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A REVIEW

Explorations in Class and Gender in the Old South

JAMES M. DENHAM

The Confessions of Edward Isham: A Poor White Life of the South, ed. Charles C. Bolton and Scott P. Culclasure. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. xxii+192 pp. $40.00(cloth), ISBN 0-8203-2021-8; $18.00(paper), ISBN 0-8203-2073-0.

Recollections of a Southern Daughter: A Memoir By Cornelia Jones Pond of Liberty County, ed. Lucinda H. MacKethan. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. xlvi+118 pp. $24.95, ISBN 0-8203-2044-7.

The two lives depicted in these accounts represent two dramatically different versions of life in the Old South. As the privileged daughter of a well-to-do slaveholder, Cornelia Jones Pond of Liberty County, Georgia, encountered none of the hardships and experiences of Edward Isham—who represented a class of people that contemporaries and historians have labeled "poor white." Pond's world was a place of supportive parents, balls, dashing suitors, and loyal servants. Edward Isham's world, on the other hand, was one of bad whiskey, knives, firearms, and poverty. Their lives offer two striking contrasts of white experiences in the antebellum South.

Ever since the publication of Frank L. Owsley's classic study *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1949), historians have explored the world of the white nonslaveholder.[1] They have also quarreled heatedly about divisions within this "Plain Folk" category. As Robert Culclasure explains, "Until a consensus develops on what to call the group—the confusion reflects uncertainty about how to define antebellum poverty as well as an understandable desire to avoid pejorative—there will continue to be a plethora of descriptive terms. One point is clear: those described as 'poor whites' are only part of the larger group variously labeled 'plain folk,' 'common whites,' or 'yeomen.'" Thus "poor whites require a many-faceted definition" (154). While moving in fits and starts, scholarship on poor whites has been going on for quite some time.[2] Most older studies of poor whites have utilized travel accounts and letters of well-to-do or well-educated persons, whose opinions reflect biases and prejudices of their class and backgrounds. Recently scholars have begun using other sources to study the lives of poor whites. Criminal records, for example, have shed light on the group. One underutilized source has been wanted proclamations published in newspapers.[3] *The Confessions of Edward Isham* represents one of the most impressive efforts thus far in bringing this shadowy group to light.

Like the lives of so many of his contemporaries, Edward Isham's life would have gone unnoticed and undocumented if not for his prosecution for a murder he committed in North Carolina. His court-appointed attorney, David Schenck, dutifully recorded Isham's life experiences as dictated to him in preparation for his trial. Schenck, who eventually became a prominent judge, died in 1902, and his voluminous papers and diaries were donated to the University of North Carolina. Missing from that cache was the notebook in which he recorded the testimony of his client, who was hanged in 1860. Isham's life story survives because Schenck's daughter donated this notebook to the North Carolina Division of Archives and History in 1945.

The editors have produced three primary documents: Isham's "biography" (renamed autobiography); newspaper accounts of Isham's murder of James Cornelius; and the trial judge's statement which accompanied the defendant's appeal to the North Carolina Supreme Court. The second and the third documents are reproduced in their original form, except that the spelling of Isham is standardized. (It often appeared as *Icem* or *Isom*.) Expertly executed maps trace Isham's movements between the Alabama-Georgia border counties connected by the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Chattahoochee river systems. The editors admit that the autobiography is "undoubtedly not a complete account of the life of Edward Isham, and although Schenck clearly played a pivotal role in determining what information about Isham has survived, the narrative unmistakably renders the voice of Edward Isham, however incomplete and filtered through the sensibilities of David Schenck" (xi).

Edward Isham spent most of his violent life on the

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move drinking, stealing, fighting, fornicating, and gambling his way through Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, and finally North Carolina, where he met his fate on the gallows for murdering his employer. Isham worked for wages: cutting timber, digging ditches, driving cattle, and mining gold. During his rambles on boat, train, horseback, and foot, Isham married at least two women but "took up" with dozens of others throughout his life. He also consorted and gambled with blacks without compunction. (He even worked for a free black named "Fax" in Tennessee.) After killing a man in Arkansas, Isham found shelter with relatives on the Georgia-Alabama border (as he often did on similar occasions). But he never stayed long. Isham killed another man near Montgomery, Alabama, fled to the Georgia–North Carolina border, and changed his name to Harland Bone. Not long thereafter, Isham killed James Cornelius in a dispute over wages and was subsequently captured in Tennessee after a flight of over a hundred miles.

The "Autobiography of Edward Isham, Alias 'Hardaway Bone,'" is a fascinating first-person tale that forms the basis for six essays analyzing several aspects of poor white life. Charles Bolton uses Isham's account to explore poor white labor in the Old South. David H. Kleit traces the resettlement of the Cherokee Country. In two separate articles Scott P. Culclasure investigates murder and criminal justice for poor whites in the antebellum South. Victoria E. Bynum analyzes the images of women in Isham's autobiography. In the last article Joseph P. Reidy explores the worlds of nineteenth-century condemned men. Both the editors and contributors make expert use of census, land, and tax records, as well as newspapers, thus leading the way to a fuller understanding of this shadowy world of poor white life. While producing a thorough annotation of the Isham text, they have also admirably demonstrated the potential of court and criminal prosecution records for documenting, uncovering, and understanding the lives of the South's most elusive social group.

