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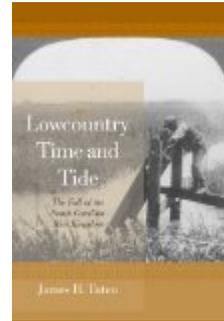
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James H. Tuten. *Lowcountry Time and Tide: The Fall of the South Carolina Rice Kingdom*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. xii + 178 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-926-3.

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Denmark on Tuten, *Lowcountry Time and Tide*

In *Lowcountry Time and Tide*, James Tuten describes the gradual decline of rice culture in South Carolina between 1877 and 1930. Eschewing the “narrowness of economism,” which emphasizes the inevitable consequence of international economic forces, Tuten seeks to return human agency to the story by concentrating on the records of prominent South Carolina rice planters like the Heywards and the Middletons (p. 6). Though he provides commonly accepted explanations regarding the demise of the rice industry, Tuten maintains that the more important question is why individuals participated in the rice culture so long after its apogee. As a corrective, he reminds the reader that rice planters could not and did not predict their own decline. They also understood that rice culture was not just about the land and the labor involved. Using as his foundation Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu, Tuten seeks the deeper meaning of rice culture as social, cultural, and symbolic capital, which produced a shared sense of identity for those involved in the production of rice.

The work is divided into two parts. The first takes a chronologic approach to the rise and decline of rice culture and auxiliary industries like milling. The second addresses the various themes associated with postbellum rice culture, including the changing agricultural practices and the importance of rice culture as symbolic capital. In describing the origins, development, and economic success of rice culture from the colonial through antebellum periods, Tuten emphasizes the dynamic nature

of the crop’s cultivation. Methods varied over time and space, and planters and processors continuously sought the most efficient organization of land, labor, and technology. Though the Civil War more severely injured rice culture than cotton culture, within a year of the war’s conclusion, many planters had obtained the necessary capital for restoration and began efforts to improve rice cultivation within a new context of increased competition, declining prices, and the transformation from slave to free labor. The struggle with free labor eventually resulted in “a complex evolution” whereby there was not a wholesale return to or an abandonment of the past (p. 27).

In spite of the challenges, planters remained in rice culture for a variety of reasons, including, according to Tuten, the importance they placed on their “culturally defined self-identity” (p. 32). For instance, even though many planters increasingly engaged in more profitable non-agricultural pursuits, they continued to participate in rice culture. They also experimented and pursued new entrepreneurial schemes that aimed to improve their profits, including plantation consolidation, participation in the phosphate industry, and professional careers. They did this during a period in which they faced both international economic competition and natural disasters.

Like previous historians of rice culture, Tuten notes the importance of 1893 as a pivotal year. It began with the so-called Flag Hurricane and was followed by a series of

other natural disasters, which destroyed the expensive infrastructure on which rice culture depends. Planters dealt with these misfortunes by seeking out additional sources of revenue, expanding their experimentation efforts, engaging in the timber and naval stores industries, and pursuing secondary occupations. However, after this point, an increasing number of rice planters, either due to financial necessity, natural disasters, or lack of skill, gradually “gave up” (p. 50). Yet, Tuten notes, “It remains remarkable that this last generation of planters clung to planting so tenaciously” (p. 71). Those who held out until 1914 managed a few good years due to artificially inflated prices, which abruptly plummeted at war’s end.

In the second part of the book, Tuten goes into greater detail regarding the experimentation and innovation that characterized the last generations of rice planters. They actively participated in the new scientific agriculture movement, established demonstration farms and experimental stations, and sought replacement crops. These activities led to greater diversification, especially of dry crops, such as soybeans, peanuts, oats, tobacco, and truck farming (alfalfa, blue grass, millet). Though at this early date, these crops experienced only limited success, this

experimentation did aid planters in dealing with new and old pests to rice crops. They also invested in tools to improve efficiency and began the process of mechanization.

The last chapter discusses rice as symbol and food-way. Noting the “symbolic power of the staple crop,” Tuten maintains that in the South, “it mattered what you planted” (p. 98). He describes the symbolic power of rice, highlighting its colonial importance—it was put on paper money and incorporated into architectural elements and furniture construction. Rice held a unique place among southern staple crops because it was also a “staple of the diet” (p. 102), which lowcountry people consumed daily. As part of this analysis, he highlights the importance of cookbooks as a means of expressing cultural identity.

The epilogue carries the story of rice, or more specifically rice plantations, to the present day. Many of the rice plantations in the South Carolina lowcountry eventually passed into the hands of northern financial barons interested in capturing the “plantation mystique.” Today many of the plantations have been preserved for hunting or as nature preserves. These plantations such as Middleton now make vestiges of this once august and powerful mystique accessible to a broader segment of the public.

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