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Bernard Moitt, ed. *Sugar, Slavery, and Society: Perspectives on the Caribbean, India, the Mascarenes, and the United States.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. x + 203 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2779-1.

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A Scattered View of Sugar Plantation Slavery and Its Aftermath

While sugar plantations and slavery have certainly not exhausted their possibilities for study, the literature in various disciplines has by now grown tremendously large. Many new works tend towards specialization, focusing on a particular time, region, or aspect of slavery. The present volume, instead, sacrifices depth to cast a wide geographical and chronological net. It explores, in eight essays, sugar and labor in India, Guiana, the Mascarenes, Louisiana, as well as the French, English, and Spanish Caribbean. The essays also run across disciplines, with offerings from professors of sociology, history, and literature; and the period covered by the essays spans from 1700 to the present. The thematic and methodological dispersion of the essays make them difficult to assess as a whole. Some individual essays may have value for particular readers, but the volume would not easily work as an assigned reading in an undergraduate or graduate course. Also, the essays for the most part are not based on primary sources, and no central thesis or theme ties them together beyond the assumption that, where sugar plantations and African slavery predominated in an economy, the social ramifications were intense and long lasting. That said, the authors generally do follow current scholarly trends that emphasize the agency of workers–enslaved or otherwise–in plantation society.

Essays by Bernard Moitt (chapter 3) and by Moitt and Horace L. Henriques (chapter 5) exemplify the latter point. These examine, respectively, slavery in the colonial French Caribbean and British Guiana. Both rightly emphasize complex and fluid social dynamics among slaves as well as planters. In both colonies slave resistance was endemic, resulting in, among other things, widespread marronage. These essays are, however, mainly synthetic and do not seem to offer new arguments or delve into new sources.

Richard Follett and Rick Halpern also take up the theme of workers' negotiation and resistance in an essay about Louisiana's sugar economy from 1861 to 1913 (chapter 7). In this instance, African-American sugar workers moved from slave to free status and were supplanted eventually–to some degree–by Chinese and Italian immigrants. As the authors compellingly point out, post-emancipation realities did not mark a substantial break in practices dating from slavery. Both before and after, workers operated under a regimen of paternalism and coercion, but were able to negotiate to some degree the conditions of their work and even demand wages. This ability increased after emancipation, but the balance of power remained with the planters. The authors make a strong case partly through their use of primary documents including plantation account books and contemporary newspapers.

While many researchers of sugar plantations seem to have posited an inextricable link between production, capital concentration, and coercive labor practices, B. S. Baviskar suggests that this is not inevitable (chapter 1). Here the author gives the example of present-day Indian sugar cooperatives, producing mainly for domestic consumption. According to the author, over half of India's sugar producers are small farmers, organized into cooperatives, which retain a great deal of control over production and even milling and transportation. These farmers have translated their economic power into political power and social welfare benefits. Bavisakar's study challenges those who would always see sugar production within a dependency theory framework. Clearly the exigencies of sugar cultivation and marketing have historically led to a wide variety of responses in regards to the organization of production, not all of which worked to the detriment of the small farmer. For example, the partnership of mill owners and smaller farmers (*lavradores de cana*) throughout the history of Brazilian cane cultivation gives further caution about generalizing from the Caribbean model.[1]

In a provocative concluding chapter, Henry Paget

traces the modern legacy of plantation agriculture in the Caribbean. Not all readers may agree with his conclusion that North American companies investing in the region are motivated by "claims to white privilege and superiority." But it seems difficult to refute his overall assertions that racism, economic dependency, and political instability remain acute problems in the region and are partly the legacy of plantation society.

Note

[1]. Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 295-312.

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