If *The Confessions of Edward Isham* offers us a rare glimpse into the world of poor whites in the antebellum South, the memoirs of Cornelia Jones Pond provide us with far more familiar images associated with the slaveholding elite. Dictated to her daughter one year before the turn of the twentieth century, Pond's memoir recounts her memories of home, family, and living within the privileged stability of one of the South's wealthiest families. In a thorough, gracefully written introduction, Lucinda H. MacKethan offers excellent context for Pond's text by providing important information on the historical development of Georgia's Midway District, as well as providing important information on Jones's family and circle of friends. Cornelia Jones's family traced its origins from the "Dorchester Puritans," who began carving out lavish plantations in the low coastal swamp lands in the 1750s. One of the families that appear frequently in these pages is the James Colcocke Jones family, which, though unrelated to Cornelia's family, had been intimately associated with them since their migration to the district in the eighteenth century. That family and the society that emerged there was brought to light some time ago by Robert Manson Myers's massive three-volume publication of Jones correspondence, *Children of Pride* (New Haven, 1972).

Pond's original text is in the Midway Museum and was given to the Midway Society by Pond's great-nephew. MacKethan inserted paragraph breaks and chapter headings which divide Pond's life into five major periods: Plantation Childhood, A Southern Belle, Home Making in the Old South, Daughter of the Confederacy, and Starting Over in the New South. Otherwise the text appears as it was originally written except that in some instances capitalization and punctuation were regularized, and missing or illegible words were inserted in brackets.

Cornelia Jones Pond's memoirs are filled with descriptions of balls, evening dresses, lavish weddings, loving family gatherings, sumptuous dinners, and devoted slaves. Her paternalistic attitudes on the "peculiar institution" mirrored those of her class. As the pampered and privileged daughter of a slaveholding family, Cornelia never questioned the morality or inherent benefits of slavery for both whites and blacks. She never challenged the inherent brutality of the system, or examined the internal impulses of African Americans for freedom. The condition of African Americans was foreordained. Providence had deigned to entrust an inferior race to her family. Such folk dutifully clothed, housed, fed, and cared for the moral and religious lives of their bondsmen. Thus in Pond's reminiscences, as MacKethan reminds us, we find "many of the same stereotypes of happy slaves, caring paternal masters, the *good* times 'befo' dah wah' that we recognize as staples of the white southern literature that began to be popular during Reconstruction. Such literature, with its racist overtones and blind spots, remains even today dangerously seductive, as the continued popularity of *Gone with the Wind* demonstrates." "Pond's account," MacKethan continues, "is rarely defensive, and less propagandistic than many penned during her own time and later, partly because the attitudes and responses belonged to a construction of events that was meant for the private sphere of

her own family and not for the public arenas. Pond is carrying on a conversation not with critics or historians of the Old South but with those who are familiar with her experiences or those who, she naturally assumes, will grow up to share her point of view" (xiii). Thus Cornelia's work certainly has limitations. Even so, McKethan reminds us that her memoir is valuable in that it adds to the growing primary literature of upper-class slaveholding women of the Old South.[4]

Cornelia Jones attended school in Macon and Madison, Georgia, before marrying Thomas Goulding Pond, a mathematics professor who became an Episcopal clergyman after the Civil War. Migrating with him to Savannah and then to Tuskegee, Alabama, and back to Savannah again, Cornelia played the role of the dutiful wife. She bore Pond three daughters and, after the Civil War, a son. When the Civil War broke out, Pond first put his mathematical talents to work building fortifications for the Confederacy on the Georgia coast. When her husband left the state, Cornelia and the children returned to her father's plantation. As the Civil War progressed, it changed Cornelia's world. She remembered the shortages, wartime weddings, the comings and goings of the soldiers, and the heartbreak she felt for those who never returned. Near the end of the war, Cornelia recalls how Sherman's Bummers stole food, destroyed property, molested her family, and "demoralized" their faithful servants. Though Pond served in both Tennessee and Virginia, he survived the war. He returned to a dramatically different state.

When the war was over, Cornelia and her family rebuilt their lives as best they could. Their most difficult challenge was the adjustment to freedom. The end of slavery meant that, as Cornelia recalled, "locks had to be put on stables because the negroes were now free and lawless. During the winter they could be seen walking the road in yankee overcoats with guns on their shoulders, a sight unknown in slavery times" (87). Cornelia tells of once faithful slaves (who now worked for shares), occupying soldiers, and surly freedman's bureau officials. In 1870 Pond joined the Episcopal priesthood and took charge of a boys' school near Mobile, Alabama. Cornelia accompanied her husband to a number of posts, including Marion, Alabama, and Albany and Mt. Airy, Georgia. Pond died in 1894 and Cornelia herself succumbed in 1902.

