3. The Cotton Kingdom

Frederick Law Olmsted

Of the numerous travelers in the antebellum South who reported on their travels and observations, Frederick Law Olmsted probably left the most perceptive accounts. Though he was a unionist who opposed slavery, Olmsted tried, and largely succeeded, in controlling his bias. His travel accounts were first published in New York newspapers (1852–1854), then as a trilogy of books. In 1861, Olmsted’s accounts appeared in condensed form as The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States.

Olmsted described scenes from great plantations, from small towns and farms, from industrial regions of the antebellum South, and from the frontier South. Olmsted journeyed to the wealthy rice districts of South Carolina and Georgia in February 1853. Thereafter, he went west by train and boat to Mobile, Alabama, passing through Columbus, Georgia, and Selma, Alabama. A year later he was traveling in the western regions of the antebellum South—southwestern Louisiana and Texas, where he found a frontier world. Olmsted also attempted to compare the character of southerners with that of nonsoutherners.


Plantation, February [1853].—... I must tell how I got here, and what I saw by the way. A narrow belt of cleared land—"vacant lots"—only separated the town from the pine forest—that great broad forest which extends uninter- ruptedly and nearly dotted with a few small corn and cotton fields, from Delaware to Louisiana... During the forenoon my road continued broad and straight, and I was told that it was the chief outlet and thoroughfare of a very extensive agricultural district. There was very little land in cultivation within sight of the road, however; not a mile of it fenced, in twenty, and the only houses were log-cabins. The soil varied from a coarse, clean, yellow sand to a dark, brown, sandy loam. There were indications that much of the land had, at some time, been under cultivation—had been worn out, and deserted,... In the afternoon, I left the main road, and, towards night, reached a much more cultivated district. The forest of pines still extended uninterruptedly on one side of the way, but on the other was a continued succession of very large fields, of rich dark soil—evidently reclaimed swamp-land—which had been cultivated the previous year, in Sea Island cotton. Beyond them, a flat surface of still lower land, with a silver thread of water cutting through it, ex- tended, Holland-like, to the horizon. Usually at as great a distance as a quarter of a mile from the road, and from half a mile to a mile apart, were the residences of the planters—white houses, with groves of evergreen trees about them; and between these and the road were little vil- lages of slave-cabins. My directions not having been sufficiently explicit I rode in, by a private lane, to one of these. It consisted of some thirty neatly-white-washed cottages, with a broad ver- eau, planted with Pride-of-China trees between them. The cottages were framed buildings, boarded on the outside, with shingle roofs and brick chimneys; they stood fifty feet apart, with gables and pig-stands, enclosed by palings, between them,... At another plantation which I soon afterwards reached, I found the "settlement" arranged in the same way, the cabins only being of a slightly different form. In the middle of one row was a well-house, and opposite it, on the other row, was a mill-house, with stones, at which the negroes grind their corn. It is a kind of pestle and mort- ar; and I was informed afterwards that the negroes prefer to take their allowance of corn and crack it for themselves, rather than to receive meal, because they think the mill- ground meal does not make as sweet bread.

At the head of the settlement, in a garden looking down the street, was an overseer’s house, and here the road divided, running each way at right angles; one side to barns and a landing on the river, on the other toward the mansion of the proprietor. A negro boy opened the gate of the latter, and I entered.

On the either side, at fifty feet distant, were rows of old live-oak trees, their branches and twigs slightly hung
with a delicate fringe of gray moss, and their dark, shining, green foliage, meeting and intermingling naturally but densely overhead. The sunlight streamed through, and played on the leaves, and clinging masses of moss; the arch was low and broad; the trunks were huge and gnarled, and there was a heavy groining of strong, rough, knotty branches. I stopped my horse and held my breath; I thought of old Kit North's rhapsody on trees; and there was no rhapsody—it was all here, and real: "Light, shade, shelter, coolness, freshness, music, dew, and dreams dropping through the unregarded rain—falling direct, soft, sweet, soothing, and restorative from heaven."

Alas! no angels; only little black babies, toddling about with an older child or two to watch them, occupied the aisle. At the upper end was the owner's mansion, with a circular court-yard around it, and an irregular plantation of great trees; one of the oaks, as I afterwards learned, seven feet in diameter of trunk and covering with its branches a circle of one hundred and twenty feet in diameter. As I approached it, a smart servant came out to take my horse. I obtained from him a direction to the residence of the gentleman I was searching for, and rode away, glad that I had stumbled into so charming a place.

