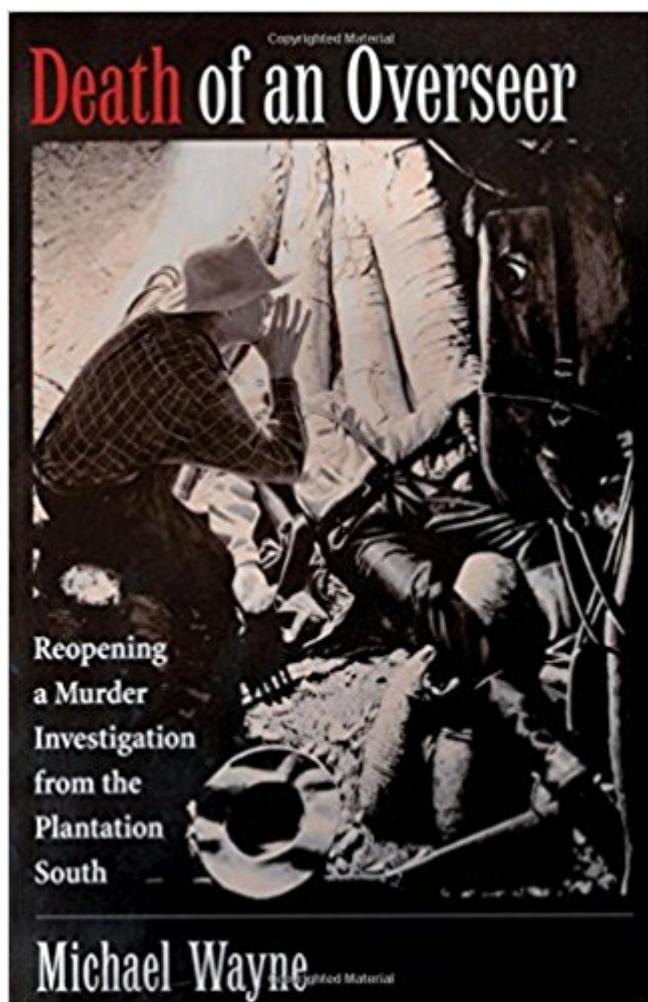


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# Death Of An Overseer : Reopening A Murder Investigation From The Plantation South



## **Synopsis**

In May of 1857, the body of Duncan Skinner was found in a strip of woods along the edge of the plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, where he worked as an overseer. Although a coroner's jury initially ruled his death to be accidental, an investigation organized by planters from the community concluded that he had been murdered by three slaves acting under instructions from John McCallin, an Irish carpenter. Now, almost a century and a half later, Michael Wayne has reopened the case to ask whether the men involved in the investigation arrived at the right verdict. Part essay on the art of historical detection, part seminar on the history of slavery and the Old South, *Death of an Overseer* is, above all, a murder mystery--a murder mystery that allows readers to sift through the surviving evidence themselves and come to their own conclusions about who killed Duncan Skinner and why.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Elements of class privilege, social ambition, interracial sex and violent death lend the flavor of a mystery to this crime story-cum-history about the brutal murder of an overseer, set on a Mississippi plantation in 1857. The main characters include the apparent instigator of the murder, John McCallin, an Irish-born carpenter and cotton gin builder who hoped to marry the widowed owner of the plantation; Dorcas, a slave and house servant who was his mistress of 15 years; three slaves who confess to the murder; and assorted blacks and whites of diverse status. The crime story is the matter of the first chapter. Following that, Wayne slips into the role of historiographer, presenting the evidence in original documents and reviewing the protocols of slavery, inheritance law and politics at the time. Although Wayne continues to refer to the characters, the work assumes the tone of a

repetitious, academic lecture that's sometimes overtly pedagogical, sometimes collegial, and is not likely to hold the interest of general readers. After an account of McCallin's later years married to a black field hand, the book ends curiously with a fictional document written by Wayne: a letter to his son in which McCallin confesses to having consort with slaveholders and dreamed of owning slaves, though he sees himself as a victim of the treachery of others. (Feb.) Forecast: Although blurbs from James McPherson and Catherine Clinton (author of Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars) give this book a trade gloss, with its four appendixes of primary documents, an essay on sources and suggestions for further reading, it is essentially a book for the classroom and amateur historians. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Although certain to be touted as a crime thriller replete with sex and issues of race, class, and homicide, this work by Wayne, a fellow at University College, University of Toronto, is a polished study in historical inquiry. An ostensible aim of this exploration of the death of a plantation overseer in antebellum Natchez, MS, is to give readers a chance to weigh the documentary evidence presented to assess whether the correct verdict was reached. This historical investigation serves as a centerpiece for a broader disquisition on slavery, 19th-century democracy and justice, and white perception and depiction of African Americans. An extensive bibliographical essay details the author's steps taken to acquire information on the individuals involved in the case and the character of life in the Natchez district, and it surveys germane works on slavery and the "Old South." A web site ([www.deathofanoverseer.com](http://www.deathofanoverseer.com)) invites readers to post new evidence or debate issues highlighted in the work. This site also provides biographical details and links to such related information as Mississippi slave narratives, scholarship on Southern farms and plantations, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Recommended for academic libraries. Kathleen M. Conley, Illinois State Univ., Normal Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I bought this book as it was being used as a text book in my history of the old south class. It was a fabulous book. Not only does it tell the true story of the murdered overseer in 1857, it goes into great detail after the story as to where the author came up with his information. Very fascinating read!

This was a book my son needed for school. Not only was the delivery quick, but the book was in very good shape and very reasonably priced.

