



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

History Faculty Publications

History

Summer 1987

Everyman as Master (Book Review)

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eyers@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. Review of *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter*, by Theodore Rosengarten. *Virginia Quarterly Review* 63, no. 3 (1987): 528-532.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

EVERYMAN AS MASTER

By EDWARD L. AYERS

Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter. By Theodore Rosengarten. Morrow.
\$22.95.

Even now, after a century and hundreds of studies, we can draw no coherent picture of the slaveholders of the Old South. Instead, our images are kaleidoscopic, fragmentary, contradictory. These men appear, alternately, as tyrannical and aristocratic, violent and urbane, corrupt and

high-minded. Most of all, they seem exaggerated, outsized, ill-proportioned. In all the portrayals we have of slaveholders in the 19th century, none comes across as a generally likable or balanced person—even the “black masters” portrayed in a recent and remarkable book by that title seem distorted by their power. Is it the portrait that is misshapen or the people they portray?

Theodore Rosengarten's new book on Thomas B. Chaplin may help us decide. The subject is an average man in extraordinary circumstances, a man born to own slaves and rich plantations yet plagued by rotten luck and weak character. The only memorable thing he did was keep a journal for 13 years and then preserve it to comment in its margins for 30 more. The result of his efforts is an intriguing mixture of drama and dryness, insight and obtuseness. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, we can glimpse the life of a slaveholder uninfluenced by participation in public life or unusual gifts of intellect. Thomas Chaplin was Everyman as Master.

This book is especially useful because it gives us both the original journal and a full-scale life-and-times treatment of Chaplin. While the result is a book so long that only the most fascinated or dedicated readers will work through the entire volume, the juxtaposition does make it possible for every reader to take the full measure of this man's life. Dip into the journal anywhere and the Old South gains a new tangibility. To read of the death of Chaplin's children, his club dinners, his fishing trips, his court battles, his boredom, his crops, his regrets and recriminations is to gain access to a life unmediated by art.

This is not to say that Chaplin's story is in any way typical. After all, he spent his entire life in one of the most unusual corners of North America: the sea islands of South Carolina. There, on the plantation named “Tombee,” his slaves raised long-staple cotton that will grow virtually nowhere else in the country. Almost everyone he knew was a relative of some sort; everyone of both races had a long history in the district. Blacks outnumbered whites by almost seven to one. Indeed,

only 1,062 whites lived in St. Helena Parish in 1860, exactly one fewer than in 1830. This ingrown stasis was a far cry from the boom times of Mississippi and Alabama, or the hard-scrabble agriculture of North Carolina and Florida.

The predominant moods of the journal are subdued rage and disgust, moods that crop up in the biographies of so many planters of the Old South. Chaplin constantly fumed against the fates. He was never satisfied, with anyone else or with himself. He stood not as a cocky, self-assured master of men but rather as a man torn by self-doubt and recrimination who happened to own dozens of other human beings. Those human beings, those slaves, did not consume much of his thought or concern. He took them for granted as individuals, even when he spent every waking moment scheming to keep them from creditors or competitors. The slaves were means to well-defined ends—financial independence and social respectability—and not much else.

Chaplin married extremely young, in his teens, and fathered a large family by the time he was 25. His equally young wife fell ill after one of the early pregnancies, yet continued to bear children until it literally killed her. Chaplin then married his wife's sister, who had been living in the home to help with child care and nursing. The master of Tombee was not a particularly warm father or husband; he seemed perpetually disappointed by his children. He felt compelled to send his daughter away from the plantation for most of the year, for the malarial environment constantly threatened death. Fevers and agues hovered over the entire island, casting shadows on whatever gaiety and prosperity the planters enjoyed. Although festive and well-equipped hunting and fishing trips provided considerable amusement for Chaplin and his circle of friends and relatives, life for this particular planter was no mad whirl.

Instead, the leitmotif of Chaplin's life—before, during, and after the Civil War—was litigation. He and his brother sued and were sued for decades on end. Their mother took a third husband of whom her sons disapproved, a pharmacist who

seemed to them a transparent pursuer of the wealth that rightfully belonged to them. The new stepfather fought back tenaciously, and recrimination begot recrimination. Chaplin, always pursued by debt, watched his estate dwindle while his neighbors enjoyed the boom times of the 1850's; he possessed too few slaves to run his plantation at top efficiency, and his crops suffered as a result. Erstwhile friends gradually deserted Chaplin, and he found himself increasingly isolated and bitter as the Civil War loomed.

Chaplin performed with some valor in the war but, along with all the other planters of the Sea Islands, lost his land when, early in the war, Union ships invaded the region. The land was confiscated and turned to the advantage of the federal forces. Surveyors descended and redrew the boundary lines, chopping the naturally complex island into neat squares better suited to the plains than to the subtle coast. The freedmen expected to receive some of the land they had worked for so long, but most of it fell to rich men and conglomerates from the North. Tombee was set aside for a school, a school that was never built.

In the decades following Appomattox, Chaplin gradually lost what property that survived the war, and he was reduced to overseeing the plantations of luckier men. Finally he came to make a living by teaching school for the children of the slaves he had held in unthinking contempt before emancipation. He reread his journal—the only remnant of his life before the war—and recorded caustic comments on his earlier complaints, failures, and imagined successes. After 20 years of court fights and red tape, in the late 1880's, Chaplin finally retrieved the plantation where he had spent most of his life. He died before he could ever see it again.

This book reveals, to a remarkable degree, the emotional life of an American slaveholder. Its implicit moral is something of a surprise even in 1987. Slavery, while obviously benefiting owners in terms of wealth and status, did not tend to make them happy. While the slave South was not a Faulkneresque madhouse for whites, neither was it a care-

free *après-war* party. Not that the slaveholders felt guilty (we have little evidence of that), but the possibility of total control of other humans seems to have fueled a frustrated thirst for power over facets of life that were beyond such control: children, health, and politics, for example. There have been other versions of “money can’t buy happiness”—America’s oldest story—but slavery obviously pushed the definition of “money” to profound psychological extremes. Slaves, their owners could not help but be reminded, were people.

Rosengarten’s treatment of this sad story is exemplary. As readers of his earlier, prize-winning *All God’s Dangers*—an oral biography of a black sharecropper—know, Rosengarten writes well and enjoys a rare talent at entering into the lives of people quite unlike himself. The research into the minutiae of Chaplin’s life uncovers fascinating connections and patterns, and brings to life a time and place easily caricatured. The book, while scholarly in its apparatus, is not much engaged with larger theoretical questions and does not attempt to reorient the historiography of this perennially puzzling society. But the prominent reviews and book club sales this book has enjoyed suggest that Rosengarten is offering something the public wants: engaging narratives about a group of people who seem, even in retrospect, out of place on the American landscape.