

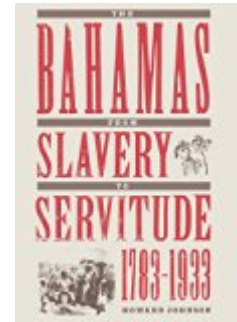
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Howard Johnson. *The Bahamas From Slavery to Servitude, 1783-1933.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996. xviii + 218 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1494-4.

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The Bahamas: Islands in Chains?

Howard Johnson, in *The Bahamas from Slavery to Servitude, 1783-1933*, assembles a collection of insightful essays which he arranges, archipelago-like, to display various aspects of continuous oligarchic control over Bahamian workers. His analysis contributes to a continuing inquiry into the nature of Caribbean colonial societies as they moved from slavery into post-emancipation environments where the supply of labor became uncertain.

Only in recent decades have Caribbean scholars displayed sustained interest in the degree to which former slaves were able to establish viable economic alternatives following the demise of plantation slavery. With respect to the colonies of Britain, the “Merivale Paradigm” held the attention of scholars for generations as they assumed the validity of Herman Merivale’s 1840s analysis. Merivale, in a series of lectures on Caribbean political economy, presented an analysis of British colonial economies as they entered the period of adjustment after the Abolition Act of 1833 decreed liberty for slaves. The degree of economic success on the part of the post-emancipation plantation owners, he said, depended to a great extent on the ratio of labor to available land. So in places like British Guiana and Jamaica where undeveloped land was readily available, the opportunity for former slaves to act autonomously was considerably better than, for example, on Barbados and Antigua where slaves were numerous and where plantation agriculture dominated a small geographic space.[1] So logical was the argument that few sought to challenge or even modify that analysis, grounded as it was in seemingly self-evident economic law.

In the mid-twentieth century, some scholars turned their attention from what had been a pervasive interest in slavery itself to post-emancipation developments. Douglas Hall on Jamaica in 1959,[2] Donald Wood on Trinidad in 1968[3], Alan Adamson on British Guiana in 1972,[4] were among those who set the stage for a burst of scholarship on post-emancipation conditions in the Caribbean.

In the 1980s, the Merivale assumption was specifically reexamined. In 1981, O. Nigel Bolland described British Honduras’ transition to non-slave labor. Belize, as slavery ended, was an underpopulated area and, following Merivale, one would have expected the slaves, once emancipated, to move rapidly toward achieving economic autonomy. Such was not the case, however, as a variety of factors both political and economic combined to rein in the newly liberated workers.[5] A now celebrated exchange appeared in the January 1984 issue of *Comparative Studies in Society and History* between William A. Green (“The Perils of Comparative History: Belize and the Sugar Colonies After Slavery”) and Bolland “Reply to William A. Green’s ‘the Perils of Comparative History’ ” on post-emancipation historical interpretation.[6] Other works followed.[7]

In this work, Johnson’s intent was to revise an earlier volume of collected essays [8] and refashion them into a more coherent synthesis. His major thesis is that the Bahamian slave descendants went from a world of dependency on the Euro-oligarchy under slavery to a new world of dependency on the same Euro oligarchy which

successfully employed an evolving system of social control. In his account he takes issue with both Bolland and the Merivale followers on the reasons for success of post-emancipation social controls and also with Michael Craton and Gail Saunders on the question of the degree of autonomy demonstrated by workers while still in the slave system.[9]

In Chapter One, Johnson presents an overview of the economic development of the islands down to 1815, in which he sets the geographic stage and introduces trends and institutions in preparation for his series of essays. The Bahamian early history includes the rapid decline of the Lucayan population, the neglect by the Spanish and the settlement by the British by the middle seventeenth century. The early English colonists lived by their wits by engaging in subsistence agriculture, fishing, selling of salt and food, salvaging operations from shipwrecks and privateering/ piracy entrepreneurship. Following the arrival of loyalists from the former Thirteen Colonies, the Bahamians enjoyed a spurt of economic activity with the development of cotton as a cash crop. Some characteristics of the Bahamian economy explored in subsequent chapters include: the boom and bust cycle with cotton being the first example, the appearance of indentured free blacks taken from among those liberated by British policing of slave traders, and slaves who were able to enjoy some unusual autonomy through successful bargaining with their owners. At the same time, we see the growing power of the agro-merchant group which will thwart that drive toward economic autonomy.

