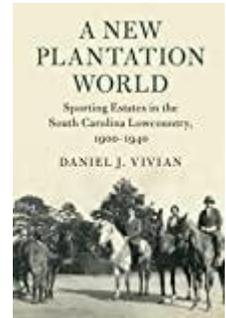


Daniel Vivian. *A New Plantation World: Sporting Estates in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1900-1940.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 362 pp. \$59.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-41690-0.



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Published on H-Environment (August, 2022)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Anne Mitchell Whisnant on Daniel Vivian, *A New Plantation World: Sporting Estates in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1900-1940*

With careful research and a preservationist's eye, Daniel J. Vivian explores the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century process by which northern white elites "discovered" the South Carolina lowcountry, bought more than seventy dilapidated former rice, cotton, and other commodity-producing plantations, and remade them in the 1920s and 30s as elegant leisure and recreational showplaces. Vivian then shows how the newly renovated properties drew the attention of popular writers, whose publications elevated such "plantations" (stripped of their histories as work camps for enslaved Black people) in the public imagination as characteristic remnants of a charming and elegant antebellum southern society. The writers' interest helped spur Charleston's and lowcountry South Carolina's post-1920s tourism renaissance. In unpacking this intertwined series of events, Vivian's book tells a compelling and insightful cautionary tale about how land-

scapes and tangible historical remains can lie about the past.

Vivian unfolds his story in seven chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1 notes that what contemporaries called the "Second Yankee Invasion" had roots in the establishment of hunting clubs on large acreages across the South from the 1880s to the 1910s. Hunting trips introduced northerners to the lowcountry's potential as a winter retreat.

Chapters 2 and 3 describe how northern buyers rehabilitated dilapidated lowcountry plantations in the 20s and 30s, importing ideas and approaches from the established "country house" movement that had flourished for several decades in northeastern locales. These two chapters articulate the book's key argument, that "by tying upper-class pastimes to former sites of slave labor, [the northern buyers] effected what contemporaries viewed as a 'renaissance' while obscuring

memory of slavery, labor, and commercial enterprise” (p. 18).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore two plantation examples, Mulberry and Medway, in deeper detail. Vivian describes the history of each site, where hundreds of enslaved people produced rice and bricks, and inventories the changes the twentieth-century owners made, both to the main dwellings as well as to the surrounding landscapes.

At Mulberry (an eighteenth-century rice plantation), between 1915 and the 1930s, buyers Clarence and Adelaide Chapman removed nineteenth-century changes to “restore” the property’s main house to its c. 1800 appearance, while selectively introducing modern features appropriate to twentieth-century life. Along the way, the house became a “substantially new building with a ‘historic’ appearance,” Vivian observes. In a lovely turn of phrase, he continues, by completion, “the Chapmans’ dwelling belonged simultaneously to a colonial past and a present that valued select remains” (p. 153).

The Chapmans transformed the wider Mulberry landscape as well, with auto roads, new outbuildings, rehabilitated rice fields for waterfowl hunting, and twenty acres of new formal gardens surrounding the main house. The built environment of agricultural production and slavery (rice fields, mill, barns, sheds, slave street), meanwhile, was largely destroyed or so altered that it became “unable to convey a strong sense of [the site’s] historical role” (p. 159).

Although different in some details, a broadly similar transformation took place at seventeenth-century Medway, a rice- and brick-producing plantation that Gertrude and Sidney Legendre purchased in 1930 and remade with a vision that intentionally incorporated signs of age and decay. The Legendres sponsored extensive renovations of the main house, expanded the gardens, and built or repurposed outbuildings and the landscape itself to support estate upkeep and hunting and recreation. When they finished, Medway’s “domestic

complex” was far more “elegant and elaborate” than it had been historically, as well as more isolated and pastoral (pp. 198-199). The plantation—like Mulberry—was “simultaneously part of the past and the present,” caught between two radically different worlds (p. 173).

At both Mulberry and Medway, Vivian inventories how popular writers described the renovated and radically remade sites (stripped of their legacies of slavery and labor) as historically “authentic.” The combined processes (renovations and writings) “offer telling commentary,” Vivian writes, “on the power of material remains to shape perceptions of the past.” He continues: “Material change and new forms of activity stirred interest in Mulberry’s history while simultaneously obscuring large portions of it” (p. 166). As the plantations were remade and stories were written that cast the new sites as material evidence of antebellum southern grandeur, “narrative and material fabric developed a mutually reinforcing relationship” (p. 203). The pasts that were presented—of plantations without slaves—were “anesthetized” and “thoroughly sanitized”; the physical remains and landscapes of the new plantations no longer represented the sites’ productive yet brutal pasts (p. 170).

