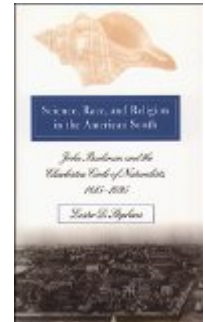


**Lester Stephens.** *Science, Race, and Religion in the American South: John Bachman and the Charleston Circle of Naturalists, 1815-1895.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xviii + 267 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2518-1.



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## Old Wine in New Skins

Lester Stephens has written what he calls a collective biography of the circle of natural scientists who lived and worked in Charleston, South Carolina, in the years before and immediately following the Civil War. An interdisciplinary work that attempts to bridge the gap between science and history, the work is a close analysis of the work and ideas of John Bachman, Edmund Ravenel, John Edwards Holbrook, Lewis Gibbes, Francis Holmes, and John McCrady. The primary argument of this book is that, contrary to the usual opinion, the antebellum South was not a virtual intellectual wasteland that contributed little of importance to the general development of modern science. Important scientific work was being done there, despite the general lack of resources and access to the most recent scientific literature, and despite its unique social and economic structure.

The Charleston circle, as described by Stephens, was essentially concerned with the collecting, identifying, and classifying of biological specimens. They pursued these scientific interests

to the exclusion of all others. Physics and chemistry were of no interest to them. With the single exception of John Bachman, they did not conduct scientific experiments.

The central intellectual issue that occupied the Charleston naturalists was how to reconcile a scientific explanation for the development of species, and especially of mankind, with the biblical story of Genesis. The arguments and counter-arguments that revolved around this issue were intertwined with developing ideas on racial differences and the growing sectional divisions between the North and the South over the issue of slavery. It is not surprising that Charleston, South Carolina, was a hotbed of radical scientific ideas just as it was a hotbed of radical political ideas in the years immediately preceding the Civil War.

For the most part the Charleston naturalists agreed with most other naturalists in America in the early nineteenth century that mankind was created in separate creations (polygenesis). According to this view blacks were a distinct separate species from whites, and, taking the next step, therefore the institution of slavery was justi-

fiable on scientific grounds. This view, however, was in obvious contradiction with the Biblical view that mankind was created in a single act of creation, and, therefore, that human beings consisted of a single species (monogenesis).

One member of the Charleston group, John McCrady, influenced by the evolutionary ideas of Lamarck and Darwin, extended their arguments to claim that societies, like species, developed from simple to more complex by a process of increasing specialization. By this reasoning slave societies, with their division of labor, represented the ultimate next step in a great "Law of Development" from primitive societies to modern. The extent to which politics and the new racial science espoused by the Charleston naturalists were connected can be seen in the large expenditures that the South Carolina legislature appropriated to support the work of the Charleston naturalists, financing their publications and their museums at public expense as a protest against the influence of Northern culture in the South.

The most fascinating figure in this group (and the one who occupies the major attention of this book) was John Bachman. A Lutheran minister, Bachman left his native state of New York for Charleston in 1815 at the age of 25. In Charleston, in addition to his duties as the pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church, he pursued an avid interest in natural science. In the course of time he met John James Audubon, and began a collaboration with him that resulted in their co-authoring of the book, *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* (1842-1854). Bachman's work was unique among the members of the Charleston circle, and of most American scientists of the day, in advocating a biblical view of an essential unity of mankind. For this view he was roundly criticized by virtually all of his colleagues.

Bachman, however, was hardly the hero of liberal ideas in the South. He was not free from either the prejudices or of the sectionalism that infected all of the members of the Charleston circle.

Bachman believed that blacks, while not originally inferior to whites, had fallen due to climate and circumstance so low as to be permanently stamped with their inferior characteristics. Bachman, therefore, supported slavery on both moral and scientific grounds, as did his contemporaries. As the Civil War approached, Bachman supported, as well, the secessionist ideology of his adopted city.

Stephens, however, withholds any criticism of Bachman, or of other members of his group. Northerners, he points out correctly, shared many of the same views. We must not, in addition, Stephens argues, judge these men by the moral values common today. Although many historians have suggested that these men were blinded, and their science suffered, from the moral and social values of their society, Stephens consistently praises the work of the Charleston naturalists. Their talents, curiosity, and hard work, Stephens argues, added significantly to the development of modern science. In addition, according to Stephens, they were relatively unaffected by social context of their day (p.161).

