



PROJECT MUSE®

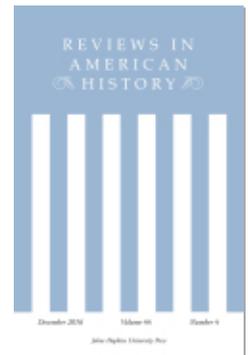
Worlds of Violence

Lee B. Wilson

Reviews in American History, Volume 44, Number 4, December 2016, pp. 532-537 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2016.0072>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/642568>

WORLDS OF VIOLENCE

Lee B. Wilson

Trevor Burnard. *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650–1820.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. ix + 273 pp. Appendix, notes, and index. \$45.00.

Terri L. Snyder. *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xiv + 171 pp. Abbreviations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00.

That white planters deployed draconian physical punishments to extract labor from African slaves is not a particularly new insight. Scholars have long understood that brutal violence undergirded plantation regimes, and that an apparatus of terror served important social and cultural functions in early America and the new United States. Given the imprimatur of law in slave codes, physical punishments were daily features of plantation life, and they served to deter insurrection, maintain social hierarchies among white planters, and create cultures that were organized around death as a ubiquitous occurrence. Indeed, an understanding that plantation societies were violent worlds has even begun to seep into the public sphere. For example, recent blockbuster films—most prominently the Academy Award–winning *Twelve Years a Slave*—have offered moviegoers a less-sanitized view of the lives of enslaved people, one in which depictions of sadistic cruelty inflicted by whites have helped to undermine what is, in some places, a popular and stubbornly nostalgic view of the Old South.

Identifying the violence endemic to slavery is an important first step in coming to terms with America's national sin, but watching the dance macabre takes us only so far. In their latest contributions to the historiography of slavery and plantation societies, Trevor Burnard and Terri Snyder move beyond cataloguing acts of brutality to analyzing the meaning of violence for white planters and enslaved people. Both depict plantation worlds in which physical suffering undergirded the daily exploitation of Africans and African Americans. Against economically vibrant and shifting plantation backdrops, planters and their surrogates deployed military-style punishments in order to extract obedience from slaves, and slaves themselves resorted to suicide

in moments of desperation and resistance. But in Burnard's and Snyder's hands, brutality, death, and mortuary politics were not mere byproducts of the extremely lucrative early modern plantation system. They were the *sine qua non* of that system. Indeed, these historians not only ask us to see the dismembered bodies and to acknowledge the fact that for slaves a minor infraction could mark the difference between the quick and the dead, but they also demand that we contemplate the visceral meaning of systemic violence for African people and for those who brutalized them.

Trevor Burnard's examination of violence is embedded in a broader study of the rise of the "plantation system" in British America between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, a system that was characterized by "large-scale landholdings and slave-based labor forces; hierarchical and race-based management systems; export orientation; high-value per-capita output; and the application of scientific techniques of management to improve productivity" (p. 4). In a tour-de-force examination of three primary plantation regions—the Tobacco coast of Virginia and Maryland, the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia, and the British West Indies—Burnard provides keen insights into the plantation system's development over time, marshaling significant economic and demographic evidence to pinpoint moments of growth and solidification. His quantitative rigor, when hitched to this regional analysis, adds nuance and depth to our understanding of how plantation colonies evolved, particularly in response to global market conditions. Indeed, Burnard reveals that the plantation system was not static. Rather, it modulated in fits and starts, not only as a result of domestic pressures, but also due to external events, including military conflicts, recessions, and demographic shifts in Europe. This alone makes *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves* a "must-read."

Atop this number crunching, however, Burnard has layered several broader arguments that point to new directions in scholarship on slavery and the development of plantation America. The first and perhaps most important of these is that the plantation complex became profitable as an economic model only when the problem of disciplining laborers—African slaves—could be solved. Crucially, Burnard argues that the "solution" to this problem emerged out of the European military revolutions of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At precisely the same time that colonies of exploitation were being developed in the Americas, European nations began to field standing armies that were subject to increasingly harsh military discipline. After serving in these armies, "brutalized" ex-soldiers became the "foot-soldiers of empire" (p. 54). They went to work on slave ships or as plantation managers and overseers, and in turn terrorized the African populations under their control. Here is an approach to slavery, then, that asks us to see that systemic violence could migrate across oceans. Indeed, Burnard's is a dark view of global history that roots the very success of the plantation system in violent international conflicts.

These purveyors of violence, the “foot-soldiers of empire,” occupy much of Burnard’s attention (p. 54). As non-slaveholding whites in plantation societies, they fall into a socioeconomic category that has long interested historians. Why did they support the plantation system, and why were they so willing to mete out harsh plantation “justice”? The economic rewards of the plantation system, according to Burnard, were widely dispersed enough to satisfy ordinary whites; wealthy planters were not the sole beneficiaries. But more than this, contra Edmund Morgan’s contention that race as a category became increasingly important in suppressing class tension, Burnard suggests that ordinary whites in plantation colonies “did not have to be inveigled into white supremacy” (p. 264). Rather, they “reveled in sadistic cruelty toward black people” because “they hated and despised blacks” (p. 265). They viewed African slaves as subhuman and, as such, willingly subjected them to acts of unmitigated and sadistic cruelty.

