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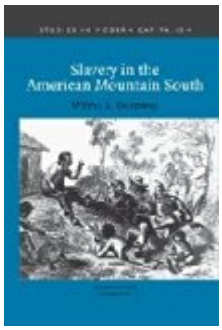

Wilma A. Dunaway. *Slavery in the American Mountain South.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xi + 352 pp. $30.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-01215-7.

Reviewed by James S. Humphreys

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Slavery in the American Mountain South is a well-researched, well-written, and cogently argued study which challenges the prevailing view of antebellum Appalachian society. Based on research in census data, county tax records, WPA slave narratives, and other sources, the book constitutes a significant contribution to slavery studies. Author Wilma A. Dunaway, associate professor of sociology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, depicts Appalachian slavery as more complex than historians have recognized. The antebellum Appalachian South is generally viewed as an area inhabited by a large white yeomen class, a fiercely independent people who disliked slavery and recoiled at any notion of being dominated by wealthy slaveholders. In reality, although slaves comprised a smaller percentage of the population in the mountain South, compared to other regions in Dixie, the institution of slavery, Dunaway explains, dictated the social, class, and economic context of Appalachian society. Dunaway amply supports her thesis, providing arguably the most nuanced view of Appalachian slavery ever put forth.

The mountain South, in some respects, proved to be an economically productive region prior to the Civil War. It produced goods primarily for export, leaving few resources for investment in local institutions. Among the exports were crops, such as tobacco and cotton, and nonagricultural products like copper and iron. Compared to slaves in the Deep South, who were concentrated mainly in field work, mountain slaves performed a wider range of functions. Building railroads, working in fields, toiling in factories, and traversing canals and rivers on rafts and steamboats, they provided labor essential to a colonial economy. Like other regions of the South, the institution of slavery in Appalachia robbed poor whites of opportunities to improve their lives. Dunaway portrays them as a class without hope, wretchedly poor and shiftless. She convincingly demonstrates that many whites never fulfilled the image of the sturdy yeoman and that poverty in Appalachia originated long before twentieth-century progressives attempted to eradicate it. These whites, the author declares, experienced hardships tantamount to those the slaves endured, and the slaves in Appalachia suffered

terrible abuses. Dunaway argues that in terms of punishment, blacks in the Deep South fared better than Appalachian slaves, a surprising conclusion given the benign nature once ascribed to mountain slavery. This contention also contradicts Ira Berlin's thesis regarding the correlation between slave density and white brutality. The higher a region's slave population, he argued, the worse it suffered at the hands of whites. The Berlin thesis, Dunaway points out, collapses when applied to Appalachia. Dunaway explains that in the mountain South whites tended to punish blacks harshly for reasons of social control, refusing, for instance, to allow unauthorized slave visits to surrounding farms to go unpunished. Infractions related to work matters usually brought the offender a lighter punishment. In response to white oppression, Appalachian slaves developed what Dunaway terms a "counter-hegemonic culture" based on oral family histories, intricate songs and dances with African antecedents, and active forms of resistance, such as the hiding of escaped slaves and the stealing of food from whites. These efforts demonstrate that black Appalachians constructed their own unique culture, a development slavery historians have doubted was possible in an area inhabited by a relatively few number of slaves.

Grounded in extensive research, Dunaway's conclusions seem difficult to refute, although they contradict widely held assumptions concerning the antebellum mountain South. One caveat deserves mention, however. Geographically, Dunaway defines Appalachia as stretching from western Maryland to northern Alabama and resting as far east as Staunton and Charlottesville, Virginia. Surely, scholars will question whether Appalachia encompasses such a huge swath of territory. ***Slavery in the American Mountain South*** nevertheless stands out as an iconoclastic work which enlarges historians' knowledge of a much misunderstood institution and region.

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