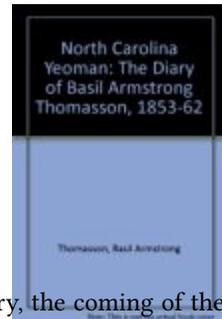


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul D. Escott, ed. *North Carolina Yeoman: The Diary of Basil Armstrong Thomasson, 1853-1862*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. lvi + 355. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1755-7.

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In 1860, about three-quarters of all southern white families owned no slaves. This non-slaveholding majority has rarely been the focus of historical inquiry, in part because its members have for all practical purposes been “silent.” We have countless diaries, letters, and other records produced by slaveholders; we have letters by and interviews with slaves and ex-slaves. But according to Paul D. Escott, the editor of the volume under review, we have only six antebellum diaries written by yeomen farmers (if yeomen are defined strictly as non-slaveholders) in southern archives today, and only one of the six—this book—has been published.

Basil Armstrong Thomasson (1829-1862) farmed and taught school in Yadkin and Iredell counties in western North Carolina. His diary spans the last ten years of his life. It appears here in full, with some helpful annotations and a lengthy introduction by Escott, who is Reynolds Professor of History and Dean of the College at Wake Forest University. Escott appends about twenty pages of “Other Documents,” which shed additional light on the life and beliefs of this young diarist. Escott’s introduction helps the reader put the diary in context and summarizes what can be gleaned from it about Thomasson’s attachment to family and religion, his education and efforts as a common school teacher in the region, his attitudes about reform and social improvement, his views of women, marriage, and gender roles, his economic and political attitudes, and his significance for the exploration of southern character and values before the Civil War.

To a large extent, these are the issues that interest Escott and most other historians of the southern yeomanry. Some of the issues do figure prominently in the diary itself, but others are barely mentioned by Thomasson. Readers hoping to find extensive treatment in the

diary of political issues, race, slavery, the coming of the Civil War, or the course of the war will be sorely disappointed. These topics figure hardly at all; each is mentioned a few times, usually in passing. They are simply not among Thomasson’s chief daily concerns, if we can assume that the diary does faithfully reflect those concerns. He lived in an area with few slaves, and consciousness of race (of “blackness” or “whiteness”) is very hard to detect in the entries. Though he did vote, politics mattered little to him, except where it intersected with his hopes for a better society (which might be summarized as requiring more faith, education, and diligence and less alcohol, tobacco, and coffee!), or where it involved threats to the Union he loved. Thomasson was a staunch Unionist, did not volunteer to serve in the Confederate army, and was exempted from conscription in 1862 as a teacher and newly licensed minister (in the Methodist Episcopal church). Since he did not live to see the end of that year (and his diary entries became less frequent and less informative in 1861 and 1862 than in previous years), we cannot know how he might have fared as the war dragged on, or what role he might have played in postbellum North Carolina.

Most of the diary’s lengthier entries touch on matters of Christian faith and doctrine. Verses from the Bible are quoted frequently; sermon topics are regularly noted and the ministers’ performances evaluated. Thomasson, apparently like his father before him, was a devout Methodist, and the diary could be used among other things to explore Methodism among the common folk in the rural South.

Most of the ordinary, short entries treat the weather, work, and involvement with family. Economic transactions are also noted, although he seems to have kept

fuller records of these in separate books that have not survived. Escott teases from the diary some conclusions about Thomasson's economic attitudes (he greatly admired Ben Franklin's maxims), but says less about the far greater masses of information about his economic activity – the varied forms of production (growing, tending, and harvesting farm and garden crops; food processing and preservation; keeping and butchering animals; bee-keeping; carpentry and repair of all sorts; blacksmithing; lumbering; making shoes and articles of clothing; or road maintenance) in which he was involved daily, seasonally, or sporadically. His schoolteaching—the main source of cash income during his adult years—was timed to fit the seasonal fluctuations of farmwork. The typical school “year” ran, with interruptions, from midsummer to mid-winter. Thomasson was a hard worker and engaged in a wide but probably typical variety of agricultural tasks, often along with other family members or in-laws. One comes to admire the networks of survival and resourcefulness revealed in the diary.

Of course, not everyone survived. Sickness and death were ever-present realities that tested and hardened Thomasson's faith, not to mention his familiarity with folk remedies and patent medicines, some of which occasionally did some good. To secular readers, his reflections on life's ultimate challenges might seem fatalistic, but he truly believed that God's will was being done, that man's stay on this earth was fleeting at best, and that a better, eternal life for the saved lay in the hereafter.

His wife Mollie seems to have been sick fairly often, and he uncomplainingly (no whining in the diary, at least) assumed her household duties by cooking meals and taking care of their firstborn son Jody. Having experienced genuine hardships (e.g., crop failures, lack of food, poverty), he was grateful for good weather and simple pleasures. He enjoyed the “home” he helped create and maintain for his family. In fact, “there's no place like home” is one of the diary's most common refrains. Piety and domesticity (of a male sort?) figured prominently in Thomasson's world.

It should be added that he was happiest when he also had time in the evenings, on rainy days, and especially on Sundays to read. He read the Bible, other books (religious and secular), and a variety of newspapers and periodicals. He was actively curious about animals, geology,

the weather, the cosmos, and human history, seeking always to reconcile the latest understanding of these with the Bible, correctly interpreted. “Knowledge is power,” he wrote in several entries (e.g., p. 129), and he could not fathom or tolerate the indifference and hostility to schooling that he thought he saw in the parents of his often absent pupils (p. 3). He also disliked idleness, dissoluteness, rowdiness, and violence. As Escott observes, Thomasson comes closer to resembling the prototypical Yankee than the honor-obsessed southerner portrayed by Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Moreover, the “cracker culture” described by Grady McWhiney may have been present in Thomasson's North Carolina Piedmont, but it was not a culture he identified with.

These observations point to an important question: Can we assume that Thomasson or any of the handful of other yeomen farmers whose diaries have survived is typical or representative of the larger group? Certainly, one case cannot by itself refute an argument (Wyatt-Brown's or McWhiney's) based on many different sources. Escott's resolution of this issue (he writes that Thomasson was both “typical” and a “remarkable” individual. Escott's contention that the diary suggests both the common characteristics of the yeoman class and the potential that resided in its individual members“ (pp. xii-xiii) may satisfy some readers, but it prompts me to pose a different question: If not a typical southern yeoman, was he nevertheless in many ways a typical American? Although he enjoyed only a very small measure of material success, his sensibility was thoroughly “middle class,” as the term is coming to be defined for antebellum America.

The diary also serves to remind us that there was an Old South in which race, slavery, and violence hardly figured at all. Seeing the whole South remains an unfinished historical project. We should thank Paul Escott and the University of Georgia Press for bringing Basil Thomasson's diary to our attention, for it illuminates parts of southern history that are rarely seen or written about.

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