

GWEN BRISTOW'S PLANTATION TRILOGY: INVOKING THE PAST TO COPE WITH
THE DEPRESSION-ERA PRESENT

by

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Chapter 1: Gwen Bristow, the Plantation Trilogy, and the Genre of the Historical Novel: Depicting the Past to Respond to the Present

Gwen Bristow's best sellers had all but disappeared from bookshelves, libraries, and the memories of American readers until just a few years ago when several of her more popular historical novels were reissued. The name Gwen Bristow, along with the other bestselling authors of other eras, was likened to names "on gravestones in an unfamiliar cemetery" which mean nothing to us (Jordison 1). The reprints feature glossy new covers and forewords by prominent contemporary historical fiction writers. These reprints represent the most popular of Bristow's novels and those most entertaining and accessible to modern audiences. Although some of Bristow's novels are now back in circulation, her most important work, a three-part series that would eventually be called *The Plantation Trilogy*, has been largely ignored by the publishing industry and scholars of today.

The limited attention given Bristow's trilogy is somewhat surprising. Of particular import are the ways in which Bristow uses the genre of the historical novel to further an agenda that gives insight into several important issues of her own time, the 1930s. Bristow sets her narratives in previous time periods in order to address the needs of the Great Depression era from a safe distance. She is specifically concerned with how people can and do cope with the Depression, how the South is defining itself culturally and regionally, and how the changing roles of women are informed by the ideology of Progressivism.

Bristow's life history provides an important avenue to understanding her novels. Gwen Bristow was born in Marion, South Carolina, in 1903. The daughter of a minister, she

was raised in various towns in the South and later graduated from Judson College in Alabama. Bristow reports that Judson College, originally called the Judson Female Institute, was a place to learn the classics and good manners (Bristow, *Self-Portrait* 3). The girls were referred to by their Christian names, but always with the prefix of “Miss.” Bristow seems to imply that the real lessons the girls were expected to learn was how to be “ladylike,” and her tone in the 1940 *Gwen Bristow: A Self-Portrait* is slightly derogatory, as if in looking back she doesn’t quite agree with the focus on “lady-like behavior” (5) She earned her degree from Judson in English and French in 1924. She remarks that it had “never occurred to her” that she would ever be anything but a writer, so upon graduation she moved to New York to enroll at the Pulitzer School of Journalism at Columbia University. Even though she had “precious little money,” she found ways to support herself during her year in New York (5). Bristow’s self-portrait reveals, at least as she saw herself, an enterprising and ambitious young woman determined to pursue a career at a time when that was not the norm. She stands out in her completion of college, her seeking of specific, professional training, and her supporting herself financially in a city far from home. When she had completed her year at the Pulitzer School, Bristow moved to New Orleans and worked as a reporter for the *Times-Picayune* from 1925-1934. During this time she met and married Bruce Manning, a journalist for a rival paper. She reports that she had “the time of [her] life” working as a newspaper reporter in New Orleans (6).

Although Bristow published a collection of poetry in 1926 titled *The Alien and Other Poems*, she had been concentrating her writing efforts on journalism. Plagued by a noisy neighbor, she and her husband jokingly plotted revenge. This fanciful way of coping with a

terrible neighbor became the first of four books, *The Invisible Host*, which she co-authored with her husband. Together they wrote and published four mystery novels for the Mystery League between 1930-1932, but it was the success of the first book that allowed them to quit their jobs and as Bristow says, settle into what they thought was the “literary life” (9). Even while writing collaboratively with her husband, Bristow continued to write novels of her own, but none of those were accepted for publication. When the Great Depression, which they had “heard of, but ignored,” suddenly hit them, Bristow went back to the *Times-Picayune* and her old desk, while her husband began to write for radio.

Though Bristow had made a living writing as a journalist and had published novels with her husband, her own novels, four at this point, had not been accepted for publication (10). It wasn't until they followed her husband's job to California, where his increased income allowed her to stop working outside the home, that she began to write the novels for which she is most associated, the historical romances. Bored and compelled to write, she began work on the first of what would later be called the Plantation Trilogy in 1934. The first novel, *Deep Summer*, was published in 1937, followed by *The Handsome Road* (1938) and *This Side of Glory* (1940).

While there is little biographical information about Gwen Bristow beyond the sketch offered above, several important factors emerge in what little there is available. First, Bristow is a kind of self-made woman: completing college, traveling to New York alone, seeking journalistic training, and working for a newspaper as a reporter who covered all manner and variety of “un-ladylike” things. Secondly, she and her husband were financially affected by the Depression, and her job was just as important as his in their financial recovery. Bristow

wrote her first successful novels in the idleness her husband's salary afforded her, but it is important to note that the idleness clearly didn't suit Bristow, a woman used to supporting herself.

The three novels that comprise the Plantation Trilogy follow two families, one rich and one poor, encompassing over 150 years. Set in Louisiana, near New Orleans, the trilogy begins just before the American Revolution and ends just after World War I. Bristow envisioned the trilogy as three separate stories that would be linked both through family lineages as well as through a shared purpose. She called the three novels the "seed, blossom, and harvest," which indicates the way in which we are to read them (Foreword, *Deep Summer* xi). She also asserts in the foreword to the first novel, *Deep Summer*, that the purpose of her writing the three novels was to understand and illustrate how Southern culture began and how it developed so that she might understand "how the modern South came into being" (xi).

Deep Summer begins the trilogy with Philip Larne coming to Louisiana in about 1774 with plans to conquer the wilderness and build a plantation on a land grant. On the trip down the river he meets Judith Sheramy and her family, who are also going to Louisiana to claim a grant. After encountering Philip several times along the river, Judith, who is every inch a Puritan, slips out in the night and elopes with Philip, a self-described pirate. Together they will, despite their contrasting viewpoints, establish a thriving plantation they name Ardeith. Judith and Philip have two sons, David and Christopher, and a daughter, Rita. Bristow uses their marriage, the Puritan to the Pirate, as a study in contrasts to illustrate the two very different viewpoints in the management of the plantation.

A secondary plot line follows Judith's brother Caleb as he meets, marries, and then chances upon the truth about Dolores Bondio. Upon discovering that Dolores is not who she said she was, Caleb turns her out, keeping their son Roger. Dolores in turn meets and marries Thad Upjohn, who is poor and uneducated, but honest. Dolores has several children, among them Gideon Upjohn, who appears at the very end of the novel. Bristow sets up a second set of contrasts, this time between the rich plantation owners and the "po' white trash" who inhabit Rattletrap Square (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 173). As Bristow says, this novel serves as the "seed," and in it she introduces the contrasts and concepts that will be explored in the next two novels. The most important seeds are those she sows in the final chapter that portend the agenda she will enact in the next two novels. In this first novel, which ends in 1810, Bristow sets up the contrasts between rich and poor; plants the idea of progress, revolution, and the pioneer spirit; and suggests the idea that some things like disease are leveling and indiscriminate across class lines, which themselves are fluid. It is these seeds that will blossom in *The Handsome Road*.

The second novel in the trilogy, *The Handsome Road*, begins in 1859 and continues the story of the Larnes and Sheramy families through the Civil War and Reconstruction. Bristow skips one generation in this continuation and further complicates the issues of class mobility, wealth, and poverty by following three descendants of the Sheramy and Larnes families. The great-grandson of Philip Larne, Denis Larnes, marries Ann Sheramy, the great-granddaughter from Dolores's first marriage to Caleb. Ann has lived a life of privilege and wealth and will continue to do so as she marries into the Larnes family. To further complicate matters, the parallel story follows Dolores's great-granddaughter from her second

marriage, Corrie May Upjohn. Even though Ann and Corrie are direct descendants of the same woman, their lives could not be more different. Bristow uses these two women to explore the seeds she planted in the first book; questions of heritage, wealth, poverty, and class mobility are prominent as the women reverse roles each time their fortunes change.

The two women's paths cross repeatedly. In the beginning, Ann has everything and Corrie May has nothing. Corrie May refuses to marry because she aspires to be something more than a tenant farmer's wife. When circumstances require it, Corrie May is enterprising enough to seek work sewing for Ann Sheramy. She spends several days each week at the plantation doing the fine sewing, but is not treated well because she is considered "po' white trash" (Bristow, *Handsome Road* 38). Bristow contrasts the plantation life with the life of a tenant farmer and with the life of the urban poor.

The Civil War changes the circumstances of both women. Ann's husband Denis is killed in the war and Corrie May (for helping her beau desert) spends the last years of the war in jail. When the war is over, their positions reverse and Ann loses almost all of her financial wealth, just barely hanging on to the plantation. Corrie May allies herself with a Yankee carpetbagger and finds herself with fine clothes and living in a luxurious house. Bristow plays these two women against each other over and over again, making them, then breaking them. By the end of the novel, Corrie May has lost everything again and Ann's wealth is increasing, but the novel ends on a hopeful note as Corrie May supports herself and sends her (illegitimate) son to school. Ann's son is raised according to traditions of the South and Corrie May's is raised with the strength to create new traditions.

The final novel, *This Side of Glory*, merges the descendants of the two families in marriage during the years just before and during World War I. Wedding Eleanor Upjohn to Kester Larne conjoins two very different viewpoints and classes allowing Bristow to explore issues pertinent to her own time in a clever way. Kester Larne becomes the immediate representative of all that is “old” about the South; he is labeled a Southerner. Eleanor is associated with all that is “new” and calls herself an American (Bristow, *This Side* 24). Bristow writes in the Foreword to *This Side of Glory*, “[t]hese types of people exist not only in the American South. You can find them in any place where an old order is changing into a new order, which in our time means just about everywhere. They do not agree – they can’t – but they need each other” (vii). This statement embodies the harvest that Bristow is seeking in this final novel. Bristow uses the text to illustrate both how and why neither the Old order nor the New order can exist without the other. She makes Eleanor and Kester representatives of the two sides and depicts them in ways that balance one to the other, the Old to the New. In the end, when it appears that the couple will divorce and the Old and the New cannot be reconciled, they come together in an understanding that together, through their children they have preserved the best of both their worlds. They have preserved the “impractical idealism” of the Old South and the “savage strength” of the New South (278).

Bristow’s choice of the historical novel genre is deliberate and appropriate to her purpose. Her use of the historical novel as a platform for her exploration allows her to make a realistic, but not necessarily factual appraisal of the South as it was and as it is in the 1930s. While the novels do offer a sense of hope and compromise, and lessons in survival, they are first and foremost entertaining. Employing this genre allows Bristow a strategy to explore the

ways in which the South and its myths formed, and also a way to present her conclusions about not only the Old South, but also the evolution of a New South that was emerging in the 1930s.

While other scholarship might be helpful in interpreting Bristow's work, an understanding of the historical novel as a genre may be the most important interpretive tool available. Gwen Bristow began writing her Plantation Trilogy in 1934 on the heels of the Progressive Era during the Great Depression. Both the Progressive Era and the Great Depression inform and shape the novels in important ways, weaving hope and optimism with a kind of mediation between the two sides. Those whose nostalgia for the Old South holds them back and those who propose unfettered progress and industrialization towards a New South. This mediation results in a compromise of sorts between the Old and the New that Bristow advocates for both the nation and the South. Using the historical genre as a platform from which she can inquire into the issues of the Depression, the economic future of the South and the nation, and the changing roles of women, allows her to do this probing from a safe distance. This detachment allows the reader to empathize with the characters and situations through a defused lens that lessens the urgency of the situations depicted. Bristow's story is crafted around issues pertinent to readers in the 1930s, yet the stories are not overtly didactic.

Traditionally, historical novels have been used as a way to attempt to understand the present by looking closely at the past. Most historical fiction can be divided into one of two categories. Historical novels are either costume dramas with fictional characters and events in a historical setting or factual, accurate stories about a historical figure or event (Byrd 26).

Bristow's work falls firmly in the realm of costume drama, which gives her the license to create a world that is realistic though not expressly factual. This distinction will be particularly important in the discussion of the ways in which Bristow promotes Progressivism in the last novel and the ways in which she appropriates technologies and attitudes of her own time and situates them anachronistically in the past to further her own agenda. Strict adherence to dates and facts is not required in the type of saga of which the Plantation Trilogy is an example, but adherence to the major tenets of Literary Realism is mandatory.

According to Sarah L. Johnson's definition of a saga as a sub-genre of the historical novel that focuses on family and domestic life, presenting a multi-generational and linear story, we can assert that characters are given import over events (179). Johnson states that sagas allow readers to become "emotionally invested" in the characters and allow readers to "see how changing times affect the characters' lives" (179). Bristow's saga is centered on characters and the social and economic effects of the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War I on them. Bristow's focus on the characters and their reactions to crises allows her to create anachronisms that do not burst the bubble of our belief but instead reinforce the ideas she is putting forth through her characters.

According to Georg Lukacs in *The Historical Novel*, a real historical novel is one "which brings the past close to us and allows us to experience its real and true being"; it must also have a "felt relationship to the present" (53). Furthermore, Lukacs asserts that this relationship consists not only in alluding to the contemporary events, "but [also] in bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present, in giving poetic life to those historical, social

and human forces which, in the course of a long evolution, have made our own present-day life what it is as we experience it” (53). In order to bring her readers “close to the past,” Bristow employs what Max Byrd calls “the bridge and the telescope” (Byrd 29). The bridge, a character with whom we can identify, acts as a means by which the reader travels back to the past. The bridge character is also one of the ways in which the reader finds answers and solutions to real problems through fiction. The telescope, as you might expect, is a way of seeing things, both as they were and as they are, presented through the bridge character.

The “bridge” characters from each narrative illustrate the ways in which Bristow is using the genre of historical fiction as a means of understanding the South as it was and as it is in the 1930s. By always assigning the “bridge” to women, Bristow further explores the changing roles of women in the 1930s while forcing readers to connect with and see the world through their eyes. Bristow uses the “bridge” characters to go beyond mere allusion to major events in her time such as poverty, class mobility, the changing roles of women, and Progressivism. These bridge characters bring to life the events of history creating what Lukacs calls “the felt relationship to the present” (Lukacs 53). In particular, Bristow uses the “bridge” characters to explore pertinent contemporary (to the 1930s) issues of class, gender, and Progressivism.

In the first novel *Deep Summer*, the “bridge” characters are Judith (Sheramy) Larnes and Dolores (Bondio Sheramy) Upjohn. Bristow carefully begins her exploration of the issues of class and the changing roles of women by using as “bridge” characters women from two distinctly different backgrounds and classes. Judith Larnes is a descendant of New England Puritans, young, naive, smart, and virtuous. Judith marries Philip Larnes, who is

experienced, cunning, and dashing. Together they revamp the rules, carve out an empire, and quickly attain wealth. They move from a flatboat, to a bug-ridden cabin, to a modest house, to a looming plantation home in the span of about twenty years. Judith shares in the wealth of the plantation in unprecedented ways. For example, she is able to write her own bank drafts on the plantation accounts. She rides a horse out to quell a slave uprising, she fires a gun, and she kills a slave. Judith is given a kind of power and agency that other lesser women characters shrink from and she wields her power in generally diplomatic ways.

Bristow weds a Puritan to a Pirate in an effort to establish the pattern of contrasts she will employ as an effort to highlight certain Depression-era social issues. Judith, for example, prioritizes the payment of debt while Philip prioritizes the purchase of more slaves. Judith advocates fixing the leaky roof before it rains again, while Philip puts off the repair because it isn't raining at that time. Bristow repeatedly employs a study in contrast to present both sides of the same issue.

