

Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth Century South

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Review

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Scarborough, William Kauffman *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth Century South*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95
ISBN 807128821

For over forty years, William Scarborough's collective portrait of plantation overseers has been the authoritative study of that topic. His new book, which focuses on southern masters who owned 250 slaves or more in the decade before the Civil War, promises to have a similarly lasting influence. It will likely gain a wide general readership as well, since **Masters of the Big House** is at once a big book based on broad research and a collection of fascinating details from the lives of the Old South's most powerful individuals.

Scarborough has boiled down his methodical research into a series of charts that delineate the lives of 340 elite planters with the sort of precision that has never before been attempted. Instead of using maps to locate these men and women geographically, the book notes these masters' residences and birthplace by state. In an initial grouping, the three most important states are helpfully divided into sub-regions, which recognizes the differences within South Carolina between the 30 Up Country and the 71 Low Country planters, those within Louisiana between the 22 cotton and the 38 sugar planters, and, perhaps most strikingly, the gulf that divided the 55 fabulously wealth Natchez nabobs from those 16 other large Mississippi slaveholders, whose numbers included the brother of Jefferson Davis.

The demographic profile of this group appears both in a series of charts and in a set of useful appendices that run a total of 58 pages. Scarborough generated these figures from his own careful reading of the manuscript census from 1850 and 1860, which required him to account for holdings across county lines to be complete about the numbers of slaves each master owned. Once he established a core group with this survey, he immersed himself in the collected papers of as many families as possible. A series of thematic chapters emerge from these

efforts to probe the private and public lives of planters, with their own words and stories allowing them to speak for themselves. Among the topics considered at the book's outset are the sources of this group's wealth (which often involved ambitious men marrying rich wives), their religious and educational values, and the relationships within their extended families.

Masters of the Big House only occasionally addresses those historiographical debates that have whirled around southern slaveholders over the last generation. One notable exception is Scarborough's insistence, articulated most clearly in the book's final chapter, that elite slaveholders enthusiastically subscribed to a capitalist ideology. Earlier chapters build up to this conclusion, which explicitly challenges the influential work of Eugene Genovese. Scarborough's claim is staked not so much on masters' relationship to their slaves, which was the key point for Genovese, as on these men and women's market orientation, the complicated business of running their Agrarian Empires, and the diversification of their wealth through outside investment and speculation beyond agriculture. In working through such issues, the book provides helpful information about commercial relationships between Natchez masters and New York agents and about the flow of capital both within the United States and back and forth across the Atlantic.

Roughly the second half of the book offers a broad and informative survey of planters' political experiences and their role in the sectional crisis, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Notable advocates of southern rights are given their due here, especially in the cases of Natchez planter John Quitman, South Carolinians R. B. Rhett, James Henry Hammond, and Francis Pickens, and the Virginia fire-eater Edmund Ruffin, whose diaries Scarborough has edited. Yet one of the main contributions of the book is to pair such Calhounite sectionalists with Whiggish sugar planters of Louisiana, wavering secessionists in North Carolina, and the predominately Unionist Natchez nabobs, several of whom spent the Civil War years in New York City.

Elite planters wielded greater political power prior to secession than they did during the Confederacy, Scarborough suggests, except in Louisiana, where planters John Perkins, Edward Sparrow, and Duncan Kenner assumed important new roles in the new government. Planters were less likely to serve in the Confederate armies than to send their sons to do so, though this seemed to have more to do with their age than with divided loyalties. An intriguing exception to this pattern involved the wartime service of Gideon Pillow and John S. Preston,

two planter-generals who would clash bitterly in 1864 over the best means to draw conscripts and deserters into the depleted ranks of the rebel army.

The book's least satisfying chapter, titled 'Toiling for Old Massa' concerns the planters' work force. It focuses primarily on planters' concern for slave medical care, clothing, and diet and never really attempts to address the perspective of slaves themselves. This absence follows less from the availability of sources than from the author's interests. The autobiographical reflections of Frederick Douglass might have been brought to bear on Col. Edward Lloyd, the only Marylander slaveholder among this elite group, for instance, while the WPA narratives might also have been put to good use, given that they are littered with references to specific large plantations.

While Scarborough insists that planters had strong intellectual and religious convictions about slavery, he is less concerned with their daily interactions with bound men and women. The book as a result neglects those experiences that most set these eighteen score protagonists apart from other rich Americans — the fact that they were simultaneously owners of great wealth and governors with absolute power over large numbers of other human beings. Statistics gathered in the book show (though these are not tabulated by Scarborough himself) that the top 50 slaveholders of 1860 owned nearly 35,000 men, women, and children. This was a population that exceeded that of Nashville and Memphis in 1860 and that nearly equaled Richmond's size on the eve of that city becoming the Confederate capital. Such figures remind us that individuals who held hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of slaves were not just masters of big houses. They were masters as well of untold numbers of cabins, sheds, and other less luxurious quarters.

Robert Bonner is the author of Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South and is completing Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood.