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Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina 1850-1900 (Book Review)

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Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850–1900. By Paul D. Escott. *The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies.* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, c. 1985. Pp. xxii, 344. \$29.00.)

The labyrinthine paths between Old South and New are becoming more familiar. We have excellent studies of slaves who became freedmen and yeomen who became tenants. We can choose among competing models of continuity and discontinuity, of persistence and change. Paul Escott now brings a fine writing style and a fine sifting of North Carolina's archives to these subjects; the result is an impassioned and richly detailed account, but one that skirts questions that lie at the center of the transition debates.

Escott argues that an elite dominated North Carolina politics and economy before, during, and after the Civil War; that the elite remained imbued with an undemocratic ethos throughout the entire nineteenth century; and that the elite changed relatively little as the decades passed. From the prosperous 1850s through secession and war, from emancipation and Reconstruction through Populism and disfranchisement, Escott believes, the mass of common people stood on one side and the elite on the other. And the elite always won—at least in the long run. This perspective is not new; Dwight B. Billings, Jr., made the same argument for the same state in 1979. Escott, however, presents a more particularized and detailed narrative than Billings did, and while the new book does use quantitative evidence to measure several facets of power—concentration of wealth, local officeholding, changes in crop mix, and investment in textile mills—it generally relies more on diaries, newspapers, and correspondence to make its case. The result is a beautifully textured account that nevertheless lacks the theoretical explicitness and refinement of the seminal transition studies. This lack obscures not only the place of North Carolina in the broader experience of the South but also obscures the very questions of domination Escott addresses.

The ambiguity of basic terminology is at the heart of the problem. Escott's North Carolina was dominated by what he calls an "elite"; this elite, however, appears not as a coherent class unified by a common relationship to the basic economic organization (as it does in the works of Eugene Genovese or Jonathan Wiener) but rather as simply those men who held virtually any political office and obtained wealth from any source. The linkages and divisions among the various men of power are never examined in any detail, and Escott uses "the elite" as a shorthand to describe those who appear dominant in any particular situation—a conception that at times embraces everyone from a justice of the peace to the governor to the entire Democratic party. It seems not to matter very much, either, that North Carolina saw the sudden efflorescence of towns, cities, and factories after the Civil War, with

unavoidable changes in the way power had to be exercised.

In Escott's picture, the men of power, whether from the mountainous white counties in the West, the mill and town counties of the Piedmont, or the heavily black counties in the East, possessed a single-minded, cynical, and successful strategy of domination. The poor of both races, on the other hand, emerge as innately good, as less racist and self-aggrandizing, more democratic and cooperative, than the hard men in power. Escott does not take the state's political parties seriously as embodiments of broadly shared ideologies and desires, and thus he conceives of power primarily as coercion and manipulation. This polarized conception of the white South ignores a whole range of relationships between the dominant and the dominated: mutual dependency, reciprocity, bargaining, common enemies, shared dreams and nightmares. The book is more about privilege than power; power is a relationship, and a relationship requires agency and even forms of complicity on the part of all concerned. That sense of tension and mediation is missing from Escott's book.

Escott demonstrates without a doubt that powerful men were quite visible in North Carolina, that they sought their own ends, that they periodically squelched popular dissent, and that they callously used racism whenever they could. This is orthodoxy for many facets of the South's history, of course, but it is still debated for other facets—including subjects as important as antebellum politics, the Civil War homefront, and postwar industrialization. In general, the more Escott has to strive to make his case against accepted wisdom, the more stimulating his narrative is. Thus *Many Excellent People* is at its best in describing the reluctance with which many white North Carolinians entered the Civil War and the varied forms of their resistance. Similarly, his discussion of the stock-law controversy fleshes out recent arguments in a useful way, as does his detailed portrait of the men behind New South industrialization. But when he covers ground where his argument is taken for granted—the fight against Reconstruction, the defeat of the Populists, the beginning of disfranchisement—the narrative slackens into familiarity.

It does not detract from this book to say that North Carolina followed a unique path to the New South. Never a plantation state, it nourished one of the strongest two-party systems in the region before and after the Civil War, witnessed a particularly intense internal conflict during the Civil War, and experienced relatively diverse and widespread postbellum industrialization. The array of evidence eloquently presented in Escott's book makes this all clear—and makes the lack of similar studies of other states all the more obvious. We need other books written with this much polish and passion—but with more rigorous notions of power and privilege—if the larger picture of the nineteenth-century South is to come into focus.

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