As a "bridge" character Judith represents a certain class of women, but she was not born into the plantation class. Because she is introduced as a young woman, we are privy to her development from a farmer's daughter to a woman and the matriarch of Ardeith. When Judith initially appears, she is still a child, unsure of herself and lacking in confidence. Her first night in Louisiana she "feels out of place," but before dinner she is transformed in appearance by a slave girl who laces her tightly and gives her an "extravagant coiffure" (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 24-25). When Philip calls for her that night, she agrees to leave with him. Since she cannot put her hair back as the slave had arranged it, she wore it loose as she was "unwilling to pin it in somber braids again" (26). Bristow uses this rather

sudden transformation as the means to introduce the idea that both identity and class are fluid and malleable.

Although Judith's transition from Puritan farmer's daughter to plantation mistress appears seamless, her early life on the plantation is not without hardships. Through Judith's eyes we experience the travails of pioneer life from leaky roofs, to giving birth in a bed full of ants, to blazing and unbearable heat. Bristow employs Judith as a "bridge" because the pioneering woman is easy to identify with because of her guileless and genuine concern for others, her practical nature, and later her ability to take care of the plantation. It is Judith's observations about life, society, and culture that reinforce Bristow's connection between the past and her present. It is through Judith's remarks and thoughts that Bristow begins to plant the seeds of progress and an attitude of embracing change. Judith states that she feels a sense of adventure, as if they might be "on the verge of a revolution" when they begin to shift their crops away from indigo, which she then labels a "relic" (224). After a few years of growing sugar cane and cotton for greater profits, Judith concludes that only those "shiftless folks too stupid or lazy" had continued to grow indigo (225). In one sentence Bristow makes clear that in order to be productive and prosperous, one must not only change with the times, but embrace innovations such as the cotton gin. When a young couple build a small house on a large plot, Judith's remark is that it is "gratifyingly indicative of the spirit that seems to animate everybody of their generation" (235).

In the final chapters of *Deep Summer* the Larnes undertake the building of a new plantation house because the original house is "out of date" and they can hear the "clamor of progress" outside as well as inside (226-27). Judith wistfully remembers the spirit with which

she and Philip began to carve out their empire and notes that the spirit is “too strong to be halted” (227). On the eve of the Louisiana Purchase she notes that they live in a country “whose byword was change” (227) and she labels them Americans for the first time.

In obvious contrast to Judith is Dolores, a Cuban barmaid who lives in New Orleans with an alcoholic aunt who beats her for being “uppity” (95). When Caleb Shramy (Judith’s brother) meets her, she spins a yarn about her background, thinking he is merely flirting and that she will not see him again. However, upon learning that Caleb has a plantation upriver, she sees an opportunity to escape her life in New Orleans and encourages his advances. Besides being a means of escaping her poverty and her abusive aunt, her deception is fueled by the fact that she believes that she can learn to “be a good wife” (95). Marrying Caleb is also an opportunity to elevate her social status. As Dolores says, in her imperfect English, she will “bring nothing [to the wedding]. I want to have all your people my people” (82). While this is a practical move on Dolores’s part since she fabricated a family in Cuba that she cannot produce, it is also an authentic expression of her desire to be accepted and included by Caleb’s “people,” who are of a different class than she. Despite Dolores’s continuing deception, what she says is indicative of her belief and Bristow’s that people can move fluidly from class to class.

Dolores as a “bridge” character serves to connect the reader to both sides of the issue of class mobility. Despite Dolores’s fabrications, once married, she is eager, almost overly so, to please Caleb, to learn to cook for him, and keep house as Judith does. She says she wants to be a “good wife to Caleb, so he will not be sorry” that he married her (85). Dolores’s credibility as a “bridge” character is hard won. While the reader may identify with her

earnest desires to change her class status, her means (effectively manipulating a man into marriage with lies) damages her initial credibility. Bristow deals with this issue in two ways. First she makes it clear that despite Dolores's deception she tries very hard to learn the housekeeping, cooking, and dress emulating the "ways of mannerly people" and their speech (90). Secondly, Bristow introduces an unattractive rigid intolerance in Caleb and his father, which evokes pity for Dolores when the truth about her past is revealed. Once the truth is discovered, Dolores remarks that she "did not think it [the deception] was so awful. I did so bad want to be quality" (95).

Bristow offers us two "bridge" characters who are remarkably different. Judith becomes genteel, cultured, strong, the matriarch of a family. To identify with Dolores means getting to the core of who she becomes too. When Caleb turns her out while saying he will lend support, her first reaction is to refuse his charity and take care of herself. Dolores proves herself resourceful first finding a room, then bargaining for a better price, and finally enlisting the help of Thad Upjohn to act as a buffer between herself and other men. These are all things of which Judith and the other ladies of the plantations would not be capable. Dolores recalls that all she wanted was to be "decent" and she can't quite figure out what she did wrong. Then she finds herself telling her story to Thad "without embellishments" and finds it a "relief to be talking about herself with complete honesty" (127). This marks a turning point for Dolores, who will eventually marry Thad Upjohn and live an honest life, working hard to help support her family.

Bristow makes it clear that Dolores is really no different than any other character; her initial lies, which one might argue were innocent enough, simply caught up with her. Dolores

doesn't master the trappings of the plantation class fast enough perhaps, but ultimately it is her past that catches up to her. When Judith, in conversation with Philip, questions Dolores's authenticity noting that she doesn't seem to understand the etiquette of entertaining, she uses as an example Dolores's ignorance of the use of a double saucer. Judith remarks that perhaps they don't have the same kinds of tea services in Cuba. Philip shrewdly points out that she didn't know about double saucers either when she first married into the plantation class. Judith replies that she comes from "ordinary farmers" who never made "pretenses of elegance" (87). While this comment literally means that Judith thinks it odd that Dolores, who claims to come from Cuban royalty, would not know about something she thinks a universal point of etiquette, it has a second meaning. The exchange between Judith and Philip also serves to highlight Judith's class mobility as well and introduces the idea that Judith and Dolores are more similar than different.

Bristow uses these two women from different backgrounds and in entirely diverse circumstances to plant the seeds of class consciousness and set in motion the parallel plots that will, in the second novel, allow her to interrogate ideas of class, wealth, women, and Progress. Bristow creates a connection to the women that crosses and blurs class lines for readers. Neither character is without flaws and neither without virtues. Bristow interweaves the fates of these two women to emphasize that class as marked by wealth is ruled by arbitrary conventions and customs and thus, is fluid. Bristow makes clear that both characters are still essentially the same when stripped of the trappings of class. As Dolores says during her confrontation with Caleb, "You liked me yesterday! I am the same as I was then!" (95). In a more obvious effort to make the women equals Bristow introduces yellow fever into the

plot as a leveling agent which first kills Dolores's daughter, then strikes Judith's son, before claiming Dolores herself.

Through these two characters Bristow plants the seeds that will then blossom in the second novel. Judith and Dolores as "bridge" characters allow the reader to identify with various aspects of the two women's personalities, whether it is Dolores's desire for a better life or Judith's generous and unsolicited support of Dolores and her family in later years. By allowing her readers to connect to the past, Bristow can then introduce issues of her own time in ways that make, as Lukacs says, history "the prehistory of the present" (Lukacs 53). The first novel serves only to plant the seeds of class consciousness, and interweave the two families' lives, so that Bristow might truly address the issues of the Depression in the second novel in a more direct way that emphasizes class tensions.

In the second novel, *The Handsome Road*, Judith's and Dolores's descendants Ann Sheramy Larnes and Corrie May Upjohn act as the "bridge" characters. Bristow continues her exploration of class and wealth, but she complicates things further by examining gender roles as well. The novel begins just before the Civil War and is built on a series of contrasts between both people of different class and various places. The contrasts serve to emphasize the surface differences between the plantation rich and the working poor.

The novel begins with Corrie May refusing Budge Foster's proposal of marriage because she is going to "be somebody" (Bristow, *Handsome Road* 37). Ann Sheramy is newly married, after much thought, to Denis Larnes. Both women seriously consider the implications of the marriage proposals, Corrie May refusing because she doesn't want to be a tenant farmer's wife and Ann accepting because she realizes the life of a plantation mistress

is an easy life. After Corrie May's brothers die of yellow fever she, rather than take charity, seeks work at the plantation Ardeith. Ann hires her to sew for her several days a week. Bristow alternates viewpoints between Ann and Corrie May to allow us to see the same scenes from both perspectives. In the midst of the war, Ann's husband is killed and Corrie May goes to jail for aiding Budge Foster's desertion from the army. During this time, both women lose almost everything; however, Corrie May leaves jail hopeful, while Ann manages the plantation alone and without much hope of success.

During Reconstruction, the women change roles as Ann has nothing and Corrie May, aligned with a carpetbagger, has everything. Bristow wants us to identify with both characters and therefore they have both virtues and flaws. They are equal parts admirable and repulsive. Bristow uses the war to level people and Reconstruction to rebuild them. By reversing the fortunes of the two women, she is able to highlight an issue of importance to her audience: the ability to start over, to rebuild yourself and your wealth, and the agency of women to make those things happen independent of men.

In the final novel of the trilogy, *This Side of Glory*, Bristow harvests all the crops she planted in the first novel and tended in the second. Wedding Eleanor Upjohn, a descendant of Dolores to Kester Larnes, a descendant of Judith, Bristow offers a resolution of sorts to the class tensions introduced in *The Handsome Road*. Eleanor Upjohn Larnes serves as the sole "bridge" character in this final novel and is an exemplar of the type of womanhood Bristow is championing. As a "bridge" character, Eleanor also promotes an agenda of Progressivism as well as a means of coping with the Depression that highlights the role of women in furthering that progress.

In this final novel, Bristow moves beyond her examination of just class to interrogate wealth, debt, and Progress. Again, Bristow uses stark contrasts; this time between characters' attitudes about money and debt to further her agenda. The contrasts between Eleanor's solid middle-class values and Kester's nonchalant attitudes about money and debt serve Bristow's endorsement of Progressivism.

Eleanor marries Kester despite her father's warning about Kester's class of people being "too blue blooded to work" (Bristow, *This Side* 3). Kester marries Eleanor despite his family's objections that she is too "common" and "not one of us" (25-26). Their attitudes about money, work, and debt are shaped by their backgrounds and the contrasts are instructive. Eleanor is college-educated and has worked for her father, who is a self-made man who lives without debt and with money in the bank. In contrast, while Kester is college-educated, he has never worked, relying instead on the income of the plantation, which isn't enough to cover the multiple mortgages. When Eleanor discovers that the plantation has been mortgaged and the bank is threatening to foreclose unless they pay the almost \$100,000 owed, the differences in their reactions are enlightening. Bristow uses their separate responses to outline a plan as to what one should do in such a situation. Eleanor plans a trip to the bank to discuss the matter, while Kester refuses to break a dinner engagement in order to take care of his business. After Eleanor secures an extension on the loan, her approach is to make a plan for payment, to cut back on spending, to do the work themselves, and to improve the yield of the cotton crop. Kester continues to buy extravagant and frivolous gifts and throw lavish parties, though he does work halfheartedly with her in managing the crops.

Identifying with Eleanor aligns us with pride, self-reliance, perseverance, and hard work. Kester's attitudes about money and debt are irresponsible and self-destructive. Eleanor's plan is one of rejuvenation, of Progress. To get out of debt, the plantation must produce more cotton; to produce more cotton, improvements must be made. When cotton prices fall at the outset of World War I, Eleanor speculates and makes deals to get a good price; Kester runs away when it gets hard (and boring) by joining the army.

While her husband is absent, Eleanor works hard both physically and mentally and with each success she makes improvements to the plantation. She first purchases tractors, cultivators, and trucks to increase productivity and efficiency. When her crops are successful, she begins improvements on the plantation house by adding plumbing, electric lights, an electric stove, and a washing machine (179). In Eleanor's hands the plantation is not only debt-free, but prosperous. Eleanor sets the example specifically for how to handle massive debt and what to do when the bank threatens foreclosure, but she also offers general hope that by improving and embracing Progress one can, with hard work, reverse your situation.

In each novel, Bristow's bridge characters are women of two distinct classes, thus suggesting that she believes that the hope for the future and the means to understand the past are in the hands of the women of America. Using Lukacs' framework as a guide, it is important to note that the "bridge" characters only take us back in time, they do not do the work of explaining how those past lives and times are the precursors to the present. Bristow enacts an agenda of using the "bridge" characters to first make us sensitive to various issues, then to explore those issues, and finally to make clear that there are solutions at hand.

Each novel presents a variety of issues, some unique to one text and some a common thread woven into the trilogy as a whole. Bristow sets the first novel in the wilderness of what will become Louisiana and she appropriately offers the pioneering spirit as an exemplar of what it takes to succeed. Other primary concerns of the novel deal with class mobility and fluidity, rural poverty, charity, and pride. Bristow takes us to a time when the pioneering spirit was necessary and as such makes clear that the spirit of the pioneer is necessary again in the 1930s. In the second book, Bristow continues to examine class mobility and rural poverty, but she complicates it and makes it relevant to readers of the 1930s by creating a cycle of losing wealth and gaining wealth in unpredictable patterns. The final novel moves away from the deep disparity between the wealth of the plantation and the rural poverty to examine an emerging middle-class that works its way up through hard work and prudent saving.

The historical trends of the 1930s and the above-mentioned “issues” of her times are important, but also important is an understanding of the historical trends of the hundred-plus years of Southern life she portrays in the trilogy. The first novel in the trilogy begins just before the American Revolution when New Orleans, the only town of any size, is a Spanish territory. The territory had long been under French control, but when it came under Spanish control starting in 1762, little changed for the some 6,000 white inhabitants of New Orleans and the settlements along the Mississippi River (Alden 119). The inhabitants were not loyal to the Spanish; however, the Spanish did not demand allegiance from the citizens since they held the territory as a means of bargaining with England and later the United States. In 1784, the Spanish closed the Mississippi River in an effort to force negotiations, which affected the

shipping of goods down river to the gulf, but the Spanish rule was otherwise uneventful. A secret treaty in 1800 returns the lands to the French, who then sell them in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. What is important about frequently changing sovereignty is that the people of New Orleans and the surrounding area find themselves without a label, without identity. This search for an identity is both important in the historical context of the novel and later in the 1930s as the South struggles to label and define itself. Bristow taps into this sense of confusion over what the people of New Orleans should call themselves and to whom they should show allegiance. The issue of Southern identity is highlighted from the very first chapters of the trilogy when Caleb identifies himself as “not really English . . . American” while living in West Florida, which is considered an English territory (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 75). He identifies as American even as the American Revolution is just beginning and Dolores identifies as Cuban. Other characters identify as Creole, or English, or Spanish, but Bristow calls for a label more inclusive that brings people together instead of dividing them.

