

Modern Cronies: Southern Industrialism from Gold Rush to Convict Labor, 1829 - 1894

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Review

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Wheeler, Kenneth H. *Modern Cronies: Southern Industrialism from Gold Rush to Convict Labor, 1829 – 1894*. University of Georgia Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$34.95 ISBN 9780820357522 pp. 196.

While many in the public get a picture of slaves, cotton, and lavish plantation homes when thinking of the antebellum South, this view is being challenged at all levels as more research is done. People who publicly upheld the Old South's values in their business dealings were looking to modernize just as much as anywhere in the North. Kenneth Wheeler's recent work, *Modern Cronies: Southern Industrialism from Gold Rush to Convict Labor, 1829-1894*, explores in detail some of the networks of industrialization forming in the South before, during, and after the war, forcing us to rethink how we approach the interactions of business and society in an area that supposedly was resistant to change in any form.

Wheeler's work focuses on the network built up in northern Georgia around Joseph E. Brown, the Civil War-era governor of Georgia. As Cherokee Removal ended and the railroad booms began, North Georgia was in a perfect position for business-minded people to make moves to their advantage. The first chapter of this work sets the stage in the Etowah Valley around an iron magnate, William Grisham. If any one man should be credited with the beginning of the industrial growth of this region, it should be Grisham, and his later connections to Brown really set the scene for Wheeler's work. The book is well researched, building webs of relationships that formed what the author calls crony networks to gain governmental support for these endeavors. Crony is not a negative term in Wheeler's writing, for the most part, but the clever use of the term gives the reader a strong sense of how the people discussed and interacted, business and industrialization to make all ships rise.

Once Etowah is put into perspective, the book moves into the coming of the Western and Atlantic Railroad and a mineral spring town, Rowland Springs, where many of these industrialists would meet and plan over the coming years. The railroad was key to the growth of

the region, using local iron, as chapter 3 discusses, and tying these new industrial concerns to wider markets. Moreover, technological advancements in iron production made their way into the valley, giving North Georgia an important place in the economy of the South as a whole and making the area well positioned as the nation began its long slide into civil war.

This is when Brown really enters the picture, and Wheeler does an excellent job of showing Brown as the expanding nucleus of industrial Georgia through the next 4 chapters. Of course, Brown needed to be born and his family needed to move to North Georgia, and Wheeler's use of a story of the raid that killed many members of his family, and Brown later revisiting that spot, was an inspired choice. The book then moves on to Brown's exposure to gold mining and his introduction to John W. Lewis, an important figure both in Brown's life and in the expansion of industry in the region. Brown married into the Grisham family, tying brown to the Etowah network, and beginning the cronyism that marks the rest of the book. It is also interesting how much the temperance movement played a role in Brown's network, and how much he drew upon its members when he took over the governor's mansion.

Brown's rise to state prominence matched the rise in the importance of industry as the state and region looked to diversify to meet the challenges of the era of conflict. Brown surrounded himself with people who he felt comfortable with, those from his home region's circles, and thus his "cronies" used their connections with him to expand the reach of their business enterprises, with varying levels of success. Wheeler constantly moves from one person to another, connecting them as spokes on Brown's wheel, turning constantly to stay ahead of the myriad challenges that they all faced as the war broke out and progressed.

Wheeler's work ends just as the New South was beginning. Brown was dragged off to Washington DC, was accused by people back home of collaborating with Yankees, then had to rebuild his life, just as Georgia had to rebuild. In the end, this book shows in microcosm the struggles that industrialists faced in the South, navigating a slave society, and bending it to modern ends, and the development of the networks so important to the expansion of interconnected business enterprises in the intersection between the industrial and political worlds.

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