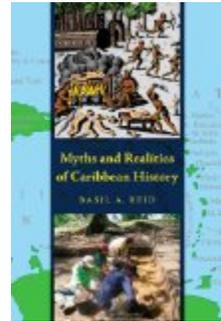


Basil A. Reid. *Myths and Realities of Caribbean History*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009. xiv + 154 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5534-0.

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Published on H-LatAm (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



Misconceptions since 1492: Uncovering the Indigenous Caribbean Past (and Present)

The “New World” colonial imagination has deeply entrenched itself in history to the detriment of indigenous peoples. Postcolonial studies, particularly Caribbean and Latin American scholarship, have sought to combat the all-too-prevalent Eurocentric notions that indigenous peoples lacked civilization, culture, and sophisticated societies. Alongside this scholarship is Basil A. Reid’s *Myths and Realities of Caribbean History*. Reid writes: “Clearly, the early indigenes of the Caribbean were not passive, timeless recipients of external European colonization but created their own histories, reflected in their dynamic social, economic, and political lifeways. We need to create them with the same active intelligence and decision-making ability with which we credit ourselves” (pp. 9-10).

In his compact work of 158 pages, including index, Reid debunks eleven myths of Caribbean history using primarily archeological evidence. In his drive to demythologize popular historical myths, Reid uses “the most current evidence to determine facts from myth” (p. xiv), even going so far as to cite the most updated findings from personal correspondence with leading scholars conducting research in the region. Tackling some of the most pervasive and obscure Caribbean myths, using a wide range of sources, and presenting findings in a manageable format, Reid is quite successful in his endeavor. The book is academic in nature but accessible to a larger audience. Reid is careful to define words that could be considered academic jargon (even providing a glossary of definitions), and the work is aided by a number of ex-

cellent maps and illustrations.

Reid’s book is divided into eleven popular myths starting first with the belief that Caribbean history has its origins in the year 1492 with the arrival of Christopher Columbus. Examining the period prior to Columbus’s voyage, Reid draws on well-established oral history and archeological evidence of indigenous peoples to uncover a record of their complex activities. The next chapter, the most detailed in the book, is devoted to the myth that the Arawaks and Caribs were the two major groups in the precolonial Caribbean, when in fact archeologists have identified the presence of multiple cultural groups in the region prior to 1492, including Casimiroid, Ortoioroid, Saladoid, Barrancoid, Troumassan Troumassoid, Suazan Troumassoid, and Ostionoid peoples. The third case debunks the common belief that Columbus encountered Arawaks upon his arrival in the Greater Antilles and Bahamas. Linguistic and archaeological data suggest that the Amerindian group archeologists call Taino, for lack of a better alternative, were not at all associated with the South American indigenous group today called Arawak. In the next chapter, building on the third myth, Reid debunks the idea that the indigenous people Columbus encountered had in fact migrated from South America, when in actuality, this group evolved indigenously within the region.

The fifth myth again examines the use of the term “Arawak” as it relates to Caribbean history and tackles the assumption that they were the first pottery makers

and agriculturalists in the region. As in other chapters, Reid draws out the mounting evidence that suggests that the Ortoiroids and Casimiroids can claim this accomplishment. The sixth myth is centered on the Ciboney who purportedly lived in western Cuba at the time of Spanish contact. However, Reid problematizes the actual existence of this group, more appropriately called by scholars Guanahatebeys. The following myth is aptly devoted to one of the great abuses of Caribbean history concerning the supposed cannibalistic practices of the Island-Caribs. Reid points out that there is no archeological data or first-hand European accounts to support such claims. In the next myth, Reid suggests that Amerindian people, rather than being limited to one northward migration route originating in South America, may have in fact also traveled directly from South America to the northern Lesser Antilles and Puerto Rico as suggested by archeological evidence and computer simulations. Turning to the Columbian Exchange, for the ninth case, he argues that syphilis was already present in the New World upon Spanish contact and that the Spanish did not introduce the sexually transmitted disease into the Caribbean. Much of what we know about Columbus's first voyage to the Americas is from his own diary. Yet as the tenth myth points out, the version cited today as the original was actually a third-hand account written by Bartolome de las Casas, and its copy had disappeared by 1545. As Reid notes, this historical account "should not be uncritically accepted and utilized" (p.120).

The final myth is the culmination of all eleven myths and what I argue is the overarching message of the book. It calls into question the assertion that the Spanish brought "civilization" to native societies in the Caribbean. As Reid points out in this chapter, the Caribbean region prior to Columbus was home to complex native communities, governed by hereditary chiefs who traded goods throughout the area and administered the construction of architectural monuments.

When a work covers such breadth of weighty topics, inevitably and understandably something will be left out.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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Citation: Amy E. Potter. Review of Reid, Basil A., *Myths and Realities of Caribbean History*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

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While Reid's work is a historical account using primarily archeological evidence to right the wrongs of precolonial and colonial indigenous Caribbean history, he does neglect one of the greatest Caribbean myths of all, that through European disease and forced labor in the years following contact, Caribbean indigenous peoples went extinct. The edited volume by Maximilian C. Forte *Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean* (2006) highlights surviving indigenous cultural practices and calls into question the reliability of the Spanish colonial census. As Peter Hulme writes, as quoted by Reid, "one debilitating consequence of the way in which the native Caribbean has been locked into an 'ethnographic present' of 1492, divorced from five-hundred years of turbulent history, has been that the present native population has usually been ignored: some seemingly authoritative accounts of the region even appear written in ignorance of the very existence of such a population" (p. 2).

It is in these works that we are able to see a modern indigenous Caribbean present, for which Reid's book quite nicely lays the groundwork and historical context. In addition, I also caution Reid to be more specific when identifying locations in his book. The generic phrase "Northern Caribbean" (see for example page 49) can have unintended and multiple meanings depending on the background of the reader.

The importance of righting some of the wrongs of indigenous Caribbean history and its overall accessibility to a wide audience, within which these myths are often perpetuated, are truly the work's shining accomplishments. I would hope to see Reid's work both on the shelf of my favorite bookstore in the heart of bustling St. Johns, Antigua, accessible both to Caribbean peoples and tourist patrons, and as required reading on the syllabus of any Caribbean undergraduate college course.

Note

[1]. Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797* (London: Routledge, 1993), 214 (emphasis added).



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