Old Dominion, Industrial Commonwealth: Coal, Politics, and Economy in Antebellum America (review)

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Old Dominion, Industrial Commonwealth: Coal, Politics, and Economy in Antebellum America. By Sean Patrick Adams. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. Pp. xiv, 305.)

The "Old Dominion" of course was Virginia, and the "Industrial Commonwealth" was Pennsylvania. Sean Adams's comparative study of these two states keeps the reader in its grip by contrasting their differences in ways that go far beyond the differences caused by slavery or its absence.

As part of Virginia, pre-statehood West Virginia appears early and often in this book. Sean Adams shows that antebellum Pennsylvania's industrial development far outstripped Virginia's (including western Virginia's). Initially, Virginia had gotten off to a faster coal-mining start, but by 1837 Pennsylvania was producing three-fourths of U.S. coal output and it continued doing so until the Civil War and well beyond (171 graph).

Adams attributes the Pennsylvania-Virginia dichotomy to differences in how they devised their state policies. Early on, Pennsylvania evolved a policy-making process that benefited the whole state's economy, not just the economy of its eastern sector. Meanwhile, Virginia's policy-making didn't just favor its East at the expense of its West, but often pitted county against county. Sean Adams adroitly unfolds a series of comparisons between the "zero-sum" political workings of Virginia and the "win-win" compromises that pre-Civil War Pennsylvania achieved. As for western Virginia, Adams paints it as a waif, a sort of Pennsylvania wannabe that ended up resembling Virginia instead.

This is economic history as it should be written, without either short-cutting or grandstanding. Each of the six chapters and even the epilogue is so conceptually thick that it could have anchored a separate book by itself. Each chapter adds facets to the Virginia-Pennsylvania comparison. An entire chapter, for instance, interprets their antebellum geological surveys and shows that, even though they hired two brothers in the mid-1830s to carry out their two separate state geological surveys, Virginia fumbled that ball too. William Barton Rogers (who surveyed Virginia) went out of his way to make friends with some of the Old Dominion's leading politicians; yet they constrained him to make fruitless searches for marl and other soil-restoring panaceas, leaving him with insufficient money and staff to investigate western Virginia's vast coal reserves. Meanwhile, Henry Darwin Rogers was surveying Pennsylvania and, although he snubbed the politicians there, they let him work in peace and eventually they made good use of his findings.

I do not question Adams's basic point, which is that state-level—and in Virginia even county-level—economic policies mattered. He may well be right when he says that, before the Civil War, state policies shaped U.S. economic development more than national policies did. But while I was reading his book, other considerations occurred to me. Only in his concluding "Essay on Sources" does Adams mention structural interpretations, and then mainly to pigeonhole them into the 1960s-1980s era of U.S. history-writing. This makes them sound tinged with radicalism, but actually it takes nothing more than classical economics to show why the early development of a core area tends to prevent true economic development from occurring later in surrounding peripheries. It is because investors from the core finance export-oriented growth in the peripheries–growth that lacks diversity and thus prevents true development. The classical economist Gunnar Myrdal had already documented that pattern in his 1957 book *Rich Lands and Poor* before radical economists seized on it. So, as Adams was making his pre-Civil War Virginia-Pennsylvania comparisons (summarized on 116-18), it occurred to me that one reason why antebellum Pennsylvania saw such plenteous industrial development and Virginia saw so little was simply because, long before the Civil War, many Philadelphians had grown money-rich to a degree that almost no Virginians had—although many Virginians were land-rich.

Then too, although Sean Adams shows the importance of coal prices and coal companies' profit margins in his first chapter, his later chapters tend to neglect that always-important factor. He does show later that wintertime coal prices were often quite high at Ohio Valley locations like Cincinnati, and he attributes western Virginia's failure to meet that market demand to the wretched condition of the Kanawha River (which flows one hundred miles from Charleston to the Ohio River). So far so good. Digging through reports of the James River & Kanawha Canal Company, in fact, Sean Adams found that by 1850 the state of Virginia had given that company over five million dollars to improve its east-west shipping route, and that only 3 percent of that money had been used for improving the Kanawha River so as to let more western Virginia coal and salt be shipped profitably to the Ohio River Valley and beyond (98). He also shows that usually it was Virginia's counties that chartered companies. So I wondered why Kanawha County didn't simply charter its own public-private company to clear and channel the Kanawha River. Adams claims that "western Virginians [who were] interested in economic development chafed under the rule of county courts, but, as the minority, they were forced to work within the decentralized framework of Virginia politics. Because Virginia's legal system had preserved the rights and interests of large landholders through propertied suffrage, farmers still dominated county-level institutions in the west–much to the chagrin of development-minded residents" (183). This is not convincing, however, because in the Kanawha Valley the large landholders were development-minded; in fact, just about everyone there was development-minded. Surely the primary bottleneck was the relative lack of money in Virginia generally and in western Virginia particularly. Western Virginians didn't reap much benefit from their enormous natural wealth because they lacked enough money to extract and ship very much of it. Before the Civil War, they even lacked enough money to bring it to the attention of very many outside investors. Had Adams continued his book past the Civil War, he would have had to acknowledge that western Virginia wasn't hogtied only because plantation lords ran Virginia. After achieving statehood, West Virginia became just as subservient to railroad and coal investors in Philadelphia and New York as it had ever been to eastern Virginia planters.

Granted that (as Adams emphasizes) eastern Virginian planters protected their dominance, not just by letting the Kanawha River remain treacherous, but also by keeping western Virginia underrepresented in the state legislature at Richmond, and stalling full reapportionment even after Virginia changed its constitution in 1851. But if Adams had carried his story beyond the Civil War, he would have had to admit that having its own state legislature didn't win economic autonomy for West Virginia either. Lots of growth did follow in the new Mountain State, but little true development occurred.

Overall, however, Sean Adams has created an important and highly readable interpretation of Virginia and Pennsylvania's economic history in the early and mid-1800s, and I commend him. When I studied economic history with his father, Donald R. Adams, at West Virginia University twenty years ago, I learned a lot, and now I've learned a lot from Sean Adams too.

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