

The British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America

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Review

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Huston, James L. *The British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America.* Louisiana State University Press, \$47.50 ISBN 9780807159187

Farmer Vs. Farmer: A New Perspective on the Cause of the Civil War

Many different theories on why the Civil War took place have been put forward over the years. Slave State versus Free State, Industry versus Agriculture, Federal Power versus State Power, and other conflicts have been used to fill the pages of historical works. None though, according to James Huston, fully account for the reason that these two sections of the nation came to blows. In his new work, *The British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America*, Huston puts forward a different idea, that this was a struggle between two different forms of agriculture, based on older British farming practices brought to the colonies by settlers. As Huston succinctly states, "The clash was between the self-mastery of the family farm and the mastery-over-others of the plantation (xiv)." The Civil War, then, was a battle over land and how it was to be organized and utilized, and the fight over the western territories would become the flashpoint of this conflict.

Huston's study begins in England at the time of the English Civil War, as the British elite began to expand their farms into large, and very profitable, holdings that would allow the gentry that owned them a life of leisure. Many intellectuals believed that this kind of life was necessary for a well-run society, that those at the top needed freedom from labor to be able to rule effectively. But, the birth of Puritanism, and its reverence for labor, emphasized the importance of the small, family owned farm as a counter to the gentry. These two forms of agriculture were brought to the colonies of British North America, and would compete with each other down to the outbreak of hostilities in 1861. Northern colonies, settled by men who had fought against land and privilege,

created small farms, able to support one family. As these families increased in size, children set out for open areas and founded the same types of farms, filling the North with yeoman in the Jeffersonian tradition. Southern settlers found cash crops, such as tobacco, rice, and later sugar and cotton, to be more lucrative. These crops could be best farmed in larger units, in the old English elite tradition, as long as there was cheap labor available in large quantities. The English elite has access to this labor in the form of farmers evicted from their land. Southern planters would have to find a different source, slavery.

The root of the competition between these two types of farms, Huston points out, is land. Large farms gobbled it up, leaving no land for small farmers and pushing them out. Thus, for smaller, yeoman farms to survive, they had to fight against large plantations. Slavery was not the central issue of conflict between the two sections then. It was just the labor system that allowed the British gentry model to take root in the southern United States. If large farms were to function, they needed cheap, plentiful labor. England had that. The southern United States created it with slavery. But, it was not slavery to which small farmers objected. These yeoman farmers resented being pushed out of areas because of the land needs of plantation owners. Moreover, as Huston points out, the usage of land in each area created a unique society. Small farmers needed towns, where goods could be traded and purchased, as yeoman farmers could not produce everything they needed without the support of others. Southern plantations attempted to be self-sufficient, stunting the growth of towns in the region, at least when compared to the North. Moreover, the distance between plantations kept population density low, again, slowing the development of urban areas.

All of this is not just speculation on Huston's part. He painstakingly gathered the data to back up his assertions. The chart, graphs, and tables throughout the text show the thoroughness of his research while presenting a picture of plantations in the South pushing out small yeoman farmers. These data also show single family farms dominating the North. His excellent appendices should be considered the centerpiece of this work and show a conflict brewing between these two systems of land distribution. Moreover, as most people are aware, but do not really take into consideration, Huston points out that the nation was overwhelmingly rural in 1860. Thus, urban America and the beginning of industry were not as important to the Civil War as many believed. It would be rural America, small farmers and planters that would push the nation to the brink. These two groups could co-exist until there was competition over land, something that the Kansas-Nebraska Act caused. As long as both North and

South had proscribed areas to expand in, conflict could be controlled. If the Missouri Compromise Line had been extended to the Pacific, the war may not have broken out. But, the line was not extended, it was completely removed instead, and conflict between yeoman and planter became almost inevitable as, “that legislation [the Kansas-Nebraska Act] convinced the rural North that the South was invading its exclusive domain (224).”

Huston is careful to not claim that this competition over land was the sole issue between the two sides. But, he does make a convincing case that land distribution was the driving reason that the overwhelmingly agricultural North came to blows with the overwhelmingly agricultural South. The North was not an industrial giant at this time. So, the old arguments of a war caused by industry conflicting with agriculture does not fit the available evidence. The fight between North and South, “originated within rural America and arose because of the stark differences between family farming and the plantation (239) .” The United States was a rural nation, and this excellent book explains how those dwelling in the countryside, not the cities, instigated this great conflict. While slavery did play an important role, the seeds of the conflict came from a time before slavery took root in North America and was spawned out of another Civil War, the English.

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