

Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management

Tom Barber
tbarbe6@lsu.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Barber, Tom (2019) "Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss3/3>

Interview

Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management

Summer 2019

Rosenthal, Caitlin C. *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*. Harvard University Press, 2018 \$35.00 ISBN 9780674972094

Interview by: Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the *Civil War Book Review* is pleased to speak with Caitlin Rosenthal assistant professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley. Today we are here to talk with her about her book, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*. Professor Rosenthal, thank you for joining us today.

Caitlin Rosenthal (CR): It's great to be here, thanks for having me.

CWBR: What sparked your interest in the relationship between slaveholders and their management techniques? What brought you to this project?

CR: Well, I suppose it was a moment of surprise that got me started on my research. I had gone to graduate school interested in researching the history of big business. Basically, what happens when big businesses got really large? And, how did that change the relationship between business owners and the people that work for them? And, along the way to studying that, I started look at account books. And I had looked at lots of northern account books for textile mills, and for iron forges, all the places that you think you should begin if you want to study big business. And then I looked at one of the first copies, I'd ever seen of Thomas Affleck's *Plantation Records and Account Book*, which is a pre-printed all-in-one blank book meant for southern slave plantations. And this book was way above average for what I had seen among the northern records. Not only that, but as I started to look, it turns out that lots of plantations use this, some of them were as big, or bigger, than a lot the factories that I had been looking at. So, I started to think that if you wanted to study management practices at scale, slave plantations would be an interesting place to start. And, it was particularly surprising because conventional business histories haven't paid that much attention to slavery. Alfred Chandler's *The Visible Hand*, still the go-to work in business history, calls plantations "a fundamentally

ancient mode of production." And I was interested that these institutions could be using really modern management practices.

CWBR: So, what is it important to see this relationship between slavery and the history business?

CR: Business history is often told in a kind of triumphant narrative. Not always, by any means, but we kind of have a history where the big innovations happened on the railroads, and in textile mills, and you can tell a really positive story about how innovation and freedom are expanding together. And if we can find some of the same innovations on southern plantations then we can see innovation and slavery expanding together. And it really disrupts some of the narratives we have about the ways that business practices develop, and innovation happens. If southern plantation were highly innovative, then there were cases where violence and innovation, or control and innovation, were evolving together.

CWBR: Now you'd mentioned these plantation account books, that were so central to your book, how did these account books and their proliferation from the British West Indies in the eighteenth century to the American South allow slaveholders to project power over enslaved people?

CR: So, one of the things that first struck me about plantation records was how complete they were. So, I had looked at lots of northern time books, where business owners had tried to keep detailed records of productivity of mill hands, and they were frequently disrupted when people quit. They would lay out a blank page intending to fill it out with everybody's productivity and pay and then you could see there was a huge amount of turnover in the workforce. A lot of early factories, in places like New England, had turnover of a 100 percent per year or more.

By contrast, when I started to look at southern plantation, planters managed to collect data for every single enslaved person every day of the year. The records that I referred to, Thomas Affleck's *Plantation Record and Account Book*, basically a fill-in-the-blanks accounting book, and in it the most commonly completed record, was the record of cotton picking. And in those records, you have day after day during the cotton-picking season, where every single enslaved person has a precise amount of cotton assigned to him or her. And that level of productivity was much, much more than I saw documented in the northern records. So, I started to try to explore what it was that let planters keep that detailed record. And, came to realize that

the circumstances of slavery, that planter's power over enslaved people, made their work easier to quantify because they couldn't resist surveillance in some of the same ways that northerner factory workers resisted that minute surveillance.

CWBR: So, what were the objectives of slaveholders? What was the gain for calculating?

CR: How did they benefit? So this is one of the interesting things, I think one of the things that has led people astray in the history of writing a business history of the plantation south, those people sometimes say: "Look they didn't always calculate their rates of productivity or their rates of profit," and that's also true for northern firms. But what was interesting about the South, is that southern—most cotton planters knew what they needed to do to make money and that is to grow as much cotton as they could. And so, by keeping these detailed records, planters could figure out how much labor an enslaved person could perform each day, and they could also develop strategies for pushing up the pace of that labor. So, they would set targets, sometimes they would pay small bonuses and also, they would also just know what a good picking target from keeping these data, day after day. So, the overarching goal I think was to push up the rate of cotton picking, and the overarching goal of that is to earn as much profit as they can.

CWBR: How did the average white southern embody this managerial consciousness? Was this a small section of planters, or a wide swath of them?

CR: I thought about trying to write a book about average practice, but as a business historian that's not generally not what people actually look at. This is, you might say, is a book about Carnegies and Rockefellers and innovators in the South. So, this is a book about people who should be included in business histories, but aren't because of the nature of their business. But that doesn't mean the practices were really unusual, there are lots of small and midsize planters that use these practices but they're not your average planter. There are no precise numbers on who kept really detailed records, but there are thousands of surviving account books from the South, and these were widespread, but not typical. There are a significant minority of planters that are following these improving practices.

CWBR: A lot of the book looks at the American South before and after the War, after the Civil War, why did you start in the British Indies? Why was it so important to look at this area before you began looking the American South?

CR: The thing that originally drew me into this history, was to trace the history of these business practices, regardless of where they came from. I was really interested in scale. What

does it take to run a big business? And so, if you are thinking about scale there are large plantations in the American South, but there are much, much larger plantations in the British West Indies. So, some of the plantations that I look at in the British West Indies, are groups of plantations. For example, I write about a plantation named Parnassus, and Parnassus had about 500 enslaved people working on it, but it was a part of group of about fourteen total plantations that had somewhere around 2000 enslaved people working on these different properties, so it gave an opportunity to look at an enterprise of much, much larger scale.

