

Joseph H. Woodward, II. *Alabama Blast Furnaces*. Bennett. The Library of Alabama Classics Series. First published in 1940 by Woodward Iron Company. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007. 170 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8173-5432-9.



Reviewed by Martin T. Olliff

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In 1940, amateur historian and scion of the Woodward Iron Company family of Birmingham, Joseph H. Woodward II, penned this short reference book describing all blast furnaces erected in Alabama between 1815 and 1940. He included eighty entries--seventy-six active furnaces and four that never went into blast--alphabetized by company name. In 2007, the University of Alabama Press reprinted this work as part of its Library of Alabama Classics series.[1] The publisher wanted to rerelease *Alabama Blast Furnaces* earlier, but lacked a suitable expert to write the introduction. This changed when the press engaged James R. Bennett, a trustee of Jacksonville State University, a former Alabama secretary of state, and an amateur historian of the state's iron industry, whose major contribution is a significant work about the Tannehill Ironworks near Birmingham. Bennett's introduction provides a short biography of Woodward, including a discussion of how Woodward assembled the book and the praise it received from such historians as Ethel Armes, author of *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama* (1910).

Woodward opened *Alabama Blast Furnaces* with four historical sketches, organized according to changes in the state's iron industry. His "Pioneer Era" ran from 1815, when the state's first-known furnace went into blast, to 1861. Though enthralled by his subject, Woodward was not blind to its handicaps and foibles. Far from succumbing to a veneration of the pioneer past around which so many myths appeared, he wrote, "In a certain measure the pioneer ironmaster was a courageous man but in his own eyes ... he was simply a business man.... These little furnaces were nevertheless the stepping stones to our modern plants" (p. 18). His "Civil War Era" (1861-65) noted the lengths to which the Confederate Nitre and Mining Bureau went to secure much-needed pig iron, including its partial or complete funding of thirteen new furnaces in Alabama. Here, too, Woodward did not follow the conventional narrative of "Yankee" depredations in raids across the state. He focused on the industry, mentioning transportation difficulties, labor shortages, industrial slavery, and inventions by hard-pressed ironmasters. This section of the book formed his article, "Alabama Iron Manufacturing, 1860-1865,"

published in *The Alabama Review* in 1954. In his very short section, "The Reconstruction Era" (1866-79), Woodward reverted to the then-prevailing narrative of carpetbagger and scalawag rule, but quickly came back to technological innovations, particularly in the change from stone furnaces to iron- or steel-shell stacks.

These three sections were the prelude to what he really wanted to discuss. In "The Modern Era" (1880-1940), he considered the rapid development of the industry in what was its golden age, a time when Birmingham became known as both the "Pittsburgh of the South" and the "Magic City." Woodward traced the growth of iron and steel making in, for him, great detail, tracking technological change, fuel improvements, expanded production, and the emergence of the by-products industry. Here, though, Woodward allowed his enthusiasm to get the better of his judgment. He ended with a booster's cheer: "But of the ultimate destiny of Alabama's iron industry there can be no question. That destiny was decreed aeons ago, when Nature stored huge reserves of coal, ore and limestone in close proximity in Alabama and cast here the mold of a great industry" (p. 30). Unfortunately, structural issues in the industry and in the world economy worked against Woodward's boosterism, and Alabama's iron industry suffered.

None of these essays are particularly satisfying. Though he follows them with a short summary, Woodward did not tell much more about the industry itself than was available in other works available at the time. That is, he did not integrate the stories of his furnaces into a narrative about the industry in the state. The essays are helpful as background and are interesting for the details they contain, but Woodward did not extend them beyond a short narrative.

The main body of the work is its eighty pen portraits and forty-two pictures of Alabama's blast furnaces. Each entry gives the company history as well as a fairly detailed account of the furnaces

themselves. Woodward described changes in ownership, auxiliary businesses, furnace erection dates, stack heights, bosh diameters, construction materials, loading systems, types of ore used, output in gross tons, and other specifics. His coverage was uneven both within many entries (highly detailed technological specifics coupled with vague business histories) and between entries (particularly in the level of business history coverage). I suspect this occurred because his research method was to survey newspaper editors and historians from across the state. This inadequate research resulted in a significant flaw: only when he mentioned it in his text did Woodward cite his sources. Readers are left to rely on Woodward's authority, which itself relies on the authority of unnamed others.

Woodward finished with two appendices and an index. The first is a list of the furnaces arranged by date when each went into blast. He included the name and location of each furnace as well as the fuel source if known. The second appendix is a tabulation of Alabama's pig iron production for 1840, 1850, and each year from 1872 through 1939. Interestingly, Woodward cited his sources for the second appendix.

Alabama's business and economic history suffers from a lack of monographic treatment. Amateur and professional historians have made significant contributions, but most of those have come since the 1970s. Alabama historiography before then was dominated by general histories and reference works, of which Woodward's *Alabama Blast Furnaces* is a good example. This work has significant flaws--its lack of verifiable sources, unevenness, and weak introductory essays. Nevertheless, it is well-written, engaging, interesting, and, if the reader accepts Woodward's expertise, authoritative. Bennett's interesting introduction places Woodward and the book into context. Furthermore, the illustrations of the blast furnaces, Confederate orders, and newspaper clippings are well executed and important (particularly, as Ben-

nett notes, because some of the original prints have been lost over time).

Despite its flaws, Woodward's work was important when it first appeared and is important now. He captured details of forgotten furnaces and provided his modern readers with inside knowledge of the golden age of Alabama's iron and steel industry. Furthermore, the entries are intellectually available to a wide audience (although readers unfamiliar with blast furnace technology should keep their dictionaries handy). *Alabama Blast Furnaces* is a fine addition to the Library of Alabama Classics series and will make a fine addition to the libraries of anyone interested in the iron and steel making industry, Alabama history, or southern economic and business history.

Note

[1]. The series began in 1982 and, though suspended between 1986 and 1992, contains sixty-two titles. Daniel Ross, e-mail message to reviewer, February 26, 2008.

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