H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian Schoen. *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xiv + 369 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9303-2.

Reviewed by Ed Rugemer (Yale University)
Published on H-CivWar (December, 2010)
Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason

The Atlantic Economy of Cotton and the Coming of the Civil War

Over the past few years historians have explored the transatlantic dimensions of the coming of the Civil War, illuminating a broader narrative that complements the nation-centered account that has bound most antebellum histories for several generations. My own *Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (2008), Matthew Guterl's *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (2008), Matthew Clavin's *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (2010), and the book under review by Brian Schoen have shown how important developments in the Caribbean and Europe were to contemporary actors in the drama of the Civil War era. While the first three books focus on how Americans were influenced by the struggles over Caribbean slavery, Schoen's work emphasizes the transatlantic scope of the political economy of cotton that proved so important to the U.S. economy and to the confidence southern secessionists had in their region's ability to declare independence and prosper in 1860.

Focused on the Lower South cotton growing states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, Schoen's book traces the growth of the political economy of cotton from its emergence beginning in the late 1780s through secession in 1860. Historians of the cotton South have privileged the story of slavery's expansion and its political defense during this era and rightfully so, but Schoen's emphasis on "the study of *political economy*" (emphasis in the original) offers a useful corrective by privileging the arguments about economic policy, especially tariffs, to more fully illuminate the intersection of "economic realties and ideological beliefs" that shaped political behavior and decision making. Schoen de-emphasizes the politics of slavery in this book not because he sees it as unimportant, but because he sees the struggles over economic policy as equally important and wrongly subsumed into the more dramatic story of the struggle over slavery. The result is a deft blend of political and economic history that enriches our understanding of the coming of the Civil War.

Commercial cotton production had not yet begun when the delegates to the Constitutional Convention arrived in Philadelphia in the spring of 1787. But in South Carolina and Georgia, where cotton production would take root a few years later, the devastation of the Revolutionary War had left a region dependent on slaves fiercely resistant to any encroachment on the rights slaveholders had long enjoyed. Influential delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, especially Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, secured protections for the international slave trade and the rights of slaveholders. Such protections were central to the "Atlantic-centered understanding of the economy" that held sway in most political circles during the early national period (p. 32). Contemporaries recognized the relative weakness of the American economy within the Atlantic world. They understood that agricultural exports to Atlantic markets would remain important and that in the South the labor would come from slaves.

The emergence of cotton as a major American export began in the 1790s and Schoen details this oft-told history with British actors as well as Americans. Schoen's account encompasses the South, the Bahamas, and the industrial midlands of England. British colonial officials distributed cotton seeds to Loyalists in the Bahamas and some of these seeds came into the hands of Carolinians. British cloth manufacturers sent representatives to the South to encourage cotton production, and most important, the British merchants of Charleston who had fled during the Revolution were able to reconstitute their community relatively quickly after the war. Despite the Anglophobia of the era, an Anglo-American cotton trade developed fairly rapidly. While Britain imported

only a miniscule percentage of its cotton from the United States during the 1780s, just ten years later 25 percent of Britain's cotton came from the United States and by 1810 more than 50 percent of Britain's cotton imports were southern grown (see chart on page 47).

While Federalists like Pinckney had been central to the defense of slavery in 1787, by the late 1790s most cotton planters identified with Thomas Jefferson's National Republicans. This stemmed in part from the antipathy in South Carolina between the underrepresented farmers of the upcountry and the aristocrats of the lowcountry where rice and Federalist politics predominated. Jefferson's political economy attracted a broad set of constituencies in every part of the Union that included slaveholding cotton planters. Jefferson's acquisition of Louisiana and the continuing conquest of the southern Indians created space for cotton growing to expand and flourish. Yet Jefferson's economic nationalism put severe strains on cotton planters, especially with the embargo of 1808. Schoen follows the debates that led to this policy, showing how both nonimportation and nonintercourse policies were rejected as inequitable among the diverse interests of the Jeffersonian coalition, resulting in the extreme policy of embargo. Cotton state political leaders supported embargo not simply out of partisan loyalty, but also because they believed that Britain's dependence on American cotton would make economic coercion an effective diplomatic tool. When embargo too failed to restrain Great Britain, cotton state southerners like John Calhoun were at the forefront of the war movement, and Schoen explains the decision to go to war in 1812 as an effort to not only curb British aggression, but also "to preserve the cohesion behind Republican economic federation" (p. 89).

