

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Stephanie McCurry.** *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. 320 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507236-5.

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Stephanie McCurry's superb study of antebellum South Carolina deserves a place on the shelves and reading lists of all historians of the South and the Civil War. In lucid prose, backed up by careful and sophisticated research, she provides an answer to one of the most basic questions about the war and the region, a question best posed in the terms many professors have heard from freshmen students: "If most Southerners didn't own slaves, then why did they fight for the Confederacy?" For her answer, McCurry looks at the South Carolina Low Country.

The Low Country represents the Slave South carried to extremes, characterized as it was by huge plantations, a majority slave population, and a political system unique in the South for its elitism. South Carolina was not "the South" any more than Massachusetts was "the North," but its very nature as the extreme example of "Southernness" makes it an excellent place to ask some basic questions about the nature of antebellum society and its relationship to the political system. McCurry's answers demolish some deeply cherished myths about the Low Country and cast new light on some very old questions in the historiography of the South.

McCurry's book is about yeoman farmers, their families, their religion, and their relationships (political and otherwise) with the planters. McCurry notes that the very presence of yeoman farmers in the Low Country has been written out of history: they exist only as "the people" in the discourse of planter politicians. Ironically, two opposing groups are responsible for this – the descendants of planters, who have found their self-created myth of the aristocratic Low Country both soothing and a lucrative tourist attraction, and antebellum travelers like Frederick Law Olmsted, who assumed the degradation of the non-planter white population and who usually saw in the South what he wished to see.

Through the use of quantified data, McCurry establishes the existence of yeoman farmers in the Low Coun-

try and demonstrates that they were the majority of the white male population in the region. According to McCurry, these farmers owned small amounts of land and possibly a few slaves. Their strategy for survival, as described by McCurry, will be familiar to any student of the new rural social history. They produced food first for family sustenance and then grew cotton for the market. Farmers were masters of small households and controlled the labor of their wives, their children and (if they had them) their slaves. Farm women worked the land alongside the men – a fact of particular historical significance, given the pro-slavery advocates' insistence that slavery kept white women out of the fields.

To this point, Low Country farmers may sound rather like farmers anywhere else in the South, or in parts of the Midwest for that matter. But McCurry understands the political significance of the household economy she describes and never lets the reader forget it. Low Country yeoman farmers were "masters" in a slave society where that word had deep meaning.

As masters, albeit of small farms and families rather than plantations and slaves, yeoman farmers controlled their small worlds and their dependents just as the planters did theirs. As threats to slavery loomed, planter politicians developed a rhetoric of mastery that could be made to include non-slaveholders as well. Students of antebellum proslavery rhetoric will be familiar with the use of the family metaphor to describe slavery: slaves were family, they were dependent, and so were women and children, and to strike at slavery was to strike at – shall I say it? – family values. Proslavery rhetoric frequently tied abolitionism together with feminism as challenges to the God-ordained authority of white men. McCurry makes it clear that this rhetoric was pitched to yeoman farmers, to whom the meaning was clear: an end to slavery meant an end to the privileges of the master for them as well as for their planter neighbors.

McCurry debunks the idea that southern whites of

whatever class were united in a herrenvolk democracy based on race. Rather, yeoman farmers made common cause with planters in defense of the privileges of mastery, but never deluded themselves that they and the planters were equal in power. Yet, according to McCurry, yeoman did not defer to planters or exist in a client-patron relationship with them. Planters had to defer to the rights of yeoman farmers as property owners and masters, since the farmer's rights derived from the same value system that justified slavery. No one in South Carolina could afford to challenge the supremacy of a master (of whatever class) in his home or cast doubt on the legitimacy of his control over his dependents and his property. Planters also had to court yeoman votes. Even though South Carolina was the most un-democratic of Southern states, vesting unusual power in the state legislature, no one could get elected to that legislature without the vote of "the people."

*Master of Small Worlds* uses gender as a category of analysis in a very sophisticated way. As noted above, gender relations help explain much about support for slavery. Gender roles – the parts played by men and women – also factor into McCurry's discussion of class relations and religion. One of the most amusing, and at the same time saddening, parts of the book is McCurry's description of the "gendered" relationships between planters and yeoman families. Men from both classes met in the militia and at political rallies (although their different status was marked at such places), but planter women and farmers' wives rarely met at all. When they did, their interactions as described by McCurry give the lie to any notions of cross-class sisterhood.

Religion, McCurry says, acted as a powerful unifying force in South Carolina – a force that was firmly pro-slavery. Beginning in the early 19th century, revivals converted much of the white population of the Low Country to evangelical Christianity. Planters and yeomen worshipped at the same churches, although seating indicated the man's status. McCurry does not believe that the evangelical impulse in the Low Country was ever seriously anti-slavery. From the first, evangelical preachers upheld the mastery of God and white men. Churches exhorted dependents to be obedient and submissive to their masters, whether those dependents were women,

children or slaves. Although congregations occasionally intervened to discipline men whose treatment of their wives was truly awful, ministers asserted that emancipation for women or slaves was unnatural and would end Christian civilization.

When Lincoln's election forced the secession crisis in South Carolina, evangelical ministers led their flocks out of the Union. McCurry points out that the insistence from the pulpit that God was on the side of the South was a critical factor in rallying cross-class support for the Confederacy. So was violence. Yeomen, in particular, suffered a crisis of fear in 1860 that led them to be suspicious of all strangers and to threaten Unionist neighbors and Yankee visitors to the region.

When South Carolina's men went to war, McCurry concludes, they did not go as equals. Everyone understood that planters had more power than yeomen. But yeomen and planters shared "a definition of manhood rooted in the inviolability of the household, the command of dependents, and the public prerogatives manhood conferred. When they struck for independence in the fall of 1860, when they contributed their part to tearing the Union asunder, lowcountry yeomen acted in defense of their own identity, as masters of small worlds" (p. 304).

Not the least of the virtues of this book is that it is written very well, in clear and entertaining prose. My criticisms are very few. I wish the book had a bibliography. Although McCurry's notes are clear and indicate the depth of her research, a bibliography is still a great convenience to the reader. On a more substantive level, I wish that this book had more to say about the relationship of yeoman farmers to slaves. McCurry reminds us that planters and yeomen were always conscious of the presence of the black majority, but this is a book mostly about whites. Nonetheless, this is simply one of the best books on Southern social history I have ever read. Sophisticated in technique and subtle in analysis, *MASTERS OF SMALL WORLDS* carries that analysis into politics to produce strikingly original insights that will have an impact on Southern historiography for years to come.

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