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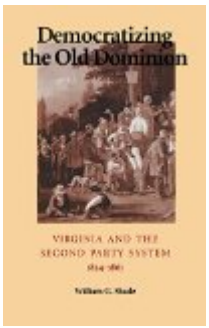
William G. Shade. *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996. xvii + 365 pp. $49.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-1654-5.



Reviewed by K. R. Constantine Gutzman

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William G. Shade is known as a practitioner of the "New Political History," and with *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, he has done what had never been done before: put Virginia politics in the context of the antebellum (Jacksonian, if you will) extension of the "political nation" to include all white men. His book is obviously heavily influenced by Joel Silbey and Michael Holt, both of whom he thanks in his preface and each of whom has fingerprints all over this work. Although I have my quibbles with the book, it is certainly a nice contemporary attempt at what hasn't been done since Charles Ambler's still-influential work on sectionalism in Virginia nearly a century ago, which is to trace Virginia's politics from the pinnacle of the Old Dominion's influence to its second declaration of independence.

"This study draws back the curtains," writes Shade, "and portrays the commonwealth as less exceptional and more commonplace than either its hagiographers or critics [sic] have conceded" (p. 3). Virginia was typical of its regions--the upper South and the "eastern seaboard"--in its rate of economic development and the chronology of its adoption of the second party system. It resembled them very closely in its political culture by 1861. European visitors thought Virginia a representative state (pp. 4-5). It is Shade's goal to describe these phenomena, and he does so well.

When I asked several historians of my acquaintance for information relating to the old chestnut that Virginia was in economic decline in the Jacksonian period, Michael Holt told me I should take a look at Shade's new book. Avery Craven's slim volume on soil erosion in the Chesapeake seems to have been the last serious work to take up this problem, and I had found its treatment generally inadequate. Sure enough, Shade provides a wealth--I might say a mind-numbingly detailed wealth--of information concerning the crops and stock produced in each Virginia county, organized by region, during the period under discussion. What I failed to find, though, was any comparison of Virginia's agricultural output in this period to that of earlier days. In other words, I still do not know whether Virginia agriculture really was in decline.

Readers of Shade's book will have a very clear conception of the regional variation in Virginia's economy, though. They will also realize that it was similar to those of states to the Old Dominion's north, and growing more so. William Freehling's depiction of Gulf Coast secessionists worried that Virginia's slavery-based society would eventually go the way, was already going the way, of New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware is supported by what one sees here.

Ambler pointed out in his classic tome that Virginia had gone through successive stages of sectionalism, and Shade's accomplishment is to put economic and ideological flesh on the political bones of that assertion. Shade makes clear that economic interests, highly correlated with the degree to which slave agriculture had penetrated a given region, drove political alignments. Whatever visitors to Shirley Plantation may think, Whiggery in Virginia was not the rich man's affiliation. Still, he is at pains to show that neither party was the "slavery party," either.

Thomas Jefferson's belief that a "natural aristocracy" would and should run the Old Dominion is shown by Shade to have been mistaken. "Democratization" of Jefferson's state involved the decline of the planter class, and especially of the old families. (This is not to deny that the names Mason and Randolph, for example, remained politically prominent in 1861. A far smaller proportion of planters sat in the General Assembly in the 1850s than in the 1790s, and many members of that assemblage in the 1850s had no ties to agriculture at all.) It also involved the ascendancy of men from cities, who proved just as uncommitted to state rights and limited government as he had expected.

For Shade, it is those who support the "limited nationalism" of Henry Clay and his branch--the dominant branch--of the Whig party who are the farsighted ones. It is those who would jettison the original structure of Virginia's republican government in favor of one more in consonance with the times whose case is obviously the stronger. Opponents of both these positions, who happen to be the same set of men, are "particularist," and their objections to "the lighthouse of the skies" and all the rest are simply beneath consideration. An illustration of this tendency is to be found in Shade's description of the Virginians' response to Andrew Jackson's removal of the deposits. Whatever one may think of the economic issues, Jackson's action--as two secretaries of the treasury told him--was flatly in contravention of the relevant statute. Shade says, "For most Virginians, Jackson's actions represented an arrogant abuse of executive power and posed a matter of essentially constitutional, rather than economic, policy" (p. 167). That seems inadequate to me.

