

Review Essay: The Catawbans

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Gary R. Freeze, *The Catawbans: Crafters of a North Carolina County, 1747-1900* (Newton, N.C.: Catawba County Historical Association, 1995)

Gary R. Freeze, *The Catawbans, Volume Two: Pioneers in Progress* (Newton, N.C.: Catawba County Historical Association, 2002)

The distance between local history for a local audience and academic history remains more a canyon than a gap. The former seeks to memorialize the places, landscapes, and structures that express shared values of a community. The latter engages in conversation about larger themes in the human experience. Often, academics use a local history setting to contribute to the larger conversation, and the resulting work—called *community* history—is about a thesis first, and a place second. In earlier years of the historical profession, some like Allan Nevins championed the joining of professional and amateur historians, but that dream itself is now history.¹ In our time the worlds of local history and academic history rarely meet, and scholars visualize local historians as provincials bent on genealogy and fogged in by lore. The monographs, articles, and editions of academic history speak to one another and form a corpus of literature. The individual publications of local history, however, stand alone, in dialogue with no other work. For most of the early twentieth century, books on local history consisted largely of the compilations of the local editors, sponsored by publishers, taking in limited topics of family, business, governmental, congregational, and military history.² Some amateur historians before the 1980s did attempt comprehensive narratives, but few successfully did so.³ Great space also has been devoted to the publication of local records to aid the genealogist—which a savvy social historian will exploit. Chief examples of local popular history endeavors are the Bicentennial Heritage books. Published since the 1970s, these black, hardbound, books compile hundreds of family histories authored by family members. They are mini-memoirs, clippings from old newspapers, and notes from family bibles and albums. And the entirety of them constitute the primary goal of local history—to legitimize the past and present of self-selected local people.

¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 194-197. Interestingly, in the present crisis in the academy, some historians are calling for an expansion of the AHA to include local, public, and independent historians, again. See Nick Sarantakes, "Blog CI (101): The Plan C Debate," <http://sarantakes.blogspot.com/2011/11/blog-ci-101-plan-c-debate.html>, accessed November 28, 2011.

² Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 2nd edition (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2003), 11-41.

³ One fine example is Homer M. Keever, *Iredell: Piedmont County* ([Statesville? N.C.] : Published for the Iredell County Bicentennial Commission by Brady Print. Co., 1976.) Interestingly, Dr. Freeze is mentioned in Keever's acknowledgements as an editor.

Here, Gary Freeze's two-volume series, *The Catawbans*, is notable for its attempt to bridge the canyon. Freeze, a history Ph.D from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is well suited to the task. He has published on mill people in the North Carolina Piedmont, and teaches local and state history at Catawba College in Salisbury.⁴ These books stand out from the start. They are wider than they are tall, fitting the reader's hands like an old photograph album. In well-written prose, straddling the pages in two and three columns, Freeze narrates a story of the communities that made up Catawba County. He eschews citations, opting for a bibliographic essay at the end of volume 1. The volumes are thick with images of documents and maps, and gripping portraits of Catawbans. Moses Yoder's gigantic, dark, and gnarled hands, for instance, in the second volume (122) convey more information than can mere words about the physical rigors agricultural life. Freeze notes that this book is not a history of the county administrative unit, but of the people of Catawba. The first volume, *Crafters of a North Carolina County*, begins with the river itself, then notes the Native American presence, the entrance of Europeans—Germans mostly, but Englishmen, too—and the development of a community of subsistence farmers, unified by a strident vision of Jeffersonian yeoman democracy. In the antebellum years, Catawba constituted a near-perfect pre-modern subsistence society of strong churches, reciprocal relationships, and traditional values. The Civil War cracked this unity, but the greater threat to harmony proved the pressures of modernity, cash markets, an onrush of goods and services, and industrialization. The Populist movement tore the county apart, but unity again prevailed with the steady march of "Progress." The second volume follows the theme of "Progress" up to the 1947 bicentennial of European and African settlement. Catawbans experienced unnoticed but inexorable change. Freeze foregrounds issues close to the social historian's heart: the decline of tenancy, the price of land and butter, transference of school control from community to state, annexation of Hickory suburbs, and the federal government's introduction of regulation in economic life. It is a deft portrayal, suggesting that ordinary people experienced the cultural, social, political, and economic shifts of the early twentieth century not as titanic clashes, but as the melancholic passing of generations. By the late 1930s, when "no [Catawban had] personal memories of the days before Progress and its power," (298) the Weidner Oak fell over and few noticed. Freeze enumerated his goals in the introduction to the first volume: "to be as comprehensive as possible...to be something of a reference guide for local history;" to be "as coherent as it was comprehensive;" to be a "serious book about all Catawbans;" and to be "as scholarly as possible without my writing sounding that way." He has accomplished these goals. If one had any complaint, it might be that the narrative is a bit *too* comprehensive, as the reader is occasionally bogged down in undelimited lists of churches, stores, businessmen, lawyers, and schools, decade after decade.