After riding a few miles further I reached my destination.

Mr. X. has two plantations on the river, besides a large tract of poor pine forest land, extending some miles back upon the upland, and reaching above the malarious region. In the upper part of this pine land is a house, occupied by his overseer during the malarious season, when it is dangerous for any but negroes to remain during the night in the vicinity of the swamps or rice-fields. Even those few who have been born in the region, and have grown up subject to the malaria, are said to be generally weakly and short-lived. The negroes do not enjoy as good health on rice plantations as elsewhere; and the greater difficulty with which their lives are preserved, through infancy especially, shows that the subtle poison of the miasma is not innoxious to them; but Mr. X. boasts a steady increase of his negro stock, of five per cent. per annum, which is better than is averaged on the plantations of the interior.

The plantation which contains Mr. X.'s winter residence has but a small extent of rice-land, the greater part of it being reclaimed upland swamp soil, suitable for the cultivation of Sea Island cotton. The other plantation contains over five hundred acres of rice-land, fitted for irrigation; the remainder unusually fertile reclaimed upland swamp, and some hundred acres of it are cultivated for maize and Sea Island cotton.

Their is a "negro settlement" on each; but both plantations, although a mile or two apart, are worded together as one, under one overseer—the hands being drafted from one to another as their labour is required. Somewhat over seven hundred acres are at the present time under the plough in the two plantations: the whole number of negroes is two hundred, and they are reckoned to be equal to about one hundred prime hands—an unusual strength for that number of all classes. The overseer lives, in winter, near the settlement of the larger plantation, Mr. X. near that of the smaller.

It is an old family estate, inherited by Mr. X.'s wife, who, with her children, was born and brought up in close intimacy with the negroes, a large proportion of whom were also included in her inheritance, or have been since born upon the estate. Mr. X. himself is a New England farmer's son, and has been a successful merchant and manufacturer.

The patriarchal institution should be seen here under its most favourable aspects; not only from the ties of long family association, common traditions, common memories, and, if ever, common interests, between the slaves and their rulers, but, also, from the practical talent for organisation and administration, gained among the rugged fields, the complicated looms, and the exact and comprehensive counting-houses of New England, which directs the labour.

The house-servants are more intelligent, understand and perform their duties better, and are more appropriately dressed, than any I have seen before. The labour required of them is light, and they are treated with much more consideration for their health and comfort than is usually given to that of free domestics. They live in brick cabins, adjoining the house and stables, and one of these, into which I have looked, is neatly and comfortably furnished. Several of the house-servants, as it usual, are mulattoes, and good-looking. The mulattoes are generally preferred for in-door occupations. Slaves brought up by house-work dread to be employed at field-labour; and the accustom to the comparatively unconstrained life of the negro-settlement, detest the close control and careful movements required of the house-servants. It is a punishment for a lazy field-hand, to employ him in menial duties at the house, as it is to set a sneaking sailor to do the work of a cabin-servant; and it is equally a punishment to a neglectful house-servant, to banish him to the field-gangs. All the household economy is, of course, carried on in a style appropriate to a wealthy gentleman's residence—not more, nor less so, than I observe, than in an establishment of similar grade at the North.

ALABAMA

Mobile—I left Savannah [Georgia] for the West, by the Macon road; the train started punctually at a second, at its advertised time; the speed was not great, but regular, and less time was lost unnecessarily, at way-stations, than usually on our Northern roads.

I have travelled more than five hundred miles on the Georgia roads, and I am glad to say that all of them seem to be exceedingly well managed. The speed upon them is not generally more than from fifteen to twenty miles an
hour; but it is made, as advertised, with considerable punctuality. The roads are admirably engineered and con- structed, and their equipment will compare favorably with that of any other roads on the continent. They are not only of more than twelve hundred miles of road in the State, and more bolding. The Savannah and Macon line—the first built—was commenced in 1834. The increased commerce of the city of Savannah, which followed its com- pletion, stimulated many other railroad enterprises, not only within the State, but elsewhere at the South, particu- larly in South Carolina. Many of these were rashly pushed forward by men of no experience, and but little commer- cial judgment; the roads were injudiciously laid out, and have been badly managed, and, of course, have occasioned disastrous losses. The Savannah and Macon road has, however, been very successful. The revenues are now over $1,000,000 annually; the road is well stocked, is out of debt, and its business is constantly increasing; the stock is above par, and the stockholders are receiving eight per cent. dividends, with a handsome surplus on hand. It has been always, in a great degree, under the management of Northern men—was engineered, and is still worked chiefly by Northern men, and a large amount of its stock is owned at the North. I am told that most of the mechanics, and of the successful merchants and tradesmen of Savannah came originally from the North, or are the sons of Northern men.