The following two chapters deal with the growing success of slaves to carve out economic independence space within the slave regime. The self-hire system emerged in Nassau as many slaves succeeded in achieving independence by negotiating their own work contracts when their owners could not employ them productively in agriculture. Another boon to the slave's economic fortune came with the collapse of cotton production after 1800. Johnson claims that the slaves, during the period of economic decline, were able to bargain for enough time both to farm and to market products so as to be considered virtual peasants. Sidney Mintz used the term "proto-peasantry" in detailing the success of many slaves in gaining some customary control over their own provision grounds and to undertake market activities. But Johnson suggests that in the Bahamas the process had gone much further than in other slave regimes.

In Chapter Four, Johnson examines the special case of Africans who were liberated in the suppression of

the African Slave Trade by Great Britain. Slaves rescued from the clutches of the other slave holding empires were apprenticed as indentures to Bahamian "handlers" or pressed into militia service. These "recaptives" formed a separate group within the society, but their essential range of opportunities was not much different than those in actual slavery. They were able as well to establish peasant-like life styles during the period.

Chapters Five and Six contain irony which Johnson should have exploited more fully. While slavery was in force, workers seemed to be moving toward economic independence and yet, after 1838 when full freedom came to the islands, the agro-merchant elite exercised ever tightening control over their former property. In order to inhibit the growth of an independent peasantry, the Bahamian elites were able to secure a prohibitively high price for the purchase of land. The ex-slave, then, lacking the necessary capital, had to settle for sharecropping arrangements. As the demand for fresh and canned fruit soared in the world markets of the late nineteenth century, merchants began buying up large tracks of land suitable for pineapple cultivation. They were then able to entice labor from those willing to work by the promise that they would be paid later but could receive credit immediately as an advance on wages. The debt trap quickly snapped shut. Johnson then describes in detail the workings of the "Credit and Truck" system in which an increasingly powerful merchant/banking/ landed class exploited labor through the control of credit and by requiring workers to accept goods from company stores instead of cash as payment. The control of the land itself was therefore not necessary to keep a labor force, of all colors, dependent on the oligarchy. Even when the state intervened at the turn of the century to control abuses of payments in kind at employer controlled stores, the lock on credit served to maintain domination by the oligarchy.

Chapter Seven describes the success of the oligarchy in recruiting a foreign, largely Barbadian, police force to insure order in the colony. The withdrawal of the British West India Regiment in the 1880s required a force whose members would not be tempted to join with those Bahamians allegedly intent on reacting violently to an oppressive system.

Chapter Eight looks at the oligarchy's reaction to immigration of foreign entrepreneurs who might threaten its monopoly of economic activity on the islands. Greeks, Lebanese, Jews, Chinese all were perceived as threats and were eventually restricted during the 1920s by immigration legislation, fees, licenses. and the like. The oligarchy

had once again, through the coercion of the state, confirmed their dominant position on the island.

The final chapter examines the Bahamian contribution to that all too familiar export of the Caribbean—its people. Caught in a system of economic exploitation and in the seemingly endless series of economic crises, Bahamians moved into the expanding economy of southern Florida. The oligarchy did not suffer, however, from this out-migration tactic. Remittances to families back home combined with income from increasing imports of food products benefited the merchant class.

