



R. Douglas Hurt, ed. *African-American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003. viii + 227 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1471-3.

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Published on H-South (December, 2005)

Retrieving the Black Rural Past

History is a product of the imagination. Facts, sources, data, and artifacts are all important, but it is imagination that shapes the remains of the past into history. This fact is plain to those who work with the scant records of the long-ago past, but is equally true for those whose sources are more recent and more voluminous. Despite its proximity to the present, the recent past is still a different country; writing its history requires no less imagination. The recent history of the rural South illustrates this well. The radical transformation of the southern countryside over the past half-century provides tangible proof of the historical distance created by even a few decades. Looking out on the region's sprawling neoplatations and multiplying McMansions, one is hard-pressed to bear in mind that the seemingly empty acres these fill were not long ago home to tens of thousands of farm families and vibrant rural communities. Further complicating attempts to envision the southern countryside as it was is the disappearance of African Americans from the rural South. At the dawn of the twentieth century, for example, African-American farm operators worked a full third of the farms in the eleven former Confederate states; in three states—Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina—black operators worked more than half of the farms. A hundred years later, less than four percent of the region's farms are operated by black farmers.[1] The result of a number of factors, including out-migration, mechanization, and federal farm policy, the African-American exodus from the rural South had profound effects on not only black culture (making it more urban-centered) and the southern countryside (making it whiter than ever before), but also how the histories of both have been told.

In this collection, eminent rural historian R. Douglas Hurt brings together the work of leading scholars in rural studies and southern history to retrieve a black rural past that has remained obscured by historical narratives that have largely depicted the southern countryside as

the place from which African Americans fled. The collection moves beyond traditional discussions of “share-cropping, cotton, and poverty” to explore how African Americans made lives for themselves within rural worlds where one or all of this unholy trinity held sway (p. 5). By and large, the essays cover familiar ground, but do so in a way that places people and communities, not crops or economic forces at the center, providing greater texture to our understanding of the lives of country people.

While not organized in this way, the eight essays in this collection seem to fall into four broad categories that might be titled Structure, Culture, Assessment, and the State. The subjects and approaches of the essays in these categories (which, again, are mine, not the editor's) vary, but together they provide valuable insights into the nature of black rural life in the first half of the twentieth century.

Louis M. Kyriakouides's study of rural migration patterns and Melissa Walker's assessment of race relations in the countryside deal largely with the structures around which rural African Americans shaped their lives. Moving, as Kyriakouides shows by drawing from a variety of narrative and quantitative sources, was a common aspect of life for rural black southerners who moved not only to cities, but between farms and in search of seasonal farm and off-farm work. Rural African Americans often moved in search of new opportunities hoping to mitigate economic hardship and/or racial oppression, but found themselves constrained by dependence on localized credit networks that made it difficult for those without financial resources to move beyond their neighborhood or home county. Despite this, Kyriakouides argues, rural African Americans moved with great frequency, undercutting the notion that debt bound tenants to particular places. Instead, he contends (following economist Gavin Wright's lead), it was the South's insular regional labor market that stunted rural folks' opportunities to

escape the “treadmill” of sharecropping (p. 17). Once this market was opened by the expanded employment opportunities of World War II, sharecropping was doomed and the treadmill broken.

Melissa Walker focuses on the simultaneous elasticity and rigidity of race relations in the rural South. While Jim Crow was largely a creature of the law in the region’s cities, custom largely defined the interaction of whites and blacks in the rural parts. The nature of rural life and work made the physical distance of formal segregation largely impossible, but race relations in the country were often as harsh—or harsher, depending on the location—than those in the city. Despite its regional variability, the rural social and economic order worked to reinforce the notion that African Americans were, in the words of one white Texan, “a serving race” (p. 89). Nevertheless, this order was not static, shifting time and again across the first half of the twentieth century as economic developments reshaped rural life. Understanding these shifts, Walker argues, offers an important challenge to historians seeking to understand the roots of black resistance during the classic civil rights era.

Hints to the nature of this resistance can be found in the essays on black rural culture by Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless and Valerie Grim. Myers and Sharpless explore the centrality of the black church to the lives of rural African Americans. Rural churches, nearly irrespective of denomination, provided a pole around which spiritual and secular life—can the two be so neatly separated?—revolved. Weekly meetings, homecomings, and revivals were not only times for preaching the gospel, but also for reunions, weddings, and community outreach. In time, too, the churches became centers for protest, providing meeting places for groups like the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). The churches provided opportunities for both women and men to work, and largely transcended class distinctions. While often conservative in theology—a fact that often frustrated reformers—the churches nevertheless fit the needs of the rural people who populated them.

Valerie Grim’s essay similarly demonstrates the importance of black culture and tradition for mitigating the harshness of much of African-American rural life. Defining culture to include “any act, behavior, idea, value system, or activity that illustrates how blacks lived and celebrated life at work, school, church, home, and throughout the community,” Grim attempts to rescue black rural life from the denigrating stereotypes that, she argues, long shaped even black scholars’ depictions of country people. Exploring a number of cultural practices, from nam-

ing rituals to food production to community activities, Grim demonstrated that, far from being backward and benighted, black rural culture was “energetic and diverse and included many social, spiritual, and educational activities” that allowed rural African Americans to create “an identity that embraced their expressions and empowered their sense of blackness” (p. 128).