Calhoun and his allies did not forget the lessons of 1808, and as the two-party system of Whigs and Democrats started to take shape in the late 1820s, the defense of slavery and the tariff became major issues of political (and sectional) contestation. Schoen challenges histories of this era that push the tariff debates into the fuzzy background of political combat. As cotton growing expanded and the price for cotton on the New York and London markets went down, cotton planters feared that high tariffs on imported manufactured goods, like so-called Negro cloth, would eventually make cotton and slavery unprofitable. While Schoen acknowledges that the political struggles over slavery provided most of the "emotion" behind the fiery rhetoric over Missouri, he suggests that the tariff was an even more intractable issue. After all, Schoen argues, "it took [only] two years to settle the debate over Missouri [while] it took twelve years" and the violent threat of Nullification "to reach a compromise over tariff policy" (p. 111). This piece of the argument seems overstated. While I am convinced that tariff policy was of genuine importance, it is difficult to imagine the military preparations that did take place in South Carolina in 1832 as resulting from the conflict over the tariff. The debate over Missouri may have resolved the status of Missouri, but it did not resolve the underlying issue of the western expansion of slavery. This would only be settled through civil war.

Schoen is far more compelling when he reframes the annexation of Texas. Like other historians, Schoen places annexation in an international context, but his emphasis on political economy deepens our understanding of this event. After the Nullification crisis, proslavery became an increasingly important plank for Democrats as northern mobs attacked abolitionists and southern thinkers like William Harper developed a flexible defense of slavery that they easily adapted to British abolition in 1834. As the second party system emerged,c cotton became the single most important U.S. export and free trade ideology became ascendant in Great Britain, which cotton planters could celebrate despite British abolitionism. When Britain appeared to support an independent Texas, annexationists like Duff Green and Calhoun blended nationalism with an argument from political economy that undermined British abolitionist accomplishment (and therefore American abolitionism). If read according to the export trade statistics that cotton planters favored, West Indian emancipation had clearly failed, and they explained this with the racist caricature of the lazy black worker. With the superiority of slavery apparently demonstrated, the Deep South became ever more dedicated to the expansion of slavery, and because most antislavery northerners were Whigs, dedicated to the Democrats. In my own account of Texas annexation I emphasized the fear of an abolitionist Great Britain, which southerners like Robert Monroe Harrison, Abel Upshur, and Calhoun believed capable of supporting an independent Texas that abolished slavery. In their view, Texas might have provided a haven for runaway slaves and, most extremely, a base to launch slave insurrections. But Schoen rightly points out that southern cotton growers were equally concerned with the development of Texas as an independent source of cotton for Britain's mills. Southern cotton growers did not want a competitor, but rather wanted access to the lands of eastern Texas for the expansion of their industry. For Schoen, Texas annexation was the ultimate accomplishment of cotton state political leaders within the Democratic Party, and it emboldened them for the political battles to come.

Texas annexation happened at almost the precise moment that the British Parliament abolished the Corn Laws, those time honored statutes of protection whose fall inaugurated the era of free trade. Cotton prices rose in 1846 and 1847, and despite the European revolutions of 1848 cotton continued to rise in the 1850s. Southern confidence in cotton had never been greater and it created the foundation for secession. The compromise of 1850 effectively killed the Whig Party in cotton states leaving no viable opposition. While Schoen does not take the reader through each of the political crises of the 1850s, he illuminates the clear progression of cotton-based arguments that rested on an economic foundation that must have seemed real and permanent to Deep South secessionists in the aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860.

Schoen's book exemplifies the importance of monographic literature to the process of deepening our understanding of the coming of the Civil War. While I remain convinced that the political struggles over the future of slavery were central to the deepening sectional conflict, Schoen's thorough account of the political economy of cotton demonstrates the economic foundation for the Deep South's bold movement toward secession. Moreover, Schoen extends the transatlantic dimensions of this era; just as the politics of slavery were shaped by developments in the Caribbean and Europe, so too did the political economy of cotton stretch throughout the Atlantic world. This book should be read by all those interested in broadening their understanding of both the Atlantic world of the nineteenth century and the coming of the American Civil War. The book would also prove useful in a graduate seminar on antebellum politics.

I picked up only one error in this book; on page 162, Schoen states that the British and the French had abolished slavery in the 1830s. In fact, while the National Assembly did abolish slavery in 1794, which confirmed the de facto abolition that had already taken place in Saint Domingue, Napoleon restored slavery in 1802. While the Haitian Army defended the abolition of slavery in Hispaniola, slavery was successfully restored in Martinique and Guadeloupe, not to be abolished until 1848.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Ed Rugemer. Review of Schoen, Brian, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30490

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.