

Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South

Christopher J. Olsen

Indiana State University, christopher.olsen@indstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Olsen, Christopher J. (2018) "Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.3.26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss3/27>

Review

Olsen, Christopher

Summer 2018

Merritt, Keri Leigh. *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge University Press, \$32.99 ISBN 9781316635438

In *Masterless Men* Keri Leigh Merritt reinvigorates the debate over white class relations in the antebellum South, and particularly the impact of slavery on poor whites. In many ways the book is an extended discussion of Hinton Rowan Helper's *Impending Crisis of the South*, with Merritt concluding that Helper was more accurate than even previously sympathetic historians realized when he argued for the devastating effects of slavery on white workers. Along the way Merritt also engages several classic debates in southern historiography, including the nature of slavery as a capitalist economic system, the extent of white class self-awareness and conflict, and the reasons for secession. Finally, perhaps most of all, she presents one of the most extended—and bleakest—portraits of a nearly hopeless life that poor whites endured in the region's slave-based economy and culture. More than just the economic workings of slavery, Merritt details the ways in which the "master class" manipulated politics, the legal system, and education, and routinely used violence to protect its slave interests with devastating impact on poor whites. For this reason alone, the book should be an important addition for anyone interested in the antebellum South.

One of the book's central arguments is simply that there were a lot more poor whites in the Deep South than nearly all historians acknowledge (the book is based primarily on evidence from South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, with scattered evidence from other states). "Poor whites" are essentially those without property, although Merritt admits that it is a difficult group to define. Her appendix, in fact, includes a clear and welcome reminder of problems with the nineteenth-century census data that historians need to take into account; these issues have received more extended discussion recently, but Merritt is convincing in her most important assertion that poorer whites were significantly under-reported. "I contend that scholars can safely assume that by 1860," she concludes, "at least one-third of the Deep South's white population consisted of the truly, cyclically poor" (16). She also traces clearly the declining place of poor whites in the southern economy over time, noting the critical impact of the Panic of 1837 and government hard-money policies that significantly reduced land-owning opportunities. When formerly American Indian lands were gobbled up by wealthy slaveowners, poor whites moved through the 1840s and into the 1850s with drastically limited opportunities for upward mobility. Historians have long-charted the cotton-induced spike in slave prices about the same time, putting master status out of reach for most whites and contributing to the concentration of slaveownership in fewer and fewer families. Lacking access to land or slaves in the 1850s, some poor whites tried to enter the manufacturing workforce but found few opportunities and

competition from immigrants and their own growing ranks in a bloated labor market; white artisans faced continued difficulties because of so many slaves who had the same skills and were increasingly hired out in the 1850s. In the end, a growing number of poor whites became itinerant non-workers, sometimes living off the land, frequently if not permanently separated from family, and often disenfranchised. These conditions fueled their alienation from slavery, Merritt argues, and made them susceptible to Republican Party appeals that included protection for labor and free land for settlers. Thus, the argument runs, masters feared Republicans not simply, or even primarily because of free soil and the long-term threat to slavery, but rather due to the potential economic and class rebellion that poor whites would lead against the master class.

Merritt excels when detailing the overpowering disadvantages that poor whites faced. Stitched together from a wide range of primary sources this narrative of day-to-day degradation and poverty adds immeasurably to our portrait of this group. Building on the work of Charles Bolton, Jeff Forret, and others, her narrative is particularly compelling in several areas: almost complete lack of education and the impact of illiteracy; a legal system crafted and manipulated by masters to keep poor whites constantly threatened, sometimes publicly humiliated, and, not infrequently imprisoned or bound out as indentured servants; both legal and extra-legal violence and intimidation; and increasingly fluid and ambiguous racial identification that foreshadowed the folly of more modern segregation statutes. Poor whites lived in a state of “qualified freedom.” In each of these areas Merritt also argues that masters focused on segregating poor whites from slaves because they were paranoid that the two groups would realize their common enemy and strike at slavery together. Her description of poor whites’ daily lives, like others before, suggests that they were closer to the material conditions experienced by slaves than yeomen farmers. And like their economic lack of opportunity, she argues, poor whites were keenly aware of how far their status slipped over time: “Thus, as poor whites entered the later antebellum period, the privileges of whiteness seemed to slip farther and farther out of their reach” (177).

Beyond the number of poor whites and their generally miserable conditions of life, her argument for their class consciousness and growing hostility toward the elite will undoubtedly spark greater dissent. “Indeed, poor white Southerners not only possessed class consciousness, but as the antebellum period wore on, they became overtly resentful of slaveholders” (5). This is not a new argument, of course, but Merritt makes it as forcefully as any historian in recent years. In turn, she asserts, the history of poor whites destroys “one of the biggest and most persistent falsities of southern history . . . : the myth of white unity over slavery” (7). It’s a fundamental argument that runs counter to most recent histories of white Southern class relations, which tend to emphasize bonds of kinship, religion, ethnicity, honor, and of course racism, among other factors holding whites fundamentally together (until the strain and destruction of war). Instead, Merritt contends that poor whites understood and resented the economic impact of slavery on their lives. “These white laborers knew enough about the world to comprehend the influence of slavery on their lives. It drove down their wages and rendered their former agricultural jobs obsolete. It stunted business ventures outside the realm of agricultural growth” (64). There are times, though, when the author suggests that the master class succeeded in keeping poor whites illiterate and uninformed—through systematic censorship and denial of public education—as to the negative effects of slavery. “This pervasive ignorance undoubtedly decreased poor whites’

ability to understand the more complicated arguments against slavery, and certainly precluded them from clearly formulating their own reasons to oppose the institution” (144). The assertion of class consciousness and conflict underlies the author’s argument about secession, too, which Merritt contends was forced on the majority of whites who were not very interested in protecting slavery. “Secession certainly was not secured by a vote, nor popular will, nor by free choice, for that matter” (284); it was “orchestrated by the master class over the protests—or at least against the wishes—of hundreds of thousands of slaveless whites” (300). Masters, in short, feared poor whites (or occasionally all nonslaveholders), and their paranoia ultimately led them to the desperate act of secession to try and keep their society together.

While the skilled use of primary sources is evident throughout the book, engagement with the secondary literature is more uneven. Merritt frames the discussion of slavery’s economics and class conflict with classic works by Frank Owsley, Eugene Genovese, Gavin Wright, and Ronald Takaki, among others (even the venerable *Time on the Cross*). More recent works tend to be suggested anonymously (“many historians assume . . .”) but not cited specifically; this could be an editor’s influence, of course, but is often unsatisfying. It’s likely that many scholars will remain skeptical about some of the book’s over-arching conclusions. But there is no denying the power and sophistication of Merritt’s discussion of poor whites’ lives, including the devastating impact of slavery and the calculating brutality of the master class itself.

Christopher Olsen is Professor of History and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana State University. He is the author of Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi and The American Civil War, and is currently working on a history of the voting process in antebellum America.