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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THE BRITISH GENTRY, THE SOUTHERN PLANTER, AND THE NORTHERN FAMILY FARMER: AGRICULTURE AND SECTIONAL ANTAGONISM IN NORTH AMERICA

Huston, James L.

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Interview with James L. Huston, Regents Professor of History at Oklahoma State University

Interviewed by Zach Isenhower

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is happy to speak with James L. Huston, Regents Professor of History at Oklahoma State University. Professor Huston previously authored, among several books, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Coming of the Civil War*, as well as *Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemma of Democratic Equality*. Today we get to talk about his most recent book, *The British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America*. Professor Huston, thank you for joining us today.

James L. Huston (JH): My pleasure, and thank you for the invitation.

CWBR: So I'll get right into it because there's quite a bit going on in this book. You're taking on a lot of long established narratives: an industrialized North growing apart from an Agrarian South; capitalist development in the North growing antagonistic to the outmoded southern economic model; a matter of free labor versus slavery; but you argue that all of these are incomplete explanations at best for sectional antagonism. So instead, the source of sectional antagonism lies in agriculture?

JH: That is the thesis of the book and it is there because of landholding patterns. Small farms in the North and large estates in the South, and that particular antagonism is, I think very evident in Europe, and the transference to North America demonstrates how the large landholders and the small landholders have a continuous battle going on. Now just as an aside the industrialized North growing apart from agrarian South let me just add to that by saying, it is growing apart in certain ways of mechanization and perhaps some social relations and what have you. But even John C. Calhoun recognized by 1848 or 1849 that the Northern industry was complimentary to Southern agriculture. They weren't in competition. That's part of the problem with that model. Where is the competition between the two? They actually kind of work together. As for the matter of labor relations, I have long argued that slavery was a threat to all kinds whatever kind of free labor was going on in the North. It's just that it seems to me that so much of the literature has focused on wage labor in cities and has not looked at the way that wage labor was operating in the countryside. At any event, from the way I set it up, and looked at the landholding patterns, there is a moment of explicit collision and that is 1854 with the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

CWBR: So it's not necessarily that there is no tension in the economic systems or in the labor but that, that tension doesn't originate with the labor, it doesn't originate with the economic systems, it all comes down to the landholding patterns?

JH: Yes I would argue that. The landholding patterns actually spin off different ideological formulations, different understandings of the way you work with other people, a different actually a sense of mastery. The large landholder is going to have a sense of mastery over others, whereas in the small farm environment, you have to master yourself in order to make the family farm operate. When you get a collision, the collision is going to be that the large operators are going to have this sense of mastery over others and it's going to get picked up. That's how I look at it.

CWBR: So towards the beginning of the book, it's not unusual for books talking about sectional antagonism to go well back into the Antebellum period, but you go back a little further you take readers clear back as far as 1066, on another continent. When you were starting out did you have an idea that this research was going to take you that far back, or was that somewhat surprising?

JH: It was a total surprise. I expected to go to 1840 and stay in the United States. But the question arose who were yeoman? What was involved? All I had was the background notion that most of us gain going to grad school. And so I got out Wallace Notestein, New American Nation series, out in 1960, *The English People on the Eve of Colonization*, and there it had a section on yeoman but also on farm labor, which was originally in *The English People on the Eve of Colonization* wage labor, and that just struck a bell right there so I just pursued it. I kept trying to find yeoman in England and I ultimately came to the opinion that they were sort of a mystical beast. I have to say 1066 to about 1450 was just a mess in terms of manors and land distribution patterns and the type of land tenure systems they had. But probably about 1500-1550 it develops into the large estates, tenant farms, and massive agricultural labors, and that's the contrast either I had forgotten about or I was ignorant of, but that's the contrast that then plays a major role in my understanding of how agriculture in North America develops. You know I have to say it was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed getting out of the United States and going into agricultural development in parts of Europe and particularly in Great Britain. But yeah it was a total surprise. I didn't expect to be doing this at all.

CWBR: I was also surprised by how significant, in Northern agriculture, the early experiments by the Puritans were to this whole thing. I expected ok, a book on agriculture, it's going to be looking very heavily at plantations and slavery and the sort of the expected set of elements, but with going to Europe and then looking at that transference to North America it seems that you sort of revived a little bit of the centrality to that Puritan experiment in the overall narrative.