Partly by rail and partly by rapid stage-coaching the coaches, horses, and drivers: again from the North, I crossed the State in about twenty-four hours. The railroad is since entirely completed from Savannah to Montgomery, in Alabama, and is being extended slowly towards the Mississippi; of course with the expectation that it will eventually reach the Pacific, and that make Savannah "the gxx to the commerce of the world." Ship-masters will hope that, when either it or its rival in South Carolina has secured that honour, they will succeed, better than they yet have done, in removing the boors, physical and legal, by which commerce is now asvayed in its endeavours to serve them.

At Columbus, I spent several days. It is the largest manufacturing town, south of Richmond, in the slave States. It is situated at the Falls, and the head of steamboat navigation of the Chattahooche, the western boundary of Georgia. The water-power is sufficient to drive two hun- dred thousand spindles, with a proportionate number of looms. There are, probably, at present from fifteen to twenty thousand spindles running. The operatives in the cotton-mills are said to be mainly "Cracker girls" (poor whites from the country), who earn, on good times, by piece-work, from $8 to $12 a month. There are, besides the cotton-mills, one woolen-mill, one paper-mill, a foundry, a cotton-gin: factory, a machine-shop, etc. The laborers in all these are mainly whites, and they are in such a condition that, if temporarily thrown out of em- ployment, great numbers of them are at once reduced to a state of destitution, and are dependent upon credit or char- ity for their daily food. Public entertainments were being held at the time of my visit, the profits to be applied to the relief of operatives in mills which had been stopped by the effect of a late flood of the river. Very many were constantly boated to be a perfect safeguard against such distress.

I had seen in no place, since I left Washington, so much gambling, intoxication, and cruel treatment of servi- vants in public, as in Columbus. This, possibly, was acci- dental; but I must caution persons, traveling for health or pleasure, to avoid stopping in the town. The hotel in which I lodged was disgusting dirty; the table revolting; the waiters stupid, insatiable, and annoying. It was the stage- house; but I was informed that the other public-house was no better.

I spent a week here [Montgomery, Alabama] and then left for Mobile, on the steamboat Fashion, a clean and well-ordered boat, with polite and obliging officers. We were two days and a half making the passage, the boat stopping at almost every bluff and landing to take on cot- ton, until she had a freight of nineteen hundred bales, which was built up on the guards, seven or eight tiers in height, and until it reached the hurricane deck. The boat was thus brought so deep that her guards were in the wa- tery, and the apple of the river constantly washed over them. There are two hundred landings on the Alabama River, and three hundred on the Bigby [Tombigbee [Tombigbee of the geographers], at which the boat adver- tised to call, if required, for passengers or freight. This, of course, makes the passage exceedingly tedious. The so- called landings, however, have not in many cases the slight- est artificial accommodations for the purpose of a landing. The boat's hawser, if used, is made fast to a living tree: there is not a sign of a ward, often no house in sight, and sometimes no distinct road. . . .

There were about one hundred passengers on the Fashion, besides a number of poor people and negroes on the lower deck. They were, generally, cotton-planters, going to Mobile on business, or emigrants bound to Texas or Arkansas. They were usually well dressed, but were a rough, coarse style of people, drinking a great deal, and most of the time under a little alcoholic excitement. Not sociable, except when the topics of cotton, land, and ne- groes, were started; interested, however, in talk about the- atras and the tax; very profane; often showing the handles of concealed weapons about their persons, but not quartel- lling, avoiding disputes and alterations, and respectful to one another in forms of words; very ill-informed, except on plantation business; their language ungrammatical, id- iomatic, and extravagant. Their grand characteristics—simplicity of motives, vague, shallow, and purely objective habits of thought; and bold, self-enlaii movement.

With all their individual independency, I soon could perceive a very great homogeneity of character, by which they were distinguishable from any other people with whom I had had before been thrown in contact; and I
began to study it with interest, as the Anglo-Saxon develop-
ment of the South were... 

