

Nonfiction Chronicle | Mick Sussman

DOMINION OF MEMORIES: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia. By Susan Dunn. (Basic Books, \$27.50.) Virginia's "brilliant, forward-looking, transforming leaders," Dunn writes, "created a nation" and then controlled the executive branch for 32 of the first 36 years of America's constitutional government. Virginia was once the wealthiest and most populous state, but by the early decades of the 19th century, its soil had been depleted by primitive farming methods; its schools were "miserable," according to Jefferson; and its roads were "execrable," a disgruntled visitor said. Its constitution preserved elitist government long after most states had expanded suffrage, and its plantation aristocracy deliberately hindered the economic dynamism that was modernizing the North. Slavery's role in the decline of the South is an old story, but Dunn, a professor of humanities at Williams College, finds fresh insights by making a case study of Virginia. She emphasizes the significance of lesser-known figures like Thomas Roderick Dew, who in 1832 published an essay that laid the intellectual groundwork for an uncompromisingly pro-slavery ideology, and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, who anticipated secession with an 1836 novel envisioning a Southern rebellion. Dunn's chief aim, though, is to show the complicity of Jefferson and Madison in Virginia's stagnation. Both men strained against plantation dogma, Jefferson because of his egalitarian creed and Madison because of a wavering faith in the national government he'd helped design. Yet they both acquiesced as states' rights radicals adduced

anti-Federalist pronouncements by the two founders to trump moderate opponents. "The seeds of Virginia's decline had been adroitly planted in fertile soil by the great patriarchs themselves," Dunn concludes.

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