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Hunting and Fishing in the New South: Black Labor and White Leisure after the Civil War

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In *Hunting and Fishing in the New South: Black Labor and White Leisure after the Civil War*, Scott Giltner delivers an intriguing and thoughtful survey of sporting cultures and racial identity in the postbellum South. The study, which, as the author notes, evolved from 'masters proposal to dissertation to book' (p. 179), offers the reader an innovative glance at race relations through the medium of sporting pursuits: certainly a fresh framework in which to explore much worked over ground. Racial dynamics represent the cornerstone of Giltner's interest, and, in a series of chapters, he considers various attributes of Southern hunting with a view to determining the complex negotiations between white elites and freed blacks in the New South.

Chapter one explores the importance of subsistence and market hunting to African-American socio-economic livelihoods while pointing out the tensions regarding black labor emerging in the post-Civil War South. As Giltner elaborates, at a time when many whites sought to rebuild a society based on their own racial and economic superiority, African Americans saw in the hunt a route towards personal freedom and economic liberty. The book details how hunting and fishing served up useful nutritional supplement to those with scarce resources and suffering dislocation. The game-rich lands of the South represented a 'paradise for poor folks' (p. 20), especially given the sleuth of firearms available after the Civil War. For disgruntled white elites, meanwhile, acts of market and subsistence hunting by former slaves became a matter of sharp

debate. As Giltner remarks, "at the close of the war, Southern planters faced not only humiliating defeat but also the possible loss of control over their entire labor supply" (p. 120). Chapter two continues this tale of tension and racialized codes by turning to explore how the elite sportsmen of the South emerged as willing allies in the landowners' quest to circumscribe black hunting. Just as farmers worried about a black population living independently of white control through hunting receipts so too did the sportsmen target African-American activities. For them, concern galvanized around the idea of the black hunter as a competitor for game and a threat to the particular aristocratic white hunting culture of the Anglo-Saxon gentleman-hero. Significantly, as Giltner illuminates, nostalgic allure for a vibrant (yet fictive) Old South, full of pliant slaves and abundant animals, informed the sporting elite's idea of a hunter's paradise. Far from just a roseate vision of the "grand old days", this elevation of the antebellum South broadcast decisive messages about proper racial divisions in the sporting field (and indeed society in general). Thus, set against the gentleman hunter described by H. P. U. (an Ohio sportsman) in the prominent journal *Forest and Stream* (1881) as a "thorough-going business man" and not a loafer, dead-beat, nor bummer?, "a votary of art and science" and a lover of "the true and beautiful, wherever found" (p. 54) were construed stereotypes of the African-American hunter as trigger-happy, inferior, uninformed and mercenary. However, with editorials from the likes of *Forest and Stream* issuing fervent criticism of African-American hunting excesses (and thereby successes), the white elite appeared in danger of undercutting their own assumed superiority in the field. As Giltner explains, "If whites acknowledged the damage done of black sportsmen, they risked calling attention to lost racial control and narrowing the distance between themselves and their supposed sporting inferiors. If, preferring to uphold whites' supposed mastery of the Southern sporting field, they held to the notion that African Americans could not be effective sportsmen, they risked downplaying the wildlife depletion and delaying its remedy — the restriction of blacks' customary rights. In the end, they chose a middle approach that explained both African-American sportsmen's regrettable effectiveness and their predictable shortcomings as symptomatic of racial inferiority" (p. 76). As explored in chapters three and four, the only appropriate place assigned to African-Americans in the postbellum elite hunting culture was as hired hands for the white well-to-do classes. As guides, teamsters, camp-tenders and dog handlers, Southern blacks participated in the sporting life and contributed to an emerging tourist industry. Giltner suggests here that such a process allowed African Americans to become "an indispensable part of the Southern sporting experience" (p. 81), and saw many reap considerable gains from their endeavours. As well as pay, hired laborers sometimes took home the catch of the day and also acquired stocks of ammunition, tackle, even firearms for use in their private hunting pursuits. This allowed African Americans a "niche in the new sporting system" (p. 81), but, as Giltner is keen to point out, did not signal a spirit of biracialism or communitarian sentiment to this arrangement. Power relations and the assumed inferiority of African-Americans consistently informed the hunting experience, as evidenced by the descriptions of an "colored peasantry" in the pages of *American Sportsman* magazine (p. 83). Meanwhile, attempts to regulate hunting in the South through licenses and firearms laws (the subject of chapter five) took on a decidedly racialized air, in the process tempering the claims of academics (for instance, John Reiger in *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (1)) who have presented the 19th-century elite hunting fraternity as altruistic conservationists. Instead, Giltner argues, the swathe of hunting regulations in the South after 1915 paid heed to the aligning forces of landowners, sportsmen and tourist interests, who combined financial motivations with modish Jim Crow sentiments to issue an attack on environmental exploitation by African Americans. This brand of racial conservation was starkly evident in the Ziegler Bill (1915), a piece of legislation aimed at 17 of the 44 counties in South Carolina. Of those targeted, only three sported a predominantly white population.

