

Tiya Miles, *THE HOUSE ON DIAMOND HILL: A CHEROKEE PLANTATION STORY*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010, xv + 315pp., \$32.50.

If readers are familiar at all with the “Vann House,” a federalist mansion left behind by Cherokees forced out of Georgia in the 1830s, it is through photographs. In these images, the house stands empty and alone, a monument to the futility of the “civilized” Cherokees’ struggle to remain in their ancient homelands. All that remains is an empty set upon which we can sketch our historical fantasies. (Recently, the U.S. public television series, “We Shall Remain,” recast the Vann mansion as the home of Major Ridge and the headquarters for the tribe’s minority “Treaty Party” politicians who advocated voluntary removal. Scenes of elegant dinner parties buttressed the popular image of “civilized” tribesmen caught in tragic circumstances.)

Drawing on the latest generation of scholarship in Cherokee studies, as well as the incomparable records of the Moravian mission at nearby Springplace, Georgia, Tiya Miles has filled that empty house with a full cast of three-dimensional historic actors. She presents James Vann, born in 1768, the son and grandson of Scottish traders who entered matrilineal Cherokee society through marriage, and, his wife, Peggy Scott, who became “Mistress of Diamond Hill” at fourteen. With Vann’s mother, Wali, Peggy would play a prominent role in the events that unfolded on Diamond Hill following her husband’s murder in 1809. Miles skillfully narrates the story of Vann’s childhood and adolescence against the backdrop of the Cherokee history. Abandoned by their British allies, assaulted by lawless settlers, and patronized by officials of the new United States, tribal leaders struggled at the end of the nineteenth century to regain some measure of control

over their lands and resources while they struggled with internal divisions and ongoing social change. Vann was ‘enterprising, clever, [and] bold,’ Miles writes, but he was also ‘hostage to historical trauma and the personal flaws of arrogance and avarice.’ (48)

After setting James Vann in this historic context, Miles moves his home on Diamond Hill to center stage. Through a combination of enterprise and the skillful use of political influence, Vann established his plantation in northwest Georgia and set about building a proper manor house. At the same time—the first years of the nineteenth century—he offered land to a group of Moravian missionaries who had promised to establish a school for the tribe’s children. At this point, both the number and diversity of the characters populating Miles’s narrative expand dramatically.

Thanks to the diaries and letters of the missionaries at the nearby Springplace Mission, Miles brings the previously-ignored inhabitants of Diamond Hill to life. Like other prosperous Cherokees, Vann had grown increasingly dependent on an army of over one hundred slaves to enact his ambitious business adventures and to maintain his patrician household. His prominence was also maintained by the brutal use of power against anyone—male, female, Indian or not—whom he believed posed a threat to his dominating presence. Vann was also quick to override traditional Cherokee values of gender equality and communal property as he amassed his fortune. By the time of his death he had created a remarkable hybrid world of Cherokee lifeways, capitalist enterprise, brutality and tribal patriotism. Each of these threads brought a separate strand of people to Diamond Hill. When they arrived, they interacted and overlapped.

Miles’s presentation of the “separate yet intersecting” slave and free worlds of Diamond Hill (p.107) is an extraordinary work of historical reconstruction. Not only

does she trace the lives of individual slaves and describe their interaction with their Cherokee masters and the ever-observant Moravians, but she keeps one eye fixed on the horizon, noting the larger significance of the smaller stories she tells. As a consequence, House on Diamond Hill is far more than a study of a single plantation; it is a brilliant window onto a half-century of Cherokee history.

There are other dimensions of Miles's narrative: the story of her interaction with the modern caretakers of Diamond Hill and that group's gradual embrace of the site's dark history, the story of Joseph Vann who (in violation of Cherokee custom) inherited the bulk of his father's estate and built the brick mansion that took the place of the wooden original, and the story of the family's dispossession amidst the chaos of removal. There are also additional stories one wishes for here: descriptions of the relationship of Vann's family and holdings to the vast majority of Cherokees who neither owned slaves nor created plantations, a discussion of the meaning of the removal "crisis" in light of Joseph Vann's decision to voluntarily emigrate, and a fuller discussion of the modern resistance (particularly among Cherokees) to her history of Indian "progress" rooted in exploitation. But the great achievement of his wonderful book is that we can never again look at the dramatic photographs of Diamond Hill without searching for the people who lived and worked there.

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