The Catawbans, which earned an Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History, is hardly the first to attempt at an up-to-date, comprehensive,

⁴ Gary R. Freeze, "Poor Girls Who Might Otherwise Be Wretched: The Origins of Paternalism in North Carolina's Mills, 1836-1880," in Jeffrey Leiter et. al, eds., *Hanging By a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1991), and "God, Cotton Mills, and New South Myths: A New Perspective on Salisbury, North Carolina, 1887-1888," in Elizabeth Jacoway et al., eds., *The Adaptable South: Essays in Honor of George Brown Tindall* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991). Freeze has also published in this journal.

narrative history of a county in North Carolina. In fact, its publication came in the midst of a flurry of similar histories of Wake, Durham, and Alamance Counties.⁵ What separates Freeze's books from other county histories is that behind his narrative lies a strongly stated academic thesis. This thesis is fully explicated in Volume 1. Freeze describes a community unified by cultural values. Those values, informed by family, work, and religion adhered Catawbans to one another through crises of war and economic change. The defining moment in Catawba county history, in Freeze's telling, is the Wiedner Oak covenant. In 1780, during the tumult of the American Revolution, the German leader Henry Wiedner and his neighbors pledged themselves to the Whig cause and mutual protection. "This pledge was so solemnly regarded that it led to a political consensus in Catawba that lasted more than a century."⁶ (49) Not only did the covenant mark a political stance, but it also defined social relations in the county. "None of the men under the oak were equal in possessions or talents. Some held more than others, yet each agreed to protect the right of all to have and acquire. They assumed, then, a social arrangement that allowed inequality but denied exclusive privilege for just the few." (50) The Weidner Oak covenant remained a sounding point for future Catawbans until the Populist movement. In fact, the Weidner farm, with its Robinson descendants, continued to stand as a bulwark of rural life, signifying the county's communal, rural, values, well into the twentieth century.

Freeze, as the back flap of volume 1 proclaims, is a populist. As such, he explores and celebrates the lives of common people. He has the eye of a social historian for forces that shaped ordinary experience, and a keen sense for the voices of rural folks and factory hands. *The Catawbans* is fully aware of the social inequalities inherent in southern life. Freeze discusses at length the social realities of racial slavery and segregation. In fact, his treatment of expanding liberalism in the 1930s anticipates the current effort to rewrite the narrative arc of the Civil Rights movement.⁷ Yet, in true consensus fashion, in moments of crisis, the marginalized communities conformed to the traditional "Catawban" values of self-reliance, hard work, and neighborliness. He has, in short, produced a populist narrative, with social history methods, and a consensus history conclusion.

That Professor Freeze manages the balance between progressive and consensus histories so well should be no surprise. In the introduction to volume 2, he pays tribute to his mentor, George Brown Tindall, a leading consensus historian who deftly maneuvered in the progressive tides of the 1960s, and 1970s. As author of *The Emergence of the New*

⁵ Elizabeth Reid Murray, *Wake: Capital County of North Carolina*, Volume 1: Prehistory through Centennial (Raleigh: Capital County Publishing Company, 1983), Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), and Carole Watterson Troxler and William Murray Vincent, *Shuttle & Plow: A History of Alamance County, North Carolina* ([Graham]: Alamance County Historical Association, Inc., 1999).

