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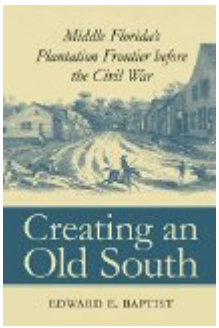

Edward E. Baptist. *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 408 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2688-1.

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Not Your Father's Old South

This book is both ambitious and modest, all in the right ways. Ambitious, because Edward Baptist very creatively weaves together a variety of themes to tell the story of the development of Jackson and Leon counties from the 1820s until the Civil War. Modest, because Baptist resists the temptation to argue that his study of these two marginal counties represents the Old South in miniature. In fact, the rejection of that claim represents the book's main argument and sets the foundation for its most creative and wide-ranging section, on the construction of the mythology of the Old South. Baptist maintains that the image of a changeless regional history is belied by the antagonistic, contingent history of these counties. He rejects the argument, fashioned by planters before and after the Civil War and repeated by historians thereafter, that frontiers developed as an extension of established plantation regions. Or, to extend one of Baptist's favorite metaphors, the white, black, and native American residents of middle Florida were not players following a script, but playwrights in their own right, angrily and violently arguing over a plot written as they lived it.

Baptist argues that planters and more ordinary white southerners, whom he calls "countrymen," came to Florida with conflicting aims. The former sought wealth and power--fertile land with access to markets, and the establishment of hierarchical patterns of racial, gender, and class relations. Countrymen certainly were not averse to riches, but they mainly saw the region as promising independence, which they valued not as a moral ideal, but as an improvement over the humiliating subordination under which they had chafed in the plantation areas of the southeast. Planters and countrymen pursued different ideals of manhood, the former understanding it as domination over lessers, and the latter as the community of white men. These conflicting understandings of manhood constituted the ideological field upon which planters and countrymen struggled for supremacy in antebellum Florida.

Exploiting their kinship ties with wealthy and powerful relations in the seaboard states, planters secured the best and most market-accessible land,

imported a large population of slaves to clear it, and then grew and marketed cotton.[1] Countrymen lacked these powerful connections. By the end of the 1820s, planters had established an uneasy domination over middle Florida, though a fragile one marked by deep tensions. The structure of power marginalized yeomen, for political competitions in the 1820s and 30s were not partisan contests, but slugfests between factions loyal to powerful men.[2] Planter honor also handicapped countryman participation. While historians of southern honor have argued that its rituals served imperfectly to channel disorder, Baptist shows that wealthy Floridians practiced savage, chaotic forms of violence designed to demonstrate their power over others. Yeomen, who were prosecuted for similar forms of violent behavior, resisted through rough-and-tumble fighting, through which even a defeated fighter won respect, and verbal tricksterism, which inverted social rankings without directly challenging planters.

Countrymen gradually built communities that eventually allowed them to mount an effective resistance to planter control. Women were fundamental to this process. Wives' labor gave them some influence. Also, women used evangelicalism to modify men's boorish behavior. Churches became the foundations of yeomen communities. Baptist identifies three sources of planters' decline: the Second Seminole War, the emergence of a party system, and the collapse of the Union Bank, which was the locus of their control. Wealthy men who felt shortchanged by the faction controlling the bank found a convenient basis for an opposition in the national Democratic party. Needing yeomen support, Democrats reached out to countrymen, acknowledging them for the first time as equals. Conservatives, associated with the Whigs, saw their candidates swamped in the elections of 1841-42. The humiliation of the old elite became complete when, pressured by mounting financial pressures, many slunk off to Texas and points west, earning themselves the shameful label of "Tall Walkers," a sobriquet that pointed up the irony of honorable men stealing away to avoid their creditors.

Cooperation between yeomen and planters under the terms of egalitarian manhood continued into the 1850s, each party maligning the other as the champion of banks, gentility, and other forms of privilege. If Florida came to resemble the ideal of the Old South in these years, Baptist is at pains to point out that this image distorts far more than it reveals. Rather than the product of planter design, middle Florida was the product of contingency, conflict, and a succession of planter defeats. Most of them adjusted to the new order, however, joining with ordinary whites in lynchings of outlaws that ritually enacted the unity of the white community. Also, they increasingly joined evangelical churches--thereby taking up "the scorned religion of countrymen" (p. 238), a complete inversion of the ideal of white inequality.

In the book's most ambitious section, Baptist relates how planters coped with these disappointments by writing a revisionist history of the state that elided class conflict, economic dislocation, and other unpleasant memories. Baptist identifies this mythologized Old South--which might be used as a case study of the invention of tradition, though oddly none of that literature is cited here--as a central and heretofore unappreciated cause of secession, an explanation that seems more creative than compelling.[3] Planters' "increasing sense of confrontation with the North," Baptist argues, was fed "most of all [by] a belief in a South that had been and must remain changeless" (p. 264). Leaving aside the question of how one might tally the influence of such a belief, it seems most unlikely that planters would find a threat to their construction of the Old South more alarming than the very real challenges the sectional conflict posed to white racial solidarity, regional honor, and slavery. Certainly, Baptist pays just due to these issues, and his analysis of how the planters'

concept of personal honor evolved into a collective imperative that propelled secessionist sentiment is nicely rendered.

