
History

4-2008

Review of Crafting the overseer's image

Daniel P. Kilbride

John Carroll University, dkilbride@jcu.eduFollow this and additional works at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub>Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended CitationKilbride, Daniel P., "Review of Crafting the overseer's image" (2008). *History*. 30.<https://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub/30>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact mchercourt@jcu.edu.

William E. Wiethoff. *Crafting the Overseer's Image*. (Studies in Rhetoric/Communication.) Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. 2006. Pp. xxii, 234. \$39.95.

While yeomen and small slaveholders have commanded their share of scholarship in recent years, the last thorough account of overseers is over four decades old (William K. Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South*[1966]). As a study of the rhetoric through which the overseer's image was constructed, this book by William E. Wiethoff does not seek to provide a definitive study of this shadowy figure. The author does not systematically explore questions of interest to most historians of the Old South, such as the relationship between whites and the enslaved or the capitalist and/or modern nature of plantation economies. Nevertheless, his book is an interesting, accessible, and informative study of the processes by which the public, professional, and personal images of the overseer emerged.

Wiethoff's book will be of interest to historians principally because he seeks to discover the degree to which the overseer's image conformed to reality. Concerning the first image treated, the Taskmaster, Wiethoff finds quite a lot of convergence. Looking at overseers state by state (a pattern followed in every chapter), Wiethoff finds that they largely deserved their reputations as hard-driving, violent men with their eyes on the bottom line. But the overlap between image and reality is fuzzier in the overseer's other incarnations. The image of the Scoundrel, for example, owed as much to overseers' actual sexual and ethical misdeeds as to planters' prejudices toward ordinary whites. Behaviors giving rise to the images of the Scoundrel and Taskmaster produced a hitherto unappreciated image, the Rival. Competing with slaves for work and respect, overseers had ample reasons to drive slaves mercilessly. Professionally, the overseer's image bobbed between those of the Subaltern and the Colleague. Class prejudices, the nature of overseers' work, and their association with slaves fueled the first image; overseers' contributions to their employers' wealth, as well as the family relationships that often bound overseer to employer, fed the second. This contrast presents Wiethoff with an opportunity to contribute to ongoing arguments about social class relationships in the antebellum South, but he does not engage them. That is a pity, because his evidence points to real unease with subordination and social mobility among slaveowners wealthy enough to engage overseers.

Significant tension is also in evidence concerning the two features of the overseer's public image Wiethoff identifies: the Spy and the Warrior. Law and custom in the South compelled overseers to monitor slaves closely after working hours. But Spies' reputations also suffered in planters' eyes. Slaveowners had mixed feelings about slave patrols because in them overseers served the public rather than their employers. Moreover, patrols' penchant for violence threatened the value of planters' property. So the Spy earned the enmity and contempt of master and slave alike. Overseers might have overcome this image by performing their final role, that of the Warrior. In peacetime, overseers were expected to join other whites in serving in the local militia. During the Civil War, overseers served a role similarly full of potential for rehabilitating their image: as the plantation Warrior, serving the Confederacy by maintaining discipline on the home front. But both forms of service further diminished overseers' image. Except in times of distress, few whites held the militia in anything but contempt. It was identified more with drunkenness, military pretension, and male camaraderie than the public safety. During the Civil War, overseers' service maintaining discipline and production on the plantation made them seem elitist and cowardly—associations that dogged planters generally during the war and eroded support for the war on the Confederate home front. In so many ways, overseers found themselves trapped between competing expectations. They could not win.

As the preceding discussion should make clear, this book asks a number of questions not typically posed by historians. The results are both surprising and frustrating. There are real payoffs here. Wiethoff's discussion of the Rival, for example, is fresh and original. Historians like Michelle Gillespie have traced the ways that skilled slaves competed with free laborers in southern trades, but seldom has it been recognized that this tension extended so far up the line as plantation management. In other ways, however, this book is not as useful as it might have been. Wiethoff's typologies are crude constructions. Although he takes pains to distinguish among southern regions (he finds interesting discrepancies in the territories carved from the Louisiana Purchase, for example), he collapses chronology, so that observations culled from seventeenth-century evidence are used to illustrate late antebellum developments. Wiethoff's study illustrates the maxim that idiosyncrasy entails both risk and reward. Historians of the Old South should approach it—with caution.

Daniel Kilbride
John Carroll University