H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Natalie A. Zacek. *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670-1776.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 304 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19044-2.

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Published on H-Atlantic (January, 2013)
Commissioned by W. Douglas Catterall

Leeward Leanings

Despite being such small places, off the track of major trade winds and often ignored by both contemporary empire builders and modern historians, the British Leeward Islands reveal much about the development of white settler societies in the colonial Caribbean, argues Natalie A. Zacek in *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands.* In her apt telling of the Leeward Islands story, she also reveals much about the shifting winds of historical interpretation. For years after their initial settlement, the four islands at the heart of Zacek's narrative shared little except their proximity to each other, but they were consolidated into one federated colony in 1670. "Literally on the margins of [the Atlantic] world," Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, and St. Kitts fought as much with each other over all manner of jurisdictional and commercial issues as they did with rival islands of other empires (p. 15). Until nearly the end of the seventeenth century, Leeward Islanders also quarreled as much neighbor to neighbor as they did with the goals of policymakers in England. And their social and economic success as British outposts looked dim for quite a while.

But many of the problems that sparked these quarrels and stymied economic success, argues Zacek, were strikingly similar to those that vexed people settling in early New England, the Chesapeake, or elsewhere in the British Empire. Everywhere in the "new world," settlers contended with outsiders who made the creation of an identifiably English settlement more complicated; everywhere, colonists had to regulate sexual and marital relationships in the face of uneven sex and race populations; everywhere, colonists negotiated their loyalties to British imperial authority and also attended to particular needs of local communities; and everywhere, colonists brought English cultural expectations and practices even as they also built slave societies in remote places. A leitmotif running through Zacek's study insists that what island colonists faced was, in many different facets, experienced in many British settler societies elsewhere.

There were, Zacek is careful to show, a few things that set Leeward Islanders apart from British settlers on the North American mainland or on larger Caribbean islands. Leeward residents experienced more frequent and more intense natural disasters than many other British places; they were more frequently threatened by foreign invasion; their rapidly growing black majorities produced persistent intense fears of slave revolts; and it took longer on the islands to forge acceptable balances of power between island authorities and English imperial rulers. However, Zacek would have us understand that these distinctions from certain other British colonies, and in particular, from the imperial hub, were not the most important defining qualities of Leeward Island development. Far more important were dominant settlers' fundamental goals and practical efforts to establish Englishness on the islands. If Leeward inhabitants bore the trappings of "island societies" that kept receiving waves of ethnic and religious peoples who were resistant to absorption, slaves who continued to evoke planters' fears, and experienced, at least on Nevis, an increasing gap between sugar planters with many slaves and those who "remained trapped in a cycle" of owning few slaves and thus failing to prosper despite their ambition, Leeward Islanders' striving to achieve stability, adapt English cultural attributes and law, and create the basis of an English political culture have too long been ignored (p. 60).

By shifting historians' emphasis from violence and exploitation (without ignoring it throughout her study) and emphasizing the nature and degree of becoming more (or remaining strongly) English, Zacek argues that the net achievements of Leeward Islanders were significant even in the face of numerous challenges to order and prosperity. For many years, the four islands remained underdeveloped, especially in comparison with Barbados or the surrounding Spanish and French islands. But in

the forty or so years after 1670, when the Board of Trade recognized the Leewards as a separate federated colony, a length of time comparable to many mainland colonies for a "take off" into recognizable stability, a slow but steady prosperity came into Leeward Islanders' grasp. As in so many other British colonies, they established a staple crop economy, viable local colonial government administrations, and a culture that integrated non-English newcomers somewhat. Planters prospered more after the 1670s, and as a result, more of them tended to stay on St. Kitts or Nevis. The most successful planters cultivated more sugar on larger estates and imported more slaves by the 1680s, while middling commercial farmers (especially on Nevis) failed when they could not acquire slaves or sufficient land to expand.

In this overall portrait of relative accommodation to challenges of island living, Zacek also draws some interesting contrasts among the four islands. For example, although Antigua remained a relatively open and fluid planting society into the early 1700s, with a large middling population, St. Kitts and Montserrat were ravaged by foreigners' attacks and as a consequence, developed more unevenly, while Nevis became increasingly hardened into a society with a few prosperous planters at the top and an overwhelmingly black population. Yet somehow–this study is not clear how–St. Kitts overcame its early vulnerabilities. By the late 1700s, that island surpassed Jamaica and Barbados in the quality and quantity of sugar it produced and had become the richest colony in the British Empire.

Prosperity in the eighteenth century came at a steep cost; by the mid-1700s, the Leeward Islands had overwhelmingly black majorities, and whites lived in constant vulnerability of slave uprisings. The everyday violence of slavery, punctuated by a great deal of absconding and building maroon enclaves away from plantations, threatened the efforts at becoming British on every island. Yet Zacek does not see this as a challenge to her overall argument. Along with a number of other recent scholars, Zacek acknowledges both slave resistance to their condition and the raw brutalities of masters, as well as increasingly harsh legal codes to punish slaves, but her more central objective is to shift our perspective from planters' confidence in their superiority to their "overriding sense of themselves" as vulnerable and "embattled," living in fear and heightened vigilance (p. 35). In similar fashion, fears about their vulnerability, rather than bravado about their freedom to act however they chose, plagued Leeward planters when their small islands faced natural disasters or raids by foreign imperial powers.