Stephens clearly admires the individuals who are the subject of his book. Unfortunately, this hagiographical perspective prevents him from an objective analysis of their strengths and faults. To this reviewer, the primary personality characteristic that these men shared was their irascible natures. An illustration of this anti-social tendency can be seen in the case of John McCrady. When McCrady joined the Harvard faculty after the Civil War he was too poor to buy himself an overcoat. When a colleague gave him one, McCrady refused to wear it thinking that if he did, he would be accepting charity and accepting his status as a dependent. He soon became ill from exposure to the northern winters and had to return to South Carolina to recuperate. Returning to Harvard, he finally got a new overcoat, and returned the previous coat with an insult to the donor. Throughout the book one story follows another of arguments

and clashes not just over scientific and intellectual issues, but over positions and salaries both between the members of this supposedly close circle and with outsiders. In journal articles and in letters such arguments often devolved into deceptive statements, name calling, and personal attacks.

Despite the title of Stephens's work and its claim of interdisciplinarity, both of which suggest that this would be a very contemporary analysis of the intersection of ideas about science, race, and religion in the American South, this work is largely old wine in a new skin.

It is not an intellectual history, for it does a very poor job at tracing the history of ideas about race, religion, or science during its period. It gives almost no background information about any of the ideas of scientists other than those in the Charleston circle. Lester Stephens describes every excruciating detail of the articles and letters of the Charleston naturalists on the characteristics and breeding habits of moles, and mollusks and jellyfish. But Stephens fails to give us a clear picture of what all of these details mean. To use an old metaphor, Stephens fails to see the forest for the trees. He might have helped the reader by including an explanatory paragraph or two summarizing and comparing the positions of his subjects, but he does not.

Nor is this work a social history. There is almost no discussion about the unique society of Charleston in these important years. There is nothing about Charleston's social classes. Women appear in the book only when they marry, give birth, or die. There is virtually nothing about the role of religion in the South. Stephens tells us a great deal about Bachman's arguments with the Roman Catholic Church, but he tells us almost nothing about the fundamental tenets of Bachman's own Lutheran faith. Outside of Bachman's biblical literalism, how his faith influenced Bachman's life and thought goes unexplored. Events one would expect to find mentioned in any book

about Charleston during these years, from Denmark Vesey to the Nullification controversy, do not appear.

If Stephens had been more familiar with the recent direction of work in intellectual history, social history, the history of race, science, or religion in the American South, I think that he could have given us a more nuanced view of the work of the Charleston naturalists. Stephens, for example, could have discussed Bachman's mission to the black Charleston community. He could have discussed Bachman's African American protege, Daniel Alexander Payne who, when his school for blacks in Charleston was closed, traveled North, and became first a Lutheran minister, then a leading member of the AME church, and ultimately the president and the principle founder of Wilberforce University. These facts about Payne you will not find in Stephen's book, however, for Payne, like virtually every other black person in Charleston during the nineteenth century, is virtually invisible to Lester Stephen's eyes.

Lester Stephens identifies two earlier works with which he takes argument. One is William Stanton's *The Leopard's Spots*. Stephens, however, fails to address Stanton's argument that most Southerners rejected the views of the polygenists, preferring their traditional Biblical interpretation. Nor does Stephens directly reply to Stanton's criticism of Bachman as a racist.

Stephens also takes exception to Robert Bruce's rather common place assertion, in *The Launching of Modern American Science, 1846-1876*, that slavery "stunted the life of the mind among masters as well as slaves." The story of the Charleston naturalists, Stephens says shows just the opposite -- that a vital, vibrant intellectual activity occurred in the antebellum South (pp. 265-266). Stephens has, I think, clearly failed to grasp the central thrust of much of the most recent work in Southern history, the history of slavery, and the history of science. If we have learned anything in the past twenty years, it is that in a

slave society, all aspects of culture are to some extent affected by the institution of slavery, and that scientific work, in particular, rarely exists in a vacuum, but is often driven by social concerns.

The case of the Charleston naturalists could have been used to illustrate these themes. In Charleston and throughout the rest of the country, Americans were actively engaged in constructing new ideas about race. As American society became increasingly secular throughout the nineteenth century, Americans began to find justifications for their ideas about social relations in science rather than in religion. It should be clear that the driving force behind the misguided "scientific" theories of the Charleston naturalists was their racism and their attempt to justify and protect the slave system against the currents of modern inquiry. That most of the rest of the world in their day agreed with these ideas does not mean that they were right, or that we should not bring our moral senses to bear when looking at them. Stephens is sadly correct, however, in suggesting that the work of the Charleston naturalists has had a significant influence on later thinking. The scientific racism that emerged in the early nineteenth century still infects large segments of American society to this day.

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