Leisure, Plantations, the Making of a New South: The Sporting Plantations of the South Carolina Lowcountry

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The mention of the Southern plantation tends to bring to mind one of two competing images: either the white-columned antebellum mansion and its manicured grounds, or the desolate home of African-American sharecroppers in the post-Civil War era. This collection of essays reminds us that at least some plantations, most notably those in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia and the Red Hills region on the Georgia-Florida border, followed a different path in the first four decades of the twentieth century. The book focusses on the thus far little-studied phenomenon of the establishment of ‘sporting plantations’ as seasonal homes or visitor destinations for members of a newly wealthy Northern business and financial elite. These newcomers were enthralled by the plantation myth and the ‘moonlight and magnolias’ version of Southern heritage, which would be encapsulated by the novel and film Gone With the Wind, but at the same time they saw the often dilapidated estates they purchased as spaces in which, rather than attempting to replicate the lifestyle of the antebellum era, they might remake these plantations as spaces for sophisticated display and performance. Originally established as venues for hunting expeditions, sporting plantations were sites in which male city-dwellers could, at least temporarily, abandon their office-bound existences and lead the ‘strenuous life’ advocated by men such as Theodore Roosevelt. For those less interested in sport, these estates allowed some wealthy Americans to act out an ideal of English-style ‘country life’ in a setting which seemed to offer a longer and more compelling history than other places of elite leisure, such as Long Island, the Adirondack Mountains, or Newport.
This topic might initially seem to be one of fairly limited interest, but, as editors Julia Brock and Daniel Vivian point out in their helpful introduction to the volume, examining the phenomenon of the early 20th-century sporting plantation allows historians to delve into questions of environmental change, social relations, spatiality, and material culture. As Brock and Vivian observe, these plantations developed ‘from deliberate choices, struggles over scarce resources, and efforts to attain experiences not possible elsewhere’ (p. 4). Thus, their histories touch on themes of North-South relations in the Jim Crow era, patterns of work, leisure, and land use in the postbellum South, and the image and reality of the South in 20th-century American popular culture, all areas in which scholarly work remains to be done.

The volume is organised into seven discrete chapters, of which the first five are concerned primarily with the Lowcountry and the final two with the Red Hills region. The first is Vivian’s ‘“Plantation Life”: Varieties of experience on the remade plantations of the South Carolina Lowcountry’, which probes the meanings that the image and reality of the plantation held for the estates’ proprietors, guests, and employees. The latter were almost all local African-Americans, and Vivian emphasises that these men and women were crucial to the endeavour, not just as guides, grooms, groundspeople, cooks, et cetera, but as living symbols of Southern history and heritage for Northerners who were used to being waited upon by whites. The most intriguing element of Vivian’s contribution is his detailed account of African-Americans’ performances of spirituals for their employers, who saw these songs as ‘a vestige of a lost era, a living link to the plantation culture of the Old South’ (p. 42), and incorporated them into their sense of themselves as a new aristocracy which had replaced that of the antebellum era. It would have been interesting to learn how the singers themselves experienced these performances, and why some wealthy Americans were enthralled by the plantation myth while others preferred to spend their leisure time in metropolitan ‘café society’ or in a Gatsbyesque embrace of the Jazz Age, but Vivian’s essay is nonetheless an intriguing analysis of the mentality of this ‘Second Yankee Invasion’ (p. 57).

Jennifer Betsworth’s contribution, ‘Reviving and restoring southern ruins: reshaping plantation architecture and landscapes in Georgetown County, South Carolina’, emphasises the material strategies which characterised these remade plantations. Their new Yankee owners, she stresses, were not preservationists in the modern sense of that term; rather than attempting to restore the houses to their antebellum appearance, or retaining elements of the romantic ruin, they renovated them according to their own, often self-consciously modern ideas of taste and comfort. In some instances, they built entirely new residences, usually in the newly fashionable ‘Colonial Revival’ style. Among these houses was the residence commissioned by the New York-based financier and philanthropist Bernard Baruch, who over a few months in 1904 purchased ten plantations on the Waccamaw Peninsula, through which he reconstituted in its totality the Hobcaw Barony, a 12,000-acre land grant which the British Crown had given Lord Carteret in 1718. I would have liked Betsworth to offer some thoughts about why this Jewish Wall Streeter, a man so associated with New York City, was so keen to identify himself not only with the South, but with South Carolina’s early origins – she does not mention, for example, that Baruch was born in South Carolina and spent his first ten years there, or that his mother had been an early participant in the United Daughters of the Confederacy, to whose activities Baruch gave financial support. She is on stronger ground, though, in her analysis of the reactions of the members of the old Southern elite to these renovated plantations, observing that, while many deplored the privatisation of agricultural lands as personal game preserves, at the same time they welcomed these newcomers’ painstaking restoration of the region’s decaying material heritage.

Drew Swanson’s essay, ‘Tending the new Old South: cultivating a plantation image in the Georgia Lowcountry,’ dovetails neatly with those of Vivian and Betsworth, as he centres his study on the reamking of the plantation landscape of coastal Georgia in ways which transformed it from a site of agricultural production, primarily generated by slavery, to one of leisure and tourism. The alluring image of the plantation, he argues, relied on the erasure as well as the preservation of historical memory and physical heritage, as proprietors and visitors alike were enthralled by the ‘mystique of the old planter world’ (p. 83), but in their view a ‘planter’ was simply a person who owned and resided on a plantation, and the mechanics of production were no longer seen as relevant to this romantic story. Swanson’s case study in this chapter is
Wormsloe Plantation, outside Savannah, and this choice of focus makes his contribution a bit of an outlier in this volume, as Wormsloe was never transformed into a sporting plantation, but instead as a tourist attraction open to the public, and these developments were the choice not of newly arrived Yankee owners, but of Wymberley De Renne, whose family had owned the property for almost two hundred years. Nonetheless, Swanson’s exhaustive analysis of the ways in which Wormsloe was transformed from a cotton estate to an historic site (which it remains today) makes a substantive contribution to debates about the ways in which Southerners shaped and Northerners consumed historical memory in the pre-Second World War era.

