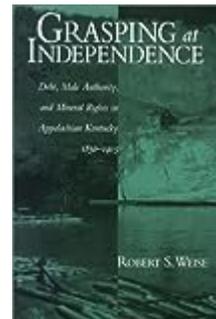




Robert S. Weise. *Grasping at Independence: Debt, Male Authority, and Mineral Rights in Appalachian Kentucky, 1850-1915.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001. xii + 374 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-112-9.



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Appalachia and the New South

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Robert S. Weise has written an important book for southern and rural historians, as well as cultural and historical geographers. Weise explores how “debt, localism, patriarchy, and insecurity” (p. 13) helped create a complex economic environment in Appalachian Kentucky well before mining companies began to develop the area. He rejects the thesis that a largely isolated, pre-capitalist, and agrarian Appalachian society was simply invaded and easily overrun by faceless corporations. Weise does not deny that exploitation took place, but he believes that the isolation thesis ignores much of the economic activity prior to industrialization. Rather, Weise avers that the people in Appalachia made choices, especially in the selling of their mineral rights, based on their local understanding of economic independence and a just and fair economic system. He shows that their economic decision-making developed in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, thus illustrating the continuity of economic thought even as large-scale mining began in eastern Kentucky in the early twentieth century.

Weise’s study focuses on how individual households

adapted to the economic transformation in Floyd County, Kentucky, from 1850 to 1915. Unfortunately, most of the inhabitants did not leave diaries, letters, or accounting ledgers. Therefore, Weise carefully scrutinized census data, mortgage books, land deeds, and court records of property disputes in selected portions of the county. Court records are a valuable source that give historians insight into personal disputes and the everyday workings of society. With these court records, Weise makes the case that the basis of economic relations in nineteenth-century eastern Kentucky remained the Jacksonian desire for independence. However, Weise uses the term “household economy” rather than “safety-first” to explain this ideology. He defines the “household economy” or “household commercialism” as the aspiration to own land, escape wage labor, eschew supervision, and to control a household’s economic decisions. Moreover, Weise also asserts that this household economy depended on male authority over wives and family.

Far from being isolated farmers, the populace of eastern Kentucky was deeply involved in the market—so much so that the predominant economic position of most

citizens, rich or poor, was debt. Weise emphasizes that they went into debt while “grasping for independence.” Each family made economic decisions to try to gain a comfortable level of land, control, and freedom. These economic decisions entailed economic risk-taking and debt. Weise uncovers a complex web of commercial relationships, often tied to kinship. He also stresses that those living in eastern Kentucky had significant business relationships outside of the region with land speculators, bankers, logging companies, and merchants. Nevertheless, Weise finds that local views of debt predominated in the enforcement of contracts. Often, local creditors accepted barter for debts or allowed debtors extra time to pay. As well, people traded debt payments as a form of currency in a cash-poor region.

This localism and lax enforcement of contracts often infuriated outside creditors, and court cases ensued. Moreover, untangling the myriad number of land claims added to the confusion and court battles. Despite these problems, Weise points out that the local citizens became quite wily with creditors and used the less restrictive legal culture in their favor. For example, they turned common stereotypes to their advantage by pleading ignorance or illiteracy when confronted in court.

Thus, Weise contends that the household economy and kinship created a unique, but not necessarily an economically backward, system of exchange. With exhaustive detail, he analyzes the commercial relationships in Floyd County from a variety of perspectives. The majority of citizens were small farmers. In Weise’s view, farmers “mortgaged their very livelihoods in their efforts to maintain” independence. They “put up their farms, livestock, and household effects, often everything they owned, as security when they went into debt” (p. 110). This debt often did not go toward maintaining subsistence agriculture, but to obtaining more land. Besides farming and livestock, mineral industries, small coal mines, and logging also became sources of trade in the region. Most individuals entered logging or other pursuits as an extension of their farming and a way to maintain economic freedom. Nonetheless, Weise observes that “the end result for most Floyd County residents was a fleeting, insecure, and highly precarious version of household independence” (p. 104).

Weise also found New South entrepreneurs in the towns of Floyd County. In many ways, local men, such as Walter Harkins, mirrored the New South boosters of Atlanta and Nashville. They saw extractive resources, especially coal and timber, as magnets for economic progress.

They hoped to attract railroads and industry while envisioning better schools, roads, and moral uplift. Weise shows how these men of influence tied together a local perspective of economic growth and independence to the national trend of incorporation and industry. They did not see local and national trends as incompatible. Indeed, Harkins and other local businessmen played an important role in bringing about development of the region.

So why would people sell their mineral rights to mining corporations if their goal was economic independence? This is one of the main questions that Weise tries to answer in the book. He shows that citizens of Floyd County saw selling mineral rights as another way to gain economic independence. It allowed them to stay on their land, pay off their debts, and to buy more land, which often meant more debt. Thus, they viewed it as a rational decision within the household economy. Weise found very few cases of fraud or deceit, although the coal companies paid as little as possible for the mineral rights, usually five to ten dollars an acre. The long-run consequences, of course, are well known, but people in Floyd County made decisions in the early twentieth century that fit their conceptions of economic independence.

This is an extremely well-researched and well-argued book. However, there are a few flaws. Although the term “male authority” is part of the title and one of the most interesting topics, this is one of the more weakly developed parts of the book. Weise shows that men saw household authority as an important part of their independence. He also explains how women often subverted this authority or used laws that protected women, especially widows, to their economic advantage. Unfortunately, Weise’s analysis of gender relations is scattered throughout the book. A separate chapter on gender issues would have served readers better and would have allowed for a more focused argument. Also, although Weise uses court records creatively to examine commercial relationships from logging to farming, the book becomes a bit repetitive because it relies on the same source.

Finally, how representative is Floyd County, Kentucky in our understanding of Appalachia as a whole? Can this microcosm be generalized to the rest of the region? Despite these minor criticisms, Robert Weise has written a book that anyone interested in understanding Appalachia in the nineteenth century and its transition to industrialization in the twentieth century will have to study. This work also corresponds well with another University of Tennessee Press book, *After the Backcountry*.^[1] Both books attempt to debunk much of the histor-

ical conventional wisdom about Appalachian society and its economy.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra, eds., *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800-1900* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2000).

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