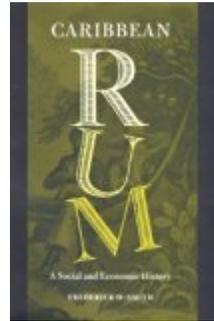


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederick H. Smith. *Caribbean Rum: A Social and Economic History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xvi + 339 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2867-5.

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## The “Spirit” of the Caribbean

Identified as critical to the New England slave trade, as important in propping up planters’ profits as sugar prices slipped, and as vital in helping to create space for revolutionary discourse, rum has long captured the attention of early American historians.[1] In this important new book, Frederick H. Smith has given rum the same treatment that other Atlantic goods, such as sugar, wine, and coffee, have received in recent years.[2] Smith, an assistant professor of anthropology at the College of William and Mary, deftly traces the economic and cultural history of rum from its first distillation during the seventeenth century through its marketing in the twenty-first century.

Unlike other colonial staples that found their major markets in Europe, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rum was produced and consumed primarily within the European colonies in the Americas and in West Africa. Smith argues that because of this unique pattern of consumption, rum “provides a special opportunity to explore the meaning of commodities in the societies that produced them” (p. 2). Focusing not on the Caribbean’s chief staple crop, sugar, but on a good made from its by-products, Smith pivots our attention away from the movement of commodities eastward to Europe and celebrates the importance of multilateral lines of exchange throughout the Atlantic. In his chief contribution to Atlantic history, Smith argues that because rum connected Caribbean islands to one another, to North America, and to Africa, it highlights the importance of inter-imperial economic and cultural exchange among colonies in the construction of the early modern Atlantic world.

After stumbling about in search of a reliable source of alcohol (as they had for a staple product), Europeans in the Caribbean soon realized they could ferment the juice of the sugar cane, or better yet the byproducts yielded from making sugar, into a strong spirit. Europeans, African slaves, and Caribs alike quickly incorporated rum into their diets despite limited productive capabilities. Capitalizing upon demand from sailors, New Englanders desperate for strong alcohol, and Spanish colonists who struggled to obtain cheap and reliable supplies of wine from Spain, rum producers in Barbados and, later, Martinique expanded production in an effort to augment their plantation returns and secure needed inputs through inter-colonial trade. As Smith argues, the universal demand for alcohol, rum’s low price, and its ease of storage fueled demand and “nurtured the growth of American trade” (p. 40). Perhaps overstating the uniqueness of rum—lumber, other provisions, slaves, and livestock served similar purposes—Smith nevertheless identifies a critical way that this Atlantic good fostered economic expansion through inter-colonial exchange.

After a survey of the production and trade of rum through the end of the eighteenth century, Smith turns to the cultural place of the sugar-based liquor in the Caribbean. Because those elements of society—such as slaves, sailors, poor whites, and pirates (including the famous Captain Henry Morgan)—who were unable to afford expensive imported spirits consumed it, rum gained both social and symbolic value as a dangerous commodity. In the Caribbean, slaves quickly substituted rum for other alcohols as they struggled to maintain African cul-

tural beliefs in the face of the cultural disruption of the slave trade, European controls, and the cultural heterogeneity of slave communities. Forced to adapt and merge their practices, African slaves also found new social and sacred uses for rum, “braiding ... shared West and West Central African beliefs about alcohol” together (p. 111). Chief among these customs was the use of rum in religious practices such as *obeah*, a combination of healing and spirituality derived from West and West Central African religions. Such maintenance and reworking of those African beliefs that were legible to large numbers of the slave population provided social ties that bound communities together.

But rum was not only a way to build social networks. While drinking, rum users stepped beyond their daily lives; rum allowed consumers to escape from the anxieties of Caribbean life and afforded free and unfree colonists alike an avenue to challenge “the existing social order” (p. 118). In Smith’s analysis, the everyday and symbolic consumption of rum provided space for rebellion, especially among slaves, because alcohol enables users to cross social boundaries safely. In making this argument, however, Smith fails to convincingly explicate how rum itself, rather than the malleability of the master-slave relationship, created these opportunities. It seems that rum was not unlike any number of tools slaves used to negotiate their status. What is clearer is that rum served a multiplicity of overlapping functions, helping to explain its cultural power.

Not content to leave rum in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Smith concludes his study with two ambitious chapters that trace the production and marketing of rum in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the concurrent efforts of reformers to combat its evils. Smith deftly explains that, though Christian missionaries blamed rum for social discord and poverty, they did not transform alcohol consumption. Rather, they had the most success in pushing temperance in those communities, such as black Creoles in Jamaica, who had already rejected rum, using non-consumption to differentiate themselves from slaves and poor whites. In other communities, the association between rum and many sacred and social rituals, combined with planters’ development of rum-based-wage and company-store systems, mitigated the efforts of reformers.

While working in a large number of archives

throughout the Caribbean, North America, Europe, and West Africa, much of Smith’s evidence derives from the British Caribbean. Although he is careful to distinguish between islands in discussing rum production, when Smith turns to consumption he is not always clear about differences between various islands. Though he pledges to examine the complex human, environmental, social, and imperial forces that condition consumption, the experiences of colonists and slaves in Jamaica, Barbados, and Martinique dominate these sections. To some extent Smith’s focus is justified, since these islands were the largest centers of rum production, but this status also made them unique and raises important questions of comparison. Did the large slave populations, relative wealth, and intensity of work on these islands lead to distinct consumption patterns? Did rum penetrate other less wealthy or more diverse Caribbean communities similarly? At the same time, Smith’s focus on the trade of rum throughout the Atlantic does not explain exactly how the culture of rum drinking circulated. By affording the movement of free and unfree African peoples through the Caribbean the same attention that he does their role in rum production, Smith could have better examined their role as cultural mediators of rum consumption.

Delving into diverse topics, such as the physical environment of the rum still, the cultural use of alcohol in West African funeral rites, and rum’s commercial history, Smith’s interdisciplinary approach has provided historians of the Atlantic with a well-argued, eloquent examination of one of the Caribbean’s transformative goods and of “Captain Morgan’s” drink of choice.

#### Notes

[1]. Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955); John J. McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution: The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Continental Colonies* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989); and Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[2]. See, for example, Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

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