Book review, A Golden Weed: Tobacco and Environment in the Piedmont South

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In *A Golden Weed*, Drew A. Swanson provides a detailed history of tobacco in the Piedmont region of Virginia and North Carolina in the crucial period of 1840–1900. Not only does this work fill a gap in tobacco history, but it offers a case study of the intersections of land, climate, economy, and culture in the creation and maintenance of an agricultural landscape. While it is a history of a particular time, place, and people, there are lessons here that apply more broadly.

As Swanson cogently argues, many histories of Southern agriculture portray Southern farmers – particularly tobacco farmers – as villains. He begins by relating the familiar narrative: ‘tobacco was an exhausting crop, and the drive for wealth in a region with cheap land and expensive labor pushed planters to use up their land and move on to fresh ground, leaving erosion and soil exhaustion in their wake.’ He asks, ‘Could people really be so short-sighted? Was greed truly such an overwhelming force?’ (p. 3). In answering these central questions of the book, Swanson avoids blame and instead seeks understanding in his balanced analysis of why tobacco made sense to farmers in the region for so long (and still does to some today). Swanson demonstrates that agricultural knowledge creation and dissemination was central to the establishment of the Piedmont as the center of bright tobacco, giving credit to farmers for seeking agricultural knowledge, even if what they found often did more harm than good. In this sense, too, this work has much to offer beyond tobacco history, in that it provides a nuanced picture of farmer decision-making.

In chapter one, Swanson describes the work cycle of tobacco, referred to in many tobacco regions as a ‘13 month crop’ because, historically, as farmers were processing and selling one year’s crop, they were beginning preparations for the next. Chapter two covers the development of bright tobacco – a variety that, when cured, is lighter in both color and taste than the dark tobacco that preceded it and that became a key ingredient first in plug tobacco and later the American blend cigarette – through a combination of seed selection, knowledge of soil conditions, and the introduction of a new curing method. Bright tobacco was ‘a crop culture that seemed to defy normal agricultural strictures, turning poor land into valuable ground and old fields into assets’ (p. 55).

Swanson uses the oft-cited origin story of bright tobacco – a slave named Stephen Slade accidentally discovered the benefits of curing with indirect heat rather than fire – to frame an important goal of the book, ‘to reconstruct a hidden ‘black’ history of bright leaf’ (p. 9). Whether Slade ‘discovered’ bright or not, whether it was an accident or not, the legend has encoded within it the stereotype of the lazy slave and a narrative in which both slaves and former slaves played only marginal roles in tobacco production. In fact, the knowledge and labor of enslaved people was crucial to antebellum tobacco, and black farmers continued as important participants in tobacco farming and manufacturing following emancipation despite the obstacles of racism.

In chapter three, Swanson complicates what has been understood as the failures of the agriculture reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century through the post-Civil War era, arguing that while bright tobacco production undermined reforms such as soil conservation and crop rotation, farmers did selectively practice other reforms. Chapters four through six cover the increased production of bright leaf through the Civil War and into Reconstruction along with changing farm sizes and marketing and manufacturing practices. His descriptions of the racist violence of Reconstruction demonstrate the problem with a monolithic narrative of this period of US history. He argues that violence in the Piedmont was similar to violence in other regions, but also different because of the context of tobacco production.

Bright tobacco served as a symbol of white control of the land, and racist violence was directly tied up in
the seasonal cycle of tobacco work. As Swanson demonstrates throughout this book, following emancipation, Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers were labeled as ‘inefficient farmers’ and blamed for the crop’s effects on the land, even as white farmers engaged in the very same practices. By the late nineteenth century it was becoming clear that the factors that created bright leaf and made it so profitable were further devastating the land through deforestation and soil erosion. Meanwhile, farmers in the region had abandoned most other agricultural pursuits in favor of this profitable, golden weed, and they therefore saw little choice other than to increase their usage of commercial fertilizers in order to continue farming.

Throughout the period covered in this book, the confluence of institutional knowledge and the demands of consumers affirmed farmer decisions to continue to raise bright tobacco in the Piedmont. In this period and beyond, agricultural experts – both lay and professional – encouraged the continued production of bright tobacco as the best or even the only option for farmers in the region. Ultimately, ‘Farmers recognized the ecological problems tobacco culture caused, but they could see no way around them’ (p. 251). In the final chapter, Swanson describes the movement of bright leaf to other regions and the competition that resulted – ironically because the early Piedmont ‘boosters’ of bright tobacco had spread the word in pockets of the South that had similar soil and climate conditions.

A Golden Weed is well-written and engaging. Swanson relies on a diverse range of sources – diaries, farm ledgers, letters, government statistics, newspapers, pamphlets, and agricultural journals. With this range of materials, Swanson is able to tell the stories of particular farmers to exemplify his arguments. This book is suitable for courses in environmental history and American studies and accessible to general readers interested in a complex examination of a particular agricultural product and region. It should, however, be of interest more widely because the lessons it contains continue to apply today as farmers and farm advocates face differently named but similar issues in their search for sustainability, diversification, and value-added production.