JH: Which also was a bit of a surprise, but I had to figure out why the estate system of English agriculture did not grow in the northern states, and northern colonies. I ultimately came to conclusion that they just couldn't transfer a good, cheap labor source. The tenant labor for example on the Van Rensselaer Estates and the patroons on the Hudson River could not generate the income necessary to live like a true English high gentry aristocrat. Thus if you wanted to make money you went to the city. That meant that the people who were willing to put in the work on a small farm were going to be able to get a farm, which is very different from what happened in England. I had to work somehow to explain that really gross deviation, where in the Southern states because of an early discovery of tobacco, later on rice and then cotton, they found sort of a monopoly crop that could sustain large landholdings if they got a cheap source of labor, and that was slavery.

CWBR: When with the lack of cheap labor in the North I found it very interesting that yes, in order to achieve a certain standard of living Northerners may have been drawn to the cities, but their savings rates really seemed to upset assertions that later, free labor is all about basically forcing labor into the lowest possible wages, sort of imposing top-down capitalism on Northern farmers. Because not only are these Northern farmers they seem far more agrarian than their Southern counterparts but also they don't really even seem that poor.

JH: I did the best I could with the numbers I could get from [Jeremy] Atack and [Fred] Bateman, *To Their Own Soil*, which gives income in the various states, approximately the average, and working that out on a family basis. I put it between about \$800-\$1000 a year, that's income of course. That's not profit, that's income. So I guess on average some of these farmers are probably saving maybe \$100 maybe \$150-\$200 a year. Those are a little bit guesses. I have to say that some questions of just important numbers that you would want to have, not really existing in the literature. So I took some leaps of faith, just to get it out as to what kind of income would indicate what kind of standard living. The way it sort of shook out is the northern farmer, the average northern farmer, is probably would be what we call a lower-middle class position. Maybe to a middle class position, in income. Soon as you hit the word "class" you're getting into a whole other realm of behaviors and manual labor versus mental labor versus leisure and things like that. But just in terms of income, they are considerably above subsistence, they're nowhere near luxury. Does that answer your question?

CWBR: Yes, yes. And then to push a little further, despite the fact that much is made of the larger cities being in the North, how is it that these smaller farms, very small farms compared to the Southern plantations, were the backbone of those larger Northern cities?

JH: First off the question of Northern cities the first thing I would probably say is that Northern cities develop because of trans-Atlantic trade. It's the Boston merchants, the New York merchants are involved in the cotton trade, the rice trade with the West Indies, with China. They're making money that's outside the sphere of agriculture *except* to the point of local farms near the cities, there you're going to get an exchange. When you get closer into the two decades prior to the Civil War than you get the railroads and the great grain trade and the Great Lakes and the canal trade. Then it's a question of rural areas supplying the urban areas with food which becomes, actually, a great economic locomotive for decades, if

not a century. Why the cities grow though is not necessarily connected to Northern farms. People gravitate to cities, some of which because they don't like farm work Horace Greeley being a good example, actually a whole bunch of Republican leaders

CWBR: Abe Lincoln as well right?

JH: Well it's a lot of work and you know not everybody wants to put in that much effort just to get a competence. So why Northern cities kept growing, you're not going to find a lot of answers out of rural America. Rural America, rural Northern society rather, produces small towns because a small farmer cannot keep a small farm going without artisan/craftsmen help. You have to have blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers (bootmakers in particular). You have to have carriage makers. There's a host of craft disciplines that small farmers need. I ran into a number of times these family farmers were trying to repair their wagons or their carriages or whatever, and all they did was hurt themselves. So the small family farms needed to be serviced and that's where you get the small towns. As it becomes more commercial then these small towns start to need some credit facilities and merchants who are making long distant travels, gives rise to the regional city, and as commerce further develops, they get attached then to the core cities: New York, Boston, Philadelphia later on Cleveland, Chicago probably. To contract this quickly, I don't know why the great cities grew great. My real answer probably would be, and it's not in the book, its immigration. European immigrants are the ones who flood to the cities.

CWBR: But what this does suggest is that those small towns are really important to that network and that's major point of divergence from the plantation complex.

JH: Oh yes, that's right. Actually the point I make about the plantation is the comparison between a free society, as it turns out northern agricultural society, and the plantation is the difference between the town setting in the north and the slave community. Because the slave community on the large plantations is actually the reflection of the artisanal needs of the agricultural community in the south. That's where you have the slave artisans and the difference in housing, standard living, and everything else is reflected in the difference between the small northern town and the slave community.

CWBR: And the effect that the plantations have on populations in the South, I thought was particularly fascinating that yes, the plantations are engines to some extent for westward migration, but not because these plantations are simply using up soil and then moving westward. It's because they're engrossing their landholding and pushing people westward.

