

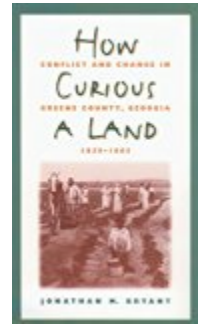
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan M. Bryant. *How Curious a Land: Conflict and Change in Greene County, Georgia, 1850-1885*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. x + 266 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2257-9.

Reviewed by Douglas Deal (SUNY-Oswego)

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Jonathan Bryant has written a solid, insightful study of the transition in one central Georgia county from the Old South to the New. Bryant, who teaches history and directs the jurisprudence program at the University of Baltimore, has put his legal and historical training (as well as his own Georgia background) to good use in weaving together diverse strands of change and continuity in the Georgia cotton belt. While legal, economic, and political issues lie at the heart of this story, Bryant's concern for social relations and for the idiosyncratic contours of personal and family histories also stands out. Together, these facets make for a well-rounded, engaging book. I only wish it were longer!

In ten chapters (and a brief prologue, introduction, and epilogue), Bryant whisks the reader through several early decades (1780s-1840s) of settlement and growth, then settles down to portray the late antebellum order, the crisis of secession, the war years, and, finally, successive phases of postbellum political reconstruction, redemption, and socioeconomic transformation. At each stage of the story, Bryant presents revealing vignettes of local whites and blacks who experienced the prosperity and pain, the hope and despair of these years.

Small incidents add emotional weight to a fairly familiar plot. For instance, early in the Civil War, a young teenager was fatally burned when the costume she was wearing and the Confederate flag she was holding to symbolize the "Southern Confederacy" in a patriotic pageant caught fire from the candle footlights that illuminated the scene; and late in the war, some hardened veterans in Greene County's Stephens Light Guards adopted a starving dog, then tried and executed the poor animal for "desertion" after it had disappeared for a few days

and returned well fed—no Confederate unit could possibly have had that much food to spare!

Closer to the main analytical thread of the book is the story Bryant tells across several chapters of the life of Abram Colby (son of a white planter and his slave mistress), who had quasi-free status as a barber in antebellum Greensboro and then became the most important leader of the county's freedpeople after the war. Though barely literate, Colby was elected by Republican voters to the state legislature, met with political figures in Washington, D.C., and testified before a joint congressional committee in Atlanta. He sought equal rights for the county's African Americans (in fact, formed and led the local chapter of the Georgia Equal Rights Association at war's end), and he tried valiantly to protect them from the political terror visited upon the county by the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, Klan assaults on Colby himself, which nearly cost him his life, were partly responsible for his departure from the county and its political life by 1871. The moral of the story, as told by Bryant, is clear: Despite the hopes raised by their own activism and the nation's promise of citizenship and equal rights during Reconstruction, Greene County blacks enjoyed only fleeting political influence, never received equal justice in the courts, and, as sharecroppers, remained economically dependent on white landowners for decades after the war.

One thread in the book, then, is the familiar "failure of Reconstruction" theme, which is elucidated with particulars drawn from the county's specific circumstances and local history. Despite a large black electoral majority (about 3:2) in Greene County, the Republican party there was fragile and vulnerable, just as it was elsewhere

in the South. The handful of local whites in the party (there do not seem to have been any carpetbaggers) led it in directions that did not benefit the freedpeople. Blacks voted (when they were not kept from the polls by terror, fraud, or economic pressure) and held some minor local offices, but they were completely excluded from jury duty (Bryant does not explain why or how, precisely). This disability, along with the prevailing white mindset in the county—that the courts were there to control the black population, black labor in particular—helped ensure that injustice, not justice, would be their usual fate in the legal arena. Vagrancy legislation, a Georgia Supreme Court decision that drew sharp distinctions between sharecroppers (black) and tenants (mostly white), and a bill that permitted the county court to crack down severely on croppers who violated terms of their court-registered contracts were among the many political and legal instruments used to maintain white supremacy and black subordination in postbellum Georgia. Except for a few well-intentioned sub-agents, the Freedmen’s Bureau did little or nothing to promote the interests of blacks, unless it could be argued that getting them back to work, under contract to their former masters, was in their interest.

