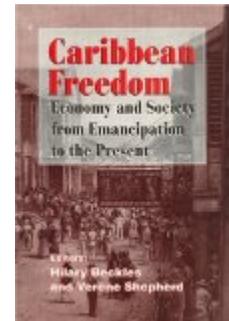


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hilary Beckles, Verene Shepherd. *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society From Emancipation to the Present*. Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996. 581 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55876-128-5.

Reviewed by Dennis R. Hidalgo (Central Michigan University/Strathclyde University)  
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Caribbean Freedom will prove a useful tool for those teachers of Caribbean history who have struggled with finding sources for their students, and a colorful source of information for those students seeking variety in their research. This book is a collection of essays dealing specifically with the Caribbean economy and society after the abolition of slavery. Occasionally, an essay may touch the slavery period to enlighten and enhance the meaning of its particular research and perspective. The book's main focus, however, is on the post-slavery experience; an area that Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd recognize as lacking vital academic aids. This Reader is companion to a previously released volume Caribbean Slave Society and Economy.

The editors justify the creation of this volume by explaining that there has been a growing number of researches on this area of study, though it has been mostly confined to monographs and professional journals that are sadly scarce. Furthermore, they argue that there is a lack of general history textbooks that can provide comprehensive coverage of socio-economic Caribbean history, therefore the need of a resource as this becomes more urgent. Hence, the inaccessibility of many important articles to students and the want of comprehensive textbooks dealing with the economic and social post-slavery experience provided the grounds for the creation of this volume. Even though the editors had hoped the book would be used in the classroom as a teaching tool, they also foresaw the book being used as a supplement to other academic guides and literature on the subject.

The essays in this book are not topically comprehensive, but they do cover a wide range of specialized topics and areas within the main subject of the post-

slavery experience in the Caribbean. This allows for first-rate essays, which, indeed, tend to be among the best in Caribbean history. Many seminal authors are included in the list of contributors, but what probably places the book in the upper class of historical research is that most of its articles are an example of first class innovative research. Since social and economic history is the main intellectual historical platform of the book, most of the essays rely heavily on empirical data. Furthermore, the editors of the book made a commendable effort to present more than one historical view in their selection of essays.

The structure of the book is user friendly on a topical or informational basis. Along with an introduction for every section, all thirteen sections into which the book is divided are curiously organized chronologically and topically. Even though the book is not intended to serve as a text book, but rather as a reference source, chronology is respected while also giving priority to the organization of its general topics. Most of the principal topics dealing with the history of economy and society are important sections in this book. This Reader also follows in the tradition of the best books on social history that include topics dealing with Women and Gender, and Race. Furthermore, to improve its usage as an effective teaching tool the editors included a Selected Bibliography, which is also divided into sections and essays.

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\* Selected Bibliography.

#### Summary

In the Introduction, the editors remind us of how important Caribbean history from the social and economic stand point is since “the Caribbean region was first within the Atlantic colonial complex to experience a general emancipation of slaves and to build a society upon the premise of universal citizenry.” The changes brought by the struggles for freedom, in most of the Caribbean islands, followed a similar process as those experienced in Haiti. They included the erosion of slavery as an institution, the acceptance of socio-economic arrangements by most social and governmental groups, and the growing of a national consciousness among most Creole groups. Doubtless, emancipation was a total break from the past—a revolution. However, as a process, emancipation continued until the aging years of the first generation of freed slaves. It took a long time, an immeasurable amount of energy, and many lives to bring to light some of their original dreams and goals. The struggle of economic and social emancipation still extends into the present.

#### Analysis

The variety of perspectives and subjects included in this book allows for a tolerant and balanced selection of essays. Narrative, defensive historiography, and data presentation for the sake of empiricism are all historical methods that blend in this book through its colorful collection. This source of various authors’ attempts to understand the Caribbean from their different points

of view while still remaining intentionally empirical is probably the book’s strongest feature.

For those looking for “ready to digest” information, this book may prove disappointing. Multiple interpretations is the dominant thrust, which makes its use special. As with most Readers, this book faces the challenges of subject cohesiveness and relevancy. Cohesiveness is tackled with a clear set of requisites that the essays should have to fulfill. They should not only deal with the time period and the geographic limitation the book is considering, but they should also focus on social and economic changes using the tools and methods that economic and social historians usually use. By using these tools and methods, the editors found a way to bring relative cohesiveness to their book while also allowing for a variety of views on similar subjects.

The strongest challenge came from the area of relevancy. The book fulfills its main goal of bringing some of the best research done on Caribbean socio-economic history since the emancipation, however it tends to emphasize the British Caribbean over other areas of the Caribbean contour. Out of fifty-six essays, eight of them deal with the Spanish Caribbean, six with the French Caribbean, three are purposely general and comprehensive, and only one deals directly with the Dutch Caribbean. The rest of the articles’ main subjects are on the British Caribbean. This probably could be explained naturally since the book originated within this same geographical and cultural context. Therefore, even though this book deals with the Caribbean after emancipation as a whole from a socio-economic perspective, it will assist more forcefully and graciously in the study of the British Caribbean. Nevertheless, most teachers dealing with Caribbean history may want their students to use this book as a valuable introduction to serious and specific research dealing with economic and social history after emancipation.

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