H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William Dusinberre. *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James Polk.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xiv + 258 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-515735-2.

Reviewed by Jonathan Atkins (Department of History, Berry College)

Published on H-Tennessee (September, 2003)

Mr. Polk's Other War

Mr. Polk's Other War

James K. Polk usually ranks as one of the nation's better presidents because he accomplished several objectives, including the acquisition of the Southwest, during his single term in office. Historians recognize him as one of the new breed of professional politicians, with little attention to how he supported himself as he pursued his ambitions. Occasionally, scholars will acknowledge that he was a cotton planter, though most–including his biographer, Charles G. Sellers–neglect to consider what influence his connection with slavery might have had on his life and career.[1] In *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James Polk*, William Dusinberre remedies this omission in a well-written and carefully-researched study of the eleventh president's roles both as a slaveowner and as a slaveowning politician. The result is a portrait of Polk that will make it difficult for modern readers to look upon him favorably.

Dusinberre opens with an account of a letter written during the 1844 presidential campaign by Polk's neighbor, political ally, and fellow-slaveholder Gideon J. Pillow. In response to charges that the Democratic nominee actively engaged in the slave trade, Pillow testified that Polk was "a warmhearted paternalist" (p. 11) who owned only a few "family" slaves. He had bought or sold slaves on a few occasions, but only for the purpose of uniting families, and he would never disrupt a family through the slave trade. This "comforting image" (p. 12) helped sustain Polk's support in the North, but the candidate by that time had actually purchased fourteen slaves from nonfamily members to provide labor for his cotton plantations. His preference to buy young males ranging from ages twelve to twenty-one makes it likely that he acquired workers who had already been separated from a parent. After his election he would buy nineteen more slaves, always instructing his agents to conceal his identity in order to preserve his public image as a paternalist master. Interestingly, he refused to use his salary as president to fund these purchases, but by the time of his death in 1849, he had increased his holdings to more than fifty slaves.

Though Polk hailed from a slaveholding family, he entered the "planter" ranks only after he had made his name as a political protege of Andrew Jackson. His law practice had been successful, but "a steady income from a cotton plantation would make his finances more secure" (p. 14). Thus, in 1831 he began developing into a plantation the West Tennessee land he had inherited from his father. Three years later, he sold this holding to invest with his brother-in-law in a potentially more productive venture in Mississippi, of which he became the sole owner in 1838. His goal throughout these investments clearly was to make a profit. "[C]aught up in the expansive, entrepreneurial ethic of central Tennessee,... his principal impulses as a slavemaster were acquisitive rather than paternalistic" (p. 13). Especially during his presidency, he hoped to gain a sufficient annual income to support himself and his wife through their anticipated years in retirement. As an absentee owner, Polk had lit-

tle actual contact with his field hands, but he expected his overseers to maintain strict discipline and to produce results. When a lenient overseer failed to produce sufficient cotton yields, Polk dismissed him regardless of the overseer's popularity among the slaves. Likewise, when slaves ran away to appeal to Polk's kin or acquaintances for protection from particularly severe treatment, Polk backed his employee. Occasionally he would act benevolently toward particular hands, but such actions usually occurred only when his wife or his mother intervened on a servant's behalf. In Congress, he expressed his belief that whipping was the most effective method of punishment, yet his records showed that he would not hesitate to sell unruly hands.

Polk's investments paid off. Through the 1840s and 1850s, his plantations' annual cash profits averaged almost 8 percent. For the slaves who produced these returns, however, life was dreary and harsh. Hands frequently ran away for temporary respite or to appeal for assistance from a Polk acquaintance or family member. More than half of the children among Polk's slaves died before reaching age fifteen, and the overall death rate on the Mississippi plantation was higher than elsewhere in the South. Bondsmen might receive some comfort in setting up their own family or making friends in an extended slave community. Polk and his associates, though, gave little consideration to "abroad" marriages between slaves with different owners; the majority of his married slaves, in fact, experienced a disruption of their unions because of sale or movement of a spouse. A sense of community was probably greater among Polk's slaves because of the large number who had been owned by members of his extended family, but the community was still considerably unstable because of the high death rate and the frequent infusion of newly purchased young males. Few enjoyed the privileges of a slave like Henry Carter, who accompanied Polk to Washington as a personal servant, or of "Long Harry," a blacksmith whom Polk allowed to hire himself out and keep a portion of his earnings. The master did allow field hands to earn their own income by growing cotton on lands that would otherwise go unused, but this incentive, like others, was designed to serve his financial interests. Even Long Harry was ordered back to the plantation–and to leave his wife and children–when the president concluded that the difficulty in collecting Harry's fees made his skills more profitable elsewhere.

Despite Polk's carefully crafted image as a sectional moderate, Dusinberre contends that the Tennessean's true beliefs on slavery issues were much closer to those of John C. Calhoun, the leader of more extreme Southern rights advocates, than historians have been willing to admit. Early in his career, Polk denied the right of Congress to interfere with slavery in any federal possession. As Speaker of the House, Polk "stacked" a committee and made several procedural rulings to "ram" (p. 123) the infamous "gag rule" through Congress. Building on the work of David Pletcher, Dusinberre argues that the United States could have achieved secure title to Texas, and probably the Southwest and California as well, without the war that Polk unnecessarily provoked.[2] Warnings from Secretary of State James Buchanan and from the Whig opposition made the president well aware that his territorial acquisitions would incite a controversy over slavery's expansion, despite "disingenuous" protestations to the contrary (p. 142). As "by far the most powerful leader of the Southern Democrats during the late 1840s" (p. 145), Polk–rather than Calhoun–established the position his party would follow through the controversy over slavery's status in the territories. Throughout, he firmly adhered to his belief in congressional nonintervention. Although he accepted slavery's prohibition in the Oregon territory and eventually proposed extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific–because slavery could not be expected to exist north of 36= 30' anyway–privately he told Calhoun that he would appoint federal judges who rejected congressional authority over slavery. These judges presumably would overturn any congressional restriction and open all of the territories to the peculiar institution.

