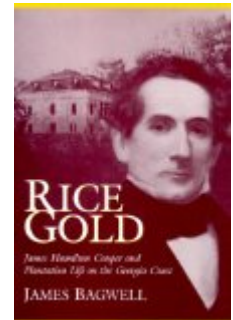


James Bagwell. *Rice Gold: James Hamilton Couper and Plantation Life on the Georgia Coast.* Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2000. xvi + 191 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-86554-651-6.



Reviewed by Tim Lockley

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James Bagwell has written a fairly standard biography of Georgian rice planter James Hamilton Couper. Couper was born into a noted and wealthy family and enjoyed a privileged upbringing that permitted him to follow his father's footsteps as a planter. In later life he lived an aristocratic lifestyle that befitted his station. While Couper was undoubtedly an important and educated man, whose cartographic skills and zeal for technical and agricultural development were noted by his contemporaries, the portrait that Bagwell paints of him ultimately amounts more to a hagiography than a biography.

Indeed Bagwell's unwillingness to uncover anything negative about his subject makes his portrait seem one dimensional. We are told little, for example, about Couper's immediate family, aside from what is really necessary. An interpretation of Couper's familial household relationships, along the lines of historians such as Stephanie McCurry, would have been enlightening, but is not forthcoming.[1] The author's preference seems to be for a standard chronological narration, which he enlivens with dramatic

episodes. Thus we get a whole chapter covering Couper's rescue of fellow passengers from the wreck of the sinking *Pulaski* in 1838. While Couper's actions were no doubt heroic, Bagwell's use of language such as "an ill wind blew through Georgia in 1838, bringing disaster" (p.37) is more suited to a novel than an academic book.

If the shortcomings of this book were limited to narrative style, they could perhaps have been overlooked. However, some serious scholarly problems are also apparent. Although Bagwell does use primary sources, mainly letters written by Couper, his uncritical reading of most of them is a major flaw. Little attention is paid to the possible bias of writers, and the author's ready acceptance of the veracity of descriptions written by visitors to Couper's plantations is somewhat depressing.

More significant is the treatment that Couper's slaves receive in the book. Bagwell states that Couper was "one of the most benevolent slaveholders" (p. xiv), that he was "enlightened" (p. xi), and that he placed great store on "honor, integrity [and] morality" (p. xii). However, Couper

was still a slaveholder, and while many visitors acknowledged him to be far more lenient than other lowcountry planters when dealing with slaves, he remained willing to sell recalcitrant slaves, to separate families, and to extract exhaustive unpaid labour from those he owned. Bagwell's claims for the benevolence of Couper would have been more credible if he had backed them up with solid evidence written by slaves after emancipation. While such evidence may not survive, without it Couper's benevolence is principally attested to by those who were not subjected to it.

Three chapters of this book are taken up with fairly detailed descriptions of the crops grown by Couper in the lowcountry, cotton, sugar, and rice. The detail used here is impressive, though readers might come away with the impression that Couper himself did all the work. Cotton picking is described as "tedious" and "laborious," not for slaves but "for the planter" (p. 57). Given the evidence and arguments put forward by Mart Stewart, in his imaginative study of the Butler plantations, suggesting that African slaves actually had a large part to play in determining how rice was grown, as they had prior experience with rice culture, Bagwell's insistence on the primacy of Couper's influence is puzzling.[2]

The absence of Stewart's research is not the only omission of a key text that should have been consulted for this work. Betty Wood's research on the informal slave economy of the lowcountry demonstrated just how important and significant this part of slaves' lives was.[3] Furthermore, William Dusingberre has written passionately about just how brutal slavery in the rice fields could be, with the ever-present threat of death, disease, family break-up, and beatings.[4] His findings stand in stark contrast to Bagwell's claim that slavery on the Couper plantations was "not particularly onerous" (p. 135). Other work by Janet Cornelius, Philip Morgan, and Whittington Johnson should have formed the nucleus of the

bibliography.[5] Instead, very little published in the last twenty-five years on slavery, antebellum society, and on the nature of power relationships between owners and slaves has been consulted.

Once upon a time all books written about the antebellum south were like this. Unfortunately that time was about a century ago. Bagwell's book offers an undemanding portrait of elite life in the lowcountry. If he had tried to re-assess or re-interpret his subject in any significant way, Bagwell's work would have been worthy of further study. Without it, it should remain on the shelf.

Notes

[1]. Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Lowcountry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[2]. Mart A. Stewart, *"What Nature Suffers To Groe": Land, Labor and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

[3]. Betty Wood, *"Women's Work, Men's Work": The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1830* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

[4]. William Dusingberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[5]. Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *Slave missions and the Black church in the antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1998); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Whittington B. Johnson, *Black Savannah, 1788-1864* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996).

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