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Death of An Overseer: Reopening a Murder Investigation from the Plantation South.

By Michael Wayne

(Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. 257 ISBN 0-19-514004-4.)

In *Death of an Overseer* Michael Wayne re-examines the 1857 murder of Mississippi overseer Duncan Skinner. Skinner was employed on the Cedar Grove plantation in the Natchez District of southwestern Mississippi. His body was found in the early morning hours of May 14, 1857. The original conclusion was that Skinner had fallen from his mount while turkey hunting. However, Skinner's brother Jesse concluded that the death might have been caused by murder. Several discrepancies in the evidence at the scene led to this decision. Skinner's horse was saddled with a seat not normally used for hunting. The overseer's body was positioned against the roots of a tree in a way that was not conducive to accidental death. The game bag found near the scene was old and was not the one he normally used. There was no sign of Skinner's gun accoutrements, which he usually carried, and he had a wound on the left side of his temple while the right temple faced the base of the tree.

These curious facts led to the establishment of a committee of eighteen men, headed by local planter Alexander Farrar. Several weeks after the occurrence the committee descended upon Cedar Grove Plantation. Interviews were held with many of the slaves to find out what they knew about Skinner's death. The slaves were separated from each other and questioned one by one. It was a cook named Jane who informed the investigators that Reuben, Henderson, and Anderson, all slaves at Cedar Grove, had killed Mr. Skinner. Following the crime, the slaves attempted to conceal the act and make it appear to look like an accident.

It was the slave Reuben who proceeded to confess to the crime. The three slaves had approached the overseer's cabin in the early hours of May 14, 1857. They broke into the house and mortally bludgeoned Skinner. Following the assault, the trio gathered up Skinner's hunting equipment and horse and made their way to the surrounding woods. Once there they

rode the horse around trying to create the image of commotion. Skinner's bloody nightshirt and the murder weapon were given to Jane to burn. At this point Henderson left to attend to his morning duties. Reuben and Anderson placed Skinner's body on the horse letting it fall to the ground, fired off his gun and scattered his equipment around. Next the two men went back to the overseer's cabin and gathered up the overseer's money. They then returned to the corpse and placed Skinner's chest key into his pocket.

By late in the afternoon Farrar had gathered up Reuben and Henderson and charged them with murder. Anderson was found some time later hiding out on a neighboring plantation. It was soon speculated that Dorcas, a cook on the plantation, had carried on an affair with an Irish-born carpenter named John McCallin. It was reported that McCallin had told Dorcas and several other slaves that if Skinner were murdered, things around the plantation would be much better. It was hypothesized that McCallin wanted Skinner out of the way so he could marry the owner, Clarissa Sharpe. With Sharpe as his wife, he could reap the rewards of being the husband of a plantation owner. McCallin was never prosecuted for his alleged role in the murder. Testimony by blacks against whites could not be used in court.

The three men were brought to trial in nearby Natchez, Mississippi. Their trial was quite speedy. At the end of the proceedings it took the jury only five minutes to decide that the men were to be hanged. The hangings took place on a plantation near Cedar Grove. Slaves from surrounding plantations were compelled to observe. Other overseers wanted their slaves to comprehend the consequences of rebellion. On the morning of December 11, 1857 the three men were executed.

Michael Wayne's work brings a detailed interpretation to this event. In exploring this text, it is clear that the author has spent a great deal of time examining the documents and evidence related to this event. In utilizing these sources, Wayne is able to present a perplexing historical mystery. The author leaves to the reader to make his or her own interpretations about the course of events in this case.

While the book presented an interesting and entertaining history, it also seemed to be quite repetitive at times. Several scenarios and descriptions are examined repeatedly. While this does help in reinforcing key points it does not seem to be entirely necessary. It also seemed that the writer sometimes attempted to be a little too creative with his telling of the story. Wayne employed some interpretations that seem not entirely based on fact. The most vivid example of this is the letter the author creates between John McCallin and his son at the end of the book. This creative act, useful in a novel but not a historical work, takes away from the book as a whole.

Despite this, Wayne's tale of a murdered overseer does demonstrate an understanding of historical research and various interpretations of that research. This title is helpful in imparting the process of piecing together documents, data, and information to develop a conclusion about a historical event.

John Gilchrist