

# Unredeemed Land: An Environmental History of Civil War and Emancipation in the Cotton South

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## Review

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**Mauldin, Erin Stewart.** *Unredeemed Land: An Environmental History of Civil War and Emancipation in the Cotton South.* Oxford University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780190865177

Though few historians would be surprised to learn that both agriculture and human conflict influenced human decision making throughout the Civil War era, Erin Mauldin's well researched book assigns southern lands, and their soils, a central role in war and the uneasy peace. *Unredeemed Land* links post war agricultural shifts to the results of long-term ecological legacies that were exacerbated by the Civil War and emancipation. In her exploration of the late antebellum period through the 1880s, Mauldin argues that the Civil War and emancipation enhanced ecological change, which complicated the relationship between farmer and nature, and southerners, both black and white, were not able to "redeem the land" to its state prior to the war. Environmental changes brought forth by the Civil War, then, accelerated racial disparities, political division, and economic hardships in the south, and thus constrained the decisions of postwar southern folk, and thus the possibilities for the postwar South itself.

Mauldin examines many questions central to the era – How did the Civil War influence southern culture and identity? How did the war continue to project its outcome into the south and its economy? Why was there a shift in agriculture after the Civil War? – in a refreshing way, through the lens of the environment and agriculture. Mauldin begins her narrative with the land. The best environmental histories connect social and cultural issues to the tangible, material world, and Mauldin does just that. For example, she analyzes common land use practices during the antebellum period, such as slave-based plantation agriculture, free range livestock, and shifting cultivation, and notes how during the postwar period, yeoman farmers and freedpeople were forced to adopt new cultivation practices.

Changes to the land made apparent by the war exasperated an already vulnerable economic and ecological state of southern agriculture. Both Union and Confederate soldiers

wrecked railroads, devoured livestock, and ravaged southern forests. In effect, such issues augmented debt and racial prejudice against newly freed blacks, and cotton was at the center of the picture. After the war, as Mauldin explains, the south was poorer, and individuals were less likely to practice subsistence agriculture as they were bound to cotton monoculture. The loss of livestock, the closing of the open range and common lands, and the decline of shifting cultivation hindered farmers' ability to be self-sufficient. Environmental conditions disturbed by wartime, such as acidic soils, erosion, and woodland clearance, fated farmers to the use of commercial fertilizer. Clearly, environmental conditions made southerners vulnerable. This is where Mauldin's primary sources are most useful.

In order to highlight the human element of ecological and economic changes, Mauldin relies on letters and journals from planters and land-lords, soldiers, yeoman farmers, and freed slaves, as well as census records and newspaper articles. The stories of individuals, weaved together with the larger, socioeconomic and environmental factors of the time, make for a read that brings the book's actors to life. Farm diaries and soldiers' letters provide a fascinating window into southern agriculture and ecological changes. With such humanizing sources, the reader learns what environmental conditions and ecological factors meant for southerners and the decisions they made.

The ecological legacies of the Civil War impacted more than just white farmers. Environmental limitations hindered and undermined efforts of African Americans to fully attain their newly found freedom. Emancipation weakened extensive land use practices, which reorganized plantations, and freedpeople used contract negotiations and sharecropping as a means of autonomy, though these labor systems certainly did not necessitate economic independence. As Mauldin demonstrates, a change in labor and land use meant a change in ecology, and contractual negotiations inadvertently had material consequences such as increased erosion and the manifestation of the cotton caterpillar. Both freedpeople and white farmers gradually closed the open range in the cotton south, as the practice was no longer rational in terms of economic stability. The end of slavery weakened the southern agricultural system, which bound both whites and black to intensive cultivation techniques. The postwar period also saw the out migration of black southerners, which Mauldin attributed to the intensification of cotton cultivation in newly settled areas and jobs in cities, which shifted the boundaries of southern culture.

Southern farmers, both white and black, were trapped in a cycle of debt, unable to redeem their land and soil. Mauldin's work reminds scholars that the natural world affects the decision-making processes of humans and reminds historians of the importance of the land to southern history and the field as a whole. *Unredeemed Land* addresses a seemingly familiar topic, the Civil War, but it forces the reader to broaden their lens to the past. Mauldin's contribution is an important read for anyone interested in the environment, agriculture, emancipation, or the rural South in the long Civil War era.

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