⁶ Freeze's conclusion endorsed the view of county historian George M. Yoder, who wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

⁷ For this trend in the South, see John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

South (1967) and *The Persistent Tradition in New South Politics* (1975), Tindall compellingly described the “paradox” of southern progressivism—that it and southern conservatism both shared possession of industrial and commercial *progress*, ensuring modern economic practice atop a base of conservative values.⁸ This, what Tindall called “the persistent tradition,” is the central tension in Freeze’s books. As already noted, Freeze’s analysis is not stuck in the consensus era. Where his twentieth century coverage resembles Tindall’s work, his examination of the nineteenth century is imprinted by Freeze’s peer, Bill Cecil-Fronsman. Cecil-Fronsman described the “common white” world as “rural subsistence agricultural communities” where the family served as the “central unit of economic survival” and social regulatory force.⁹ Freeze’s narrative also owes a debt to Steven Hahn’s *Origins of Southern Populism*, wherein the erosion of rural “habits of mutuality” by the currents of capitalism and industrialism riled upcountry Georgians to action as Populists.¹⁰ He even explores the same fence and stock laws that interested Hahn. Freeze synthesizes these works in a sustained argument and skillfully embeds them in a genial narrative.

In drawing on Cecil-Fronsman and Hahn, Freeze has marked rural life before and after the Civil War as particularly “pre-modern.” He paints a happy portrait of a world of subsistence farming, reciprocal economic relations, and institutionally strong congregations that sacralized the various networks of the community. I believe that the implied romanticism of this vision (and Cecil-Fronsman’s and Hahn’s, too) is a bit overstated. Uncooperative weather, premature or sudden death, doubts about salvation and a dozen other factors frequently stressed or sundered social relations. And few fully-fledged agricultural places were immune to the ideological and material forces brewing at a national scale.¹¹ Nonetheless, Freeze has sustained an interpretive theory that needs to be part of the current historiographical discussion. The primary experience of common people more often included forces of unity than those of division.¹² As historian David

⁸ George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), and *The Persistent Tradition in New South Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975). See also Samuel L. Webb, “Southern Politics in the Age of Populism and Progressivism: A Historiographical Essay,” in Boles, ed., *A Companion to the American South* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002). Further, in 1974, Tindall encouraged exploration of ethnic identity by historians to explain a south increasingly “mainstream,” yet ever distinctive. *The Catawbans’* exploration of German ethnic identity is evident throughout. See George B. Tindall, “Beyond the Mainstream: The Ethnic Southerners,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 40 (Feb., 1974), 3-18.

⁹ Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), quotes on page 134.

¹⁰ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹¹ See for instance L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers, *The Old South’s Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origin of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), and my own forthcoming dissertation, entitled “Faith and ‘Domestic Felicity’ in the Antebellum South.”

Farber has recently noted, “the struggle for equality is central to American history. But to understand the power and pull of political conservatism...a counternarrative built on many Americans’...desire for order and stability needs to be constructed, as well.”¹³ Examination of these forces, in light of New Left and social history innovations, have been sorely lacking in the study of the American south.

I hesitate to use the word “fashion” to describe historiographical trends, but it is undeniable that consensus conclusions are currently out of fashion. So what happens when an out-of-fashion interpretation drops in the historiographical stream? At first, it seems, very little. *The Catawbans* has not been reviewed by major academic journals, though likely because of the publisher, not the interpretation.¹⁴ And its interpretation is not presently part of the academic discussion of rural life in the South. Evidence, however, may be found elsewhere. In 2006, labor historian Leon Fink reviewed the history *Cooleemee* by Jim Rumley and the work of the Cooleemee Historical Association to develop the town’s historic resources.¹⁵ Freeze provided the introduction to *Cooleemee* and the book bears the same populist and consensus stamps as *The Catawbans*. Fink condemns the Cooleemee project as heritage, not history. Heritage, Fink explains, is a constructed past, with “the tinge of nostalgia,” that does not critique communities, but provides a base for retrenchment of reactionary values. In Fink’s formulation, no light can exist between consensus history and heritage, especially when the former exhibits sentimentalism about the past. Fink’s concern is one to be watchful for, particularly in a local history context. But how can a consensus history—or simply one privileging a “desire for order” over *struggles* for equality—receive a fair hearing if the reaction is to be a conflation of interpretation with more nefarious motives?