This regime of terror, instituted by white colonists who were predisposed to view Africans as little more than beasts, was staggeringly effective in producing wealth for planters and their metropolitan backers, and Burnard marshals his unsurpassed command of economic data, particularly from Jamaica, to support this contention. Planting was at “least as profitable, and probably a good deal more efficient, than any other form of money making that operated in the early modern world in Europe and its dependencies,” and the plantation system itself was not doomed to failure absent blunders on the part of imperial administrators (p. 103). Perhaps more importantly, planters were not anxious patriarchs but confident capitalists—savvy improvers who applied Enlightenment principles to increasingly complicated planting enterprises. This depiction of planters’ economic behavior, which has steadily gained credibility among colonial historians, has much in common with scholars’ revised view of nineteenth-century slave owners, whom they have increasingly characterized as market actors who zealously pursued profit maximization at the expense of enslaved people. For Burnard and these other scholars, the Ashley Wilkes planter stereotype has been thoroughly eclipsed by the image of the planter-as-entrepreneur, a sophisticated and confident market operator who brought untold wealth to many and untold misery to millions more.

If the systemic application of military-style discipline to slaves made the plantation system economically successful, this was in part because violence was highly effective in deterring resistance. For Burnard, “the sad truth” about plantation brutality was that it “worked, at least to keep enslaved Africans quiescent” (p. 106). Widespread rebellion was not a significant problem, he asserts, nor did the fear of slave uprisings cause undue anxiety on the part of white planters and their operatives. Burnard instead suggests that planters were a confident bunch who “were less incapacitated by fear of what slaves might do to them if they rebelled than is commonly supposed”

(p. 237). This view runs counter to a prevailing historiography that suggests that white planters were anxious paternalists, ever on guard for potential slave rebellions. His desire to prove that resistance was, as a systemic matter, ineffective also deviates from current scholarly interest in highlighting moments in which slaves exerted agency or at least attempted to give meaning to their own lives. Indeed, much recent work in the history of slavery can be characterized as an attempt to recover evidence that enslaved people carved out space for themselves in a system that refused to acknowledge their basic humanity; for historians of slavery, a central question continues to be how to accurately depict the “degradation of black life” without “supporting the nihilistic notions of slaves as being socially dead” (p. 272). Scholars run the real risk of brutalizing enslaved people a second time by submerging the ways in which slaves asserted agency through acts of resistance and rebellion, both large and small. Burnard is aware of this, and contends that he prefers to steer a middle course, modulating between “the totalizing implications of the notion of slavery as social death . . . and the equally totalizing idea of slaves engaged in an essentially theological battle between the forces for evil (slave owners) and the forces of good (themselves)” (p. 272). Nonetheless, it is clear throughout *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves* that he has chosen to depict slavery as a “relentless destroyer of people,” viewing plantation colonies as Hobbesian worlds in which resistance was limited and anemic (p. 272). This perspective is in keeping with his previous work and it flows directly from his evidence. Nonetheless, it may be troubling to those who would prefer to see moments of slave agency to leaven an otherwise bleak view of life for the enslaved in the eighteenth-century.

Terri Snyder also takes up this critical question of the relationship between violence, resistance, and agency in her study of slavery and suicide. Whereas Burnard’s work primarily explores the consequences of white on black violence, Snyder examines instances of self-inflicted violence among slaves. The historical record is sprinkled with anecdotal evidence that slaves, for a variety of reasons, resorted to suicide, but Snyder’s is the first book-length study of this phenomenon. Whereas Burnard’s work is rigorously empirical, Snyder concedes that it is nearly impossible to quantify the extent to which African and African American slaves took their own lives. She cannot determine whether the occurrence of slave suicide was “frequent or rare”; nonetheless, she musters an impressive array of evidence to show that “through the eve of the Civil War, the suicides of enslaved people were visible and significant features of slavery in America” (pp. 20, 6). Lacking solid data, Snyder instead focuses upon the meaning of suicide to slaves, their communities, and to the whites who read about them in the popular press. In chapters that range from a discussion of suicide on transatlantic slave voyages, to the implica-

tions of slave suicide for emerging legal codes, to the impact of suicides on an emerging transatlantic antislavery moment, Snyder argues that slave suicides played a significant role in shaping whites' perceptions not only of slavery as an institution, but also of people of African descent. Suicidal violence, for Snyder, helped to make race even as it exposed the core contradiction at the heart of slavery: that people could be property.

