

*Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina*. By S. MAX EDELSON. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006. 399 pages. \$45.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Cara Anzilotti, *Loyola Marymount University*

This brilliant blending of economic and cultural history provides a powerful corrective to the prevailing view of southern plantations as static, tradition-bound sites of entrenched paternalism. S. Max Edelson's work is a study of the evolution of a colonial venture and of the plantation, both in image and in fact. Those who journeyed to Carolina in the late seventeenth century expected to enrich themselves as they furthered Britain's imperial agenda by recreating English agricultural practices essentially intact and by molding the landscape to conform to their notions of a civilized space. They were always conscious of the quest for wealth, Edelson argues; rather than remaining on the periphery of an expanding transatlantic marketplace, the Carolina planters were intimately tied to the market through their agricultural endeavors and were in fact "early modern capitalists" (4).

In making this compelling argument, Edelson sets aside the image of the plantation as unchanging and wedded to its remote locale and redefines it as a dynamic place, adapting to local conditions and to the market in innovative ways. The image of the planter is redrawn here too, as Edelson envisions him not merely as the colonial equivalent of an English gentleman but as the active "man of trade, who put the demands of commerce at the center of his social world" (8). To that end South Carolina's settlers modified their expectations of establishing English-style farms throughout the colony and effectively accommodated to the unique landscape of the low country.

Refining that landscape presented challenges and opportunities. The Lords Proprietors' carefully articulated vision of English husbandmen forging communities in a wilderness made orderly through the imposition of traditional settlement patterns and farming techniques and the careful control of commercial activities was essentially ignored by the settlers themselves. Edelson shows that for low country colonizers the plantation became a vehicle of personal, not collective, advancement. And the planter became an innovator, modifying a traditional English agricultural model to meet the challenges and the opportunities South Carolina's lowlands presented. "For planters determined to acquire wealth rapidly in early Carolina, adapting to the environment meant reaching beyond a pool of British practices and enhancing husbandry with foreign techniques" (48).

The simple answer to the question of South Carolina's economic success was rice. The colony's proprietors had envisioned agricultural innovation, but the search for a salable commodity progressed fitfully. Ultimately, rice cultivation wedded the desire for a marketable staple to the low country's unique topography. When settlers first encountered the region's extensive swamps, they seemed nothing more than wastelands to be avoided. But Edelson charts a dramatic shift in local appraisals of Carolina's various geographic zones, noting that those regions that had been dismissed in the colonists' first estimation over time became the most desirable real estate. This reevaluation necessitated a physical and psychological shift away from English crops. Settlers learned to embrace foreign foodways to

survive and to prosper. And as they appropriated an exotic crop, they redefined it as an extension of English husbandry rather than a departure from it. As Edelson puts it, “they applied the innovative approaches of ‘improved’ British agriculture to make this foreign crop their own” (54).

In his discussion of the origins of rice culture, Edelson offers a solid evaluation of recent views on race and rice in the colony’s history. In charting the development of rice cultivation and the task system of slave labor in South Carolina, historians have argued that the skill of enslaved Africans was so crucial to the planting process that low country masters negotiated with their laborers for more favorable terms than were the norm in other slaveholding communities. Edelson argues instead that the implementation of rice culture entrenched slavery and fundamentally worsened the condition of the enslaved. He maintains that the task system was not representative of the active agency of African laborers carefully negotiating labor demands in exchange for their expertise in rice cultivation. Rather he argues that tasking answered the planters’ need to free themselves of the cost and complication of provisioning slaves in a wilderness setting by making their captive laborers responsible for themselves. Once a slave’s daily task was complete, he or she was free to see to individual needs, such as cultivating garden plots of Indian corn, squash, beans, and rice. As Edelson points out, in the chaotic world of the seventeenth-century low country, growing food took precedence over generating exports for the transatlantic market. The decision to cultivate rice hinged on its versatility as consumable and commodity. Both master and slave therefore had a stake in its success, making rice cultivation a reflection of cross-cultural adaptation.

This shift from uplands to swamp, from European grains to rice, and an absolute commitment to slavery marked the colonists’ ability to adjust to a challenging physical environment in the search for a marketable product. This adaptability, Edelson argues, must also force a reappraisal of the plantation as a static entity. He describes the colonial landscape in terms of zones, each with its own distinct purpose and culture. Within the core zone, defined by its early settlement and close proximity to Charleston, the eighteenth century saw a shift away from intensive rice cultivation and toward the production of locally marketable commodities. The core also became known for its stately homes and luxurious environment, all designed to be pleasing to English sensibilities. The frontier, on the other hand, dedicated as it was to maximizing rice production, consisted of crude but efficient slave labor camps. Yet the planter elite embraced both worlds. They made their homes in the core and made their fortunes in the frontier’s remote, harsh environment. As a result Carolina planters became managers of far-flung business enterprises, not “the plantation” but plantations spread across the colony. The drive for wealth led planters to invest in more property and more slaves and to demand more output from both. But in their desire to reclaim their Englishness, they isolated themselves from their frontier holdings and thus the suffering that their profits entailed, creating a fictional world for themselves in which gentility existed without brutality.

Edelson points out that, though South Carolina’s planter elite laid undisputed claim to their place at the top of a local hierarchy, their desire for recognition as English gentry was

clouded by their engagement in a commercial venture (planting) and their endorsement of and affiliation with slavery. Because they could not fully achieve gentry status, Carolina planters looked inward and evaluated one another on their own set of standards, most importantly their expertise as agricultural entrepreneurs. If they were judged harshly by British observers, they could find admiration among their provincial peers for their commercial and managerial success. Still, emphasis on colonial exceptionalism, as Edelson notes, did not diminish the planters' desire for acceptance as members of a transatlantic British elite. This desire only changed following the Revolution, when Carolina planters found themselves part of a newly conceived regional elite, a southern slaveholding aristocracy. Here is the place from which the contemporary image of the plantation emanates. Here the plantation is a static, paternalistic entity, part of and yet removed from the market. The planter is the traditional patriarch, wealthy but not devoted to the business of planting. These images linger in the collective imagination. As Edelson so ably demonstrates, planter and plantation must be reenvisioned because both were dynamic, adaptive, and fundamentally wedded to a rapidly widening marketplace. In modifying English agricultural practices to suit an exotic environment, Carolina colonists wrote their own definition of plantation and in the process reinvented both self and place.