The second volume, covering most of the twentieth century, contains methodological issues that are a bit more troublesome than nostalgia. Freeze chose to base the narrative “almost exclusively on a close reading of almost every newspaper published in the period.” He anticipates criticism of this method, noting, “a close reading over time of many episodes and events does identify the trends that a historian needs to explain a topic.” (XI) Fair, and true, enough. This is *longue duree* on a small scale. Such attention paid to local newspapers is an effective way to gauge the homely and historically invisible concerns of the everyday. One still considers that local newspaper voices, especially in the Jim Crow South, represented a small segment of economic

¹² This phrase—“primary experience”—is derived from Daniel Wickberg, “What is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New,” *The American Historical Review* 112.3 (2007), 661-684.

¹³ David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3-4.

¹⁴ *The North Carolina Historical Review* gave volume 1 of *The Catawbans* a note, but not a full review. Volume LXXIV (January 1997), 105-106. By contrast, Jean Anderson’s history of Durham County, published by an academic press, received a review in the *Journal of Southern History* 58 (November 1992), 756-757.

¹⁵ Leon Fink, “When Community Comes Home to Roost: The Southern Milltown as Lost Cause,” *Journal of Social History* 40 (Autumn, 2006), 119-145. Jim Rumley, *Cooleemee: The Life & Times of a Mill Town* (Cooleemee: Cooleemee Historical Association, 2001).

boosters, and only reflected contention in the socially regulated confines of partisan politics. The problem is the exclusion of non-journalism sources from outside the county severely limits the ability to explore episodes and themes in local history. Take one example. Freeze details the creation of county roads in the 1910s, including the negotiations and tax deals between rural neighborhoods, the county, and the state. He notes that at one point, the “County commissioners planned to adopt the chain gang as a maintenance force, something already practiced in Deep South states.” (144) It is too fleeting a reference. A fuller accounting of this decision would have taken up the institutionalization of convict labor and the racial assumptions behind it.¹⁶ Such decisions, even if made at the state level, reflect views shared by people in Catawba that suggest that there were divisive aspects to any perceived social harmony. I do not mean to repeat Fink’s argument but merely to suggest limitations to such local history methods.

My ultimate concern lies not in Freeze’s methodology or interpretation. It lies primarily in the fact that these methods and interpretations seem to matter very little in the marketplace of local history. In fact, I suspect the discussion these books prompt of historiography, methods, and interpretation is utterly invisible and completely irrelevant to the intended audience. When Freeze writes in Volume 2 “what follows is my interpretation of the modernizing experience of a truly remarkable set of North Carolinians,” my academic eye is drawn to the phrase “modernizing experience,” but would most not hone in on “a remarkable set of North Carolinians”? (XI) Do non-academic readers utilize history in a way that makes academic arguments meaningful? Some do, indeed. Most, I fear, do not. Take the latest local history phenomenon: Arcadia Publishing’s “Images of America” series. The little brown volumes presently grace every bookshop and historical society that caters to a local audience (they too line the shelves at most Barnes & Noble Booksellers.) They are compilations not unlike the efforts at the turn of the twentieth century where a local author would gather material (in this case, photographs) and provide captions and text. Their highly visual and extremely portable size makes them exceedingly accessible. I recently visited a small town in California and wanted a quick introduction to its local history and historic spaces. At a local bookshop I found the required Arcadia book, read it in less than an hour and used it to guide an impromptu bike tour of the town the following day. It proved the perfect companion precisely because it was not a weighty tome. *The Catawbans* is an ambitious hybrid, a valiant attempt to bridge the canyon between local and academic history. I cheer Freeze’s effort to bring solid scholarship to an uneven genre, but wonder if the style does not limit its effectiveness as an accessible local history tool. From an academic’s perspective, only the addition of more pillars to the bridge will tell.

¹⁶ For a recent discussion of convict labor in road building, see Susan W. Thomas, “Chain Gangs, Roads, and Reform in North Carolina, 1900-1935,” Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2011.