In making this argument, Zacek very self-consciously takes aim against long-standing interpretations that placed Caribbean toeholds "beyond the line" of regulated commerce or polite society. Against such studies as Richard Dunn's 1972 enduring classic interpretation of the first century of British West Indies development, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713*, Zacek denies that the Leeward Islands were ungovernable, perpetually violent, social failures ensnared in their own creole degeneracy. Zacek argues that white Leeward inhabitants did not lose their Englishness as they clawed their way to profits and succumbed to the tropical climate and temptations to behave badly a long way from home. Rather, "white inhabitants displayed a strong sense of identification with the mother country" and made herculean efforts to implement "both metropolitan and local law and ideals of polite public and private behavior" (p. 3). Moreover, a degree of stability, even a measure of prosperity for a few at the top, eventually emerged. Allowing for differences among the Leewards, together they overcame marginality and "then with increasing speed, developed their sugar industries" from the 1670s to 1770s (p. 64). Ethnic and religious differences were the basis for some of the greatest contention on the islands in the early years, but like many other British colonies in the Caribbean and on the mainland, "these miniature societies succeeded in integrating" many alien people like "the far more intensively studied mid-Atlantic colonies" (p. 67). And in another familiar pattern, islanders' need for labor led to large-scale importation of indentured servants during the same period that servitude peaked in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other mainland colonies; but to separate this pattern from the typical view of Virginia, Zacek finds that these primarily Irish Catholic servants in the Leewards came to be seen "less as a sturdy yeomanry that might serve to defend the islands from foreign attack or slave revolt than as a turbulent proletariat" (p. 79). As Zacek carefully points out, a few Irish immigrants were able to overcome the fear and loathing of their ethnicity and religion to become stalwart defenders of the British culture and law in the Leewards; but they were a small number of Irish Catholics present on the islands, and the great majority of this immigrant population failed to own land and slaves. The Scots who came to the Leewards generally fared better than the Irish; island planters tagged the former as more prone to temperance and frugality, more likely to bring credit to the islands and build valuable patronage networks, and often willing to become a Protestant cultural buffer against Catholics. As elsewhere in the British Empire, the religion and eth-

nicity of Irish and Scottish immigrants–including the social and ideological differences between them–became valuable windows onto the class and status differences emerging in the midst of sugar planting and slave trading prosperity.

But as Zacek provides us with a number of gazings through this window, her revisionist picture of whites in the Caribbean demonstrates a variety of distinctions within and among ethnic and religious populations, distinctions that could become relatively inconsequential in cases of economic success and even eradicated with the willingness to Anglicize. Minority populations of Quakers, Huguenots, and to a lesser extent Jews, she argues (again, drawing parallels with other British American colonies), became socially integrated to a great extent because of their ability and willingness to adopt the highest value in island culture: their "Britishness." As with nature, foreigners, and ethnicity, Leeward Islanders improvised, adapted, and accommodated–words appearing frequently in this study–to the challenges of island life a long way from the dominant metropolitan cultural standards. The same willingness to adjust cultural mores, argues Zacek in another chapter, arose in aspects of sexual contact and social control of women, which provides another revision of long-existing historical interpretations: that islanders were not simple "creole degenerates" but rather Britons who strove to stabilize island life by permitting gray areas of marital practices, sexual liaisons, and childbearing that would not have been tolerated in England. Across the islands, settlers' fundamental goal of establishing their Englishness did not unravel under the impact of sexual or gendered conflicts. And in her chapter about political culture and governance, Zacek underscores this theme once again: administrative and political life was "inherently unstable and overdetermined the outbreak of vitriolic conflict" from time to time, but islanders overcame the worst of it by "articulat[ing] a strong sense of British identity," as, Zacek argues, so many other settler political cultures did through their adaptability (pp. 214, 12).

Following work by other scholars, such as Trevor Burnard, Sarah Pearsall, Barry Higman, and Larry Gragg, this is a book centered on the emergence of a British white creole elite on the Leewards that was willing and able "to uphold metropolitan social, political, and cultural ideals" (p. 264). Much of Zacek's argument rests on her formidable skills at carefully mining a source base that would frustrate many historians, for it often reveals only a few pointed stories of good fortune, or a glimpse here and there of persecution or criminality, or a snapshot of the islands at a moment in time. She makes the most of a difficult cluster of sources from far-flung archives, and the result is a study that fits more within the analytical rubrics of cultural history than of social and economic history.

In establishing that the Leewards "should not be dismissed simply as social failures," Zacek has achieved much (p. 265). There are dimensions, however, that are missing. The British imperial metropole is all but absent in sections that address the emergence of governing elites on the islands. Zacek does not examine planters and slaves together or study the daily work and material lives of island people; or spend much time with inter-imperial connections between the Leeward Islands and Africa or other Caribbean places, such as the nearby Spanish Main or Puerto Rico. As a result, readers may lament the absence of dimensions about slave trading; labor organization; planters' networks of business relations; and the mechanics of how fortunes were built in the economy of sugar by planters who acted, more often than not, as businessmen. Islanders may not have been "beyond the line," as so many histories of the Caribbean maintain, but it is not always clear in this study how close they were to it. Zacek insists on a high degree of persistent Englishness being established on these remote islands, and yet they faced many persistent and deep-going challenges to sustaining that Englishness; just how creolized, or muted, that Englishness became is never directly addressed in this study.

Some readers may conclude that there is a teleology of "becoming English" or even simply sustaining an English identity over time that ought to be more nuanced. Nevertheless, this study will sit on our shelves alongside other thought-provoking recent scholarship that establishes certain roughly similar patterns of development that the Leeward Islands shared with many other British colonies before the 1770s and asks us to consider closely the significance of islanders' experiments as "Englishmen overseas."

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Citation: Cathy Matson. Review of Zacek, Natalie A., *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670-1776.* H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

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