Chapter 6 inventories the newspapers, magazines, and books about the new old lowcountry plantations that proliferated throughout the 1930s. Focusing on plantation profiles written by Chlotilde R. Martin and Chalmers S. Murray in the *Charleston News and Courier*, articles in popular magazines, the writings of Herbert Ravenel Sass, and the essays in the oversized, illustrated volume *Plantations of the Carolina Low-Country*, Vivian traces how a new narrative about regional history emerged that placed these “plantations” at the center and credited the northern buyers with “reviving” them.

Coverage of these sites “illustrates the deceptive allure of what scholars ... have called ‘tangible pasts,’” Vivian notes. These remains, while seem-

ingly offering unmediated encounters with history, “tend to be profoundly misleading” and “poor guides to history” (p. 247). “As well-informed authorities recounted the history of the region,” he concludes, “they lashed nostalgia for an imagined past to sumptuous retreats that bore little resemblance to the commodity-producing complexes of the colonial and antebellum eras” (p. 252).

Creation of the “new plantation world” by the incoming white northerners came to a close by the 1940s, but the remade, nostalgic *idea* of “the plantation” their interventions reinforced lived on. The process, Vivian concludes, “demonstrate[s] the interconnectedness of narratives and place, the evocative power of material remains, and the implicit authority of the category ‘historic’” (p. 315). The legacy of the Yankee Invasion in “majestic landscapes where vestiges of a seemingly noble past commingled with stately buildings and verdant gardens, all steeped in the charm of time,” evoked “a history the lowcountry never had” (p. 317).

Vivian’s smart and insightful work asks us to critically evaluate any purportedly “historic” landscape or built environment we might encounter. Specifically with regard to the plantation landscape (of lowcountry South Carolina as well as, implicitly, elsewhere), it also urges a nuanced understanding that acknowledges that “authenticity” rarely exists, and reminds us that many such sites exhibit “a *mélange* of elements from multiple periods” that often reveal “little about the underlying processes involved” (pp. 305-306). These broad cautions are worth bearing in mind, as *every* landscape is a palimpsest—its layers as obfuscatory as they are informative.

Furthermore, by probing white northerners’ role in creating a landscape that has supported a romanticized, “Lost Cause-ish” southern history, Vivian demonstrates in a new way how American forgetting about histories of slavery is and has been a national (not just southern) process. Just as

white northerners were implicated in the broader systems of wealth and racial exploitation built upon slavery, they have been part of the process of “silencing the past” that has allowed many to downplay what slavery meant. Moreover, by demonstrating how this happened—on the ground and in popular writing—Vivian makes it clear that it was not necessary for the northern buyers to have had an explicit goal of rewriting history for their interventions to have supported the process of doing so.

For all its strengths, Vivian’s book is at times a tedious read. The text is burdened by many names of individuals who are not adequately developed. Historical phenomena too regularly happen in threes. Major points are repeated perhaps too often. Black experiences on—and responses to—the new “plantations” appear only briefly. And while Vivian’s expertise in architectural history and description allows him to evaluate and draw significance from fine details of the material transformation, it also at times produces a text that is difficult to follow. For a reader less schooled in visualizing “two-over-two windows” (p. 149), “Federal mantles and cornices” (p. 149), a “standing-seam metal roof” (p. 148), “stepped gables” (p. 178), “fenestration” (p. 178), and so forth, descriptions do not readily produce the intended insights.

The problem is compounded by the Cambridge University Press’s visually uninspiring design and production. The relatively few included images are all reproduced at small scale, giving readers few visual clues to help them follow the particulars of the northern buyers’ interventions. An image of Mulberry on page 148, for instance, is said to show the “standing-seam metal roof and ancillary buildings in rear,” but this reader could not readily see either. With regard to the landscapes, a series of antebellum base maps and “as renovated” maps depicting the transformations of these plantations from production to leisure would have dramatically improved the book’s ability to convey the magnitude, nature, and signi-

ficance of the changes described. These critiques, however, should not deter anyone with an interest in historic preservation, landscapes of slavery, lowcountry South Carolina, or the processes of

history from reading this intelligent and worthwhile book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Anne Mitchell Whisnant. Review of Vivian, Daniel. *A New Plantation World: Sporting Estates in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1900-1940*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 2022.

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