



Roger G. Kennedy. *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xv + 350 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-515347-7.

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Jefferson's Old South, A Betrayal of Men and Land

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Using a series of fascinating anecdotes and bold propositions, Roger Kennedy's *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause* weaves together a rich cast of characters to produce "a book about that descent—by no means inevitable—from light to dark," the transformation of Jefferson's hope for a republic of free-holding yeoman farmers into a slave-holding plantation aristocracy (p. 28). For Kennedy, who formerly directed both the National Park Service and the National American History Museum, this moral outrage has added saliency due to the terrible effects that plantation slavery had on the land and on the American Indians and yeoman farmers who inhabited it. Virginians'—and especially Jefferson's—role in key "political decisions, made by narrow majorities" ultimately, Kennedy argues, set the course for slavery's success, the South's economic backwardness and, he implies, the Civil War (p. 2).

Those familiar with the work of William Freehling, David Brion Davis, and Paul Finkelman will not be surprised that Jefferson's commitment to the abolition of slavery was deeper in mind than in heart or action.[1] Kennedy himself seems less than convinced that Jefferson ever seriously considered emancipation to be a real alternative. He mentions Jefferson's racial prejudice and fear of free blacks, but to these traditional arguments Kennedy adds a psychological explanation central to his analysis. The loss of his father early in his life made Jefferson an "uninitiated man," perpetually seeking the "sympathy and love from a band of brothers," especially those who sought the continuation and extension of slavery (pp. 34-37). Such a hypothesis would be difficult for anyone to prove, though it does exemplify the depth with which Kennedy wants his reader to contemplate his characters. It is just as likely that the acknowledged fragility of union itself prevented not just Jefferson but most national figures, North and South, from directly or immediately challenging slavery's existence. It should also be noted that, for Jefferson and many of his contemporaries,

the extension of slavery westward was not necessarily seen as inimical to the gradual emancipation of slavery. As Kennedy rightly points out, the continued profitability of cotton in the Lower South eventually ensured the long-term economic vitality of slavery. Yet even after Jefferson's death, political economists and supporters of African Colonization continued to sustain the belief that diffusion remained the best and most practical way to bring about a more "natural" and peaceful end to slavery. A deeper appreciation for the varying degrees of pro- and anti-slavery thought in the early national and antebellum period would have led to a more nuanced understanding of Jefferson's and the nation's own complicated (if still uncourageous) thinking on the issue. Ever a moralist, however, there is little room for gray in Kennedy's story.

Such contrasts also inform his depiction of the damaging effects of plantation slavery on the land and non-slaveholding people of the Southeast. The viability of cotton in climates below one thousand feet in altitude along with Britain's conscious efforts at so-called "textile colonial-imperialism" perpetuated a plantation economy that stripped the native peoples of their land and the land of its nutrients (pp. 55-59, 97). King Cotton, described as "an overmastering organism," indelibly shaped the political, economic, and environmental developments of the period (pp. 169-70). Kennedy's arguments bring a fresh Atlantic context to southern studies and rightly elevate cotton's importance for shaping political and economic commitments in the early national period.

His interpretation, however, frequently conflates unforeseen long-term consequences with intentionality in a way that misleads rather than clarifies the developments and decisions he examines. Kennedy asserts that Jefferson served Britain's "invisible" commercial empire more effectively than any other American statesmen (p. 166). Hamiltonian Federalists, in contrast, are portrayed as the true visionaries seeking a diversified economy and

economic independence. (It should also be noted that Kennedy believes Hamilton rather than Jefferson served the true interests of yeoman farmers). Yet Jeffersonian-Republicans, as Drew McCoy, Jacob Crowley, Doron Ben-Atar, and John Nelson show us, sought to accomplish precisely the opposite.[2] Anglophobia constituted a central, or perhaps the central, plank of the Republican Party and shaped a political economy (albeit unsuccessful) that was aimed at weaning the new nation from commercial dependence on Britain. It is true that most cotton planters came under the Republican political tent largely because of the pro-expansionist policies Kennedy identifies. But Jeffersonian-Republicans, even more than Federalists, also proposed neo-mercantilist measures targeting Britain; supported small- and, after 1807, large-scale manufacturing (including cotton spinning); and ultimately, fought what many conceived of as “a second war of independence” against Britain. Kennedy almost completely ignores these issues and the rich historiography of early national political economy and foreign policy. Cutting against the interpretation of John C. A. Stagg, Richard Brown, and others, Kennedy interprets the War of 1812, the Louisiana Purchase, and the cession of the Floridas as emerging simply from an unquenchable thirst for more cotton lands (see especially pp. 66, 193-204).[3] Such an approach obscures what may be the more interesting question of how cotton planters themselves struggled to define and preserve their place within national party politics and international geopolitics.

