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Gelien Matthews. *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. ix + 240 pp. $42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3131-2.

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Slaves on the Floor of Parliament: How Caribbean Revolts Shaped the British Abolitionist Movement

Gelien Matthews seeks to "rescue slave rebellion from its obscurity" in the accounts of the British antislavery struggle (p. ix). Despite an increasing quantity of literature on Caribbean slave revolts, Matthews's approach to the topic provides us with an innovative, fresh, and succinct study that begs the reader to reconsider past scholarly interpretations of the British movement to abolish slavery in the early nineteenth century. By examining public and private documents created by British abolitionists, and spending ample space to dissect other scholars' views, Matthews manages to demonstrate that slave revolts on the islands of Barbados (1816), Demerara (1832), and Jamaica (1831-32) were important in shaping the discourse of British abolitionists in London. Surprisingly, historians have typically considered the slave revolts to have had a negative effect on the abolition movement, but Matthews finds that abolitionists adopted the slaves as agents of change, rather than as examples of chaos or architects of carnage, as pro-slavery activists described Caribbean slave rebels. In revealing the semi-symbiotic relationship between slaves and abolitionists, Matthews answers a decades old call to inject slaves into the center of the abolitionist story.

Matthews, a professor of history at Caribbean Nazarene College in Trinidad and Tobago, asserts that the "focus of scholarship has been oriented too narrowly toward assessing the value of slave revolts in the achievement of emancipation" (p. 8). In short, Matthews disagrees with common perceptions of a one-to-one relationship between revolts and emancipation, instead exploring how revolts pushed metropolitan abolitionists to expand and modify their advocacy efforts.[1] These "saints," as many were called, included recent Hollywood stars William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, who initially approached abolition from a conservative vantage point. The slave revolts, Matthews contends, "succeeded in shifting the abolitionists' conservative policy progressively to the left" (p. 10). Indeed, the very content of abolitionist discourse was shaped by the Caribbean rebellions by reinforcing their humanitarian arguments aimed at freeing the slaves. As such, Matthews successfully finds a niche in the growing literature on Caribbean slave revolts by employing a social historical approach that highlights the agency of marginalized peoples.

The framework of Matthews's argument progresses chronologically in three phases, which begin in chapter 2. "Agitating the Question" commences with an examination of the negative impact of slave revolts (seemingly beginning with Barbados in 1816, but sometimes skipping back in time to the Haitian Revolution) on the abolitionist cause. At first, according to Matthews, the abolitionists appeared defensive about slave revolts, with men like Wilberforce identifying such events as counterproductive to the task at hand. Pro-slavery constituents were alarmed by the revolts, fearing that abolitionist rhetoric had sparked them. The general conversations between abolitionists and their pro-slavery counterparts seemed to fluctuate between outright disassociation with the slaves, as was the case with Wilberforce, and accepting some responsibility for inciting the revolts. Abolitionists, Matthews argues, were on the defensive regarding slave revolts almost continually until wide-scale emancipation in the region in the 1830s.

Nevertheless, this did not mean that abolitionists always viewed slave revolts in a negative light. Chapter 3, "The Other Side of the Slave Revolts," examines the favorable impressions of the revolts that were recorded by numerous, less defensive, abolitionists in the early nineteenth century. Matthews demonstrates how abolitionists attempted to diffuse the inaccurate pro-slavery accounts of savage and barbaric slave rebellions. For example, she explores how one anonymous author countered pro-slavery supporters' descriptions of the violence in the Caribbean by suggesting that even if the revolting slaves of Barbados wanted to "inflict grievous bodily harm upon their masters they were incapable of doing so"

because they lacked sufficient weaponry (p. 65). Abolitionists often acknowledged the validity of certain aspects of the pro-slavery argument, for example, the concerns over widespread violence, and Matthews skillfully identifies these complexities in the abolitionist vs. pro-slavery debate. Matthews repeatedly presents a nuanced interpretation of changing abolitionist discourse, as its authors sought to defend and positively spin the news of increasing violence in the Caribbean.

The next two chapters serve as the core of *Caribbean Slave Revolts*. The crux of Matthews's argument–that the slave rebellions *positively* influenced abolitionists' discourse–comes into full view in chapters 4 and 5 by illustrating the transformation of conservative abolitionist thought to what Matthews characterizes as the progressive left (a conceptualization of early nineteenth-century British politics that may be troubling for some readers). Matthews details the emergence of a split between more conservative anti-slavery advocates, such as Wilberforce, and more radical men like Clarkson during the 1810s and 1820s. One seemed to parade his humanitarian acts in front of high society, while the other sought to engage the common man in the fight, bringing before the public the instruments of torture used to control slaves. Clarkson made known the horrible conditions of slaves, causing abolitionists all over Great Britain to begin a call to alleviate their suffering. By rebelling, according to Matthews, slaves "led the abolitionists to focus their attacks on the most significant dimension of plantation society–the draconian penal codes of the various island legislations" (p. 134).

Interestingly, Matthews contends that the continuation of revolts in the Caribbean forced a more radical abolitionist discourse to develop, because the slave rebellions provided some of the most useful evidence to support immediate emancipation. Wilberforce himself exemplified the move from a conservative gradualist approach employed in previous decades to a more radical or "progressive" immediatist platform (to borrow a term from the American anti-slavery movement). Led by Wilberforce, the abolitionists began to emphasize the *threat* of slave revolts and the potential for carnage on the islands–mostly in the form of dead white men–to counter pro-slavery arguments. According to Matthews, the rebellious slaves, who would increase their activities at key moments in the anti-slavery era (such as after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade), provided the more progressive abolitionists with a key argument: full emancipation would avoid further bloodshed, whereas gradual emancipation might actually increase it.

Overall, Gelien Matthews presents an interesting account of the influence of slaves on British abolitionist discourse in the early nineteenth century. At the same time, the work is dry and social-scientific in its writing style, although the subtle and sophisticated analysis provides a fresh perspective on well-worn material. Matthews's sharp analytical eye is evident in many passages, particularly in her analysis of the legitimacy of Wilberforce's "humanitarian conscience." It is in such discussions that Matthews avoids the temptation to simplify the abolitionist cause as a case of good vs. evil, or vilify those who were not fully supportive of immediate emancipation of Caribbean slaves. The essence of *Caribbean Slave Revolts* is its humanizing of the abolition movement, placing its chief actors–the "saints" and slaves–in the context of their time. Matthews, as the recent movie *Amazing Grace* does in a less than scholarly manner, reminds us that politics can significantly hinder the efforts of humanitarians, in both the nineteenth century and the present, and that sometimes compromises must be made. *Caribbean Slave Revolts* may not be suitable for undergraduate classes, but instead would work better as part of a seminar or reading-intensive graduate level course on slavery, emancipation, and/or the Atlantic World. Matthews succeeds in making the connection between the actions from below–those marginalized peoples at ground level–and policy-makers several thousand miles across the Atlantic in London. A classic example of social history, Matthews's extensive use of textual analysis of abolitionist tracts gives a voice to the slaves who left little in the form of written records. It could be used as a fine example of historical detective work, because she manages to find the voices of the oppressed in the documents of the oppressors.

Note

[1]. Two examples, as highlighted by Matthews in her introduction, are Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964); and Michael Craton, "Emancipation from Below? The Role of the British West Indian Slaves in the Emancipation Movement, 1816-1834," in *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After*, ed. Jack Hayward (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1985).

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