Another important thread in the book is the economic transformation of the county once slavery was abolished. An old order dominated by planters gave way to a new order dominated by lawyers and merchants—“new men,” who mostly came from the county’s established elite families. Though already somewhat dependent on the world market for cotton before the war, county residents became even more so after the war—a dependence that Bryant describes in lugubrious terms throughout the book. Of course, before the war most cotton was grown on plantations, but the high prices of the 1850s enticed many yeomen to grow more of it (and less corn). Once the war was over and slavery gone, the pre-war financial structure (the factorage system) that had depended on property in slaves as collateral for loans dissolved completely and was replaced by a new credit system built on crop liens. Via the liens that furnishers and landowners (often the same individuals) had, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and other borrowers found themselves forced, year after year, to grow more cotton and, correspondingly, less of the food crops they had grown before or would have preferred to grow. A county that in 1849 had been self-sufficient in food became by 1879 heavily dependent on food imports from other regions.

Bryant calls this transformation of the economy

“commercialization,” but the change did not, in his view, lead to the development or betterment of the county. Not only was per capita wealth far lower in 1880 than it had been in 1860 (the abolition of slavery, which moved ex-slaves from the numerator to the denominator of the wealth calculation, and the war-related destruction of other forms of property were mostly to blame), but, according to Bryant, the economy was in some ways less modern than it had been before the war. Up to a point, this argument can be followed and accepted with ease, but Bryant also, unfortunately, muddies the theoretical waters by using terms like “capitalist” and “commercial” inconsistently and incongruously.

For example, in describing Greene County planters and farmers of the 1850s, Bryant calls them “capitalists” (p. 204n) who “still acted on beliefs developed in a cooperative subsistence economy” (p. 50). The economy of that decade is variously described as “precommercial” (pp. 54, 204n), “dependent on the world market” (p. 12), “commercializing” (p. 20), and “undeveloped” (p. 52). After the Civil War, he says, a “capitalist ethic” prevailed (p. 167), but paradoxically this did not modernize the economy. Rather, it did the opposite, by “replacing the carefully managed, centralized, factory-like slave plantations with decentralized, family-based production” (p. 181). Even after recognizing that the latter phrase hardly captures the close controls landowners continued to exercise over their labor force, one faces a real analytical puzzle: The antebellum order was supposedly precommercial, yet it was also capitalist, modern, and dependent on the world market; the postbellum order became commercial and was even more dependent on the world market, but it was less “modern” than before the war! A further element of confusion rests in the concurrent claims that the postbellum order was characterized by “decentralized, family-based production” (not capitalist?) and by a black rural majority that consisted mainly of sharecroppers, who were “just hired hands working for wages” (p. 155)—the essence of agrarian capitalism, one would think.

In formulating and presenting his economic argument, Bryant might have drawn more extensively on the work of others who describe the same transformation, sometimes for the very same state of Georgia. I am thinking here of works by historians like Barbara Fields, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Eugene Genovese, Steven Hahn, Joseph Reidy, Lawrence Shore, and Harold Woodman. Bryant lists them all in his bibliography (with one surprising omission: Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*

[1985]), but except for a footnote here and there, he does not really utilize, or engage in argument with, the theoretical insights they offer. Some reflections on the findings of Hahn and Reidy, in particular (since they have worked on nearby counties and the very same issues), would have strengthened Bryant's study.

On balance, though, the book is sensible, sensitive, and solid. We need more studies like this one to give flesh and bones to the generalities we often use to describe nineteenth-century Southern society. I have no reason to quarrel with the fine compliments to the book written

by Dan Carter and Daniel Crofts and quoted on the dust-jacket. It is, indeed, one of the "finest histories of a southern community" that we have (Crofts), and it does have "broad implications for mid-nineteenth-century Southern history" (Carter).

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