Spaced within the narrative of acrimony between whites, Baptist includes two chapters on the evolution of African-American life. While interesting and well drawn, they are awkwardly integrated into the book. A combination of factors made life extraordinarily difficult for enslaved women and men, who coped by fashioning a vernacular history of their condition, centered on the trope of theft, that contradicted the paternalistic fictions increasingly popular with their masters as middle Florida became more stable during the 1840s. Slaves exploited this sensibility as well as they could in order to wrest some autonomy for themselves, also employing some of the same verbal stunts employed by poor whites. Baptist's depiction of the enslaved community is consistent with the relatively bleak picture of many recent slave studies.[4] Though he argues that the black community grew more resilient and stable, the worlds of enslaved women and men still existed at the whims of their masters--which, as his treatment of the G.T.T. (Gone to Texas) phenomenon illustrates, were too fragile a foundation for stable families and communities to develop.

Baptist's claim that white society in antebellum Florida was the product of a succession of planter defeats is a controversial claim. A large literature, after all, documents the skewed distribution of wealth and political power in the antebellum South which, as Edward Pessen showed, was part of a national trend.[5] My own work, however, implanted a nagging question that ***Creating an Old South*** helped answer. If the privileged were powerful and rich and growing more so, why did they complain so much about American life and their allegedly insecure place within it? Planters had to construct an imaginary Old South because their efforts to establish one of their own devising was decisively defeated by yeomen. They wanted far more than wealth and influence--they desired unchecked domination of their society. They enjoyed control of their homes and workforces, though even here they had to make concessions. But they could not impose their preferred model of class relations, and in accepting equality with socially inferior whites they also saw their own culture transformed.

As this thesis of planter "defeat" suggests, Baptist has little tolerance for explanations of planter-yeoman cooperation that involve manipulation or hegemony.[6] Although wealth and most political offices remained concentrated in planters' hands, on the issue that meant most to them--the terms of manhood--they were soundly defeated. Wealthy and ordinary whites may have agreed to maintain a society in which resources were distributed inequitably, but this inequality was far less acute than it would have been if planters had had their way. Poorer whites won recognition on the issue that they prized--their equal standing in the world of white men--after a process riddled with conflict and uncertainty. Though planters might have benefitted from the racial unity to which this process led, they did not manipulate yeomen into it. Rather, it was the planters who were forced into a position they did not wish to occupy.

Baptist deserves kudos for tackling a subject that historians of the American South might dismiss as marginal. Like many local studies, he has shown how developments in middle Florida can illuminate broader processes. But Baptist had greater ambitions, and here the University of North Carolina Press should be commended for giving him the room to exercise his creative chops. At 392 pages, ***Creating an Old South*** is a long first book. Baptist has made the most of his opportunity, showing not only how middle Florida participated in and departed from the major movements of the period, but in presenting a new way of writing southern history. Historians often pay lip service to the need to recognize contingency, to show change over time, and to respect the

indeterminacy of the past. Baptist has succeeded like no author I can recall in realizing these objectives. In doing so, he has complicated the very concept of the "Old South."

Notes

[1]. Baptist's take on kinship ties is quite different than the study of planter migration likely to be most familiar to southern historians, Joan Cashin's ***A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For a cogent statement of Baptist's position, see his "The Migration of Planters to Antebellum Florida: Kinship and Power," ***Journal of Southern History*** 62 (1996), 527-54.

[2]. Christopher J. Olsen's ***Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830-1860*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), another recent study of the southern frontier, also stresses the influence of primal concepts of manhood. However, Olsen is more circumspect about the influence of political parties in Mississippi. Baptist's assessment of violence, politics, and patron/client relations is similar to that presented in Joanne B. Freeman, ***Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Andrew Jackson's Honor," ***Journal of the Early Republic*** 17 (1997), 1-36.

[3]. Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, eds., ***The Invention of Tradition*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[4]. See especially Brenda E. Stevenson, ***Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); also Peter Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community," ***Journal of American History*** 70 (1983), 579-601.

[5]. Edward Pessen, ***Riches, Class, and Power before the Civil War*** (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1973); and Pessen, "The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality: Wealth, Mobility, and Equality in the 'Era of the Common Man'," ***American Historical Review*** 76 (1971), 989-1034. The literature on southern class structure is large and diverse; for an introduction, see Randolph B. Campbell, "Planters and Plain Folks: The Social Structure of the Antebellum South," and Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Peculiar South Revisited: White Society, Culture, and Politics in the Antebellum Period, 1800-1860," in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds, ***Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham*** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 48-77 and 78-119.

[6]. Baptist especially takes issue with Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," ***Agricultural History*** 49 (1975), 331-42. He's not completely sold on 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), either.

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