The chief value of Cornelia Pond's memoir is that it brings to light the experiences, views, and opinions of a woman who represented one of the Old South's most distinguished families. MacKethan's excellent introduction puts Pond's memoir in the proper historical and regional context. The work would have profited from maps which could have traced Pond and her family's movements through Georgia and Alabama. The work also lacks an index and illustrations. (It is hard to believe that such a well-to-do family left no likenesses of themselves, or that photographs of their plantation were unavailable.) Further, MacKethan makes no attempt to place this memoir within the overall genre of Southern women's memoirs and autobiography. But these are only minor criticisms. General readers will find this brief memoir accessible, and scholars will find it useful to the extent that it furthers our understanding of Pond's region and class.

Notes

1. "Poor whites" should be carefully distinguished from those whom Frank L. Owsley labeled "Plain Folk." Owsley and subsequent scholars have argued that this group represented an unstudied and largely undocumented middle class of yeoman farmers and small slaveholders which constituted the bulk of Southern society. See Samuel C. Hyde, ed., *Plain Folk in the South Revisited* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985); Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1992); I. A Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Persistence, 1880–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989). Some scholars, beginning with the path-breaking work of Grady McWhiney, have chosen to call this group "Crackers," a contemporary depiction. See McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988); James M. Denham, "The Florida Cracker Before the Civil War as Seen Though Travelers' Accounts," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 72 (April 1994): 453–68; idem, "Cracker Women and Their Families in Nineteenth-Century Florida," in *Florida's Heritage of Diversity: Essays in Honor of Samuel Proctor*, ed. Mark I. Greenberg, William Warren Rogers, and Canter Brown, Jr. (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 1997), 15–28; Dana Ste. Claire, *Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History* (Daytona Beach: Museum of Arts and Sciences, 1998); James M. Denham and Canter Brown, Jr., eds., *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives: The Florida Reminiscences of George Gillett Keen and Sarah Pamela Williams* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

2. An excellent contemporary source for social groups in the South is Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860). Older, but still useful, studies of poor whites are Paul H. Buck, "The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South," *American Historical Review* 31 (October 1925): 41–54; A. N. J. Den Hollander, "The Tradition of 'Poor Whites,'" in *Culture in the South*, ed. W. T. Couch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 403–31. See also Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939). From Shields's study until the late 1970s not much scholarly work on poor whites appeared until J. Wayne Flynt's publication of *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979). Subsequently, a

number of excellent studies have appeared. See especially appropriate sections of Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); and Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

3. For example, see Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villainy: Crime and Retribution in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959). See also James M. Denham, *"A Rogue's Paradise": Crime and Punishment in Antebellum Florida* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 88–89, 156–60; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Community, Class, and Snopesian Crime: Local Justice in the Old South," in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath Jr., *Class, Conflict and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 173–206; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*.

4. Several recent works have made particularly good use of manuscript sources to shed light on elite women's roles in the Old South. See Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Joan Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford, 1991); Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Recently, a number of letter collections and memoirs have appeared which shed light on the role of plantation women. See, for example, Joan E. Cashin, ed., *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Richard C. Lounsbury, ed., *Louisa S. McCord: Poems, Drama, Biography, Letters* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Carol Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Wilma King, ed., *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 1856–1876* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997). Elizabeth Fox Genovese, *Beulah* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Judith W. McGuire, ed., *Diary of a Southern Refugee During the War: By a Lady of Virginia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Virginia Clay Clapton and Ada Sterling, eds., *A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama, Covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853–66* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999). See also Denham and Brown, *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives*, forthcoming.

ADE Session at MLA Annual Meeting

The Modern Language Association will meet in Chicago 27-30 December 1999 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, with the ADE panel to be held on 28 December in the Acapulco Room from 10:15 to 11:45 A.M. The topic is "Editing in the Digital Age: W. B. Yeats and Marianne Moore," chaired by Richard Finneran, Hodges Chair of Excellence Professor at the University of Tennessee. The panelists and their topics are George Bornstein (University of Michigan), "Exploring the Electronic Environment with the Yeats Prototype"; William H. O'Donnell (University of Memphis), "Exploring the Electronic Environment with the Chadwyck-Healy *W. B. Yeats Collection*"; and Robin Schulze (Pennsylvania State University), "Authorial Selection and Editorial Practice: Towards an Electronic Edition of Marianne Moore's Early Poems." You must be a member of MLA to attend the convention.

The 2000 MLA meeting will be held in December in Washington, D.C. Anyone wishing to propose a panel should write to Joel Myerson, Department of English, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208.

ADE 2000 Annual Meeting in Berkeley 5–7 October 2000

Call for Proposals for Papers and Sessions

The Program Committee for next year's annual meeting hopes to be able to present some sessions that are related to the California locale, for example, the history of Spanish California, topics concerning Native American history and culture, Bay Area figures focused upon in various disciplines, and other "Western" matters. This of course does not mean that subjects related to other regions and countries are outside the Committee's scope as it tries to develop a program that will be of interest to all. If you are planning to propose the presentation of a 20-minute paper or to submit a plan for a session, the deadline is 15 February 2000. As soon as possible, please contact the Program Committee chair, Joseph R. McElrath, The Frank Norris Society, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1580; e-mail: jmcelrath@english.fsu.edu; phone (850) 644-1522; fax (850) 644-0811.