Shade adopts the position of Drew McCoy in ***The Last of the Fathers*** that James Madison was the arbiter of the true meaning of the "Virginia Doctrine" and, like McCoy, he belittles those (including William Branch Giles) who disagree. At one point, he has John Taylor of Caroline, William Branch Giles, and Jefferson (respectively the Virginia House sponsor of the Virginia Resolves of 1798, the Virginia Senate sponsor of those Resolves, and the author of the draft Kentucky Resolutions) agreeing with the main body of Virginia politicians regarding those "Principles'" content. Still, it seems obvious to Shade that Whiggery, which has enlisted old man Madison's support, has the better of the argument (see, for example, p. 13). As I have noted elsewhere, I am unpersuaded; Madison valued the union more highly than did his fellows, so he had changed his position. In advancing the notion of a conspiracy of anti-Madisonians, Shade ignores Mills Thornton's article in the *VMHB* some years ago questioning the very existence of the "Richmond Junto." If it did exist, it would be nice to see a refutation of Thornton.

In his opening chapter, "Notes on the State of Virginia," Shade says it is "ironic" that Virginia was among the last states to adopt the type of con-

stitution Jefferson had proposed in his work of that name. Of course, it was not ironic at all, for while other Virginians found Jefferson's views concerning the federal constitution congenial, his contemporaries, to his dismay, rejected his calls for constitutional reform consistently. Their constitution of 1776 was the culmination of their colonial constitutional tradition, and they were not ready to jettison it the moment it was written. Shade's account of the slow reform of that initial American constitution follows the path laid down by Robert P. Sutton in his ***Revolution to Secession*** by assuming, as noted above, that every move toward the Jeffersonian ideal was self-evidently positive and that all opposition was based on self-interest.

Shade is easy on Jefferson's memory, too, in associating calls for reform of the slave system with it. As Paul Finkelman and others have argued at length, Jefferson was often hesitant to do anything much about slavery within Virginia itself. Antebellum Virginia Whigs who moved to reform it surely deserve to be allotted whatever credit is due them in their own right, not as heirs to a Jefferson who never was. Shade does a nice job explaining how the issue of slavery reform came to be tied to suffrage and apportionment reform within Virginia and to states' rights doctrine in the federal realm. Leaders like Abel P. Upshur and John Randolph of Roanoke early convinced their fellow easterners that the various "reform" initiatives were of a piece, and Herrenvolk democracy was a long way away.

"The Slave Question," Shade's chapter on the disputation of slavery, is perhaps the finest in the book. Here we have all the fascinating characters, including Jefferson, Upshur, Randolph's brother Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Thornton Stringfellow, Thomas R. Dew, and all the rest, and the story of Virginia's slide into "Slavery Now, Slavery Tomorrow, Slavery Forever" is nicely told. Here, too, is the split with Whiggish West Virginia on permanency, the tragic shoal on which Old Virginia would run aground. The arguments on both sides are well treated, and the progress toward disaster is deftly handled. Of special interest is his treatment of the American Colonization Society's history in Virginia, where Taylor, Randolph, and John Tyler were all high-ranking officers at various times. The only consensus was Henry Wise's toast: "Slavery--whatever differences of opinion may exist among us Virginians on this vexed subject, we are unanimous on one point, a positive determination that no one shall think or act for us" (p. 212).

I am not sure what the intended audience of this book is. When Shade refers to Herrenvolk democracy without defining it, he gives the impression that he has a solely academic audience in mind. There are several such glitches. (For example, "a truly Weberian fashion," p. 123; "Pinckney's third resolution," p. 216.) Yet, his debt to such as Silbey is often only tacit, and one wishes he would deal with their arguments more directly, whether by saying "Virginia was part of the general phenomenon he describes," by saying "here's what made Virginia different," or by noting that "Silbey explained this long ago." (See, for example, pp. 103-4.) He does the same thing when referring to stereotypical notions of antebellum Virginia. The fact that Dan Crofts, Freehling, and others have portrayed Virginia differently than the stereotypical way adds to the confusion about his intended audience.

In sum, Shade's book is a nice overview of Virginia's development into a typical American state in the period 1824-1861. Readers of Jack P. Greene's ***Pursuits of Happiness*** may think it unsurprising that the typical society should eventually have a typical constitution and political system; Shade does a good job of showing how this predictable outcome came to pass. Antebellum Virginia, which has been too much neglected, has her chronicler.

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