The second novel, *The Handsome Road*, begins just before the Civil War and continues through Reconstruction. Again, Bristow uses the issues of the historical past to make connections to her own time. Specifically, she harnessed the “fiery spirits” of the South as they begin to rebuild after the war as a way to understand the reactions to the effects of the Depression (Coulter 18). Although the South’s heaviest damages in the aftermath were in both spirit and property, Coulter suggests most Southerners reacted with what has come to be identified as a particular brand of Southern optimism (18). Though the years of Reconstruction are typically rendered in a negative light, those years were also a time of renewal and innovation. It was actually quite fortunate that the South was predominantly

agricultural as the war didn't damage the land nor preclude Southerners from planting and producing crops immediately after the Surrender (19). The South, particularly Louisiana, was then able to develop their own means of processing their cotton and manufacturing cotton cloth in local cotton mills. These Southern cotton mills were the result of "Southern initiative" and were financed by "Southern capital" (268). The burgeoning cotton mills marked a moving away from a strictly agricultural way of life, but more importantly they marked a willingness to embrace new ways of life heretofore not considered by the plantation class. Although Bristow does not incorporate the cotton mill into the novels, she does promote a kind of "Southern initiative" whereby the old ways are discarded for the new. Particularly the introduction of and skeptical reception of the sugar mill and the cotton gin in the final pages of the first novel set up this embrace of innovation that Bristow is trying to further. Moving beyond the South, Bristow offers the same solutions for the nation at large during the Depression. In this novel, she stresses the importance of taking the initiative, embracing new ways of doing things, and investing capital in unproven methods.

Finally, in the third novel Bristow works to mediate the two reactions that really did occur during the years just before, during, and following World War I, but remained relevant into the Depression era. The quickening pace of change was inescapable during the war years and there were two reactions: either a defensive reaction to the new and unfamiliar changes or an embracing of the changes as an escape from cultural and economic poverty (Tindall, *The Emergence* ix). Thus, Progressivism in the South was "traditionalistic," "individualistic," and "set in a socially conservation milieu" (7). George Brown Tindall argues that Progressivism in the South was founded on the aspiration of the middle-income groups who

could both own and develop productive property, a kind of hybrid capitalist-laborer (6). Bristow highlights this attitude in the final novel when Eleanor, whose background is middle-class, enacts the tenets of Progressivism after a taste of true prosperity. Eleanor's initial taste of prosperity lends momentum to her further developing the plantation using the latest agricultural and industrial advances. Bristow tempers what might at first seem like rampant hand-over-fist spending, by imbuing Eleanor with a financial sensibility when debt is discharged before making additional purchases that makes clear her spending is responsible not profligate.

Bristow remarks in the final lines of the Foreword to *Deep Summer*, “[a]ll this is over now. But what we have today is the result of it. What people *did* is always important if we want to understand what they *do*” (xii). The Plantation Trilogy relies heavily on the power of the historical fiction genre to build bridges between the past and the present to create understanding. Her readers, utilizing that bridge, are offered both hope and solutions to common issues of the Depression.

Although it might seem that a trilogy of historical novels written over eighty years ago would be sorely out of date with modern readers, the themes Bristow develops over the course of the narratives are more apropos than ever. Throughout the trilogy Bristow champions the underdog, the innovator, the pioneer, finally labeling them “American” in the last novel. She offers hope in the stories of both the wealthy families who lose it all only to struggle back to financial success and the poor families who literally start with nothing but work their way up to middle-class. To the problems of failing wealth, poverty, and homelessness, Bristow offers the solutions of pride, hard work, and innovation.

Chapter 2: The Plantation Trilogy as a Response to the Great Depression

Gwen Bristow's Plantation Trilogy offers a strategic response to the stresses of life during the Great Depression in 1930s' America. Bristow's organization of the three novels as "seed, blossom, and harvest" is a useful platform from which to launch a conversation about how the three books outline the problems of the Depression, explore those issues in depth, and finally offer suggestions for moving beyond the Depression. This chapter will examine only the first two novels, the seed and the blossom, because the third book which serves as the harvest is best explored alone. While the third novel builds on the spirit of the Progressive Era to offer solutions for moving forward into the future and beyond the Depression, the first two novels focus solely on the problems of the Depression. Bristow uses the first in the series, *Deep Summer*, to outline the major issues of the 1930s. Although the primary physical concerns are food, shelter, and clothing, other important issues focus on self-esteem and pride, financial security, disintegrating families, and the desperate measures some were forced to adopt to survive. In *The Handsome Road* Bristow, Bristow focuses on issues surrounding food, clothing, and housing as she explores the devastation of financial ruin. Although the second novel also shows the beginnings of the recovery and stresses that financial ruin could happen to anyone, it does not offer solutions to any of the myriad problems of the Great Depression.

Gwen Bristow was certainly not the only producer of cultural products during the 1930s to offer solace to Americans. The goal of this chapter is to analyze the ways in which

Bristow uses a historical lens to buffer the realities of the Great Depression, especially food, clothing, and housing. Much of the popular culture of the 1930s focused on the social effects of the Depression and attempted to address Americans' concerns and perhaps allay their fears by offering "hope and energy" in a time that was fraught with fear and uncertainty (Tindall, *America* 1027). Best-selling fiction was only one of many popular media outlets of the period that aimed to alleviate the downcast mood of the nation. The general feeling about popular culture of the 1930s is that it was specifically trying to offer an "escape" from the "grim realities" and that it was all intended for "pure entertainment" (1044-45). Many records of the decade offer the "screwball comedies," violence-ridden gangster films, animated cartoons, musicals, and monster movies as evidence of the escapist or entertainment aspect of popular culture of that era (1045). Throw into that mix Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Mae West, and W.C. Fields and it might seem as if entertainment was the only objective. However, some critics contemporary to the 1930s thought Hollywood fraudulent in its depictions of both rural and urban everyday life. They argued that films such as *State Fair* (1933) in which a Midwestern farmer's only concern is whether his hog will win the state fair, offered only a distraction from things that needed to be faced (Eldridge 67).

David Eldridge cautions against dismissing all popular entertainment as escapism. Eldridge notes that recent criticism of the films of the 1930s turns the idea of escapism upside down. In fact, current film studies of the era dismiss the notion of "escape" and instead embrace the idea of the films as "mirror images of modern society, or vehicles for film-makers who used humorous or fantastic genres to deliver 'messages' that would have

provoked controversy if placed in a contemporary, realistic setting” (68). Obviously popular culture can serve as both an escape and a vehicle for a message, and it is within this context that Bristow’s trilogy should be studied. Using the historical settings of the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War I allows Bristow “to deliver ‘messages’” without provoking controversy (68).

Although Bristow’s fiction may at first glance seem like mere entertainment, closer readings reveal an underlying agenda intended to mitigate the uncertainty many Americans must have felt during the Depression. In that vein, the essays in *American Cinema of the 1930s: Themes and Variations* de-emphasize the idea of escapism in 1930s popular media completely. Ina Rae Hark argues in the Introduction that Hollywood began making films during the Depression that attempted to displace the fears and uncertainties of Americans (2). Much like Bristow’s use of the genre of the historical novel as a way to create a lens that allows readers to view the issues indirectly, Hollywood produced movies that confronted the realities of the Depression “obliquely,” so that concerns were “transported to other climes and other eras more often than anchored in a contemporary setting” (2). For example, of the ten films that won the best picture category of the Academy Awards between 1930 and 1939, seven were set in the past. Using settings that ranged from eighteenth-century Tahiti and the high seas, to the Oklahoma territory in the mid-nineteenth century, to the relatively recent World War I, films allowed viewers to escape their worries for a time, but underlying this surface escapism were examinations of pertinent issues for viewers.

A survey of the best-selling books lists of the *New York Times* finds the same trends in popular fiction. A myriad of novels were either set in other countries or in the previous

century. Significantly, several novels are authored by Southern writers and set during the Civil War and Reconstruction; those include *Gone with the Wind* (1936), *Lamb in His Bosom* (1933), and *So Red the Rose* (1934). Transporting characters back in time whether in film or fiction removes the reader or viewer from the immediacy of the message, but the message is there nonetheless. In addition to using historical settings, films also used bridge characters to allow viewers to identify with a particular figure. A perfect example of this technique is the film *Cimarron* (1931). Adapted from a novel by Edna Ferber, it is set during the days of the Oklahoma territories and not only offers viewers a bridge to the past but also a message to women in the present who have been deserted by their husbands. While at first it seems the main character is Yancey (the male lead), it is in fact his wife Serba. After they settle in Osage, Oklahoma, Serba is abandoned by Yancey. Yet, she manages not only to survive but to thrive by running his newspaper, working to improve the city, and finally being elected to Congress at the end of the film.

Besides the use of historical settings, a common theme of Hollywood movies of the 1930s was that of “radical transformation” that totally altered a character’s existence (2). These transformations tended to result in characters losing everything or having it taken from them. A good example of this plot device is the film *It Happened One Night* (1934). The main character Ellie, a wealthy heiress, runs away from home and finds herself penniless and dependent on the generosity of strangers. The film serves as an illustration of the capriciousness of wealth, showing how Hollywood, in not so subtle tones, bolstered the morale of American moviegoers by offering characters with whom they could identify. Even gangsters and shysters were presented by Hollywood as having worked hard only to have

everything “capriciously ripped away” or as a hero “slick and clever enough to beat the system” (12-13). Thus, despite the economic hard times record numbers of people went to the movies during the 1930s (26). In the year 1933 some sixty percent of the population (about 70 million people) went to the movies once a week (Tindall, *America* 1045).

Similarly, readers sought out novels, and the bestseller lists reveal trends toward Southern writers, historical novels set in the South during the Civil War, and novels by women. One advertisement for Bristow’s *The Handsome Road* boasts that “18, 218 readers have taken the road to sheer enjoyment” (Display ad 116). Although 18, 218 is a far cry from the 70 million people attending movies each week, it is easy to imagine the books being passed hand to hand as family and friends shared one copy.

The novels of Gwen Bristow’s Plantation Trilogy spent numerous weeks on the bestselling book lists of eight major cities. Though it was most widely read in the South (in New Orleans, Atlanta, and St. Louis), it made appearances on the bestselling book lists of New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington, Chicago and San Francisco. Combined, the novels spent 29 weeks on the bestselling book lists in 1937-1938. Without a doubt the Plantation Trilogy was popular and widely read, a pattern which makes it the perfect platform from which Bristow can both enumerate the myriad issues of her time and offer solutions to those issues. Under the guise of mere entertainment the novels provoke no controversy, but embedded in the plot is a confrontation of the key problems her contemporaries were likely facing.

The advertisements for Bristow’s novels, published most notably in the *New York Times*, represent the attitude in which popular culture was presented to potential audiences

both rural and urban and highlights the use of the bridge character. One advertisement for *The Handsome Road* (1938) encourages readers to “take the handsome road to entertainment” because it is “one sure way to a grand time!” (Display Ad 67 and 116). These ads seem to suggest a savvy campaign to reach readers by implying that a novel could serve as both an escape and a message. A second newspaper advertisement from September 28, 1938, touts Bristow’s second novel as a “rich novel of Louisiana...the story of Corrie May Upjohn of Rattletrap Square, who finally walked ‘the handsome road’” (Display Ad 159). This ad implies much more through omission than it says outright. *The Handsome Road* is a novel of two women—Ann and Corrie May—to whom Bristow gives equal treatment, but the ad focuses only on Corrie May. Although both women are bridge characters, this focus on the one character who starts with nothing and gains everything is indicative of one way in which popular fiction and films were presented in the 1930s as a message of hope.

As purveyors of comfort and hope, the three novels follow two families and their descendants and vividly chronicle their waxing and waning wealth and the ways in which they deal with the financial challenges confronting them. The story spans a broad swath of history from before the American Revolution to just past World War I, and Bristow is careful to emphasize the effects of natural disasters, social change, and political upheaval on both the wealthy and the poor. The novels are fraught with anxieties about money from both the wealthy class and the “poor white trash.” Those anxieties and the accompanying fear reflect in great detail the ways in which people felt during the Depression (Tindall, *America* 1027). Always at issue are the ways in which people of various classes aspire to wealth—attain,

maintain, and view it. Using the lens of the past allows Bristow to develop themes of survival and perseverance that offer hope and encouragement to Depression-era readers.

Bristow does continually offer hope in the midst of her characters' seemingly hopeless states, and their stories are clearly anchored in a kind of hopefulness that is indicative of the optimism and the pioneering spirit that is frequently attributed to Americans. Bristow's characters are, like those created by Hollywood, frequently "radically transformed," by the losing and gaining of fortunes. This scenario would have been familiar to most Depression-era readers. The major stresses of the Depression are quite simply centered around having or being "less": jobless, homeless, penniless and hopeless. However, Bristow offers an optimistic view that those states are reversible. Other social hardships of the time included absent fathers and husbands, hungry children, financial insecurity and uncertainty, distrust and fear. Even as late as 1939 the hardship continued, as 9.5 million (about 17%) were still unemployed (1038). This continued hardship led desperate people to desperate measures, and petty theft, street corner begging, and prostitution were common (1039).

Bristow's *Deep Summer* (1937) serves as an outline of the central issues facing Americans in the 1930s. It is this seed that she will plant and then bring to fruition in the second novel. In the novel, Bristow recalls the pioneering spirit that is so connected with Americans and their subsequent belief in the American Dream. It calls on that spirit and illustrates, using the story of Judith and Philip Larnes, the possibility of starting with nothing only to carve out a niche to find success and wealth and to follow and realize the American Dream. In his book *American Culture in the 1930s*, David Eldridge acknowledges that

“different people experienced the consequences of the Depression with different intensity, and...economic difficulties did not entirely define their existence” (4). Bristow primarily uses the trilogy to highlight the ways in which different people, in this case a wealthy family and a poor family, react to financial and social adversity, illustrating too the pursuit and interpretation of the American Dream by both classes. Though the Larnes family has few financial worries in the novel, Bristow uses their story to vilify debt and promote the embrace of modern innovations to increase productivity. In the same novel, through the story of Dolores Upjohn, Bristow explores petty thievery, charity, pride, hunger, eviction, and potential homelessness but also the Upjohn’s pursuit of the American Dream. Though Dolores’s family is in perpetual hardship, Bristow instills them with pride, resilience, and resourcefulness, and their lives are ultimately better because of it. Even though they aren’t successful by some measures, they survive which is far more important.

Bristow introduces in this first story two recurring themes or “messages” that would likely speak to the readers of the 1930s. She emphatically endorses the American Dream and the possibilities it implies, and she shows that survival is possible. *Deep Summer* serves to outline the many issues confronting the people of her time, but it also lays the foundation upon which the second novel will stand. *Deep Summer* introduces characters whose lives the readers can identify with and who then act as the bridge between the fictional past and the realities of the present.

Through the story of the two families Bristow explores the pursuit of the American Dream and the attitudes and habits necessary to realize it. At the core of the American Dream is the idea that one can start with nothing, at the bottom, then work ones way up. Bristow

develops this belief in full in the first novel as a reminder of an American's inalienable right to work hard toward the fulfillment of the American Dream.

Although the idea of the American Dream has its roots at the United States' inception, it has been reinterpreted with each generation. The Declaration of Independence guarantees the *freedom* to pursue prosperity and success, but it does not guarantee the prosperity and success. In 1931 James Truslow Adams published a book called *The Epic of America* in which he articulates his version of the American dream appropriate to those times. Adams defines the American Dream this way: "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement," and this ideal applies to all Americans regardless of their circumstances of birth or their social class (415). Adams's reinterpretation reflects attitudes that are rooted in the prosperous 1920s but embodies an optimism necessary and appropriate to the early part of the new decade when financial problems abound. For Adams, Progress still promises a better life. The key to Adams's reinterpretation is the verb phrase "should be." Life should be better in the 1930s, especially following such a prosperous decade as the 1920s. Bristow addresses the idea of what "should be" true for Americans during the 1930s in the first novel, but she also acknowledges the realities of what "is" the reality for most during the Depression.