Matthew Lockhart’s “‘Rice Planters in their Own Right’: Northern sportsmen and waterfowl management on the Santee River plantations during the baiting era, 1905–1935,” moves the volume’s focus from material to environmental concerns. Lockhart argues that private duck-hunting clubs played a crucial role in waterfowl conservation in the inter-war era. These private wetlands, owned by passionate hunters, such as the members of South Carolina’s Santee Club, which controlled 25,000 acres of land in the Lowcountry, ended up extending by several decades the working life of the region’s failing rice plantations, as the Club hired local men, usually African-Americans, to cultivate rice on its lands in order to attract larger numbers of ducks, a practice known as ‘baiting’. Although Lockhart ably supports his thesis regarding the motives and methods which underlay the Santee Club members’ desire to ‘prop up a dying culture’ (p. 128), this chapter is likely to be of limited interest to the volume’s audience.

Of much wider appeal is Hayden R. Smith’s ‘Knowledge of the hunt: African American guides in the South Carolina Lowcountry at the turn of the twentieth century.’ As Smith stresses, the labour of black men remained central to the plantation landscape as it was transformed from one of agricultural production to one centred on elite leisure, because long prior to the Civil War these men were a crucial element in hunting and fishing in the region. They were viewed as having immense knowledge of the natural world, and this knowledge gained them considerable respect among members of the white elite. When Northerners acquired Lowcountry plantations, they followed this practice by seeking out local men who were known as the most effective hunting guides, and, according to Smith, these men’s ‘specialized expertise allowed them to exercise authority amid severe inequality and maintain cultural and economic autonomy’ (p. 144). This is an intriguing claim, but to be entirely convincing it requires more evidence, perhaps along the lines followed in Katherine C. Mooney’s recent study of the involvement of white and black men in American horse-racing, and Smith might also have drawn upon Philip D. Morgan’s widely-cited work on the use of the task system of enslaved labour on Lowcountry plantations, and its implications for African-Americans’ deep engagement with and knowledge of local landscapes.

The volume’s last two essays turn to the Red Hills region, through co-editor Brock’s ‘A “Sporting Fraternity”: Northern hunters and the transformation of Southern game law in the Red Hills region, 1880–1920’ and Robin Bauer Kilgo’s ‘Life and labor on the Southern sporting plantation: African American tenants at Tall Timbers Plantation, 1920–1944’. In the former, Brock notes that sporting plantations began to emerge at a time in which matters of land use, hunting, and conservation were topics of heated public debate. Hunting for sport was increasingly prioritised over that done out of necessity, and as a result new laws regarding conservation benefitted wealthy whites, but not those of lower socioeconomic status, and were especially damaging to African-Americans, who found their access to hunting and trapping grounds extremely limited. While I see Brock’s claim that ‘all white southern men clamed stake in the affirmation of manhood that hunting provided’ (p. 151) a bit overstated, she succeeds in showing that, in the end, solidarity based on class trumped that of region, as an alliance between elite northern and southern sportsmen (epitomised respectively by the Hannas, a Cleveland clan who had made a vast fortune in oil-refining, and H. W. Hopkins, a ‘local grandee’ and politician (p. 155)) increasingly marginalised less affluent local whites from the hunt.

Kilgo’s essay, like Swanson’s, focusses on as single plantation, in this instance Tall Timbers, in Florida’s Leon County, and centres on the material lives of its black tenants, about which an unusually rich set of textual and archaeological sources have survived. These resources suggest that Tall Timbers’ sharecroppers experienced more secure and autonomous tenancies and a higher standard of living than was typical of the
rural South, and thus that black residents may have had better opportunities on sporting plantations than elsewhere. Although this chapter serves as an interesting case study of the lives of sharecroppers, who in many cases have left few traces in archives or historic sites, Kilgo admits that it is not currently possible to know whether or not the patterns found at Tall Timbers were also present on other sporting plantations.

As this review indicates, the contents of this volume, although they focus on a relatively short period of time in two small regions of the American South, vary widely in terms of their methodologies and disciplines: several are works of social and/or cultural history, while others contribute to environmental studies, legal history, and archaeology. For readers who are primarily interested in this era of Southern history, and particularly that of North-South relations in this time, Vivian’s, Betsworth’s, Swanson’s, and Smith’s essays are likely to be of the greatest interest, while specialists in environmental history or material culture studies may want to delve into Smith’s, Brock’s, or Kilgo’s articles. But while the readership for the book as a whole, rather than for one or more of its constituent parts, may be limited, it is nonetheless encouraging to see a group of junior scholars, in collaboration with several public historians, producing a set of clearly written and informative essays on a topic which may initially seem rather specialised, but which can offer insights of value to a number of broader fields of study within American history.

Notes


The co-editors appreciate Professor Zacek’s thoughtful review and hope that her comments will inspire other scholars to investigate the fascinating, little-studied history of southern sporting plantations.

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