Dusinberre does not deny that Polk was the "continentalist" or "nationalist" presented by most historians, but "his Southern Democratic version of continentalism contained several unexpungable adjuncts" (p. 143) because he represented the "entrepreneurial ethos" of "small slavemasters or would-be masters" (p. 165). These "small men-on-the-make" (p. 165) saw slave ownership as the key to wealth and fortune, and they "avidly sought their own short-term economic advantage, giving scarcely a thought to the long-term interests of Southern white people" (p. 166).[3] Had Polk lived through the secession crisis, Dusinberre speculates, he would not have followed the Unionist course of either his brother William H. Polk or his friend John Catron–both of whom apparently had financial interests tied to the perpetuation of the Union–but would have acted as did another political ally, Cave Johnson, who remained loyal until Tennessee withdrew from the Union following the conflict at Fort Sumter. Yet civil war itself could have been avoided had Polk not "brought to the national stage the constricted views of a Tennessee slavemaster" (p. 169).

Dismissing warnings about racial chaos, proposals for colonization, and appeals to "Southern Honor" as nothing more than demagoguery, Dusinberre argues that Polk and his Democratic comrades should have backed off on demands for the right to take slavery into the territories, abandoned efforts to secure more slave states, and stressed to Southern voters the distinction between the abolitionists–who had relatively little popular following in the free states–and the mass of Northerners, who opposed slavery's extension but agreed that the federal government could not affect the institution within individual states. Masters then could have continued to reap the benefits of their slaves' labor until the cotton economy finally became unprofitable; at that point, the Southern states could have moved toward gradual emancipation.

Slavemaster President provides an excellent microcosmic study of a slaveowner and his plantation that should be received as a significant contribution. The author skillfully scrutinizes Polk's extensive correspondence and plantation records to present an insightful perspective on several historiographical issues. Dusinberre does not reject completely the conclusion of scholars who argue that slavery sustained a premodern social order, but he contends that the South should be seen as "semicapitalist" (p. 57) because of its capitalist features, including a "vigorous entrepreneurial spirit" (p. 58) among slaveowners and a labor market based, not on daily wages, but on "the capitalized value of enslaved labor power" (p. 70). Masters occasionally could act with a benevolent paternalism when such kindnesses did not conflict with their interests, but Dusinberre presents a sobering reminder of the fragility and instability of the slave families and community that historians often emphasize. Overall, *Slavemaster President*'s depiction of slavery is one that will startle even the most die-hard adherent to the "moonlight and magnolias" myth.

Dusinberre's examination of Polk's political career, while thoughtful and stimulating, is less persuasive. Too often, this section often comes across as a legal brief in which the author prosecutes Polk and his Democratic associates for the crime of causing the Civil War. In his zeal for a conviction, Dusinberre draws several conclusions that are not clearly sustained by the evidence. Accusations of the antislavery sentiments of William H. Harrison, the Whigs' 1840 presidential nominee, do show that Polk could seize on abolitionism "as a stick with which to beat his Whig opponents" (p. 124), but in this campaign he was supporting an unpopular and colorless incumbent during an economic depression; in these circumstances, such charges appear to have been signs more of desperation than of "the centrality of the slavery issue to Southern Democratic politicians and their eagerness to condone disunionism" (p. 126). The president's disagreements with his opponents and his secretary of state do not necessarily render "disingenuous" the statement in his diary that he had difficulty conceiving "what connection slavery had with making peace with Mexico" (p. 142). The author's suggestion that "the humiliations Polk had experienced in governing his slaves" might have "contributed to his determination to show the Mexicans ... who was boss" (p. 140) seems a Freudian stretch. Southern Democratic opposition to Polk's concession on slavery in Oregon, and Democrats' rejection of the 36= 30' line in favor of popular sovereignty, indicate that the president and his party were not as closely in sync as portrayed here. And while an alternative scenario that could have avoided war is entirely plausible, many readers will see racism, party ideology, and honor as powerful cultural forces that could not easily be sidestepped through "free, calm discussion of Southern whites' best options" (p. 159).[4]

These reservations do not detract from Dusinberre's accomplishment. The author has presented a powerful argument that deserves consideration and should stimulate debate among antebellum historians. His examination of Polk as a slavemaster goes beyond abstractions to bring a sense of reality to discussions of slavery. And his call for modern historians to "reexamine our leaders' false turnings" and "to forsake our strange esteem for the men who led us into disaster" (p. 174) is well vindicated here. Few readers will leave this work with a sense of admiration for a president usually praised for fulfilling his campaign promises.

Notes

[1]. Charles G. Sellers, *James K. Polk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957-1966). Dusinberre notes that Sellers accepted Gideon Pillow's letter, discussed in the next paragraph, as "an unadorned statement of the actual facts" (p. 12).

[2]. David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973).

[3]. Surprisingly, Dusinberre does not cite William L. Barney's *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), which makes a similar case for the leading role taken by smaller planters in driving the movement for secession.

[4]. A more persuasive consideration of "what might have been" can be found in Gary J. Kornblith, "Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise," *Journal of American History* 90 (June 2003): pp. 76-105.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

/~tenn/

Citation: Jonathan Atkins. Review of Dusinberre, William, *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James Polk*. H-Tennessee, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8192