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Review of Crafting the Overseer's Image by William E. Wiethoff

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William E. Wiethoff, *Crafting the Overseer's Image*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006. Pp. 256. \$39.95 (ISBN 1-57003-646-2).

Wherever slaves worked on plantations in the antebellum South, overseers were hired to supervise and discipline them. Crops, soil types, and topographies varied greatly across the region, but professional slave drivers were fixtures of the landscape from the colonial era to the Civil War. Their ubiquity pleased few people, slave or free. Accounts of their sadism, sexual violence, and general coarseness and stupidity are not limited to slave narratives and abolitionist tracts; gripes and horror stories fill the public and private writings of plantation owners, too. Harriet Beecher Stowe was hardly taking literary license when she made slave owner Simon Legree the character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who maligns "yer cussed overseers."

Crafting the Overseer's Image catalogues how Southern plantation overseers were portrayed in slave owners' writings, traveler accounts, legal documents, and slave narratives. It is the first book-length treatment of the subject since William Kauffman Scarborough's *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* was published in 1966. Wiethoff eschews a chronological narrative in favor of seven topical chapters, each detailing a different characterization of the overseer. Some of these images are familiar, including the overseer as "taskmaster" and as "scoundrel." Others are less so, such as the overseer as "spy," "'clandestinely peeping and prowling about Negro houses when honest men should be asleep,'" in the words of one Alabaman (133). Most chapters are organized geographically, presenting a state-by-state digest of the various "images of the overseer."

The most valuable aspect of Wiethoff's book is his succinct summaries, sprinkled throughout the narrative, of more than two hundred court cases involving overseers, from contract disputes to criminal prosecutions. For historians studying overseers, Wiethoff's informal digest of cases can serve as an introduction to an underused set of sources. However, Wiethoff's readings of these cases would have benefited from a more comprehensive grounding in the legal history of slavery and particularly in work examining the cultural function of trials in Southern life, such as Ariela Gross's *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom*.

As a general matter, though, the book neither supersedes nor supplements *The Overseer* in a meaningful way. Although Wiethoff describes the earlier work as a history of plantation management, as opposed to his exploration of "how superiors, peers, and subordinates expressed their perceptions, if not intuitions, of the overseer," Scarborough was well aware that historians' uncritical reliance on elite materials had created a distorted picture of overseers. Wiethoff's account of the overseer as "subaltern" (chapter 4) does little to move beyond Scarborough's chapter on "Discord Between Overseer and Planter." Similarly, the reader of Wiethoff's analysis of the overseer as "colleague" (chapter 5) or as "warrior" (chapter 7) may be better off sticking with Scarborough's discussions of the "Overseer Elite" and the "Overseer During the Civil War."

Part of the problem is the book's focus—on the history of the *image* of the overseer, as opposed to the history of the overseer himself. It proves to be an awkward distinction to make. To give an especially troubling example, Wiethoff's

overseers never rape slaves. Rather, they “enacted the scoundrel’s image” (32) or “earn a scoundrel’s image” (33). The fussiness of these formulations is magnified by the choice of the word “scoundrel” as the catch-all descriptor for overseers who raped or otherwise terrorized slaves. The term veils acts of brutality with an almost quaint euphemism. It does not help that Wiethoff repeats the word 111 times in a 22–page chapter.

The state-by-state progression within many chapters is also distractingly repetitive, although perhaps of some use to scholars studying specific states. The first chapter, for example, describes how overseers were perceived to be taskmasters in Maryland. Then it essentially finds the same thing happened in Virginia. They were taskmasters in North Carolina and Kentucky, too—just as it turns out they were everywhere else in the South.

Forty years on, it is time for another book to take *The Overseer’s* place as the definitive history of the subject. Scarborough’s work, after all, is limited by its tone deaf assessment that “the majority of southern overseers performed their duties with commendable energy, efficiency, and competence.” But Wiethoff’s sense of the overseer’s moral position is equally unsatisfying. The book fixates, unconvincingly, on the idea that overseers felt that they were competing with slaves for scarce jobs “in a desperate contest that arguably prompted cruel and vicious behaviors” (54). Instead, Wiethoff’s evidence points to a subtler status insecurity among overseers, providing a glimpse of the dynamics of working-class white racism that long outlived slavery.

Also left unaddressed is the question of why so many slave owners reflexively badmouthed overseers even as pro-slavery arguments emphasized the benign nature of the institution. Through the overseer, elite Southern whites could express a basic awareness that what they were doing was wrong, all the while affirming their blamelessness. By crafting the overseer’s image, they were crafting their own.

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Kathleen S. Sullivan, *Constitutional Context: Women and Rights Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Pp. 181. \$45.00 (ISBN 10-0-8018-8552-3).

The field of women’s history has dramatically changed in the past decade. Seeing beyond a narrow, liberal view of women’s progress, students of women’s rights have graduated to more sophisticated methods of analysis. They now look at race, masculinity, class, religion, and the larger range of rights arguments that fueled debates on women’s political, civil, and legal status in the United States. Kathleen Sullivan, a professor of political science, has ignored this scholarship. Indeed, she fails to engage with any serious work that challenges her preconceived and uninformed view of nineteenth-century feminism.

Sullivan’s book is less a scholarly inquiry than a screed against Elizabeth Cady Stanton and liberal feminism. She reduces nineteenth-century feminism to the