism in a full array of prime colors and subliminal hues. Put it all on an outsized canvas and the resulting picture will give rise to as many interpretations of the South as there are beholders. No other region of America can be seen in such a way; it's what makes the South not exactly a nation within a nation but the closest thing to it.

Not just one mind of the South exists, but many, each with a distinct lyricism that creates a seemingly unconnected cacophony—a harsh, blaring racket that can delight or frighten or horrify. The heartbeat of the South, that blaring racket, determines the pace of social patterns, standards, thoughts, and relationships. In his classic book, *The Mind of the South*, published more than fifty years ago, W. J. Cash recognized that there were many Souths contained within the one. Cash captured the essence of the heartbeat—the paradox between the legend and the reality of the South's cultural fabric. Cash's brilliance in explaining this paradox came in his analysis of the Old South and the continuity between the old and the new. Cash's delineation of the Old South was based upon three historic legends:

- the existence of an aristocratic, Cavalier-spawned Southern gentry;
- the idea that slavery was inherently beneficial to the black race;
- the belief that the "Cause" espoused by the Confederacy was a just one.

By far W. J. Cash's greatest contribution to historiography and belles lettres was his concept of the Savage Ideal. As defined by Cash, the Savage Ideal was (and is) dogged resistance to change of any stripe, plus the sanguine determination to fight all challenges to the existing order. The Ideal had its beginnings in white supremacy,

demagoguery, and the off-center mentality of intolerance and racial hatred. It is a seemingly immutable theme, and as long as its roots exist in Southern soil, the South will exist.

Now half a century after Cash's landmark study, the question of the South's true nature remains. It is the purpose of this work to look at the South since Cash's day and to hear anew the conflicting lyricism rising from the South's class structure, psyche, and economy—to listen once more for the brazen racket of the Savage Ideal.

WE must all judge for ourselves whether the most recent "New South" is anything more than a mask. One has but to peel it from the collective face to see:

black farmers going it alone on the desolate Mississippi delta,
fighting the odds against corporate agri-giants to put some brothers
back on the soil;

gentle charity from feeling people feeding the homeless of all
races in mission houses and shelters and storefront churches;

the KKK opening its new international headquarters in a double-
wide trailer while skinheads and neo-Klanners try to rewrite the
civil rights movement with white supremacists the winners this time;

a new breed of environmental watchdogs, late in arriving but
coming now head-on at the spoilers with no quarter being asked
and none given;

smug, anachronistic, two-faced towns of the old Deep South,
once colorful and possessed of some character but now reduced
to the seduction of *Fortune* 500 barons to keep these new white-
flight capitals alive;

Indian tribes begging the government for some new lands and
just a few houses for the homeless exiles of the forgotten Trail of
Tears;

present-generation mega-heroes—rock stars, athletes, movie
idols—rising from relative deprivation to the heights and leaving
behind pity, compassion, and empathy;

new artists, writers, poets, and singers carrying on the traditions