So that was the first reason that I started investigating, I wanted to see where these practices came from. The second reason is that there is a lot of connection between the British West Indies and the American South. The more research I did, the more the split felt artificial—to stop my investigation at the borders of the United States, especially for the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. It really felt like it would be artificial to ignore the connections, and I find people moving back and forth between these geographies and I think because planters are sending accounting records across the ocean, accounting information is also not just within the United States, but also to the West Indies.

CWBR: How did increasingly sophisticated accounting practices, and slaveholders' fidelity to them, influence politics in the decades leading up to the Civil War?

CR: Most of the calculations that I study in the book are the internal calculations for the plantations, so planters keeping data that they can use in their day-to-day management, but as the Civil War approaches you also find planters calculating the value of slavery to the Union. So, a planter might on his own plantation make an inventory of enslaved people, and price each individual person, and sum that up to get a total and they would have an estimate of all the value of all the human capital they bring on their plantation. But leading up to the war, and to secession, you have politicians and planters summing what they think are the total value of enslaved people across the South. And they use those totals first to argue that the South is indispensable to the North because of the huge amount of invested capital. And then as they continue to feel that slavery is being threatened, they use it to argue for secession, say we need to secede in order to protect this loss of property. And the totals that they estimate are usually between three and four billion dollars and it looks like from modern estimates by economists that they are quite close to the correct valuations, for the value of enslaved people to the South and to the country.

CWBR: How does resituate what we think about when we think of the abolitionist movement? How did slaveholders see this movement?

CR: They abolition as a threat to their market freedom. We rarely think about slavery as being aligned with freedom. Right, but planters thought that they had a freedom to own slaves. They saw this as a market freedom, as a right to property. So, they saw abolition as taking these market freedoms. And so, one of the things that I've arrived at as talked through the book, we need to be thinking about framing abolition as a kind of market reform, as a successful labor regulation that protects enslaved peoples' freedoms—substantive human freedoms—against these overreaching market freedoms that had been granted to planters.

CWBR: In terms of thinking about labor reforms, what does an understanding of managerial techniques tell us about slavery as a lived experience? And in what ways did enslaved people respond to planters' reliance on a numerical discipline?

CR: Enslaved people were really well aware of how planters were calculating their value. There's a great book on this by Diana Ramey Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh*, where she talks about people's awareness of how they were being calculated. And, I think what reading these [account] books do is it allows us to see the level of surveillance that enslaved people faced day-to-day; and, the way that their work lives were being policed information as well as by violence. So, violence and information were working together to extract as much labor as possible from enslaved people. Now you can see that from slave narratives efforts by enslaved people to resist this collection of data because they know that data gives planters more power and gives them more information. There are accounts, for example, of people stuffing melons into bags of cotton so that they're going to be overweight because people know if planters know exactly how much cotton every enslaved person can pick every day, that gives them a lot more power to police them more effectively and to extract labor more easily.

CWBR: How did planters try to implement these techniques after the war? And, what were their growing central priorities after the war?

CR: Watching how planters' account books change after the war, gives a clearer view of how both planters and enslaved people saw freedom. What you see on the planters' side is that they are first and foremost trying to reestablish control. They're trying to figure ways to replicate the circumstances of slavery through different means. And they have a lot of trouble doing that. One of the most amazing things to come out of the records is that those records of cotton

picking, which planters kept relentlessly, and were very common across the South, basically disappear completely after the Civil War. It is almost impossible to find examples of people having their picking weighed every single day over the course of the year. I think it's because enslaved, the formerly enslaved people, refused to have their labor monitored with that kind of precision.

And on the one hand, that's the really positive story. The freed people are able to change the shape of work, so they're not constantly being surveilled so that the data isn't monitoring in the same way. On the other hand, we also see planters experimenting with other modes of control. So, there are in planters' records, records that show them pushing formerly enslaved people into debt, so that they're able to establish something like debt peonage. And then you also see records of something called "lost time," where planters keep track of every time a person misses work, and they actually make people pay for their missed time. So, in addition to not paying for their wages for that labor, they have a penalty system where people have to pay whenever they miss time. So, they are able to develop new mechanisms of control, they look different from the previous ones, but they end up being very successful at re-establishing economic domination, even if they can't get the patterns of slavery back.

CWBR: So finally, what are the legacies and lessons readers should take from a history about masters and management?

CR: I think that this is above all a cautionary tale about how compatible highly sophisticated quantitative practices can be with inhumane labor practices. It is really convenient to think about innovation and data going with high tech and sophisticated practices, but this is a story where data went hand-in-hand with violence. It wasn't a substitute, but rather they were complements and they each made the other stronger. And not only that, I think data offered planters a kind of distance from the people that they were measuring and monitoring. This was true in the American South, it was even more true in the British West Indies when a lot of planters were absentees, they didn't have to reckon with slavery face-to-face they could simply deal numbers and with data. So, as a cautionary about what the data can enable us to overlook, and how much can be lost from the data in terms of the human costs. Where you might have great data on productivity and on profit, but it leaves out the most important human story.

CWBR: Professor Rosenthal I appreciate you taking the time to sit with us to discuss your most recent book *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*.

CR: Thank you, it was a pleasure.