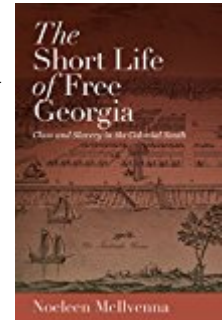


Noeleen McIlvenna. *The Short Life of Free Georgia: Class and Slavery in the Colonial South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 158 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-2403-7.



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Literate residents of eighteenth-century England who read the novel *Moll Flanders* (1722) were presented with both a cautionary tale and a travel inspiration. Moll Flanders was born in Newgate Prison, but eventually leads a life of slave-attended luxury in the American colonies. Author Daniel Defoe created Moll Flanders after his own three-year incarceration in Newgate Prison. Her story resembles that of “the worthy poor” for whom James Oglethorpe and Sir John Perceval founded a new colony in 1732. Called Georgia, this thirteenth and final British colony in continental North America was of a different character than its colonial counterparts. Intended as a haven where former convicts and debtors could gain worth through noble enterprise, Georgia was unique in its initial approach to settlement, labor structure, and the prohibition of slavery. In *The Short Life of Free Georgia*, rather than recounting the familiar story of Oglethorpe’s failure to permanently ban slavery, Noeleen McIlvenna provides a view of Georgia’s class struggles from the political perspective of white colonists.

McIlvenna presents a history of Georgia’s Trustee era that deviates from a standard focus on the increasingly racial justification slavery by addressing the impact of that racism on class conceptions at a historical moment when a free-labor economy was possible.

The Short Life of Free Georgia departs from other recent traditional and ethnohistorical approaches to the region by illuminating the political, economic, and religious processes that blurred the line between the need and the desire for slavery by early Georgia’s elites. After living without slavery from 1733 to 1750, the free white people in Georgia, “fooled by a relentless and ruthless propaganda that claimed the mistreatment of others would bring enrichment” (p. 113), acquiesced to a South Carolinian model of African slavery. McIlvenna argues that although Georgia successfully served its purpose as a buffer against the Spanish at St. Augustine, the real threat to Oglethorpe’s philanthropic mission was the machinations of expansionist-driven Carolinians, who lusted after Georgia’s rice-ready marshes.

Throughout the Trustee Era, the Malcontents, as Georgia's proslavery contingent of colonists were known, failed in their attempts to expel a white working class of expanding autonomy and dwindling deference. Malcontent leaders Patrick Tailfer and Thomas Stephens eventually found South Carolinian allies in their quest for the slave labor and quick profits they believed were owed them by their social status because, as Defoe observed, "Servitude and hard Labour were things gentlemen could never stoop to" (p. 36).

McIlvenna's chronological approach connects seemingly disparate events like the Stono Rebellion, the War of Jenkins' Ear, and the Great Awakening to the ensuing labor shift and the effects of political debates over slavery and land tenure. Originally, Georgia was to be managed by employees of the Trustees in lieu of a governor. Land was free for the laboring poor, and ownership reverted to the trust should the settler leave the colony. Prohibitions on alcohol, in conjunction with a five-hundred-acre cap on land ownership and a system of land tenure that prohibited women from inheriting land so their families could not amass large acreages through marriage, were ideas that were both admirable and infuriating. This blueprint for the salvation of the poor was also the foundation of discontent across classes, but dissatisfaction was expressed in a multitude of ways. While Savannah's working poor were content to smuggle rum, McIlvenna notes that "the breach of the societal hierarchy provoked the better sort into protests of a different nature" (p. 38). The Malcontents were born of this frustration, but their efforts to rid themselves of the charity colonists and replace them with African slaves were impeded by the "death of deference" inspired by the evangelical Great Awakening in Georgia (p. 41).

McIlvenna argues that the proslavery mission of the Malcontents intensified in the late 1730s. Unable to conquer the spirit of equality encouraged by the evangelist George Whitefield and oth-

er Oxford Holy Club alumni, Tailfer combined the concerns of the poor over land tenure and the Malcontents' desire for slavery into one "Representation" to be circulated in London in 1738. The Trustees modified land tenure in response, but stood firm on the prohibition of slavery, a decision that the poor were initially indifferent to but were later thankful for after the bloody Stono Rebellion the following year. The ensuing War of Jenkins' Ear caused many Trustees to focus on military defense instead of the philanthropic mission, while still others "took affront to the lack of deference shown them by those on the ground in Georgia" (p. 58). This perception was intensified by the Malcontents' rumors that the colony had been abandoned by all but Oglethorpe's soldiers and that Oglethorpe was not an efficient administrator. In fact, the marshes south of Savannah were only temporarily abandoned due to the war, and many of the laboring poor received good wages from military-related work or constructing Whitefield's orphanage in Savannah.

Such circumstances left fewer white workers available to the Georgia elites and those who remained expected higher pay, leading the Malcontents to leave for South Carolina. In 1740, Georgia was indeed a colony "where people of all ranks could achieve a competency, supporting a family with a degree of financial security unavailable in England and the potential for greater rewards for those prepared to take risks" (p. 70). Regardless of the rumor or the reality surrounding labor, however, "the imperial security argument lost its power to persuade policy makers in London of the need to keep slavery illegal in Georgia" (p. 76). By 1748, a convoluted system of power-through-debt created by Whitefield's former assistant, James Habersham, that favored South Carolinian planters resulted in "a substitution of hierarchical systems: race surpassed class as the binding identity, cutting off ambition for some while justifying another's success at the expense of a 'lesser' person" (p. 93).

One valuable contribution of this monograph is the exploration of an alternative to Oglethorpe's original plan. McIlvenna points to the Malcontents' argument that slavery promised dramatically increased profits, but the Purrysburg settlement across the Savannah River in South Carolina, also founded in the 1730s as an outlet for the poor, suggests the opposite. Slavery was legal in that iteration of the laboring poor experiment, but small farmers still made their way to Savannah to earn better wages after being unable to afford good land in the area, as the best locations for rice production in were quickly purchased and consolidated among elite absentee planters from South Carolina's lowcountry. Additionally, the Georgia colony remained on royal financial support following the introduction of slavery. Thus, McIlvenna concludes, slavery was neither responsible for Georgia's continued existence under royal oversight nor an inevitable pillar of eventual success.

The author's concise prose throughout this monograph makes it a valuable tool for undergraduates, providing a strong case study for comparative analysis of social class transformation in the Atlantic world as well as for the development of class and race conceptions in the American colonies. The use of excerpts from *Moll Flanders* throughout the text firmly grounds McIlvenna's argument in the debates of the time. *The Short Life of Free Georgia* is a meticulously researched and essential contribution to the study of slavery and society in the colonial South.

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