Bristow uses the Larnes family to illustrate the desirable or expected state of a family in the 1930s, and through their story she asserts her vision of what is required to be a financial success. Bristow's interpretation of the American Dream is anchored in the pioneering spirit of America and a belief that life can be better for everyone. Bristow uses the Larnes's improving housing as a measure of their success, but she is careful to make clear

that to move forward everyone must work hard and endure hardships. For Bristow, the realization of the American Dream is rooted in hard work, patience, and prudence. The Larnes family of *Deep Summer* literally starts with nothing by way of infrastructure in the backwoods of Louisiana, and through hard work and perseverance they build a “dynasty” embodied by their plantation, which they name Ardeith (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 17). Judith and Philip Larnes realize the American Dream, as defined by James, as their lives are “better and richer and fuller” than before (Adams 415).

Bristow uses Philip to illustrate the achievement of the American Dream as measurable through a succession of bigger and more luxurious houses. Before Judith and Philip are married, he has only a land grant and a flat boat full of smuggled slaves. Philip, second son of a North Carolina planter, has no inheritance. He admits to being a “good for nothing” as the second son, but he has always dreamed of being a planter (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 15). When he discovers that he can get a land grant for his service in the French and Indian War, he takes advantage of the offer, but he doesn’t have the money to buy plows, or slaves, or anything else necessary to begin a life in Louisiana. With a group of like-minded men, Philip takes to the sea to intercept ships bound for the Carolina coast. In order to finance his dreams of building a plantation, his piracy appropriates the goods that the “older sons...bought but didn’t need” (16). He remarks that when he noticed the lack of resources, he “went out and got what I had to have” (16). Philip notes that everything he has is stolen, but that it is ““only about as much as my patrimony might have been were I not punished for the crime of having been born later than my brother”” (16). Philip justifies his thievery and piracy by viewing it as his entitlement. Philip’s comments serve to highlight the fact that

sometimes the circumstances of life are dictated by tradition or necessity, neither what is expected nor what is deserved.

Philip's attitude of entitlement is quickly discarded. When he takes possession of the 3,000 acres and begins to build the plantation, he also discards his attitude of getting or taking what he needs, instead investing in himself and the plantation through hard work. Philip shifts, as a landowner, to someone who understands that despite the tradition of inheritance he can earn the position that his brother inherited. Philip is the incarnation of the rags-to-riches story, a man who begins with nothing, works hard, and achieves success.

Bristow allows the characters to revamp the rules and endorses Philip's efforts to change his fortune, but only reluctantly endorses the means by which he does so. Philip promises Judith that he is, despite his past, willing to keep all the Ten Commandments "for her sake" (15). Philip acknowledges that he has indeed broken the commandments before, but only as a means to an end. The end for Philip is the dynasty he envisions creating from the plot of land, a young wife, and perseverance. Bristow's text seems to condone Philip's piracy in this context, only as it is conducted as a "Robin Hood"-type enterprise of taking from the landed, older brother and "giving" it to the landless, younger brother. Bristow allows Philip to take only what he needs, no more. She tempers the piracy with Philip's pledge to live by Judith's standards.

The ability to afford increasingly better housing has long been a sign of achievement in regards to the American Dream. Philip's success is measured by his house, and though he outlines for Judith his dreams for Ardeith (the plantation), all he has is 3,000 undeveloped acres. Still, he envisions a manor made of clay and moss, with a "double line of oaks"

leading to the door and a dynasty that they create together (16-17). The manor house is just a dream, so he hastily builds a cabin to offer shelter to Judith, who finally agrees to marry him. From the flatboat to the leaky-roofed cabin, Judith and Philip begin to realize their dreams of a grand house and financial success.

After the journey downriver, Judith's family prepares to spend time with friends in a grand house. Judith doesn't even spend one night there before Philip comes for her, and they elope in the night. From the primitive accommodations of the flatboat they move into an equally primitive cabin. Judith's first six weeks in the cabin are during May and June, and she suffers horribly from the unexpected heat. The cabin, just four walls with holes for windows, is built of un-chinked logs that allow the sun to push through. With the kitchen fire close at hand and no way to escape the heat, Judith watches the progress of the men building the house of moss. Judith silently laments that Philip couldn't wait until "he had a house fit for a woman to live in" (28-29). Although she doesn't initially complain, she later thinks of the cabin as a "hovel" (29).

Months later, Judith goes into labor on a rainy night. The difficulty of labor is exacerbated by the rain pouring through the leaky roof and saturating the bed. Drones of ants and flying cockroaches seek refuge in the relative dryness of the cabin. The biting ants and cockroaches harass her until dawn, when their son is born. After the child is born, Philip plasters the cracks in the walls, but even so he cannot tolerate the thought of Judith and David living in such conditions. He deems the cabin unfit to live in and sends them to a friend's home until the moss house is finished. When the house is finished, Philip comes for Judith and the child and remarks that the new house is "'not a castle...but fit to live in'" (64).

The moss house is “shining, bright pink...behind a white gallery” with three entrances and sixteen rooms (66). The windows are real glass and the dining room table will seat over 20 people (67). It is described as opulent and “a palace” (67). In just a year’s time the Larneses have moved from a flatboat where both dishes and clothes were washed in the river to the one-room, bug-infested and leaky cabin to the pink moss house described as a palace (67). With this very rapid ascension from hovel to palace, Bristow makes clear to the reader that hard work, patience, and endurance are all that is needed to achieve the American Dream, clearly a timely message to readers of the 1930s.

The pink moss house is completed in 1775. Twenty-five years later, at the turn of the century they begin work on the cypress house, which will be the final physical embodiment of the dynasty that is Ardeith and the Larnes’s manifestation of the American Dream. This final house is the product of both financial prudence and the embrace of Progress. As the plantation grows and becomes more successful, Judith is given unprecedented access to their finances. Not only is she able to write bank drafts on their accounts, but she is privy to all aspects of their financial situation. In more than one scene, Bristow allows Judith not only an opinion about their finances but also the ability to voice it in the discussion. In the area of finance, Philip comes to represent the attitudes of the 1920s, a kind of unchecked prosperity governed only by his own desires. Judith, however, represents the 1930s as she exercises caution and advocates staying out of debt and reinvesting in their own plantation. Judith’s attitudes about money further highlight Bristow’s attitudes about what “should be” and how to achieve success during the 1930s. Judith becomes Bristow’s mouthpiece in regards to finances.

Using Judith and Philip's contrasting attitudes about money is Bristow's way of making a point about the choices people of her time have to make concerning money, debt, and expenditure. In one scene, Philip wants to use the profits from the indigo crop to buy more slaves, arguing that the next crop can be even bigger and more profitable if he has more slaves. Judith disagrees and "insists" Philip pay the debt for a parcel of land first because "debt is shameful" (71). Although Ardeith is a large plantation that has generated considerable wealth, it is ultimately a farm that relies on crop yields for its success. This concern for crop yield and debt reflects a key issue that faced farmers in Bristow's time. Many farmers in the 1920s were affected by an agricultural depression and in an effort to make farming viable again borrowed large sums to finance the mechanization of their farms (Eldridge 3). In the 1930s, these same farmers who were deeply in debt were foreclosed on "at the rate of 20,000 a month" (3). Both characters advocate spending money in ways that readers can relate to, especially during the 1930s. Bristow allows readers to see both sides, but she comes down on the Judith's side advocating the payment of debt before reinvestment in the plantation.

Bristow uses this same contrast several more times in the novel, pitting Philip's profligacy against Judith's practicality and prudence. These scenes play out as not just commentary on the issues of her time, but as advice for people struggling financially. For instance, Judith prioritizes the purchase of supplies to keep the house free of bugs, and Philip prioritizes the purchase of fancy French wines for parties (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 68). Although the Larnes family is relatively wealthy, Bristow uses them as the model for responsible spending and money management endorsing a debt-free lifestyle that is modest

and in many ways frugal. Judith draws on her Puritan background and remembers the hardships they endured in the first few years of their marriage, never losing sight of what it was like to have less. Despite their growing wealth, she finds balance in ways that Philip cannot. For Depression-era readers, Bristow's affirmation of Judith's methods sends a message about money management.

Bristow also endorses Judith and Philip's pioneering as another way of changing the rules. In order for them to find success in their new environment, revamping all the rules is necessary, and it is this advice that Bristow offers her readers for surviving the 1930s. When Judith arrives in the town of Dalroy that will be her new home, she expects to find the mores and ethics, the dress and religion of New England transplanted there as brought by the inhabitants. Instead she finds somewhere in the river they have crossed a line between her staid and stolid New England and this new land of infinite possibility. She notes that the "rules of New England...had no meaning under the river sun" and concludes that nobody could bring New England to Louisiana (20-21). Judith plainly voices the attitude that in order to thrive in this new environment, she must leave behind her old beliefs and change the rules to fit her new circumstances. Bristow uses the voice of Judith to introduce the idea that in order to both survive and thrive, one must adapt, even if it means overhauling the rules. To survive in this new environment whether it is moving to a smaller house, sharing a home with relatives, or migrating from Oklahoma to California, the things that won't work in the new environment must be abandoned.

In the final chapters of *Deep Summer*, Bristow introduces the idea of Progress as a means of moving beyond the hard times but also a means of preventing stagnation. Though

the Larnes family has suffered few hardships, they recognize that with the turn of the century and the sale of Louisiana in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 their plantation could become less prosperous unless they too change with the times. Ardeith is the first plantation to grow and mill sugarcane, and the first to own a cotton gin. David, the oldest son, has brought these new inventions to the plantation, so they understand the need for change, but the turn of the century along with becoming Americans brings a new attitude and the “clamor of progress” (227). This embrace of change and progress is a further revamping of the rules. Clearly, Bristow recommends not only accepting change but also seeking it out in order to move forward.

Through the Larnes family Bristow endorses technological Progress as a means to increase wealth. Innovations and improvements, when incorporated into an existing operation without incurring debt, will increase productivity. At the end of the novel, the Larnes family begins to plan for the future, deeming the old house “out of date” (227). Judith admits that it would be so easy to just “go so far and no further and relax among...what they had already attained” (227). Judith acknowledges that the “spirit with which [they] had gone into the wilderness was too strong to be halted” (227). Even though the 1930s was a time of financial hardship, it was also a time of great change. Judith remarks that the country’s “byword was change,” and it had “no respect for relics,” implying that in order to continue to improve one must embrace the changes (227). The Larnes family represents the way things “should be,” but the realities of the Depression make it difficult if not impossible for everyone to achieve these dreams. For those that cannot succeed, they must seek at least to survive.

Bristow carefully balances her illustration of what “should be” with a depiction of what “is.” She is careful to present give both sides equal treatment, but she makes clear that readers are to come away having learned the lessons she is teaching. If Judith and Philip represent what “should be,” then Dolores Upjohn and her family depict what “is.” Bristow uses the Upjohn family to depict and explore life on the other side of success, the world in which survival is the goal.

Bristow utilizes Dolores and her family to reflect the realities of the Depression for those who were out of work, homeless, and suffering in extreme poverty. Initially, Dolores marries Caleb Sheramy, Judith’s brother, but lies about her background. Upon learning that Dolores is not who she said she was, Caleb turns her out, offering to support her but denying her access to her son. Dolores’s story is at first full of hope as she marries into a higher class, but it descends quickly into chaos as she is turned out to fend for herself. This sense of hope that descends into chaos and uncertainty echoes the transition between the 1920s and the 1930s. Bristow barely avoids making Dolores a caricature of the down-and-out, and she does this by giving Dolores a stubborn pride, resourcefulness, and a determination to survive.

Bristow employs Dolores to outline key problems that many Americans were facing in the 1930s. One major issue during the Depression was the abandonment of wives and children by men who were out of work. A study conducted in 1940 revealed that 1.5 million husbands left home and deserted their wives (Tindall, *America* 1038). Bristow creates a broken family and an abandoned wife in the separation of Dolores and Caleb that mirrors the realities of 1930s America. When Caleb seeks and succeeds in having Dolores declared an unfit mother and the court prohibits her from seeing her son, Dolores, effectively abandoned,

steals money and silver from the Larneses, who have sheltered her during the court proceedings. She commits petty thievery to avoid more solicitous kindness from the Larneses, but she later feels some guilt for stealing. Alone in a strange town, she vows to make her own way instead of taking charity and feels a sense of triumph over Judith and her ilk when she realizes that she is resourceful enough to find a room and negotiate the price when they wouldn't know what to do in that situation.

Like many during the Depression who found themselves without a home or job, Dolores finds herself with few options. In addition to a feeling that none of the choices available to her are very good ones, she suffers from a particularly bad case of low morale. Bristow, without overdoing it, makes Dolores a representative of all those women and men who were jobless, homeless, and without prospects during the 1930s. Dolores represents the one-third of the nation that President Roosevelt identified as “ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished” in his second inaugural address on January 20, 1937 (qtd. in Lowitt and Beasley xvii).

Gary Dean Best, in his book *Nickel and Dime Decade: American Popular Culture During the 1930s*, summarizes the 1938 studies of unemployment conducted by Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld, noting that those who were unemployed passed through three stages: optimism, pessimism, then fatalism or resignation (Best x). Dolores's options echo the three stages identified in the study. Her first and most optimistic option is to return to New Orleans and hope her aunt will take her in again. The next and more pessimistic alternative is to sell fruit on the docks, which frequently leads to women prostituting themselves. The final course of action is the most resigned and fatalistic and one she doesn't contemplate for long.

Although she does acknowledge the possibility of jumping in the river below the wharf where there won't be anyone to save her, she does not truly consider suicide. Bristow allows Dolores to contemplate these options as a way to make clear the limited number of possibilities that a woman would have in her situation.

Together Dolores and Thad represent the reality of what "is" for the 25 percent or 13 million American who were unemployed by 1933 (Tindall, *America* 1022). Of those 13 million, 1.2 million were also homeless (1022). Though the statistics are grim, Bristow also uses Dolores and Thad to explore the recurring theme of survival. When families of the 1930s were forced to prioritize their needs due to shrinking wages and higher prices, housewives were the primary jugglers of budgets as they attempted to keep their families in food, housing, and clothing (Best 123). Dolores recognizes those three categories as their basic needs and resourcefully arranges for them to be fulfilled after a chance meeting in a tavern. Thad Upjohn is uneducated, but good-natured, and though he is able-bodied, he is basically helpless as he can't find work. He resorts to sleeping on the docks and until Dolores buys his dinner, he has not eaten in three days (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 113). Thad is the voice of the many able-bodied men who can't find work. He says, "It ain't so easy getting along these times" because there is no work (124). Dolores and Thad agree to stay together. Dolores offers to support them with the little bit of money she stole, mend his clothes, and cook for them until he finds a job. Dolores realizes that together are they protected, but alone they are vulnerable. Bristow uses this exchange between Dolores and Thad to highlight the major concerns of families during the Depression and to give voice to those who were unemployed and homeless.

