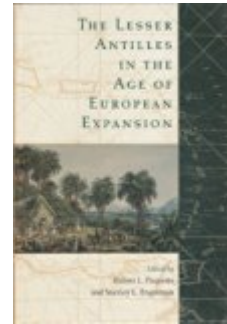


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert L. Paquette, Stanley L. Engerman, eds. *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996. xii + 383 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1428-9.

Reviewed by J. H. Galloway (University of Toronto)  
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## Return to the Islands

The title suggests this book is a general history of the Lesser Antilles, but it is in fact the exceptionally well-edited proceedings of a conference held at Hamilton College and Colgate University in October of 1992 as part of the commemorations of Columbus' first trans-Atlantic voyage. There are eighteen essays, each of which deals with a specific issue in the history of these islands between their discovery by the Spanish and the abolition of slavery. Much of the discussion is also relevant to the history of the Greater Antilles, and indeed all the authors assume their readers will have at least a general knowledge of Caribbean history.

This, therefore, is not a book for the neophyte. It will probably be very useful to those who perhaps have been away from the subject for a time and who wish to be brought up-to-date on current thinking and trends in research. It should also interest those concerned more generally with the history of European expansion. The book has yet another readership: I recommend it strongly to Caribbeanists approaching comprehensive examinations.

The unity of the collection derives from the overall revisionist theme. The authors question the validity of long-accepted interpretations, point to new directions researchers might take, and bring out the significance of formerly-neglected topics. The editors have organised the essays chronologically into five groups: Europe and the Indigenous Peoples; War and Imperial Rivalries; Migration, Trade and the Trans-Atlantic Economy; Slavery;

and Abolition and Emancipation. The essays are well-written, well-referenced and, most importantly, stimulating.

The collection begins with controversy. We know, or rather thought we knew, that in 1492 Caribs inhabited most, if not all, of the Lesser Antilles, that they were migrating to the north and west at the expense of the Arawaks (Tainos), were warlike and, to an extent, cannibal. Both William Keegan and Louis Allaire, in their respective essays, challenge this traditional historiography which they trace to the failure of Columbus and the Tainos to understand each other on the subject of the human geography of the Caribbean. Their "deconstruction" of Columbus' diary and review of the archaeological evidence show just how open debate still is on the characteristics of the pre-contact society of these islands.

The people whom the Europeans came to call Caribs lived on St. Vincent until the end of the eighteenth century and there are still descendants of Caribs on Dominica today. Kenneth Kiple and Kriemhild Ornelas draw on the epidemiology of introduced diseases to account for the survival of the Caribs long after the Tainos disappeared from the scene and then for the decline in Carib population in the eighteenth century. Michael Craton discusses the events that lead to the deportation of the last Caribs of St. Vincent to Belize in 1796, noting the contrast between the sophistication of the Carib leaders as revealed in their negotiations with the English and French and their depiction as primitives by the illustra-

tors of the time (p. 82).

The essays that follow in the next two sections vary in interest and approach. The paper by John Appelby on the early years of English settlement is nicely done, but contains little that is new. Alison Games bravely argues the case for upward mobility in Barbadian society before and through the sugar revolution. Using a variety of documents, she tracks the fortunes of 983 people whose names appear in the London port registry of 1635 as having travelled to Barbados in that year. This list provides the basis of much interesting analysis which, however, tends to confirm rather than amend existing findings. David Eltis updates statistics on the role of the English in the Atlantic slave trade since Philip Curtin's *Census* of 1969, while Andrew O'Shaughnessy succinctly describes, drawing on an impressive range of data, the importance of the military in the slave societies of the British islands. Stanley Engerman in his essay on "Europe, the Lesser Antilles, and Economic Expansion, 1600-1800" invokes the thesis Eric Williams set forth in his *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) that the plantation economies contributed to the industrial revolution, but at the end of his discussion Engerman leaves open the question of the precise nature and significance of that connection.

Three authors show the difficulty of putting mercantilism into practice. Julius Scott indeed argues that at the end of the eighteenth century the movement of people and goods between the colonies was "as important to the region's identity as what separated them as imperial rivals" (p. 141). Sailors, traders and runaway slaves were adept at "Crisscrossing Empires", to quote the title of his paper. One of his sources is unusual: the report of a Spanish spy who in May and June of 1795, under the orders of the Captain-General of the Caracas district, travelled through the Lesser Antilles to Puerto Rico and back to learn about the military and naval plans of the English and French and to sense the prospects for slave rebellions and outbreaks of republicanism. The spy found the Danish colonies of St. Thomas and St. Croix to be extremely rewarding listening posts because of the extent of trade being carried on there and the constant comings and goings of people from around the Caribbean, Europe and North America. P.C. Emmer and Norman Barka provide

further evidence of the great extent of illegal traffic between empires in their accounts of commercial activities on the Dutch islands of St. Eustatius and CuraCao.

The final six papers suggest that the focus of interest in the study of slavery is now on the lead up to emancipation and on its immediate aftermath. David Gaspar writes about "Ameliorating Slavery: The Leeward Island Slave Act of 1798"; Anne Perotin-Dumon and David Geggus write respectively about the experience of the slaves and free coloreds of Guadeloupe and Martinique during the French Revolution. I found the papers by Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Roderick McDonald to be among the most intriguing in the collection. Trouillot questions the paradigm of the determining role of the availability of land in the fate of the former slaves that has guided post-emancipation studies of the British islands since Herman Merivale (*Lectures on Colonization and Colonies*, 1841-42, 2nd edition, 1861) and supports his arguments with a case study of "Dominica's First 100 Days of Freedom." McDonald writes about the implications of emancipation for the social structure of St. Vincent, examining the struggle of the various social and racial groups for status in the impending new order. There is surely scope for much further work of this kind. Seymour Drescher's essay provides a suitable end to the volume. He draws on the record of "Dutch Capitalism and Antislavery" to question the validity of another prominent thesis of Antillean history: the link between the forces of capitalism and the process of explanation. "At the very least," he concludes, "the time is over when historians of slavery will unself-consciously credit capitalism with leading the charge against slavery" (p. 363).

There inevitably are gaps in the coverage. I would like there to have been another paper on urban history to complement Barka's study of late eighteenth-century St. Eustatius. There is nothing in the collection about environmental history and, rather surprisingly, no paper about the sugar plantations. Many books are too long; this one is not long enough.

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