

Flush Times & Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson

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Review

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Rothman, Joshua D. *Flush Times & Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson*. University of Georgia Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-8203-3326-7

Assessing Slavery and Society

From the appearance of the word "capitalism" in the subtitle, readers might infer that Joshua Rothman's *Flush Times & Fever Dreams* concentrates on financial or economic aspects of slavery during the boom years of 1830s Mississippi. This expectation would be mistaken. Rothman, who is an associate professor of history at the University of Alabama and director of the Frances S. Summersell Center for the Study of the South, instead tells a series of gripping and often grisly tales of that era. The account begins with fortune-seeker Virgil Stewart's 1833 arrival in Madison County, Mississippi, on the eve of the opening of sales of former Choctaw lands by the federal government; proceeds through Stewart's entanglement with notorious criminal John Murrell; and ends with two bouts of mass hysteria and extra-legal executions: the slave insurrection scare of 1835, in which six white men and at least a dozen slaves were killed; and a somewhat lesser episode in Vicksburg the same year, when five men alleged to be professional gamblers were seized and hanged.

Rothman tells these stories well, evoking a sense of social and psychological context for the main historical actors, so that the actions described become understandable, to the extent that delusional mob behavior can ever be understood. Almost every paragraph is meticulously documented, using both archival and secondary sources, but many readers will prefer to skip the notes and concentrate on the unfolding narrative. The book devotes little effort and makes little contribution to determining the degree of truth in the sensational allegations that were taken seriously at the time. But Rothman is surely right to suggest that beliefs in murderous plots and vast slave-stealing conspiracies were more reflections of widely-shared apprehensions and ambivalences than

responses to objectively plausible threats.

The term “capitalism,” however, seems to mean little beyond a broad expression for a wide-open frontier setting in which rapid settlement was driven by the promise of instant riches. Previous scholars with more social-scientific orientation (specifically, Laurence Shore and Christopher Morris) have emphasized the contrast between responses in different counties, highlighting the relative absence of towns, institutions and established networks in Madison as compared to Hinds County. Rothman dismisses this analysis in a footnote, asserting without further discussion that “the counties were far more alike than they were different and the variance between how whites reacted to the scare in the two places is easily overstated” (361 n. 10). Although the conclusion may be valid – in the absence of quantitative indicators, the degree of difference is after all a subjective judgment – but the dismissal evades the underlying argument, which is that underdevelopment of community institutions and networks throughout the cotton frontier region, especially relative to the influx of slave population, contributes to an understanding of the social bases for the insurrection panic.

Another sub-theme in the book is the insecure and often precarious status of nonslaveholding whites in areas dominated by large plantations. Both Stewart and Murrell were economic losers, trying to advance themselves through unconventional channels. Rothman notes that the whites who became targets during the scare “stood relatively low on the economic ladder,” though the chances of attack were greater for those who seemed deviant in some other way as well, such as the practice of “steam doctoring” (143). The author emphasizes that ambivalence about risk-taking, gambling, and easy money during flush times were national phenomena, not unique to the slave South. As formulated, this statement is undoubtedly true. By emphasizing the generality of such socio-psychological sentiments, however, Rothman misses the opportunity to compare northern and southern frontier cultures more systematically. Geographic patterns of settlement were quite different in the two cases, and the root of the contrast is plausibly related to the institution of slavery. In the absence of property rights in humans, free-state settlement was driven by efforts to recruit scarce labor from the East, providing a modicum of status and protection even to those without property. Ambivalences and apprehensions were everywhere, but only in the South were whites hanged for alleged conspiracies to foment slave insurrections.

In his Epilogue, Rothman argues that the events in Mississippi in 1835 contributed to the coming of the Civil War, by aggravating the regions' caricatures of each other. Northern abolitionists pointed to the hangings as confirmation of the depravity of slavery. Defenders of slavery were not slow to link Murrell and his gangs to diabolical abolitionist schemes. He might have added that the events of the 1830s fostered regional polarization by solidifying southern unity along racial lines. After 1835, nonslaveholding white southerners could hardly fail to appreciate the risks of an insufficient display of support for the institution of slavery.

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