

fragile concept outlines most effectively the dynamics between yesterday and tomorrow, and this complex analytical prism helps grapple with the current cultural and political climate in the United States.

Rieke Jordan

Goethe-University Frankfurt

Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 361 pages. ISBN: 978-1-107-18424-4.

“The people of the South” were not “led into secession, against their will and their better judgment, by a few ambitious and discontented politicians,” wrote former Confederate president Jefferson Davis in 1881 in his memoir on *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (199). On the contrary, “[t]he truth is, that the Southern people were in advance of their representatives throughout, and that these latter were not agitators or leaders in the popular movement” (200).

Keri Leigh Merritt’s *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, in many ways masterfully dispels the Confederate president’s argument by demonstrating the deep-seated tensions between slaveholders and non-slaveholders in antebellum southern society. Despite poor whites leaving “virtually no written records” behind, Merritt – drawing on court records, census data, newspaper articles, veterans’ questionnaires, and slave narratives, among other sources – convincingly argues that poor whites, who found few job prospects and little bargaining power in a slave economy, became increasingly militant during the antebellum era and “helped push slaveholders into disunion” (3, 26).

Building on work by southern historian Charles C. Bolton, Merritt defines poor whites as people “owning neither land nor slaves,” including only those individuals who owned less than 100 dollars (16). Thus, “scholars can safely assume that by 1860, at least one-third of the Deep South’s white population consisted of the truly, cyclically poor” (16). Yet, due to the scarcity of poor whites’ written records, Merritt at times has difficulty documenting where these poor whites lived and how many they were at any given time. This occasional lack of definite proof forces Merritt to qualify her argument (e.g. through the use of “likely,” “relative,” “indicate,” and “seems”) and this along with chronological leaps between the historical

examples cited, sometimes decades within a few pages (e.g. on page 153-155), detracts somewhat from the overall account. The final impression, however, is one of the author's enviable mastery of the primary and secondary material.

Throughout her well-researched and well-written book, Merritt time and again points out – and addresses – gaps in the historiography of poor whites in the South. As such, Merritt's work greatly contributes to the existing scholarship on southern labor history and adds valuable layers to existing knowledge about competing class interests within antebellum southern society. Moreover, Merritt's demonstration of the complexity at the bottom of southern society (e.g. by detailing quite extensive interaction between poor whites and slaves) nuances the prevailing narrative of white supremacy in the antebellum era.

Throughout the book, Merritt's sympathy for poor non-slaveholding whites in the South is palpable, and historical structural inequalities are even occasionally used to contextualize debates on class and labor in contemporary America society (e.g. page 112: "There is a point at which labor becomes so degrading and demoralizing that some people may stop working, preferring to take risks with their futures to avoid the daily drudgery of their current lives."). In other words, Merritt's account of the antebellum South is one where structural inequality left precious little room for poor whites' individual agency and left a lasting historical imprint. Given the legal, economic, and social restrictions enforced by slave-owners through whipping, incarceration, and vigilante violence, Merritt's narrative is convincing in relation to the antebellum period, but one is left with a sense that focusing almost solely on the antebellum era is less than half the story if trying to explain post-bellum events.

To unpack the other half of the story, this reviewer would have wished for a more thorough treatment of the role of poor whites in early reconstruction and support of, or opposition to, freedmen's rights. Merritt's study downplays – and at times also argues against – white supremacy as being prevalent among the working poor. While acknowledging that there was "near-universal consensus among southern whites regarding racism," (7), Merritt nonetheless argues that "[i]n the vast majority of cases, poor whites seemed far more likely to get along with slaves and free blacks than to self-segregate or demonstrate a vicious type of racism" (28).

As the book's subtitle indicates, Merritt mainly deals with the pre-Civil War South, when poor whites and slaves, in some instances, found common

ground in undermining the planter class through stealing, foraging, bartering or trying to ensure their physical safety. Yet, as Merritt recognizes, but does not elaborate upon further, the situation was markedly different after the Civil War, when poor whites – many of whom had fought (voluntarily or involuntarily) to preserve slavery – competed with freedmen for unskilled jobs. Thus, this reader, recalling Eric Foner’s words that “[o]rdinary farmers comprised the bulk of the [Klan] membership,” is struck by the fact that Merritt mainly skirts the issue of racial conflict after the Civil War. In fact, Merritt’s only mention of the Ku Klux Klan is in the context of freedmen suffering the “violence of vigilante groups,” with no mention of poor whites’ role in such violence (324), despite her statement that “poor white racism” appeared to be both “violent and pervasive” after emancipation (28).

In the end, however, Merritt’s main object is a deep analysis of class relations in the antebellum South and the author achieves this aim in impressive fashion. In fact, having read *Masterless Men* it is clear to the reader that “the people of the South” were indeed “led into secession, against their will” and Merritt, following in the footsteps of *The Free State of Jones* author Victoria Bynum, succeeds in revealing “one of the biggest and most persistent falsities of southern history (...): the myth of white unity over slavery” (7).

Anders Bo Rasmussen

University of Southern Denmark

Juliette Wells, *Reading Austen in America*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 239 pages. ISBN: 978-1-3500-1204-2.

In 1846, Hans Christian Andersen wrote in a letter to his patron Jonas Collin that he had been told by a friend that the English translations of his novels were “pirated in America” and had “winged their way about in cheap editions by the thousands in the New World.” Andersen adds: “That I had already crossed the world-ocean was beyond my dreams” (qtd. in Topsøe-Jensen xix). Although he would never cross the Atlantic and visit America in person, his works certainly did find their way there, and not all of them in pirated versions. Indeed, in the late 1860s, some of Andersen’s tales were published in English in the USA before they were published in Danish. The background to this state of affairs was a devoted American reader’s