Bristow imbues Dolores with a stubborn pride and resilience that is clearly understood to be a factor in her survival. Though she is clearly poor, she is proud and refuses help from Judith repeatedly over the years. Periodically, Judith sends a servant with word about Roger (her son) and an offer of help; each time the servant returns to say that although Dolores lives poorly she “insisted that she needed nothing” (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 172). Similarly, David Kennedy reports that many recipients of Depression-era relief efforts felt that the programs that distributed food and clothing were degrading (172). Bristow allows Dolores to refuse all kinds of relief and highlights her stubborn pride.

Many years later, when Judith and Dolores meet again, it is in Dolores’s home in Rattletrap Square. Judith is shocked at the squalor; her face is “distorted with horror” at the sights out the carriage window (172). The shanties are close together and pigs and chickens wander around rooting in garbage, the piles of which are black with flies (173). This image recalls something quite similar to the so-called Hooverilles of the 1930s. Described as “squalid settlements” that popped up across the country, the Hooverilles housed many of the more than 500,000 Americans who lost their homes or farms during the Depression (Tindall, *America* 1022). Despite living in such conditions, Dolores insists, “I don’t want for nothing. Thad makes a living on the docks” (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 175). As Judith returns home, she is haunted by what she saw there and can’t believe there is anything “so awful in the world” (176). She wonders aloud what they had done to deserve that life. Philip answers, “What does anybody do to deserve anything?” (177).

Through this scene Bristow validates those who have, by no fault of their own, ended up in poverty. By acknowledging the plight of the homeless or those who are living on the

fringes of society, Bristow acknowledges the large numbers of her contemporaries who, despite doing everything right, lost it all. Along those lines, the winter of 1932-1933 was marked by increasingly higher unemployment and according to Tindall “panic struck the banking system” (Tindall, *America* 1025). Many banks collapsed during this time, and people rushed to withdraw their savings. Some found themselves too late so that the bank collapse took their savings with it. Others simply found themselves short of cash. Just as the Hoover administration ended, nearly four-fifths of the banks were closed (1025). Although Bristow’s plot doesn’t reflect an actual event that correlates with the bank collapse of the Depression, it captures the feeling of helplessness that people were experiencing when banks failed taking their hard-earned savings with them. The Stock Market crash and the subsequent bank failures were brought on by “reckless speculator[s]” and “gamblers” playing the real estate and stock market not the “average Joe” who frequently lost both savings and homes (1013). Lorena Hickok in her letters to Harry L. Hopkins says, “The great majority of these people [those on relief] are here through no fault of their own” (Lowitt and Beasley 45). The average citizen was blameless in the crash yet suffered the most, with depositors losing \$7 billion dollars between 1929 and 1933 (Kennedy 162-63). Bristow introduces the idea of blamelessness and reiterates that no one who suffers in poverty did anything to deserve it.

When Dolores dies in a yellow fever outbreak, the plot begins to follow her son Gideon, who is working the docks. As a child he sold bananas on the wharf, echoing the trend of selling apples on street corners during the Depression. As an adult he is essentially a day laborer who never knows if he will have work the next day or not. In this situation he feels “so tired and powerless against the universe” (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 240). Gideon’s

situation reflects the reality of many day laborers during the Depression. Hickok reports repeatedly that the unskilled worker has little hope of finding work in areas where crops have failed and relief work projects and funds are both limited and finite (Lowitt and Beasley 41). Esther, Gideon's girlfriend, sells fruit on the docks too until they are married. Then she stays home in a single rented room cooking, washing, and caring for the babies. Gideon and Esther become the voice of those out of work and homeless.

When Gideon (having replaced Dolores as a focal character) is out of work, Esther seeks a grocer who will throw in an onion with the purchase of a bag of rice. Desperate to feed the family, she finds there is nothing extra being offered and their situation is grim. Although Esther is described as a "good wife" who cooks, cleans, washes, and mends, some nights they go without supper. Esther develops a look of someone "seeing forty years all at once instead of just one day at a time," and she begins to remark on her social position in comparison to the plantation owners she sees in town (Bristow, *Deep Summer* 247). When asked how they are doing, Gideon always replies, "'Oh, we're doing fine, fine,' because he couldn't bear to have folks know anything else of him" (247). Gideon thinks that "the shame more than hunger" hurt him and watching his child grow thin made him "feel terrible" (247). Esther and Gideon both lose their self-esteem, she because she can't cook for the family or keep the house clean and he because he can't provide monetary support.

Gary Dean Best argues that humans have two basic psychological needs: self-esteem and social status (xii). During the Great Depression, the unemployed were sometimes viewed with contempt or disgust by others and over time began to feel inferior (xii). Lorena Hickok's reports, which vary from state to state, offer evidence of Best's assertions. Although the

relief agencies administered aid differently from state to state, the attitude from relief workers and local government that “there is something wrong with a man who can’t make a living” was consistent (Lowitt and Beasley 67). Hand in hand with this attitude that those applying for relief were “undeserving” or “bums” is their own apathy and hopelessness. Hickok describes heads of family initially refusing to ask for relief and then, when they finally accept it, losing all hope of ever living any other way (6). Others refused to take relief payments but were willing to work for the relief to avoid more damage to their self-esteem. Because so many were unemployed during the 1930s, Best argues that many lost their self-esteem and social position, a situation which fueled the insecurities that were already inherent in the decade (xi). Bristow’s portrayal of Gideon clearly aligns with this pattern.

The Handsome Road

The Handsome Road is the blossom or fruit of the seeds Bristow planted in *Deep Summer*. The issues of food, housing, and clothing are further explored in this novel through a series of pairings that serve to highlight the differences between rich and poor. Bristow complicates this examination first by overlapping the stories of Ann and Corrie May and secondly by reversing their fortunes twice, so that each returns to her original state after experiencing the other side for a time. Bristow abandons her depictions of what “should be” in favor of amplifying what “is.” *The Handsome Road* operates as a mirror reflecting the realities of many Americans’ lives during the Great Depression, but it also serves to strategically offer hope to readers.

Bristow began writing the trilogy in 1934 shortly after Franklin D. Roosevelt took office. The year 1933 marked the highest unemployment rate ever recorded and, although relief efforts were finally being administered, it was in many cases too little relief, too late. Lorena Hickok reports that people were feeling “discouraged” (Lowitt and Beasley, Introduction x). When Roosevelt took the oath of the office in 1933, he took on too the concerns of the nation and began immediately to take measures to alleviate the fears that had pervaded the nation in the final days of Hoover’s presidency. Roosevelt and his New Deal sought to overhaul the economy, revive the agricultural sector, and most importantly relieve the suffering of millions of Americans who were homeless, jobless, and hopeless. Roosevelt enacted a three-part strategy, the combined effects of which restored “hope and energy to a nation paralyzed by fear and uncertainty” (Tindall, *America* 1027). Bristow too employs a strategy intended to restore hope and energy to her readers through characters who can bridge the gap between past and present and further development of the theme of survival.

Although Bristow introduces some of the divisions between the classes and the problems of the 1930s in the first book, it is the second novel which illustrates in great detail the ways in which people were and are affected when there are great social and financial shifts in society. The second novel in the trilogy, *The Handsome Road*, is set during the Civil War and Reconstruction in Louisiana. The circumstances of many people during the 1930s mirror in significant ways the circumstances of people in the South during Reconstruction. Reconstruction in the South uprooted and overturned all the traditions of the region, making it necessary to start again and re-establish routines and procedures that had, before the war, been givens. Reconstruction presumably made equal both rich and poor, and in many ways

the Depression did the same thing. Bristow capitalizes on the similarities between conditions during Reconstruction and the Depression particularly the ways in which fortunes were lost and regained and perhaps lost again. Through the eyes of both Corrie May and Ann readers experience the flux of finances and the accompanying anxiety that surround either trying to keep a fortune or trying to gain one.

David Kennedy in *Freedom From Fear* remarks that the Depression “was not just a passing crisis but an episode that revealed deeply rooted structural inequities in American society” (168). Bristow uses this novel to give voice to the feelings of helplessness that arise out of such inequities, but also to reiterate that fortune can change suddenly and class is fluid. The overlapping stories of Ann and Corrie May are studies in contrasts that highlight the inequalities of class, but also serve to examine in depth the three most widespread issues of the Depression: food, housing, and clothing.

Bristow employs Corrie May’s crack-pot father’s proselytizing to introduce the inequalities between the rich and the poor. Old Man Upjohn’s tirade begins: ““Some folks got too much and others ain’t got enough”” (Bristow, *The Handsome Road* 7). He continues with the opinion that society is organized all wrong and concludes that there is no justice when all the land is owned by only 1% of the population (8). Old Man Upjohn claims to have read these statistics and concludes that in the South there are seven million people and six million of those “owned nothing at all” (11). Although Corrie May generally ignores her father, these numbers sink in and she becomes aware of the inequality that surrounds her. Corrie May’s awareness begins to drive her actions and influence her decisions. This newfound awareness propels her to do more than just survive; she wants to thrive.

Bristow explores society's inequities by highlighting the vast chasm between Ann and Corrie May, or the plantation class and the working class. When Corrie May and Ann first meet, Corrie May notices Ann's elegant hands, unblemished by work. When she returns home with the image of Ann fresh in her mind, she views her own mother with new eyes. While Ann's hands are "exquisite" and likely to stay that way, Corrie May sees, in her 35-year-old mother's hands, her own future (Bristow, *The Handsome Road* 11). Corrie May's premonition about her own future is further exacerbated when her brothers die logging land that belongs to the Larneses and she is forced to find work herself to support her grief-stricken mother and ne'er-do-well father. Corrie May travels to the plantation to claim the insurance Denis Larnes offered against the workers' deaths. Seeing, from the back hall, the way in which the Larneses live further strengthens Corrie May's resolve and she remarks as she leaves, "I ain't gonta have to work hard... my whole life" (37). Corrie May's awareness of class differences highlight the inequities of Bristow's time. During the 1930s a heightened sense of class emerged, and by 1939 workers polled realistically identified themselves as lower or lower-middle class based on income, but identified their social class as "middle" (Kennedy 322). This emerging class consciousness is reflected in Corrie May's resolve to escape the "quicksand" that is Rattletrap Square, eschew marriage to a tenant farmer, and work her way to a better life.

These issues of work, jobs, and joblessness, especially for women, are central to the message of Bristow's work. Unemployment during the Great Depression affected the most vulnerable the most severely. The youngest and oldest, the uneducated and the unskilled, and especially rural Americans were most likely to be out of a job (165). Women were

particularly hard-hit with working women losing jobs at a faster rate than men (164). In 1930, women (typically under the age of 25) made up 22 percent of those gainfully employed. Women's job options were limited to "teaching, clerical work, domestic service, and the garment trades" (27). Bristow uses Corrie May to mirror the realities for a woman of the 1930s who must work: very few occupations coupled with very few jobs. In this context, Lorena Hickok's travels around the United States beginning in 1933 revealed a curious apathy that ran rampant among those receiving financial aid in rural communities. She remarks that she can't understand why they don't protest or otherwise confront officials when relief offices are closed (Lowitt and Beasley 170). Bristow counters this apathy with Corrie May's attitude of relentlessly seeking work, trying to better herself, and refusing charity. At no time does Corrie May submit to the hopelessness that she identifies as a chief attribute of women in her neighborhood. Instead, she recognizes the kind of trap, or "quicksand" that the life of a tenant farmer's wife can be. When she refuses Budge's marriage proposal, she gives a voice to the many young women who were postponing or canceling wedding plans at the onset of the Depression (Kennedy 165). Corrie May realizes that to marry Budge means working her "hands off, cooking and picking cotton and raising young uns" (Bristow, *The Handsome Road* 38). She further explores her options if Budge should die in an accident, asking; "What would I do? I couldn't pay rent so I'd get turned offn that piece of ground. And could I work for somebody? Could I sew or scrub or taking in washing?" (38). Understanding, as Corrie May says, "one had to stay alive, one had to eat and pay rent" succinctly highlights the major issues that arise from a state of joblessness.

Food, housing, and clothing are central concerns that depend on employment and are directly related to social class distinctions among Bristow's readers during the Depression era. Those readers would have been alert, then, to distinctions in these three factors that Bristow sets up between her two major women characters in the second novel, *Corrie May and Ann*. Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt in her book *Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* notes that food frequently "communicated messages about morals, religion, individualism, and education," and it can also be argued that both clothing and housing communicate the same types of messages about women (8).

Of the three most common concerns of the Depression, clothing seems most superficial; however, beyond being protection from the elements, clothes are symbols of status and also indicators of self-esteem. Bristow uses the clothing of Ann and Corrie May to explore the inequities and changing fortunes of the two women but also to explore the effects of doing without. As the story opens, Ann is well-dressed, with matching shoes and gloves while Corrie May's dress starts clean but is soiled by the dust from the wagon, and she is barefoot. Bristow creates a set of contrasts that put Ann beside Corrie May in an illustration of too much versus not enough. Ann wears hoops which are costly in and of themselves, but also require eight yards of fabric to cover them. The hoops help to create Ann as a sort of caricature of too much as when she has difficulty exiting a carriage because her hoops won't fit through the door. In the same scene, her hat is described as straw, "bigger than a parasol" and with ribbons that hang "halfway down her skirt" (Bristow, *The Handsome Road* 104). For Corrie May, the hoops come to represent her ambition, her desire to improve her lot in life. In one of her first bursts of pique in the novel she declares, "I'm gonta be somebody

and have me some clothes to wear” (37). When Corrie May begins to work for Ann, she is given many clothes that Ann casts off. Among them is a set of broken hoops that Corrie May repairs with string and a dress with a skirt “seven yards around the bottom” (100). Corrie May wears an entire outfit castoff from Ann’s closet and performs the role of “fine lady,” but even so each piece is a kind of making do, the whole ensemble a costume for her performance. She adds a new ribbon to last year’s bonnet and tilts it back to mimic this year’s fashion. She adds a shawl to cover the “teased out...armholes” and a sash to cover the gap at the waistband (99). The hoops are the envy of her friends in Rattletrap Square, who lament the fact that they will never have them because they “take so much cloth” (101).

In every scene Ann’s clothes are described as lavish and rich and in every case they are just a little bit too much. For example, her riding habit is so long that she cannot walk without folding the skirt over her arm (46). She wears a dress with a hand-embroidered ruffles with little sprigs of flowers that makes Corrie May “wince at the thought of the many hours some seamstress” invested in a dress that will “hardly survive six launderings” (104). Although Ann’s clothes are frivolous, she too wears them mended and darned, but only if the mending and darning does not show. Bristow makes clear that clothes are about status and appearance, much as they were to those forced to make do during the Depression. This contrast she creates between Ann and Corrie May serves to emphasize the divide between those who have too much and those who have too little, but to make clear the capricious nature of fortunes she reverses them for the two ladies.

Bristow uses changes in the two women’s dress to reflect shifts in their social class status over the course of the novel with their personal circumstances paralleling larger

changes in class between Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction in the South. For 1930s readers, or course, these fluctuations in social class identity would have offered particularly powerful connections to their own times, when so many American women were undergoing their own dramatic adjustments in social identity so visible to others through such markers as clothing. According to Lorena Hickok's reports from various states, women were the last members of the family to get new clothing. The rationale was that men needed clothes for working outdoors, the children needed clothes for school, but it was assumed that the women would stay indoors and thus, were not so much in need of new clothes. Hickok repeatedly found instances of women who owned only one dress and few, if any, who owned shoes or stockings (Lowitt and Beasley 23).