[Southeastern Texas] We passed, on both sides the Sabine, many abandoned farms, and the country is but thinly settled. We found it impossible to obtain any infor-
mation about roads, and frequently went astray upon cat-
tle paths, once losing twenty miles in a day’s journey. The people were chiefly hardymen, cultivating a little cotton upon river-banks, but ordinarily only corn, with a patch of cane to furnish household sugar. We tried in vain to pur-
chase corn for our horses, and were told that “folks didn’t make corn enough to feed them, and if anybody had corn to give his horses, he carried it in his hat and went out be-
hind somewhere.” The birds were in poor condition, and
must in winter be reduced to the verge of starvation. We
saw a few hogs, converted, by hardship, to figures so un-
natural, that we at first took them for goats. Most of the
people we met were natives, immigrants from Southern
Louisiana and Mississippi, and more disposed to gaiety
and cheer than the Texian planters. The houses showed a
tendency to Louisiana forms, and the table to a French
style of serving the jerked beef, which is the general dish at
the country. The meat is dried in strips, over smoky fires,
and, if unainted and well prepared, is a tolerably savoury
food. I hardly know whether to chronicle it as a border
barbarism, or a Creoleism, that we were several times, in
this neighbourhood, shown to a bed standing next to that
occupied by the host and his wife, sometimes with the
screen of ashawl, sometimes without.

We met with one specimen of the Virginia habit of
“dipping,” or sniff-chewing, in the person of a woman
who was otherwise neat and agreeable, and observed that
a young lady, well-dressed, and apparently engaged, while
we were present, in reading went afterward to light her
pipe at the kitchen fire, and had a smoke behind the house.

The condition of the young men appeared to incline
decidedly to barbarism. We stopped a night at a house in
which a drover, bringing mules from Mexico, was staying,
and, with the neighbours who had come to look at the
drove, we were thirteen men at table. When speaking with
us, all were polite and respectful, the women especially so;
but among one another, their coarseness was incred-
ible...

[NORTH AND SOUTH: DISTINCTIVE REGIONS]
The whole South is maintained in a frontier condition by
the system which is apologised for on the ground that it
favours good breeding. This system, at the same time,
tends to concentrate wealth in a few hands. If there is wis-
dom and great care in the education of a family thus
favoured, the result which we see at the North, under the
circumstances I have described, is frequently reproduced.
There are many more such fruits of frontier life on
the South than the North, because there is more frontier life.
There is also vastly more of the other sort, and there is
everything between, which degrees of wealth and degrees
of good fortune in education would be expected to occa-
sion. The bad breed of the frontier, at the South, however,
is probably far worse than that of the North, because the
frontier condition of the South is everywhere permanent.
The child born to-day on the Northern frontier in most
cases, before it is ten years old, will be living in a well orga-
ised and tolerably well provided community; schools,
churches, libraries, lecture and concert halls, daily mails
and printing presses, shops and machines in variety, having
arrived within at least a day’s journey of it; being always
within an influencing distance of it. There are improve-
ments, and communities loosely and gradually cohering in
various parts of the South, but so slowly, so feebly, so ir-
regularly, that men’s minds and habits are kept firm quite
independently of this class of social influences.

There is one other characteristic of the Southerner, which
is far more decided than the difference of climate merely
would warrant, and which is to be attributed not
only to the absence of the ordinary restraints and marva
of discipline of more compact communities in his education,
but unquestionably also to the readiness and safety with
which, by reason of slavery, certain passions and impulses
may be indulged. Every white Southerner is a person of im-
portance; must be treated with deference. Every wish of
the Southerner is imperative; every belief undoubted; every
hate, vengeful; every love, fiery. Hence, for instance, the
scandalous fiend-like street fights of the South. If a young
man feels offended with another, he does not incline to a
ring and fair stand-up set-to, like a young Englishman; he
will not attempt to overcome his opponent by logic he will
not be content to vie in feats, or to cast ridicule upon him;
it is impelled straightforward to strike him down with the
readiest deadly weapon at hand, with as little ceremony
and pretense of fair combat as the loose organization of
the people against violence will allow. He seems crazy for
blood. Intensity of personal pride—pride in anything a
man has, or which connects itself with him, is more com-
monly evident. Hence, intense local pride and prejudice;
intense pride in family, by which I mean the desire that
anywhere to be the best; this constitutes the blood,
and this expression of defence is much more easily re-
duced to a matter of manners and forms, in the common-
place intercourse of society, than self-appreciation, this
characteristic pride of the Southerner needs to be borne
in mind in considering the port and manners he com monly
has, and judging from them of the effects of slavery.