

The Conquest of Labor: Daniel Pratt and Southern Industrialization. *By Curtis J. Evans.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. 360 pp. Photos, maps, chart. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN 0-807-12695-0.

Reviewed by Susanna Delfino

Writing biography is the best tool that we, as historians, have to investigate the culture of a class of individuals. Unfortunately, use of this valuable tool is often precluded by the paucity, if not outright absence, of sources. Such is the case with myriad antebellum southern manufacturers, who either left no written records or saw them destroyed during the Civil War, when scores of factory sites were burned down by the federal armies. This scantiness of sources has long been interpreted by historians as confirmation of the weakness of the manufacturing class in the South, usually portrayed as subordinate to powerful agricultural interests.

Taking advantage of the wealth of public and private records concerning Daniel Pratt, the famous Alabama industrialist, Curtis J. Evans has begun to remedy the relative absence of historical accounts of the industrial South. His book is a thorough, well written biography, an excellent piece of business history, an exhaustive social and economic history of Prattville, and a vivid chapter of the political history of the South, both before and immediately following the Civil War. It is, in other words, a monumental work on Pratt and Autauga County, Alabama.

In his introduction, Evans mentions the dearth of studies on southern industrialists. However, during the past few decades this situation has changed, and as studies have been published, certain themes and issues have emerged as well. Thus, his approach unavoidably raises some questions. Pratt's very notoriety should have suggested the need for preliminary observations to provide the necessary context. In fact, the name of Daniel Pratt, like that of his contemporary, South Carolina textile manufacturer William Gregg, has appeared throughout even traditional historical accounts of southern industry that invariably described manufacturing as a sporadic and "artificial" phenomenon in the antebellum South. This fact, however, did not conflict, according to those authors, with the existence of places like Prattville or Graniteville.

Rather than telling us how Prattville, Autauga County, and Alabama stood in relation to other industrial settings within the slave states, Evans concentrates on his case study, arguing that "at least one southern state was not trapped in the firm and fatal grip of a premodern ideology" (p. 5). In so doing, he elects to ignore that, during the 1850s, eight of the slave states and five out of the number of those that would later join the Confederate States of America were more industrialized—sometimes dramatically so—than Alabama. If those states were still caught in the

grips of a premodern ideology, should we conclude that this ideology was not incompatible with industrial development? The lack of a broader context undermines the book's thesis, depriving Evans of the splendid opportunity to discuss at length some of the interesting points he raises. Among these is his reiteration of the northern origin of Pratt himself, of his closest collaborators, and of a substantial number of his skilled workers. Attention to nativity might have offered Evans a good occasion to investigate the cultural and economic motivations that brought so many northerners to the deep South in an age of increasing sectional tension over the issue of slavery (certainly as interesting to discuss as the opposite northward migration by southern manufacturers and mechanics that also took place), or to compare the economic behavior of northern-born industrialists and mechanics with that of their southern-born colleagues, even if only within Alabama. Rather, the reader increasingly gets the impression that antebellum southern industrialization was the product of the deeds of a handful of Yankees who strove hard to affirm the gospel of modernization in the South amidst general indifference, if not patent opposition.

Hence, we do not gather from this book the extent to which Daniel Pratt was—or was not—representative of the class of southern industrialists/entrepreneurs. Was his remarkable success as a manufacturer due more to his Yankee upbringing, that is, to a supposedly distinctive northern culture, or to a combination of personal luck with the specific circumstances in which he operated? These significant questions do not find an answer in Evans's book.

Yet, despite these flaws, Evans's biography of Daniel Pratt is worth noting and reading, and for more reasons than the ones listed at the beginning of this review. For instance, the book provides a compelling critique of the thesis set forth by Jonathan Wiener in the late 1970s regarding the persistence in power of the old planters' aristocracy after the Civil War. It also offers an illuminating account of Alabama party politics and the ambiguities of their attitudes regarding the issue of industrialization. In sum, Evans's book may not be innovative in its theoretical approach, but it marks a great advance toward synthesizing the industrial history of the South from its antebellum inception.

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(forthcoming). At present, she is working on a comparative history of the American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno in the first half of the nineteenth century.