For the two central women characters in Bristow's middle novel, the first shift in fortunes occurs when the carpetbaggers levy a heavy tax on plantation owners and Ann, whose husband has died in the war, can barely pay them. During the same time, Corrie May aligns herself with a carpetbagger and lives lavishly on his ill-gotten gains. Bristow maintains the contrast between the two women in a scene in which Ann comes to pay the taxes. Ann's dress is described as the "plainest gray poplin with narrow white bands at the throat and wrists, the skirt made scant as though there had not been cloth enough for fashionable puffery" (Bristow, *The Handsome Road* 210). Her hair is rolled into "a bun below her bonnet" and the absence of hair extensions that were fashionable during that time cause Corrie May to label the lack as a "sure sign...of poverty" (210). Ann's clothes are clean and neat, but just barely enough.

In contrast, Corrie May's dress on the same occasion is described as "white muslin... over a pink silk petticoat...with nine flounces and a train a yard long" with a sash of velvet and gloves embroidered with peacock feathers (207). She wore looped braid extensions under her tiny bonnet tied on with velvet ribbon. Corrie May is the picture of too much; the extravagant and frivolous dresses are now her domain.

The second shift reverses their fortunes again and Ann is regaining wealth, but Corrie May has lost it all. In the final scenes Ann and her son Denis are rebuilding the plantation, and Denis describes her as wearing garments made of "dark materials" and in "exquisite simplicity" that gave her an "impressive beauty" (261). Ann is also described as a "great lady" who is "assured and unapproachable" (261). The contrast this time is not to Corrie May's clothes but to the clothes of her son, Fred. Corrie May has insisted that Fred attend school and his classmates ridicule his shirts made from flour sacks. Corrie May uses his desire to have better shirts to teach him about money and responsibility. The emphasis is on earning the money honestly, being responsible with it, and getting an education.

A second major issue facing people during the Depression is that of housing. Bristow's awareness of the issues of inadequate housing, foreclosure, and homelessness during the 1930s are explored in depth in *The Handsome Road*. She begins her examination with a simple contrast to highlight the vast divide between those least affected by the Depression and those who were losing it all. Both Corrie May and Ann describe the plantation Ardeith, but it is Corrie May's description that highlights most vividly the disparity between the two worlds that the two women inhabit. Corrie May, who does not have access to the front door of the manor, describes Ardeith as behind gates that encompass a "lawn like

green velvet” (26). Once inside the hallway she marvels at the silver doorknobs and the architectural wonder that is the spiral staircase. Corrie May is also concerned that her feet might be leaving dusty footprints on the shining floors. She notes the “perfectly white and clean” state of the balustrades of the elaborately carved staircase (27).

Ann’s description elaborates further on the extravagance of Ardeith, its silver doorknobs, hinges and sconces, the white marble mantels, and the thirty rooms of the main house. She details the crimson drapes of brocade lined with silk and the massive bedroom suite that was brought down the river in pieces accompanied by the craftsman who then assembled it in place (51). Ann too marvels at the staircase and recounts the legend of its building. It took the architect months to design it after a chance remark that life moves not in a circle, but in a spiral inspired it (52). Each morning it takes two slaves two hours to dust each hand-carved balustrade.

Conversely, Corrie May’s home in Rattletrap Square is only one room. She lives with her Ma and Pa and two brothers. She sleeps in a “little cubbyhole behind the kitchen” (16). Corrie May describes Ardeith by remarking on the ways it is different from her home. She describes Ardeith as a place where there is “no dirt, no screaming children, nobody drunk next door, no cats prowling against her legs, no cockroaches, no bad smells” (71). Bristow uses the voice of Corrie May to introduce the remarkable contrast between the homes of the wealthy and the homes of the poor. The publication of Arthur Raper’s 1936 work titled *Preface to Peasantry* in which the living conditions of Southern tenant farmers and their families are described in detail suggests that people in general and perhaps Bristow in particular were aware of the plight of the Southern tenant farmer during the 1930s. Raper

describes the exteriors of the homes as frequently made from unpainted lumber discarded from sawmills, the upkeep, adornment, and appearance of which is largely ignored (61-62). The interiors are described as “unceiled,” with unscreened windows, and walls covered with newsprint that lets in the drafts (63). These houses are either too hot or too cold depending on the season and damp because of chronically leaking roofs (64). The tenant farmers’ lives are dominated by dirt, poverty, disease, and illiteracy. Through the descriptions of inferior housing Bristow relegates Corrie May to a class below even that of the tenant farmer of the 1930s; she and her family depend on intermittent, odd jobs.

The farming crisis of the 1930s served to highlight the plight of the tenant farmer and the sharecropper and illustrated the tenuous hold those people had on their habitations. Bristow makes Corrie May and her family a manifestation of the reality of the rural, working poor. On the eve of the Civil War, Corrie May finds herself without work and thus unable to buy food. Once employed, she receives food as part of her pay, but pockets part of it because there is never enough at home. Corrie May is the embodiment of the working poor. After going to jail for aiding a deserter, she finds herself homeless for the first time. Though she resourcefully finds a job, it is not before she has slept on the wharfs for several nights. Below even the tenant farmer and the sharecropper, Corrie May relies on day labor to feed herself.

David Eugene Conrad in his book *The Forgotten Farmers* defines the Depression era day laborers as “most unfortunate” and their existence as “precarious” (7). This precarious existence was “without assurance of work, food, or housing” from day to day (7). The Great Depression brought to light not only the plight of the day laborer in the South but also what

Conrad calls the “tragedy of tenancy” (8). More celebrated books than Bristow’s from writers like Steinbeck, Agee, and Caldwell brought Southern tenancy to the public view through their depictions of the extreme privation and poverty prevalent in the South (8). Bristow’s historical lens buffers the harshness of the scene but is nonetheless a reflection of the stark realities of what it was like to be poor in the rural South.

Corrie May’s situation temporarily changes when she aligns herself with the carpetbagger Gilday, who skims from the taxes being paid to his office. Corrie May and Gilday rent a fancy house from a formerly wealthy family and spend money as fast as they acquire it. Corrie May squanders money buying fancy clothes, throwing lavish parties, and saving nothing. Though it might seem at first that Bristow is advocating this spendthrift behavior, she is only echoing a belief that the poor, if they had money would spend it unwisely. Conrad attributes this extravagant spending to the belief by tenants and day laborers that they could not escape their situation, so they might as well spend what they had on something they wanted. Corrie May is the epitome of this belief. She throws a lavish party with ice formed into the shapes of peacock feathers and buys dresses of the most expensive and impractical materials, never looking ahead. Bristow not only comments on the profligate spending but allows Corrie May to become haughty and vain. Bristow focuses on what happens if the money dries up as it does for Corrie May, and the reader understands that though it seemed like Corrie May was living the good life, she was instead doing everything wrong and so she is eventually humbled.

Thomas Hart Benton’s observation about those who are living in poverty and the irresponsible way in which they spend money echoes the attitudes that many had about the

rural poor during the 1930s and confirms Conrad's assertions. Benton notes that any cash that came their way often "vanished in immediate pleasures" (qtd. in Tindall, *The Emergence* 196). Lorena Hickok reports too the tendency of those receiving aid during the Depression to indulge in one or two "good meals" just after receiving their relief (Lowitt and Beasley 26). This profligacy is illustrated in the ways in which Corrie May spends lavish amounts of money to decorate her house. Her subsequent turning out by Gilday with a \$100 and nowhere to go, echoes too the consequences of imprudent spending. Corrie May finds a single room to rent, but pregnant and alone, she finds herself quickly evicted when the money runs out. She is forced into a state of homelessness for a third time. She eats from a trash can, then she finally walks to Ardeith and petitions Ann for work in exchange for food. Ann, who has weathered the period of Reconstruction proudly, refuses Corrie May any help. Corrie May ends up asking for and receiving charity from a family of freed slaves who care for her until her child is born. She then moves back to the city and takes in laundry, baby on her hip, living from day to day. Corrie May frequently has to swallow her pride and request her pay. Although her existence is precarious, she has learned from her past. She insists her son go to school and teaches him about money. Bristow makes clear that working as a day laborer is drudgery, but also that people can start over, improve themselves, and make a better life for the next generation.

Bristow's awareness of the capriciousness of the fates for the lower classes is illustrated through Corrie May's story. Bristow uses Corrie May to examine the life of the rural poor, but it was not only the poorest of the citizens who were affected by the Great Depression. Using Ann Sheramy Larnes's story, Bristow illustrates the ways in which

taxation, commodity prices, and banking issues affected the upper classes during the Depression as well. Bristow makes Reconstruction the platform from which she obliquely explores the situations of other Americans affected by the Depression. Reconstruction allowed the carpetbaggers to, through the auspices of the federal government, levy heavy taxes on the plantations and their lands. Ann, whose husband died in the war, struggles to pay the tax bill knowing that if she cannot make the payment, she will be turned out and the plantation broken into parcels and sold. The scene in which Ann pays the taxes is marked by extreme anxiety. Upon counting the money, she is \$10 short and tries to pay the remainder with her wedding ring. She offers the ring inscribed with her wedding date in an act of desperation, her face drawn and “like chalk” (Bristow, *The Handsome Road* 214). Ann’s character illustrates the realities for many middle-class Americans who, though not destitute were in danger of losing their homes because they were short of cash.

Perhaps the most important issue facing the poor during the Depression was food. With so many unemployed, the lack of adequate housing, clothing, and food were all problems, but food is the most important of the three. Reportedly families lived for weeks during the Depression on bread and water, or “bulldog gravy” made of flour, lard, and water (Kennedy 169). Starvation and diseases such as pellagra ran rampant in already depressed areas such as the mining hills of Kentucky and the Deep South (170). Similarly, during the Civil War and postbellum eras, adequate food was also an issue. The similarity between the conditions of the Great Depression and the postbellum era allows Bristow the perfect lens through which to view the ways an upheaval like the Great Depression wreaks havoc on ordinary people’s health and survival. Bristow capitalizes on the similarities between the

Civil War era and the 1930s to highlight the inequalities that were becoming obvious to the nation during the Depression. Bristow again stands Corrie May and Ann side by side to explore the ways in people were affected by food shortages, rising prices, and the inability to afford food, but also to examine class in the South.

The second chapter of Engelhardt's *A Mess of Greens* specifically analyzes the ways in which the type of bread women were baking marked class status from around the turn of the century into the 1930s in the South. Corn was locally grown and likely tended by women in kitchen gardens in the South. Unrefined and simple to grind or process, corn was frequently served as either cornbread or hominy and was a staple of the Southern cook. Simple cornbread was considered an "everyday" staple. Engelhardt examines the Progressive era movement to reform Southern women by teaching them to make biscuits instead of cornbread. The white flour, more refined and imported, was deemed more hygienic, and the biscuit became a marker of middle or upper-class status (61). Therefore, cornbread came to signify lower class status. Although some cooks made both cornbread and biscuits, labeling them "everyday" and a "luxury" respectively, many women viewed the type of bread a woman baked as an indicator of her class, her cleanliness, and her morals (61).

Similarly Bristow conflates wheat flour and corn with social class in *The Handsome Road*. In the midst of the Civil War, Ann throws a party buying many luxury items, including "wheat flour" (147). The wheat flour represents Ann's wealth and ability to buy luxury items but is also as a class marker according to Engelhardt's analysis of wheat versus corn. The two women's attitudes about food also serve as markers of class and wealth. Food is first mentioned in the novel when Corrie May meets Ann in the park. Ann buys molasses cakes

and shares them with Corrie May. Corrie May eats the cake, but Ann, who has never tasted them before, buys them to toss to the swans. This first appearance of food in the novel marks the differences between the two women. Corrie May is hungry and appreciates the simple food and Ann is frivolous and basically wastes it. Significantly, there is a second incidence in which the roles of the women are reversed and it is Corrie May who is frivolous. In this case, ice is an indicator of class difference. Early in the novel the Larneses could afford ice and used it to make ice cream. Later, when Corrie May reserves all the ice for her lavish party, Ann needs the ice to prevent her food from spoiling. Corrie May refuses to sell the ice to Ann, and subsequently Ann's daughter dies after drinking tainted milk. Bristow's use of such an innocuously simple thing as ice to make clear the inequalities between the classes highlights the way one should behave. Bemoaning a lack of ice because you can't have ice cream is silly, and hoarding all the ice for a lavish party is selfish.

Consistent with Engelhardt's thesis, throughout the novel, Corrie May is associated with corn and corn derivatives. Only during her brief sojourn with Gilday is she not associated with corn because she has money during that time. In the opening scenes Corrie May makes spoonbread for her beau. Spoonbread is made from corn meal and served with side-meat, collards, and molasses; this was considered a "good meal" (14). In the final scenes of the novel, after Corrie May has experienced the comfortable life that money can buy but is again reduced to the status of working poor, she serves her son hominy.

In the final pages of the novel both women are humbled and proud. Ann is working hard to rebuild her plantation, and she is eating humble but nourishing food, collards and muffins. Though Bristow doesn't elaborate on the basis for the muffins, it is likely that they

were made of cornmeal. Corrie May is eating hominy, taking in washing, ensuring her son gets an education. If corn is the indicator of class, then both women end the novel equal, leveled by war, hunger, homelessness or the threat of it.

Bristow ends the novel with images of both Ann and Corrie May. Placing the women and their sons side by side allows her to create a stark contrast between Ann, who has risen back to her former prominence, and Corrie May who, though she supports herself and her son, has no hopes of ever being more than a member of the working poor. It is Corrie May's son Fred, who has secured a paid position as an apprentice, who will not just survive but thrive as he makes his way into the middle class. Corrie May's final thoughts about her son reveal Bristow's agenda for the final novel in the trilogy. Corrie May realizes that although her son "had inherited no tradition [unlike Ann's son] he had the strength of which fresh traditions were made" (286). Bristow leaves the story of the two women, each a success in her own way, with a glimmer of hope. The message entwined beneath the plot is one of hope for those who lost everything in the Great Depression. Although both women struggle, they each succeed and fail and succeed again, as Bristow indicates that what is required to survive the hardships is the "strength" to make "fresh traditions" (286). The final novel in the trilogy, *This Side of Glory*, demonstrates exactly what it takes to create new traditions and reconcile the past with the future.

Chapter 3: *This Side of Glory*: Progressive Solutions to the Depression's Problems

The final novel in Gwen Bristow's Plantation Trilogy, titled *This Side of Glory*, is set between the turn of the century and World War I, thus during the Progressive era. Published in 1940, this last novel is a departure from the first two in that it offers solutions to Depression-era problems and advocates a plan for the future that specifically calls on women to implement it. It goes beyond illustration and exploration to prescribe specific courses of action. Labeled by Bristow as "the harvest," *This Side of Glory* serves as a culminating treatise on the way to success and prosperity in the future for readers in the 1930s. Bristow also strives to reconcile past and present or the Old South and the New, while identifying the middle class and especially women as agents of recovery and change. Although there is a consensus among historians that the Progressive era was over by 1920, Bristow was a product of that era and as such she champions many of the movement's same reforms to home and farm, including focusing on efficiency and mechanization. Drawing on the Progressive-era reforms, the Domestic Economy movement, and Eleanor Roosevelt's 1933 book *It's Up to the Women*, Bristow outlines a plan of action that highlights women's roles in recovering from the Depression and for bringing the past and the present together for a more harmonious and prosperous future.