Hunting and Fishing in the New South tenders a valuable addition to scholarship on the racial constitution of the New South and to environmental history. Identity is located at the core of this work — whether that be the role of hunting in African-American communities or the conjuring of an aristocratic-style sporting life based around the powerful landscape (in both ecological and symbolic terms) of the plantation. Giltner displays considerable skill and uses a wealth of first-hand resources to convincingly unpack the mentality of the elite white sportsman. What is slightly less well worked over is the perspective of the African-American hunter. Given the rich tradition of black hunting that Giltner alludes to, the study would benefit from a deeper analysis of African-American attitudes. How did the African-American hunter describe the terrains and the

animals he encountered in the post-Emancipation South? Under what terms do black narratives reveal the uncultivated land beyond the ordered world of the plantation as both a larder and a locus for liberation? How did African-Americans construct their hunting personas in terms of history or socio-economic foundations? Class and gender issues also receive rather cursory treatment. Such caveats aside, the book does a good job at highlighting the different subcultures at work in American hunting, and blazes a worthy trail in pointing to the importance of hunting for marginalized groups. Another aspect deserving of mention is the important regional perspective provided by this survey. Giltner successfully avoids the polemics of anti- and pro-hunting common to the lexicon and instead delivers an informed, analytical historical work centred on Southern traditions and practices. The work successfully avoids creating a victimology and offers a balanced appraisal of hunting cultures. Of particular interest in this regard is the notion of an imagined South and its relationship with national unity and urban/rural dynamics. As Giltner elaborates, 'The South's emergence as a leading sporting destination heralded economic and cultural reunion between North and South. Thousands of visitors from around the country and across the world journeyed to Dixie seeking both ready supplies of fish and game and an 'authentic' Southern experience' (p. 7). Of course, the fantasy landscape of plenty, hospitality, animal abundance and leisuredom that Giltner delineates here is not uniquely Southern. Such descriptives also marked the 19th-century West (my own home turf), and the book might connect more adroitly with national sporting literatures and narratives of conquest. Thinking, for a moment, of the Western context, many of the slurs and stereotypes thrown at Southern blacks might be usefully compared to the Native American hunter. Giltner has little to say about the West (to be fair though, it does fall beyond the purview of his study), however his comment that 'elite hunters of the West' who used the sporting ethos to disestablish competing traditions of Native Americans' (p. 115) overlooks a complex relationship of emulation as well as subjugation at work on the plains and in the Rockies. Perhaps the greatest insights Giltner offers in *Hunting and Fishing in the New South* concern the plantation and its typologies of hunting. This heady and constructed landscape redolent with historical connections, a lengthy cultivated past and an association with aristocratic living contrasts sharply with a Western sporting theatre predicated on wilderness and the pioneer-everyman hero-hunter.

All told, *Hunting and Fishing in the New South* provides a provocative regional study that highlights the value of approaching the American past from a socio-environmental perspective. The story of hunting in the South between 1865 and 1920 offers a rich and layered narrative that, as Giltner notes in the conclusion, remains full of contradictions. Sporting pursuits provided a path of liberation and economic freedom for African Americans, yet at the same time, allowed white elites to both recreate and revel in the master-servant relationships of the antebellum past. Tourist and conservation impulses also betrayed a tendency to glorify the conformities and power structures of the Old South. A close study of hunting rights and cultures thus offers a great opportunity to elucidate all the ambiguities and racial tensions of the South in the late 19th and early 20th century. Phrased in sporting parlance, the blend of race and environmental exigencies in *Hunting and Fishing in the New South* is a pretty good catch.

Notes

1. John Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (Winchester, Ontario, 1975). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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