Throughout its history, Spanish Town, Jamaica, a small town nestled in the center of St. Catherine’s Parish, has been myriad things. For over five hundred years, it served as an urban center for Jamaican trade and business. Spanish priests and missionaries used the town as a religious center up until the island became an English possession. Not long after the island changed hands, the English made Spanish Town the island’s capital, as well as the political and legal seat of the island. Meanwhile, this small village grew into a complex multicultural town where Spanish, English, Africans, Jews, and Scots intermingled to create a uniquely “Jamaican” culture. Although modern day Spanish Town has long since fallen from its original glory, it still maintains some importance by housing the Jamaican Archives and Public Record Office. In his book, Gone is the Ancient Glory: Spanish Town, Jamaica 1534-2000, James Robertson presents a succinct and interesting history of this town.

Taking a strict chronological approach, Robertson makes his way through Spanish Town’s intricate past in the chapters that follow. Although approaches like these can be restrictive, in this case it works, allowing the reader to compartmentalize much of Spanish Town’s history. Yet, at the same time, the pockets of time outlined by Robertson’s chapter divisions put that history in a wider context. Chapter 1 spans Jamaica’s history under Spanish rule, while chapter 2 examines the difficult transition from Spanish to English rule from 1655 to 1692. These two chapters are perhaps the most interesting in the book, as this is a much neglected era in the island’s history. Furthermore, Robertson closes each of these chapters with a reflective section examining the legacies and survivals of the Spanish and transition eras in present-day Spanish Town. In chapters 3 and 4, Robertson examines the urban growth of the town, competition with Kingston over prominence of the colonial government. It is in these chapters that Robertson clearly defines his study as an urban history of a Caribbean capital.

Chapter 5 is perhaps the strongest chapter in the entire book, as it places Spanish Town in the most studied era of Jamaican history: 1780-1838. In his examination of this peak period of Jamaica’s influence, economy, and historiography, Robertson offers a fresh point of view by examining it purely from the perspective of Spanish Town. Yet, this chapter is not just an examination of slavery and emancipation. While the chapter does touch upon these themes in some detail, it is also a discussion of Spanish Town’s experiences in dealing with emigrants from Saint-Domingue during the Haitian Revolution, French and Spanish threats to the island’s security, and the arrival and influence of evangelical missionaries. Furthermore, as Robertson explains, the town continued to grow as a major urban center of the island.

In chapter 6, Robertson discusses the post-Emancipation era in Jamaica. Again, taking this period purely from the perspective of one small town, he effectively analyzes a period where Jamaican freedmen became accustomed to their newfound freedom and citizenship, Jamaican planters struggled to survive in a wage-labor system, and Spanish Town itself struggled to maintain its place of power. As Abolition struck a blow to the Jamaican economy as a whole, the post-Emancipation economy took its toll on the city, as public and governmental buildings began to suffer and deteriorate. By the close of chapter 7, Spanish Town lost the competition with Kingston, as well as its place as the island’s capital. Consequently, the deterioration that began in chapter 6 intensified. Robertson’s assessment
of Spanish Town’s decline continues throughout the remaining chapters, as more and more of the city’s private and public sectors move to Kingston. Yet, as Robertson points out, the city remained an important social hub and residence for the surrounding agricultural community. In his epilogue, Robertson offers an optimistic discussion on the present and future town. While the ancient glory of an old Jamaican capital may be gone, Robertson cautions readers not to write Spanish Town off just yet.

While readers may expect this book to be purely a historical study of a Jamaican town, Robertson’s study is so much more. *Gone is the Ancient Glory* is a history of its people, its buildings, its streets, as well as its past. It is an urban history that adds texture and depth to an already vast historiography of the island. Robertson adds insight to that urban landscape he illustrates not only by presenting an anthropological study of the town’s historical landmarks and attractions, but also a complex sociocultural study of the town’s inhabitants. While today’s visitor’s may see the last vestiges of a colonial government in fallen buildings and an old rusty iron bridge, Robertson forces the reader to see the town for what it once was.

Furthermore, Robertson’s extensive research shows on every page of his book. Robertson collected a wealth of information for this project, visiting twenty libraries in four different countries. In addition, the majority of the photos in the book are Robertson’s own. I myself witnessed his careful investigation of documents in the Jamaican Archives and the West India Collection at the University of the West Indies-Mona Campus as he was putting the finishing touches on this manuscript just before its publication. As a result, *Gone is the Ancient Glory* sets a benchmark for future urban studies of its kind.

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