Snyder is particularly deft in reminding us that slave suicides occurred for a number of reasons and could be interpreted by whites and blacks in a variety of ways. Suicide was never an act with a singular meaning, and this was in part because Africans and Europeans brought to their encounters different ideas about what taking one's own life meant as a practical and spiritual matter. This is especially clear in Snyder's analysis of suicides on transatlantic slave ships. Both Europeans and Africans, she argues, held distinct ideas about what constituted "good" and "bad" deaths. Whereas for early modern Europeans "suicide was regarded as the apex of a bad death and the worst way of dying," for some West and West Central Africans, older proscriptions against suicide had already "eroded" as a result of frequent slave raiding (pp. 28, 29). For many slaves transported across the Atlantic, then, suicide was not a shameful act; rather, it offered "an acceptable and perhaps admirable response to captivity and enslavement" (p. 29). These contrasting perspectives on self-destruction played out in a gruesome way on transatlantic voyages as slaves committed suicide in response to shipboard conditions, sexual abuse, failed insurrections, and their own spiritual beliefs that suicide might allow them to return home.

Whatever the underlying cause of slave suicides, for white mariners and shipmasters, self-destruction had practical and ideological consequences. First, those involved in the slave trade began to develop methods to deter their valuable human cargo from dispatching themselves. They forced slaves bent on starvation or dehydration to eat and drink, for example, and they desecrated the bodies of those who committed suicide. Perhaps more importantly, slave suicides also prompted those involved in the transatlantic slave trade to begin assessing and categorizing enslaved people based upon their perceived propensity to commit suicide. Rather than viewing suicide as a natural result of "the circumstances of captivity, enslavement, and sale," mariners increasingly associated self-harm with certain types of slave cargoes (p. 45). The colloquial knowledge in the trade that entire ethnic groups—particularly the Igbo and Akan—were predisposed to suicide influenced the stated preferences of merchant and planter buyers in the Americas. But it also fostered a type of racialized thinking that contributed to the development of later, more developed views of racial difference. The process of commodification that began on the coast of Africa, then, was more than an economic one; it had far-reaching consequences for shaping how white Americans viewed African and African American enslaved people.

This propensity to “disarticulate suicide from slavery,” which had its origins in the transatlantic slave trade, continued throughout the colonial period and into the early United States, as Snyder shows through an analysis of popular depictions of slave suicides (p. 45). In plays, stories, and newspaper accounts, enslaved people were portrayed as committing suicide for a variety of reasons, including in response to “physical insults or disgrace, the denial of liberties” or “out of loyalty to one another or even to slave owners” (p. 118). Crucially, however, these accounts did not link suicide to the fact that violence and self-destruction were inextricably bound up with chattel bondage. Even when accounts of slave suicide were deployed in antislavery literature to critique the cruelties of the slave trade, attacks against slavery as an institution were muted. It was only with the rise of antebellum abolitionism, and particularly first-person slave narratives, that suicide became linked in the public sphere with the circumstances of enslavement.

The temptation to view each individual act of slave suicide as a powerful moment of resistance and agency must have been overwhelming to Snyder. After all, in asserting the power to die, slaves gave the lie to their status as objects at law and made resounding claims to their humanity. And, indeed, Snyder does not deny that whites viewed slave suicides as troubling. Self-destruction “directly exposed the contradictions of slavery” in that it laid bare the fact that slaves were human beings who were capable of making the monumental decision to end their own lives (p. 17). In destroying themselves, slaves inverted the fiction that they were property, not people. Suicide also “called into question” planter paternalism, forcing owners like Virginia planter William Byrd II to distance themselves from the suicide deaths of their slaves because they feared for their personal reputations (p. 17). To her credit, though, Snyder does not overlay her hand by suggesting that all slave suicides were unambiguous expressions of individual agency. Rather, she acknowledges that suicide—when it was a choice—“was selected from an egregiously narrow range of possibilities” and ultimately resulted in a slave’s death (p. 17). The factors that prompted individual slaves to kill themselves varied widely. Snyder, too, suggests that scholars cannot assume that every act of suicide was also an act of premeditated resistance, and she refrains from viewing self-destruction as the triumphant outcome of an isolated showdown between master and slave. Deviating from an older historiography that casts the history of slavery as a sequence of power struggles and negotiations, she instead leaves us with the picture of a plantation system that was enduring because it was flexible. Americans were able to process and absorb individual acts of self-destruction with surprising ease, and to the extent that the suicides of enslaved people triggered cognitive dissonance on the part of white owners, they quickly overcame it. Given this, Snyder has provided historians with a sensitive and nuanced treatment of a subject that, in less skillful hands, might have become simplistic.

Lee B. Wilson is an assistant professor of history at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. She is currently revising a book manuscript entitled *English Law and the Law of Slavery in Colonial South Carolina and the British Atlantic World, 1669–1783*.