I read this book because I'm currently researching the life and times in the Natchez district up and the decades after the Civil War. I recently finished Dr. Wayne's other book, "The Re-Shaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District", which was immensely helpful to my research. I found useful information about Natchez plantation life in this book as well. I wasn't much looking for a murder mystery as I approached this book but I went along for the ride anyway, I'll admit bringing along the suspicions I had going into the book on who the responsible killer likely was, before I even started. And I was right, but Wayne tries so hard to steer us from the obvious that Farrar arranged and benefited from the murder and is responsible for the hanging of three slaves during his noble pursuit of justice. It's bizarre to me as to why it's so important for the author to convince us that Farrar has absolutely nothing at all with Skinner's murder. Simply put, we all know behind every great fortune is crime. Dr. Wayne solely relied on Farrar's own letters to make his case as to why Farrar should not be blamed for the murder; in short because Farrar says so. This was precisely Farrar's purpose in writing the letters, to make the case for someone else, to absolve himself of blame, to protect his reputation and standing in society as the whispers rightly grew that Farrar has swindled an old lady widow out of some of her land holdings. The book points out that Farrar enriched himself from the sale of the estate, where the murder took place, of which he was the administrator. This was his goal all along because as Wayne says in the book; the planters goal was to acquire ever more slaves and more and more tracts of land. Farrar never went to the local sheriff about the murder but decided to handle the murder outside of the confines of the law in his own way, setting up his own investigative committee. Oh, and that was because that's how planters did things in those days, Wayne says. All evidence points to McCallin being his own man and wasn't intimidated by the town elites. Being a regular on the property in question, he probably saw Farrar as a swindler one mile away who tried to rail road him to get what he wanted; the widows land. Farrar probably saw McCallin as a threat to acquiring the desired property, even making sure the investigation records stated that McCallin had a 15 year relationship with a black woman, in an obvious attempt sully his reputation. McCallin defended himself in the town paper calling the bluffs of the elites posted in the paper for all to see, threatening him to leave town. What's the best way to get a man to leave town? -Directly, or in this case indirectly pin a murder charge on him. McCallin refused to leave. Towards the end of the book, Wayne follows up with McCallin in later census records, after the Event has blown over and discovers that McCallin made a family with another black woman and their children. He then goes into the history of the Irish and how they were not really white until maybe mid 20th century anyway, indicating the McCallin tried to forge his way into society, but aimed too high and later failed and thus resigned himself to his later life choices. Or

perhaps, McCallin was always his own man and did what he wanted with his own life that made him happy. Lastly, Wayne says he wonders who purchased a stately obelisk grave marker for the murder victim Duncan Skinner, a "large and impressive statue for a man of modest station". Wayne says who paid for the tombstone is unknown. Ok Dr. Wayne.

Death of an Overseer starts off a murder mystery and on the way teaches a good bit on historical research and writing. In respect to the latter the book is far more illuminating in potential pitfalls and mistakes as well as demonstrating sources to draw upon. As the former Michael Wayne impresses early on he will not tip his hand as to who he thinks was the responsible for the murder. It's an interesting if unoriginal idea and at times Wayne's writing makes for sometimes disjointed reading as he tends to repeat earlier passages to the point you feel like saying "you've mentioned this before, move on!" But he doesn't move on and does keep repeating himself and frankly it gets annoying. Wayne also slowly parses out additional information to change your mind all while slowly chugging along to the end. Wayne's writing is quite good from a historical and genealogical perspective, but the end takes a truly bizarre turn as Wayne, after scrupulously avoiding conjecture, comes up with a maudlin fictional letter from the "falsely" accused and dying McAllin to his young son. The letter is hysterically maudlin, sounding painfully like a 20th Century writer striving to sound 19th Century. The premise is too far fetched and intended to "exonerate" McAllin in way too heavy handed a manner. For a writer striving to let the reader decide why would you include such a ham-fisted attempt to exonerate? And therein lays the problem. Its evident Wayne is indeed NOT impartial. If he were truly impartial he never would have included this bizarre fantasy, so clearly he thinks McAllin had absolutely no role in the murder. In that respect he doesn't really want the reader to decide, he wants to steer you towards what he thinks is the right direction. I read the book and made up my own mind. Wayne makes a compelling case the three slaves murdered the overseer. Its unlikely Farrar could have created the lie about the slaves implicating McAllin without others seeing through it and Farrar had too much to lose to gamble on something so patently foolish. So in likelihood the slaves probably implicated McAllin. Whether he was truthfully involved or not is unknown. His behavior was certainly suspect after the murder. Wayne's elaborate hypothesis that McAllin was querying the slaves solely on Clarissa Sharpe's behalf is too far fetched. If Clarissa Sharpe needed that done she would have brought someone in of her same class who had the resources to get to the bottom of it. That person would have been Farrar, a planter like herself, not McAllin a carpenter. The class system that was so dominant in the South at the time would have had it no other way. Futher, McAllin stood to gain nothing from inquiring with the slaves to see who

murdered Skinner the overseer. Skinner was an obstacle to McAllin and he would have no interest in finding out what had happened or who may or may not have murdered him. Wayne loses his objectivity in a desperate attempt to clear McAllin in a non-too-subtle manner and the book suffers as a result. Had he left out the fictitious letter that tips his hand I would have thoroughly enjoyed the book. Some mysteries are just never meant to be solved.

A riveting murder mystery involving race and sex in the Old South, "Death of an Overseer" is equally fascinating for what it reveals about the historian's craft. Besides this, it is beautifully written. Historians and the general reader alike will find this book hard to put down.

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