Johnson has made a significant and well-written contribution to the on-going debate as to the nature of post-emancipation societies and the transition to them. He claims that the Bahamian slave regime in its last years was unique in terms of opportunities for autonomous actions by slaves. Slaves living as virtual peasants, slaves hiring themselves out, apprenticed Africans, free blacks and browns, high amount of mobility all give a picture of a system in transition which is using various forms of labor simultaneously. Johnson agrees that his characterization of the slave regime is similar to Rebecca Scott's description of Cuba's system as it began to fall apart even before the formal ending of slavery in the 1880s.[10] All of this runs counter to the story told by Michael Craton and Gail Saunders in their 1992 work. He also takes issue with Bolland, who regards the control of land as the central factor in the continued domination of planters after slavery, by his insistence that the control of capital and credit can be just as vital a factor. He also claims that credit and truck systems, contrary to assertions by both Bolland and Green, existed not only in the Bahamas and Belize, but in sugar producing colonies as well.

Johnson has done well in framing windows through which we can observe selected views of the Bahamian societal landscape. The picture, however, is not panoramic. We need to see more of the context in which the oligarchy is operating. Some of the terrae incognitae include the nature of the local political system; the relationship between the Bahamian colonial government and the Imperial power in London; the impact of market forces on the agro-merchant elite as they struggled with what appears to be one economic setback after another; the effects of social tensions among groups or aggregates such as the former slaves, the former African apprentices, the people of color and the Europeans of various economic levels; the changes in fortune and composition of the families that comprise the oligarchy; and the nature of the economy in Nassau's growing urban area.

We look forward to additional analysis by Johnson in which he might use to advantage the Minutes of Assembly of the Nassau legislature and additional statistics to support newspaper accounts. We anticipate also a response from those with whom he disagrees. Certainly Michael Craton and Gail Saunders who have marshalled considerable statistical evidence in their description of the slave regime in their first volume will rise to the challenge. Their second volume, carrying the story to the present will probably have much to say about the role of the agro/merchant oligarchy in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Finally! Bolland will undoubtedly remind Johnson that he is aware of "truck shops" operating not only in the Bahamas and Belize, but also in the sugar colonies.[11]

Notes:

[1]. Herman Merivale, *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies* (2 vols.; rev. ed.; London:Oxford University Press, 1928).

[2]. Douglas Hall, *Free Jamaica, 1838-1865, an Economic History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959),

[3]. Donald Wood, *Trinidad in Transition: The Years After Slavery* (London:Oxford University Press, 1968).

[4]. Alan Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838-1904*(New Haven:Yale University Press, 1972).

[5]. O. Nigel Bolland, "Systems of Domination after Slavery: The Control of Land and Labor in the British West Indies after 1838," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Oct. 1981), pp. 591-619.

[6]. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 26, no.1 (Jan. 1981), pp.112-125.

[7]. See, for examples: Michael Craton, "The Transition from Slavery to Free Wage Labour in the Caribbean, 1790-1890." *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 13 (1992), pp. 37-67. Frank McGlynn and Seymour Drescher., eds., *The Meaning of Freedom: Economics, Politics and Culture after Slavery*(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press,1992). Michael Moorh, "The Economic Impact of Slave Emancipation in British Guiana, 1832-1852,"*The Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol 25, no 4 (Nov. 1992), pp. 588-607. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, et al., eds., *Between Slavery and Free Labor; The Spanish-speaking Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1885). Karen F. Olwig, ed.,*Small Islands, Large Questions: Society, Culture and Resistance in the*

Post-Emancipation Caribbean (London & Portland: Frank Cass, 1995). David Richardson, ed., *Abolition and its Aftermath: The Historical Context, 1768-1916*. London & Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 1985. Mary Turner ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: the Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

[8]. Howard Johnson, *The Bahamas in Slavery and Freedom* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1991).

[9]. Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream; A History of the Bahamian People, vol I: From Aboriginal Times to the End of Slavery* (Athens: University

of Georgia Press, 1992

[10]. Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[11]. O. Nigel Bolland, "The Politics of Freedom in the British Caribbean," in McGlynn and Drescher, *The Meaning of Freedom*, p. 123.

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