If Jefferson is, at least partially, the villain in this “tragedy,” the work is not without its “heroes.” At the most general level they come in the form of those best positioned to resist the onward march of plantation slavery and King Cotton, namely Indians and hard-working yeoman farmers. Though recognizing their flaws, Kennedy’s approach to both groups borders on romanticism. The reader is told that economically “yeomen and Indians had more in common than planters and Indians” (p. 9), and Kennedy implies that the yeoman and Indian had more in common than yeoman and planter. On a personal note, as the descendant of mid-western livestock farmers, I would like to think the best of the yeoman class. While Kennedy is probably right in suggesting that the family farms and Native American agriculture were considerably easier on the land than the slave plantation, historical reality is more complicated. Historians like Joyce Chaplin, Rachel Klein, and others have demonstrated that many yeoman farmers actively sought to acquire what their eastern slaveholding brethren had, more slaves, more land, and better access to international markets.[4] Whether in South Carolina in the 1790s or Al-

abama and Mississippi in the 1830s it was typically the yeoman areas that desired to keep the access to foreign and domestic slave trade open. Jefferson may rightly be blamed for betraying his own imagined Arcadia of free-holding farmers; he cannot, however, be easily condemned for betraying the yeoman himself.

The same may not be said of the failure of Jeffersonians to accommodate Kennedy’s other victims, the southern tribes and those supposedly representing their interests. Particularly attractive to the author are Alexander McGillivray, described as a Creek leader of mixed European-Indian ancestry, and William Bowles, a Tory resister to American westward expansion. In contrast to Claudio Saunt, Kennedy portrays such individuals as visionaries willing to imagine a multi-racial nation and treat the land with more respect than the slaveholding cotton planters who replaced them.[5] Their removal from the scene, Kennedy argues, allowed agents of Virginia, in league with the multinational firm of Pantan, Leslie, and Forbes, to implement Jefferson’s desired strategy of Indian removal through indebtedness. Not all experts will agree with Kennedy’s interpretation of what took place on the ground and behind the scenes, but the complex political drama that Kennedy evocatively describes is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the most interesting part of this book.

It is probably unfair to criticize a book, particularly one of such a broad scope, for leaving out parts of the story—even this lengthy review cannot cover all of Kennedy’s thought-provoking claims. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how small a role the primary seedbed for the Southwest—the Southeast and especially South Carolina—plays in Kennedy’s narrative. Instead, Kennedy inflates the importance of cotton for Virginia’s economy. A note in the appendix acknowledges the omission, identifying space as the culprit. Still, one wishes that Kennedy would have gone with his initial instinct and told a story “along two parallel lines, one proceeding southwestward from Virginia and the other emanating from Wade Hampton’s South Carolina” (p. 245). The result would have been a more complicated and accurate portrait of the people and politics of the Cotton South.

In the final analysis *Jefferson’s Lost Cause* does more to raise interesting questions than to provide convincing answers. Kennedy’s emphasis on the environmental and political impact that the Anglo-southern cotton trade had—though oversimplified and disproportionately emphasizing Virginia—represents a rich area for further study. It will be difficult for academic historians to overlook the book’s unsupported speculations, scarcity

of documentation, general lack of chronology, and unabashed moralizing. These criticisms aside, the spirit of Kennedy's intervention, his appreciation of historical contingency, and his desire to bring the history of the land and the diverse people living on it to a wider audience are commendable. In this alone the public and the profession are indebted to the continued intellectual and literary contributions of a long-time public servant.

Notes

[1]. Paul Finkelman, "Thomas Jefferson and Slavery: 'Treason Against the Hopes of the World,'" in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 181-224; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, 1999), p. 177; and William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 1, *Secessionists at Bay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 119-210.

[2]. See, for example, John E. Crowley, *The Privileges of Independence: Neomercantilism and the American Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), especially pp. 140, 144-145, 159; Merrill Peterson, "Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1785-1793," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22 (October 1965): pp. 584-610; Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), especially pp. 174-178; Doron Ben-Atar, *The Origins of Jeffersonian Commercial Policy and Diplomacy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); William Appleman Williams, "The Age of Mercantilism: An Interpretation of the American Political Economy, 1763 to 1828," *William and Mary Quarterly* 15 (October 1958): pp. 419-437; and John Nelson, *Liberty and Property: Political Economy and Policymaking in the New*

Nation, 1789-1812 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), especially pp. 54, 135, 146, 173.

[3]. Roger Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971); John C. A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Stagg's detailed examination of the Madison administration's handling of Mexico in 1812 and 1813 further undermines Kennedy's claim that the quest for cotton lands blinded Republicans to other geopolitical realities. "The Madison Administration and Mexico: Reinterpreting the Gutierrez-Magee Raid of 1812-1813," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59:2 (April 2002), pp. 449-480. See also James Lewis, *The American Union and the Problem of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783-1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[4]. Joyce Chaplin, "Creating a Cotton South," *Journal of Southern History* 57:2 (May, 1991), pp. 171-200; Rachel Klein, *The Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760-1808* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Patrick S. Brady, "The Slave Trade and Sectionalism in South Carolina, 1787-1808," *The Journal of Southern History* 38:4 (November, 1972), p. 616; Edwin Miles, *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), pp. 25-26; and John Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 319-320.

[5]. Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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