Despite this, black assessments of rural life were, as the essays by Ted Ownby and Peter Coclanis and Bryant Simon demonstrate, quite diverse. Ownby, for example, explores black conceptions of rural life in his essay on agrarianism in the African-American autobiographical tradition and finds a complex understanding of rural life as at once disturbing and appealing. Focusing on Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston, he argues that Washington was the most traditionally agrarian of these writers. Hardly a romantic when it came to rural life, he disdained what he saw as the common intellectual and cultural poverty of rural people, but nevertheless believed the rigors of farm life could provide the character needed to succeed. Du Bois, whose own relationship with the southern countryside came largely while teaching in rural Tennessee and Georgia, was equally hard-headed about the downsides of rural life, but tended to cast black rural life in more idyllic terms. For Du Bois, sharecropping was an unmitigated evil, but farm life and the bonds of community it nurtured were at the heart of the “black folk.” Thus, like Washington, he believed African Americans had much to gain by nurturing their ties to the land. A generation later, Richard Wright was less convinced of the redeeming value of farming. Sharecropping, he showed in works like *Black Boy* and *Twelve Million Black Voices*, destroyed all it touched. However, Ownby argues, these works, especially the latter, displayed an agrarianism that celebrated country people’s commitment to family, community, and faith. Similarly, Hurston held no brief for farm life per se, but reveled instead in the vibrancy of black life in the workcamps and rural communities that dotted the landscape.

Peter Coclanis and Bryant Simon, meanwhile, attempt to explain everyday people’s reactions to life in the country. Drawing on economist Albert O. Hirschman’s model for explaining customer reactions to firm decline, Coclanis and Simon use a schema of “exit, voice, and loyalty” to explain how rural African Americans dealt with the harshness of rural life. Often, rural black southerners found conditions so difficult that “exit,” the act of leaving, was their only option. Thousands quit the land entirely in the first half of the last century to protest the harshness of southern rural life. Thousands more, they argue, voiced

their displeasure with conditions, either speaking out loud—an act that could be deadly—or through the “harder to track voice of ‘infra-politics’” (p. 202). Still others contended with the harshness through “loyalty,” shown in obsequious acts that could win favor from whites while defending the parts of rural life to which the actors were truly loyal: home, community, and family. While it is difficult to classify all acts by black rural southerners within these specific schema—African Americans’ strategy of moving from place to place that Coclanis and Simon characterize as an expression of “voice”, for example, could just as easily be classified as “exit”—this way of describing rural African Americans’ motivations is helpful for understanding not only why some left, but also why so many remained.

Where Coclanis and Simon highlight the individual rationality of rural African Americans’ decisions to stay on the land, the essays by William P. Browne and Jeanie Whyne demonstrate the constraints placed on their ability to remain in agriculture. In both cases, the focus is on the importance of state actors in imposing these constraints. Whyne’s detailed essay on the work of black Extension Service agents sheds important light on the impulse to modernize southern agriculture. Drawing on the model of subaltern studies developed by historians of South Asia and Latin America, Whyne argues that black agents were subalterns who served as intermediaries between the state and black farmers. Unlike the subalterns of colonial India, who often used their position to negotiate the demands of colonial authority, black farm agents found themselves increasingly in line with the state’s designs for rationalized, modernized agriculture and out of touch with the demands of black agriculturalists. By rejecting calls from groups like the STFU for reform and pushing black farmers to modernize—a goal they believed would allow them to maintain a living in a modern agricultural world—agents actually set them up to fail in a world of agricultural production that demanded they get bigger or get out.

Indeed, as William P. Browne shows in his essay, federal policy all but ensured that African-American farmers would not have a place in the world of modern

agriculture. The positivist philosophy embodied first in the development of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1862 and later in its policies during the New Deal, Browne argues, established a regime in which large-scale, scientifically-oriented agriculture would dominate. Neither of these approaches inherently excluded black farmers, but, when combined with the realities of power relations in the rural South, they set the stage so that smallholders and landless farmers (the majority of black farmers) would not have access to the resources needed to compete. While his essay ranges beyond the 1950 end-date set in the collection’s title, he offers a depressing account of how the legacy of these seemingly benign policies has proven disastrous for black farmers.

All told, these essays provide a helpful starting point for understanding African-American life in the rural South. Those teaching undergraduate or graduate courses in southern, rural, or African-American history will find that they are useful not only for providing an understanding of rural life, but also for spurring research. For, while the essays are strong, each contains enough lacunae to warrant further, localized studies.

Notes

[1]. This is, of course, not a wholly precise way to measure the South’s rural African-American population, (or the South, for that matter), but it makes clear the region’s profound demographic transformation of the last century. Data for 1900 compiled from Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, available on-line at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>. Data for 2002 compiled from U.S. Department of Agriculture, *2002 Census of Agriculture*, Volume 1 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), Tables 1 and 43, available on-line at <http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/>.

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Citation: Evan Bennett. Review of Hurt, R. Douglas, ed., *African-American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10985>

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