JH: I think yes they are pushing some people out. It's a long term process, it was a long term process in England, and I think the parallel works. The problem is the sons and the daughters of small farmers. Where they going to get the land to have their small farm? The northern farms of the states that compose the Union in 1850, was about 880,000 I think. It's going to grow in the same states to over about 2.1 million in 1900-1910. They're still multiplying small farms up there, but in the southern states where you have the plantations of thousands and thousands of acres, you're not going to have the spare land for extra small farms, and I think that's the crisis the yeoman were facing in the South. The plantation was undercutting the yeoman's society in the South.

CWBR: I also want to talk about the plantation's ability to exert that kind of influence as it seems to me essentially a very capitalist enterprise. I mean this requires capital to make one large and then it sort of seems to create an advantage that just keeps regenerating, they have the capital to invest in more land, to invest in more technology...

JH: The plantations were making large amounts of money. They were investing that money either in land acquisition or in more slaves. You know, compared to the English example, the English had to use a lot of manures and a lot of fertilizer in order to continue to be productive and to be successful in terms of money income. Southern planters used, as far as I can tell, quite a bit of fertilizer. The difference is though, if necessity arose, they can move West. I mean they weren't cut off. If they were cut off I think they would have made the switch to invest it in manures, fertilizing, something to maintain their operations. I don't think that westward expansion was a life-or-death kind of situation for them. Now I have to say that the financial statements of the plantation where they're investing their money in everything, I'm not altogether I don't have a balance sheet for them. I don't know very many who actually do now that I think about it. They were generating a large amount of income, and the great planters were living close to the style of the gentry who were making about they had 1000 acres or 10,000 acres which was considered high gentry in England.

CWBR: There was some evidence that you found in Virginia that I thought was really interesting about just how adaptable the plantation system may have actually been even if it's a small study.

JH: OK first point, the plantation turns out to be adaptable because it's big. That's a point I got to that everybody emphasizes the number of slaves, I emphasized the number of acres *and* slaves. With a large landholding you can do some more systematic, efficient exercises than you can on a small farm. Now the second part on wheat is I ha read Irwin's article, I think in the *Journal of Economic History*, I'm not sure where, on slavery and wheat growing in the Shenandoah, on the Piedmont. I thought that's good you know it's interesting, economic questions, economy of scale, and how did the wheat farmers (slave owners) make slavery pay in wheat farming. I had no idea it was very extensive. I was invited by Gary Gallagher to give a talk to a small group in Charlottesville some years back and, I think it was Edward Ayers, hit me with slave plantations producing *enormous* amounts of wheat. Well I just sort of tucked that one away. Then when I went to the University of Virginia library and then to the Virginia Historical Society, and I finally looked at some of these collections of wheat growers, and northern farmers [were producing], what 50 bushels, 100 bushels, and these guys [southern planters] were producing 5,000, 6,000, and in one of the magazines of southern agriculture somebody was producing 10,000 bushels of wheat. That's enormous! That's an *enormous* output. That puts them right up there with some of the good sized English estates and by the way, the English Estates were growing wheat and they were doing it with cheap labor. There's no reason why I personally think the slave plantation could not have been adapted to other kinds of crop, and the reason is because on a large plantation you can get specialization of labor. Certain people do certain things all the time, be the plowmen, be the ditchers, and have some carpenters, some people be dray people, transportation workers. You make occupations that are very specialized and you get a certain economic efficiency from that. Then there is the economies of scale from what [Robert] Fogel and [Stanley] Engerman call mass productions in the fields. That's a point of some controversy, but compared to a family farmer who has to do everything on his own, has to stop doing some things to do something else, has got a multiple number of jobs, the comparison is pretty obvious. The northern family farmer is a jack of all trades. You've got to do everything. He and either a couple sons or a hired hand to help him, they're doing everything. And you don't get any division of labor, you don't get any repetitive motion activity in the fields like you do in slavery. I think that was probably

transferrable. The old explanation is that, wheat is what, a four month crop whereas cotton is what, ten month crop, that it's the length of the growing season necessary which made slavery work for cotton but not for wheat. I think that given the size of the plantation, growing different crops, a little rational management, and from what I can tell from the account books, the large planters were very rational people. They kept a tight control on what was going on their plantation. I don't see why they could not have gone into these other activities if cotton prices started to falter, if they had to make a switch to something else to keep their plantations going, or to move into other areas, like Kansas.