Long before the industrial revolution left Americans "unsure of their nation's identity," the South struggled to define itself in the context of the Union (Jaycox iv). Before, during, and after the Civil War, Southerners were called upon to define themselves in the context of their place in the nation, but Southerners struggled to balance regional identity with national identity. James C. Cobb argues that even prior to 1850, well before the Civil

War, “the North” and “the United States” were used interchangeably (35). The conflation of Northern interests with national interests created an atmosphere of exclusion that ultimately divided North from South (37). Northern-based detractors deemed the South “antithetical” to the North and cited “decadence, indolence, and devotion to slavery” as the primary issues of division (37). Prior to the Civil War, national allegiance implied that the South would have to “northernize” (37). As Southerners observed efforts to make Northern interests those of the entire nation, white Southerners developed a greater sense of “their own distinctness” (42). Following the Civil War, Reconstruction (1863-1877) demanded that people make a “new start” according to E. Merton Coulter in *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (19). Coulter also notes that Reconstruction was a time when new leaders could rise whose positions didn’t depend on “family trees, arms, or wealth” (19).

In his book *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, James C. Cobb notes that at the same time that Reconstruction demanded that the South make a new start, Southern leaders recognized the necessity of building an industrialized “New South” as the only avenue to prosperity (67). The architects of the New South planned for economic revitalization while simultaneously embracing the so-called “lost cause” of the pre-Civil War South (67). This plan allowed them to sustain a distinct identity and to reclaim their lost status. The tenets of the first plan for a New South vowed to “northernize” the region’s economy, but also to restore the definitive “Southern” ideals of the Old South (68).

The Progressive era (1890-1920) was marked by a consensus that major changes in the late nineteenth century had produced what Walter Nugent called, “unwelcome, un-American imbalances in their society” (1). Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr. marks the period prior to the

Progressive era as a time of “material expansion” with the most remarkable changes occurring in the areas of industrialization, communication, and transportation (7). Such major changes led to social and economic problems that encouraged a growing class consciousness (9). This new awareness of class coupled with rapid urban-industrial growth left Americans “unsure of their nation’s identity” (Jaycox iv). According to Ekirch, those who considered themselves Progressives were united by their belief that the United States had to find solutions to a “series of new problems confronting modern industrial society” (Preface ix). Progressives looked to the government for reform and urged a shift from the industrial revolution to a more political revolution (6). This shift was marked by renewed personal patriotism, and although the philosophy of Progressivism was always “forward-looking,” it was also nostalgic for American heritage. Through this renewed patriotism, Progressives supported anew “historic national ideals” which they “translated into social and political action” (ix).

The 1930s marked a second time in history when the South needed to make a “new start” as the Progressive-era advances of the 1920s gave way to the Depression-era losses of the 1930s. The abolition of slavery and early efforts to mechanize plantations had led to a large population of share croppers and tenant farmers who had little to lose, but the South suffered further great losses in the agricultural depression of the 1920s that made farming untenable for many more. Those farmers who borrowed money to mechanize their farms in the 1920s faced foreclosure in the 1930s when they couldn’t pay their debts (Eldridge 3). Issues of class and identity were exacerbated with the second wave of industrialization in the

1930s as myriad tenant farmers and share croppers found themselves without work or in bad working conditions.

In the third novel of her trilogy, Bristow's focus is on identity and class, specifically the ways in which members of various classes respond to and deal with outside pressures. Bristow tackles the issues of identity and class in *This Side of Glory* by wedding an old-money Southern plantation owner (Kester Larnes) to a middle-class, college-educated woman (Eleanor Upjohn), literally bringing together the Old South and the New South under one roof. In the Introduction to the novel, Bristow acknowledges that both the Old and the New have strength, but that they are different kinds of strength. Eleanor's middle-class upbringing imbued her with a "strength of aggressive energy" and Kester's strength is one of "endurance" (Bristow, *This Side* vi). Using the marriage as a metaphor for managing the identity struggles of the South, Bristow presents and examines both the Old and the New South and concludes that it will take both to move forward. Bristow's conclusion echoes Allen Tate's statement about the Southern renaissance of literature which defines Southern literature as being "conscious of the past and the present" (qtd. in Tindall, *The Emergence* 68).

Bristow employs the Larnes and Upjohn families, who oppose the marriage, to voice the differences between the Old and the New. Although the objections are about class, Bristow focuses on identity and allows the differences in class to highlight their differing philosophies about money and living life. Bristow's object is to examine the ways in which Kester and Eleanor deal with the problem of their impending foreclosure and \$100,000 debt. Their reactions to the debt are based on both their class and upbringing. Bristow uses this

situation to suggest the ways in which her readers should cope with Depression-era problems of their own.

When Kester and Eleanor first meet, Eleanor describes her father's history as the "typical American story," that is one of a "self-made man" (Bristow, *This Side* 14). Fred Upjohn is said to be "entirely of today" and it is from this position that he offers his opinion of Kester Larnes and his family (14). Fred's assessment of Kester is harsh. According to Fred, Kester is a "no-count parlor ornament" and the "indolent hand-kissing scion of a worn out line" (30-31). He further disparages him calling him a "faded rose of old Southland" and "a child in a man's body" (33). Although Fred's assessment of Kester as irresponsible and lazy will prove to be mostly true, it is a harsh judgment that readers may not readily accept because Kester is charming and suave. This assessment of the Old Southern gentleman from the perspective of a middle-class man implies that a man's value is measured by his accepting responsibility and working actively instead of banking on his family name.

The Larneses' evaluation of Eleanor and her family is no less harsh. They object to the marriage because Eleanor is "not one of us" (25). They consider her "common" and imply that she and her family are not civilized (27). This implication hinges on the fact that her mother was an orphan and her father was the illegitimate son of Corrie May Upjohn (a key character in the second novel of the trilogy) and as such Eleanor has no background, no ancestors (24). They think but don't say that she is the descendent of white trash and thus a poor match for their son. They neither consider nor care that her father worked his way out of poverty, instead focusing on her lack of pedigree. Eleanor offers a definition of their

differences without judgment. She defines herself as “an American” and Kester as “a Southerner,” and with this statement Bristow dismisses discussions of class and focuses on identity (24).

Although in the previous novels Bristow examines the myriad problems of the Depression, in this final novel she focuses on only one problem of the 1930s, foreclosure. Shortly after Eleanor and Kester marry, the bank threatens to foreclose on Ardeith and it is revealed that the plantation is mortgaged for \$100,000. But the problem of foreclosure is only a platform from which Bristow can examine class, identity, and character. Bristow employs the foreclosure situation to examine the ways in which Kester and Eleanor each deal with the problem based on their upbringings setting up a debate of sorts. Foreclosure was a reality for many struggling during the Great Depression and as such it offers the perfect platform for Bristow to examine the issues of identity and class in the South. According to David Eldridge, 150,000 homeowners lost their homes in 1930, another 200,000 in 1931, and another 250,000 in 1932 (2). Bristow’s readers would have no doubt been aware of the myriad foreclosures across the country and as such may have identified with Eleanor and Kester’s plight. Perhaps they even found themselves taking sides as the Larneses attempted to save their home.

Upon learning that a foreclosure is imminent, Kester and Eleanor react in very different ways. At the news, Eleanor first expresses a complete sense of disbelief which quickly turns to anger. Eleanor was brought up to believe that you paid back what you borrowed (Bristow, *This Side* 60). When she confronts Kester about the extent of the debt, he shrugs her off; he has no idea how much he owes. She slowly realizes that they had been

living in luxury on borrowed money, “money they had no right to spend” (61). She tells Kester she would “rather scrub floors than spend money that wasn’t [hers] to spend” (60). This marks the first difference between their attitudes about money. Eleanor is careful, while Kester is carefree. Eleanor’s careful attitude about money echoes the idealized, middle-class American notion of work and the belief that you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Conversely, Kester’s carefree attitude is indicative of his Southern upbringing in which he will inherit his wealth rather than work for it. He feels like he is entitled to or deserves his wealth. Kester’s attitudes are based on a system wherein someone else works hard and the benefits are reaped by the plantation owners.

Kester’s carefree attitude is a marker of his class, while Eleanor’s attitude is more in line with her middle-class upbringing. When her anger dissipates, Eleanor is galvanized and makes a plan; they will go to New Orleans immediately and visit the bank to find out exactly how much they owe and the terms of the loans. Eleanor steels herself for “the battle” ahead, but Kester refuses to break a dinner engagement to make the trip saying, “Tomorrow would be soon enough” (64-65). Eleanor’s thoughts reveal the differences between a Southerner and an American; Kester believes the dinner engagement is “sacred” and she deems sacred an engagement to repay borrowed money (65). Bristow makes clear that this disagreement is not just about business and pleasure, but a deeper debate about obligations and shirking responsibility. It is a continued debate about being American versus being Southern. Kester’s relationships are sacred, but the emerging middle-class American’s sacred relationships are to the market and the economy.

This debate harkens back to the antebellum era in the South in which the “New South” architects sought to find balance between industrialization and the ideals of the Old South. Although Kester is technically an American, he represents the ideals of the Old South without consideration for the tenets of a New South. James C. Cobb notes that proponents of a New South were looking for a synthesis between sustaining a distinctive identity, and reclaiming their lost status and autonomy while moving forward (68). David R. Goldfield summarizes the creed of the New South as a “[march] forward to modernity, while looking to the past for its inspiration and guidance (qtd. in Cobb 68).

Finding that they owe \$100,000, Kester outlines an impromptu plan, and upon securing a meeting with the board of directors, he celebrates his minor victory “as if the battle had been fought and won” (Bristow, *This Side* 79). When it comes time for the meeting with the bank board, Kester is suffering from a hangover and Eleanor must attend the meeting alone. She doesn’t have the flair that Kester does, but she is businesslike and direct. When asked who will execute the plan, she confidently answers that she will and that she has a “habit of finishing what I start” (80). Kester depends on his charm, but Eleanor relies only on her ability to work hard. She secures the extension on the mortgage.

Although Kester and Eleanor initially work together relatively well, tensions arise about the way they do things. Kester asks Eleanor if their differences are because she is American and he is Southern. Eleanor wants to explore their identities and backgrounds because she does believe that their differences lie in their identities. Eleanor articulates their differences by noting their “deficiencies” (82). According to Eleanor, Kester’s deficiencies are in the things he does (or doesn’t do) while her deficiencies lie in the way she does things

(82). She acknowledges that she thought his parents “revoltingly useless” and suspects he found hers “crude” (82-83). She identifies a “hard streak” in her father and herself, the hard streak being the thing that enabled her father to “climb out of the wretchedness” of where he was born, but she notes too that Kester’s family must have once had the same “hard streak” when they came to Louisiana as pioneers (83). What makes him a Southerner is his gentleness and tact, his gallantry, high breeding, and ideals and what makes her American is a quality of brashness and uncouthness, of being “closer to the facts” (84). Significantly, she defines this new class of Americans (the middle class) as Second Pioneers, because they possess the qualities “that made it possible for the American nation to be” (84). Their discussion is concluded with the realization that neither of them can save the plantation alone. Bristow suggests that to move toward a prosperous future citizens must combine the best qualities of their past with the best qualities of their present.

Bristow will, by the end of the novel, have reconciled the two sides by recognizing that both have something of value to offer, but she plays out the debate between Southerner and American as the Larneses attempt to save the plantation from foreclosure. In the months leading up to World War I, Eleanor and Kester divide the work, which she calls “backbreaking drudgery,” and find that their skills and attitudes are complementary (85). Eleanor realizes that Kester is creative and though he can come up with a scheme he can’t carry out the fine details. Eleanor is efficient and can execute any of Kester’s plans, and working together they find themselves with an estimated 1,000 bales of cotton, but the cotton prices slump because of the impending war.

The falling prices mean they cannot make their first installment and the bank is not offering extensions. Eleanor proposes they sell the family heirlooms stored in the attic; this practical solution brings out a streak of sentimentality in Kester but ultimately he agrees. On the day of the sale, Eleanor is very businesslike and haggles to get the best prices while Kester stands by useless and bored (107). While this scene marks the beginning of Kester's increased restlessness and his waning commitment to the plantation, it also suggests something interesting about the Old South and the New. The buyer attempts to buy the family portraits because "porky millionaires" who haven't got family portraits can purchase instant ancestors (109). Bristow implies here the yearning for heritage that the middle class lacks, a point which supports the idea that Old and New must blend to move forward.

When America enters the war, Kester enlists even though he is beyond the age of conscription. During the time between his enlistment and his leaving, he disengages from the work of the plantation and Eleanor accuses him of "running away" because he is "incapable of accepting the tiresome challenges of everyday living" (174-75). With Kester's enlistment, Eleanor takes charge and in one decisive action saves that year's cotton crop. She then sets in motion a plan that will allow her to, in Kester's absence, make the plantation both free of debt and profitable. During the war years, Eleanor works tirelessly and accomplishes not only her goal of a debt-free home, but an improved and efficient plantation that will be safe from creditors for years to come.

At this point in the novel, it might seem as if Bristow is valorizing Eleanor's middle-class values of hard work and perseverance, while making Kester appear useless and ridiculous. However it might seem, Bristow turns the story around to make Eleanor's forward

motion and excitement about the future sound like gloating and greedy aspirations. When Kester returns to the plantation after the war, he finds it transformed. It is not just free and clear of debt, but it is controlled and managed. More importantly it has been remodeled and is overflowing with expensive and somewhat frivolous modern gadgets. Eleanor's zeal in transforming the house translates into stripping it of its humanity for Kester. He remarks that she has transformed the house into a "Ford factory" and the plantation into "a mill" and he has come home to a "profiteer" (217). Bristow turns the tables in this scene and makes Eleanor appear in a negative light to highlight the fact that both classes possess virtues and faults. In that vein, Eleanor is also the representative of the middle class and as such she indulges in a kind of conspicuous consumption that marks the American middle class.

When Kester and Eleanor first began working together to save the plantation, they were a balanced team, but one without the other threw the balance off. In the final chapters of the novel, they drift apart, quarrel, and eventually separate. Just when it appears as if their differences are irreconcilable and they will divorce, a crisis brings them together. Over the hospital bed of their daughter, Eleanor and Kester realize that together they have children with two inheritances because of their backgrounds and that the children will be better for it. They recognize that their children will inherit both the "impractical realism" of the Southerner and the "savage strength" of the American (278). Their marriage has brought down "a barrier that intolerant generations had been building for a hundred and fifty years" a barrier that divided classes, but also a nation (279). Bristow allows the reader to see both the good and the bad in each class, but in a rather trite ending makes the point that being a true American embraces both class and region.