CWBR: Well let's talk about that, because despite how divergent these area the system that creates self-mastery versus a system that's predicated on mastery of others they coexist for a very long time, and its territorial expansion that actually brings them into competition, and then that's when you argue that one to has to come out on top. I was wondering how does it work, that you called the plantation complex, basically that they're warring on small farmers?

JH: I'm going to refine your statement a little bit, which is whether the plantation complex had to expand economically or not is one question. The political leaders thought it did. Maybe for economic reasons, maybe for political reasons in order to keep the Senate equal between the free and slave states. It is the *political* decision to repeal the Missouri Compromise. That is the kicker, because those were the areas reserved for the sons and daughters of northern family farmers. That's how they're [rural northerners] looking at this. It's their patrimony. It belongs to them. If you want a blundering generation, I would say that's it. The logic of my argument forces me to concede that if they would have drawn the 36 degree 30 minute line through to the Pacific Ocean, that they might have avoided a sectional split. Because the migration tends to go in a directly west pattern and not a north-south pattern, and it was likely that if the southerners kept beneath that line and northerners kept above it, then the two systems were not going to get entangled. But as soon as the political leadership of the South declared we have to repeal that line for what, reasons of honor, reasons of constitutional equality, for possible expansion, whatever. That's what ignites the northern agricultural districts. By the way my last table, where I chart out how the agricultural congressional districts are voting from 1842 to 1860, I added that in the last two weeks of writing this book. I had made the division, I had listed all these congressional districts, and I said well nobody can make of this, I can't make sense of this. So then I collapsed it to see the pattern and actually I went back and added 1842-1851, and the northern farming congressional districts were

voting democrat continuously, even through the Wilmot Proviso California controversy

CWBR: They're actually the strongest voting block at one point aren't they?

JH: Yes by a substantial majority, and then you hit 1854 and it's just the death knell of the Democrats in the northern agricultural congressional districts. That was the point at which I said ok, there's an economic basis to this political realignment. It was not necessarily a signal that a war is forthcoming, it was not necessarily a signal that maybe expansion into Mexico would be opposed. That's conjecture, but it is a statement, "a plantation will not go about 36 degrees 30 minutes." That will not be permitted, and then southern political leaders read it as well, "this is a war on our institution," the Republican Party that grows out of it. So some of it I would say, there is some misreading going on. Southerners are hypercritical, hypersensitive to anything that suggests that slavery will not be considered an equivalent economic interest in the Union, whereas most northerners *distinctly* have the realization that the plantation creates a different type of society, one that is hostile to the small farm. And they're not going to allow it to go above 36 degrees 30 minutes.

CWBR: We often like to interpret the Civil War as a catalyst for tremendous change, but when we start talking about the landholding patterns rather than the labor on them specifically, it seems to call a little bit [of that change] into question. Did the war really change this fundamental agricultural antagonism?

JH: As far as northern agriculture is concerned, at least by the numbers, it continues on a trajectory of small farms, at least in the states that constituted the Union in 1860, the northern states. When we get to the southern states, the plantation system is gone, but actually the landholding system the people who owned the land continued to own the land. That's the part, Johnathan Wiener in 1978, *Social Origins of the New South*, I remember insisted that in Mississippi and Alabama the landholding pattern remained the same. I think David Wright says the same, but what's the index here, what are the actual numbers? Sharecropping, when it comes about, makes the comparison between northern and southern agriculture really difficult. Southern agriculture obviously undergoes a major transformation, in terms of the labor supply and what happens to African Americans. The North just preserves it's family farm, rural village setting, right up virtually into the 1950s. Actually in a way, I guess I edited this out, but farms now have grown big and they're now containing thousands of

[formerly independent] farms. Even the old family farm is being incorporated so they can escape estate taxes and things like that. But at the same time we're seeing, in almost every state, the small towns disappearing, drying up and dying. I would say the reason for that is because the size of the farm has changed. When the family farm was 100 acres, 160 acres, you got the small rural villages and towns, but when your farms are thousands of acres, it squeezes those towns out of existence. That's what's happened in western Oklahoma, western Kansas, western Nebraska, actually western New York is facing the same thing. And I would say the major part of it is the difference in the size of farms.

CWBR: Well Professor Huston, there's a lot more I wish we had time to talk about, certainly. I appreciate you taking the time to discuss with us your most recent work, carefully researched, and a great read. The book is the *British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America*.

JH: Thank you.

The Civil War Book Review extends its sympathies to the Oklahoma State University and Stillwater communities in the wake of the October 24, 2015 Homecoming parade tragedy. Readers interested in expressing their support can find information on memorials and donations for victims [here](#).