The Progressive Influence

Much as Eleanor confronts the problem of their impending foreclosure by altering the whole plantation, the Progressives sought to tackle society's problems by altering society through reform, and middle-class women were at the forefront of the movement's reform efforts. Although Progressives shared a "belief in society, a common good and social justice, and [the idea] that society could be changed into a better place," they disagreed about how to make those changes (Nugent 5). Faith Jaycox notes that although Progressive causes were varied, by and large the Progressives thought of themselves as an emerging middle class, "confident they could solve the problems of their changing and sometimes chaotic society by applying scientific expertise and by organizing people, institutions and government in efficient new ways" (ix). The watchwords of the Progressive era were "efficiency" and "scientific" (339). For the middle class, the changes were "desirable and necessary" (Nugent 4).

Significantly, the Progressive era was marked by "legions of activist women" who rallied behind various causes even before acquiring suffrage brought them together as a voting block (1). According to Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider, American women had long been viewed as the protectors of virtue and morality and in this era they moved out of the home to use their influence for "cleaning up the messes" of society (Schneider 12). Women organized to educate mothers to improve the lives of children. They organized as anti-Suffrage or Pro-Temperance to change women's and families lives. They organized

clubs and settlement houses like Chicago's Hull House bent on upgrading the quality of life. Women organized for better public sanitation or what they called "municipal housekeeping" (Nugent 55). Other groups worked with unions to improve wages and working conditions for female factory and mill workers (Schneider 12). The "women of the time believed in progress, the uneven but sustained upward movement of the human race" (12). Bristow's characterization of Eleanor echoes these trends.

The Progressive era was marked also by women's attempts to make housekeeping in all its aspects more efficient and more scientific. According to Marilyn Irvin Holt, the Domestic Economy movement grew out of the Progressive movement and outlasted it, thus creating the foundation for the Roosevelt administration's federal recovery programs. The Domestic Economy movement sought to encourage women to transform themselves and use science to improve their lives (3). The word "economy" referred to economy in time, money, and work and related programs set out to teach women how to run their households more efficiently. In the South, for example, women organized tomato canning clubs for young farm girls. The clubs served both to give the girls an income and to teach them efficient and safe canning methods (Engelhardt 84). Originally governed by the Department of Agriculture, the Domestic Economy movement took on further authority when in 1914 the Smith-Lever Act passed and funded 2,000 "home demonstration agents to train housewives in homemaking, budget management, and child rearing" (Schneider 40). Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider note that although many programs were put in place to educate working-class women, more often than not middle-class women sought out the classes on "household

sanitation, chemistry of foods, home economics, home sociology, house architecture, principles of housework, marketing, and sewing” (40).

In the same vein, Eleanor Roosevelt’s 1933 book called *It’s Up to the Women* credits women with pulling the nation through other hard times such as the pilgrim’s first winter, the American Revolution, and the Civil War (vii). It serves as a call to the women of Roosevelt’s own day, who “have a big part to play if we are coming through [the Depression] successfully” (vii). Roosevelt believes that “in this present crisis it is going to be the women who will tip the scales and bring us safely out of it” (ix). She admonishes women “to work hard” to keep the family clean, clothed, and fed and she understands that almost everyone is experiencing financial hardships (13). She advises women to run their homes efficiently, create budgets, and practice self-denial and discipline. She advocates “extension courses” and consulting “the home economics department” to learn more about running a proper home. More specifically she encourages women “to organize their households and themselves, to see that they live within their incomes” (248). She concludes that the homes of America “still form the basis of our civilization” and women should be prepared through education, and equipped to meet emergencies whenever they arise (256).

It is not hard to imagine that Gwen Bristow might have read the works of Eleanor Roosevelt because they were so widespread. Besides her book *It’s Up to the Women* (1933), Roosevelt wrote for *Women’s Home Companion* (1933-1935) and her “My Day” newspaper column which began in 1935 ran daily in sixty papers (Emblidge 4). By 1938, the column was running in 75 papers and had 4 million readers (28). Her autobiography, *This is My Story*, was serialized in *Ladies Home Journal* (28). Add to that Eleanor Roosevelt’s

popularity among women and it is not hard to imagine Bristow, a well-educated former journalist, reading Roosevelt's work.

Whether or not the "Eleanor" of the final novel of the trilogy is a direct invocation of the then-president's wife, Bristow invokes the spirit of the women-driven Progressive era reforms and the Domestic Economy movement by empowering the aptly named Eleanor Upjohn Larnes to make all the decisions on the plantation. Bristow, like Roosevelt, suggests through her use of a strong female protagonist that women are the ones who will weather the hard times best by embracing change and progress. Bristow seems to exhort women as a group to help pull the country through the financial crisis by using Eleanor Upjohn Larnes as a bridge character that brings readers close to the past so that they can bridge the gap between the past and their present.

Identifying Eleanor as both middle class and American creates credibility for her as Bristow's bridge character. As a bridge character Eleanor reaches out to middle-class women reading the novel who are offered various ways in which they might identify with Eleanor. First, Eleanor is faced with an enormous debt and the threat of losing her home; then she is left alone to make ends meet. Eleanor is determined to pull the plantation out of its cycle of debt and she does that by reforming it with the modern machinery and techniques she uses to produce the cotton crop. She focuses first on educating herself, then on efficiency and machinery and making life easier both in and out of the house. Although Eleanor does much of the work herself, she acts more as a manager directing an overseer who then directs the workers. Taking a managerial role is in line with the Domestic Economy belief that women

should view themselves as managers and agents of their family and farm and running their household or farm as a job (Holt 47).

Both the Progressive-era reformers and Eleanor Roosevelt extol the virtues of a good education, but more importantly they advocate being educated in specific areas. Although Eleanor's college degree in mathematics prepares her for keeping the plantation's books, she has little knowledge about growing cotton. When Eleanor and Kester first begin to run the plantation together, she works physically hard, but depends on Kester for the knowledge she needs to be a cotton planter (Bristow, *This Side* 82). When the cotton prices slump due to the impending war, they finally decide to sell even though the price is low, but Eleanor discovers that cotton is used in explosives and decisively stops the sale of their cotton. Kester is absent during this time, so Eleanor spends two days in the library educating herself about "guncotton," "cellulose," and the international laws that govern the shipping of raw materials for munitions (162). This new education makes her an expert in guncotton and she devises a plan to make large sums of money on their crop. With Kester still absent, she approaches Mr. Tonelli, who has amassed great wealth importing bananas from his Central American banana plantations, with her proposal. Eleanor explains what she has learned about cotton and the production of ammunition and suggests a business deal. She has 932 bales of cotton and she asks Mr. Tonelli to advance her \$30,000 purely on the speculation that the war will continue and there will be cotton shortages in the next year. Eleanor executes this plan without Kester and the risk pays off as shortages push the price of cotton higher and higher.

Coupled with Eleanor's speculation on the cotton crop are several other measures that Bristow might have borrowed from Eleanor Roosevelt or Domestic Economy experts. From

the outset of their mortgage crisis, Eleanor creates a strict budget that allows for few if any luxuries. She practices self-denial not just for herself, but for her daughter as well by putting off buying clothes until they are sorely needed and they have the cash to pay for them. While shopping for her daughter, Eleanor buys herself a new hat but refrains from buying anything else, instead relying on the hat to spruce up her wardrobe (90). Roosevelt too advises women that “a new hat will frequently make people think that everything one has on is new” (43). Although Eleanor remarks that she hates “to be shabby,” she accepts the hardship without complaint, again something Roosevelt admonishes women to do in *It's Up to the Women* (104).

Drawing on the Domestic Economy movement, Bristow advocates a more efficient lifestyle thereby implying that through efficiency and mechanization financial security can be achieved. Roosevelt called the progress in the domestic affairs a “revolution in our country” (24). She notes that “we are coming to count on modern inventions, which simplify the work of running a home” (24). She and other domestic economists imply that this simplification will foster better relationships within the family as the woman now has more time at the end of the day and she isn't exhausted by her work (24). Bristow too implies that the unpaid work of women is exhausting, but it is also that work that will bring about success.

When Kester enlists, Eleanor accuses him of running away from the hard work and tedium of running the plantation, which is perhaps Bristow's commentary about the men who ran away from families during the Depression. Eleanor confronts him, reminding him of his responsibilities at home. He replies that she “know[s] all about it now” implying that she is

just as capable of running the plantation as he is (Bristow, *This Side* 174). She nonetheless also reiterates to him that the plantation is a full-time job and additionally that running a house and raising two children is “too much to add to it” (174). He then states that it is her job to “keep the home fires burning” while he goes off to fight for democracy though it is more likely that because of his age and social position he will not see combat (174). Eleanor understands that Kester is taking advantage of the fact that she is both capable of and determined to finish the job she started and she will save the plantation without his help. Eleanor then acknowledges that Kester would be more concerned if she were a “helpless featherbrain,” but the point Bristow is clearly making is that Eleanor is not (174).

Bristow uses this scene to highlight an important point. Eleanor and other women like her are capable of running the plantation, or the business, or the household without the men. They are even capable of running the house and the business, while raising the children. Eleanor resolves to succeed by not only clearing the debt on the plantation, but in making it “a model of efficient abundance” (177). Bristow implies with the scene that women in general and Eleanor in particular are more than capable of managing home, family, and business.

In keeping with the advice of Roosevelt and other advocates of Domestic Economy, Eleanor sets about “fulfilling her dream of the plantation’s renaissance” (179). For Eleanor the renaissance means tractors, cultivators, trucks, and sprinklers. She “reforms” the entire operation in line with the Progressives’ labor reform. She pays better wages to her workers and repairs their cabins too. Since the mechanization of the plantation means she has more time, she turns her attention to the house, adding plumbing, electric lights, an electric stove

and washing machine, vacuum cleaners, and an intercom system. She congratulates herself on moving toward a “crisp and impersonal efficiency” where workers work regular hours and machinery does the hardest work (180). Inside the house, the “household contrivances” do the same thing, making work easier and more efficient for everyone (180).

Eleanor as the bridge character allows the reader to experience success along with her. When she compares her own achievement to the “bored and useless life” of Isabel Valcour, an Old Southern belle, she smiles and is “satisfied” (188). She describes Isabel as “appealing” and a “soft and lovely parasite” to create a contrast between the Southern woman and the American woman (238). Through this contrast it is clear that her self-reliance, her strength, and her ambition to continue improving are the marks of an American woman. By the time Kester returns, the plantation is free of debt and what she calls a “model of prosperous efficiency” (201).

Kester, as representative of the Old South, cannot abide the changes to the plantation and the house. He represents the ideal Southern gentleman who originated in the antebellum South that sought its own distinct identity in Great Britain and Ancient Greece (a model slave society) (Cobb 42). The ideal Southern gentleman derives from the knight of England and is imbued with gallantry and chivalry. Kester cannot imagine ““pecan pie in the same house”” as the new, modern bathroom (Bristow, *This Side* 207). Up to this point, Kester cannot see the necessity of melding the Old South with the New and Eleanor dismisses the Old as sentimental, nostalgic, and thus useless. Despite their disagreements Eleanor and Kester reconcile at the end of the novel and acknowledge that in their children are the best traits and values of both the Old South and the New, the Southerner and the American.

Eleanor voices the major differences between her power and Kester's. Her power lay in the "strength to make an onslaught" and his in the ability "to withstand the siege" (262). Eleanor admits her biggest mistake was in assuming "that only the aggressors were of much value in the world" (262). Bristow ends this novel and thus the trilogy emphasizing the need to come together, to balance "the manner of life" with the "means" (280). The ending is a hopeful, post-Depression message to readers that calls for understanding the past and embracing the future. The final sentences warn readers not to expect the "coming years to be either easy or simple" but instead to recognize that the crisis has "taught them the beginning of wisdom" (280).

Coda

Gwen Bristow's Plantation Trilogy employs the genre of the historical novel to examine and offer solutions to the problems of the Great Depression as well as to explore issues of regional and national identity. Furthermore, Bristow's use of women as bridge characters who offer readers a point of entry into the historical story and role models for their present behavior echoes calls from Eleanor Roosevelt and others for women to take charge and enact solutions. Through the lens of Progressivism, Bristow outlines a plan for her 1930s' readers that requires a combining of Old and New in both the South and the nation.

Although I have attempted to thoroughly examine Bristow's treatment of Depression-era problems and solutions and have argued that her view is strategically aligned with Progressivism, I have not been able to explore all of the questions surrounding Bristow's

trilogy. I would like to propose a few additional questions that have emerged in the course of my research, in hopes that this project will extend into further study of Southern authors writing during the Great Depression.

First, and most obviously, I have not examined any other Southern authors who were writing in the 1930s. Besides mentioning William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Mitchell and a few others, I have not examined them closely in concert with Bristow's trilogy. Two things come to mind that would be important for further study. One goal would be to take a close look at Southern authors participating in the Southern Renaissance of literature who were, whether they claimed it as their purpose or not, trying to define themselves and their region in relation to the nation. Another fruitful avenue would be a comparison of Bristow to Margaret Mitchell that examines gender, race, and Progress. *Gone With the Wind's* longevity and *Scarlett's* notoriety both beg to be examined side-by-side with *The Handsome Road* and Corrie May Upjohn.

I did not even attempt to address in a thorough way the issue of race and race relations either as portrayed by Bristow or in the 1930s and I believe that Bristow's Plantation Trilogy is an important platform from which to examine racial tensions in the South. These novels, especially coupled with others of the 1930s, open doors to discussion and understanding of race relations in the South both in the historical context of the texts' settings as well as during the period when they were written. Despite my focus on women, class differences, and white poverty in the novels, Bristow's treatment of the issue of slavery and its aftermath illuminates the myriad ways in which many Southern writers of her generation were trying to tell the truth about slavery, the Civil War, and race in the South.

Finally, Bristow's novels could be productively studied through the feminist lens as each novel portrays strong, smart women with agency. The novels illustrate the ways in which strong women can confront challenges, and the ways in which they struggle and succeed through hard work and ingenuity in the face of adversity. Bristow's focus on the female perspective is an important lens through which the roles of Depression-era women can be studied as they navigate the changing attitudes and beliefs about gender roles. Equally important would be an examination of the performative aspect of the female characters in the first two novels all of whom perform their gender roles.

This study of Gwen Bristow's Plantation Trilogy demonstrates that even the most commonplace works of fiction offer valuable lessons in research and scholarship. The recovery of Gwen Bristow's Depression-era fiction has offered a unique perspective from which to view the Great Depression and the changing roles of women in the 1930s. Bristow's contributions to the genre of American popular fiction cannot be ignored. Furthermore the Plantation Trilogy should be offered as evidence that best-selling fiction can offer critical social commentary, solutions to serious problems, and hope during hard times.

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ABSTRACT

GWEN BRISTOW'S PLANTATION TRILOGY: INVOKING THE PAST TO COPE WITH THE DEPRESSION-ERA PRESENT

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Gwen Bristow's best sellers had all but disappeared from bookshelves, libraries, and the memories of American readers until recently when several of her more popular historical novels were reissued. Although some of Bristow's novels are available, her most important work, a three-part series that would eventually be called *The Plantation Trilogy*, has been largely ignored by scholars. Yet, of particular import are the ways in which Bristow uses the genre of the historical novel to further an agenda that gives insight into several important issues of her own time, the 1930s. Bristow sets her narratives in previous time periods to address the needs of the Great Depression era from a safe distance. She is specifically concerned with how people can and do cope with the Depression, how the South is defining itself culturally and regionally, and how the changing roles of women are informed by the ideology of Progressivism.