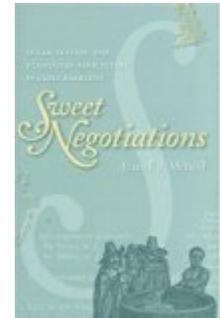




Russell Menard. *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2006. xvii + 181 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2540-0.



Reviewed by Pamella Richardson

Published on H-Caribbean (April, 2007)

Sugar, I would argue, is a commodity with totemic significance for the study of a whole cavalcade of important processes, from capitalism and colonialism, to identity and linguistics. Indeed, over the past few decades, sugar has provided the focus for a variety of studies concerning the emergence of modernity and industrialization, and more critically, the plundering of continents and the horror of the transatlantic slave trade.[1] Sugar has circulated both materially and discursively in the unfolding of these events and in the historical debates and discussions that have followed. In particular, sugar has been positioned as a central figure in the histories of plantation America and slavery. *Sweet Negotiations* is an economic and social history as well as a historical geography of Barbados in the seventeenth century. Menard's analysis focuses on what happened in relation to sugar and when; on chronology and sequence, through which he reconfigures our understanding of how a particular set of circumstances--those commonly referred to as the "sugar revolution"--unfolded.

Russell Menard is Professor of History at the University of Minnesota, eminent in the field of colonial American economic and social history. Menard's historical method and expertise in the Southern colonies of North America are resonant throughout this book. Whereas some historical studies in this field give us interpretive analyses that reify macro-scale processes with little account of the multiplicity and situatedness of historical events, Menard avoids this totalizing effect by piecing together the details of a very specific story. This story is firmly located in Barbados in the 1630s and 1640s. Emerging from detailed historical enquiry, Menard's main objective is to reconsider the well-entrenched notion of the sugar revolution and, in light of the archival evidence he cites, to convince us that the notion is misguided and misleading. B.W. Higman has described the sugar revolution as "a concatenation of events located in the seventeenth-century Caribbean with far-reaching ramifications for the Atlantic world" and summarized this in terms of six central elements: "a shift from diversified agriculture to sugar monoculture, from production on small farms to large plantations, from free to slave labour,

from sparse to dense settlement, from white to black populations, and from low to high value per capita output." [2] The main argument of *Sweet Negotiations* can be summarized in Menard's own words: "I do not contend that Barbados was not changed profoundly in the middle decades of the seventeenth century; however, I contend that it is an error to attribute those changes solely and entirely to sugar, as Barbados was already on its way to becoming a plantation colony and a slave society in response to the decision of planters who grew tobacco, indigo, and cotton before sugar emerged as the dominant crop of the island" (p. 4). Menard's overarching conclusion is that the so-called sugar revolution should more properly be considered as a "boom." Moreover, *Sweet Negotiations* reconfigures the conventional understanding of the relationship between sugar, slavery, and plantation.

I found *Sweet Negotiations* to be very well structured in terms of the organization of chapters and formulation of the argument. Chapter 1 begins with a review of the economy and demography of Barbados in the 1630s, with the aim of assessing the productivity of the colony in the years leading up to the sugar revolution of the 1640s. Menard uses a variety of secondary sources, some historical publications including Richard Lignon's well-known *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1647) as well as Deed Books from the Barbados National Archives, to reconstruct the price of different crops, land holdings, and the prevalence of commodities used as currency in island exchanges. Through this analysis, Menard offers a fresh insight into the specific changes in Barbadian crop production and economic exchange throughout the 1640s. Menard charts the fluctuations in tobacco and cotton production and prices in the 1630s, showing how different crops came into favor as circumstances changed. He found that sugar was first used as a means of payment in Barbados in 1644 and came to rival tobacco by 1647, becoming the main source of payment by 1648. By 1649, sugar

was the dominant export of the island (p. 17) and by 1660, sugar occupied roughly 60 percent of the island's land and accounted for about 90 percent of total exports (p. 18). Menard highlights the unrecognized occurrence of a cotton boom in Barbados in the 1630s, suggesting that land consolidation was taking place at this time in anticipation of the cotton fortunes (p. 23). The identification of land consolidation in relation to a cotton boom is interesting because it is often assumed that consolidation of land holdings followed the expansion of sugar production, and was somehow a consequence of the physical requirements of this new crop. Indeed, the development of plantations is a key aspect of how the sugar revolution had been characterized. Menard refutes this argument, by showing that large plantations were beginning to emerge with the success of cotton in the 1630s. The second key point of this chapter is that Barbados was not in a state of depression before the introduction of sugar cane, but rather, was already on the way to prosperity. In sum, Menard argues that sugar in the 1640s intensified or accelerated a process that was already underway.

Having reinterpreted the relationship between sugar cane and plantation, chapter 2 goes on to question the orthodox understanding of the relationship between sugar and slavery. Through reference to Richard Dunn and Hilary Beckles' extensive research into this area as well as a rigorous review of Deed Books, Menard reverses the long-held notion that slavery followed the introduction of sugar cane production. Though it is clear that slave labor was employed in Barbados before sugar cane became a significant crop, it remains the case that there was an enormous increase in slavery following the sugar boom. I am not sure why Menard is so keen to hammer home the point that enslaved labor preceded sugar, unless of course this point is set against a long-outdated and disingenuous colonial argument claiming that sugar created the need for slavery. More interesting, I think, is the section in which

Menard examines the connection between seventeenth-century slave labor and indentured labor. Here, the notion that slaves replaced servants is challenged. Menard uses the Deed Books to demonstrate that this was not strictly the case; rather, the number of servants and slaves both increased throughout the 1640s but the pace of growth of African slaves increased relative to the growth in white labor (p. 43). This chapter offers an illuminating review of the different kinds and processes of indentureship, an issue that is often neglected in studies of this period. The chapter also charts the demographic changes of the 1640s and points to the fluctuations in white immigration and emigration, and the implications of the rapid Africanization of the population as enslaved labor increased. Menard argues that the details of these demographic changes were highly contingent and particular to Barbados and suggests that rather than trying to identify an America-wide story of the development of slavery, this set of transitions should be considered as a unique Barbadian trajectory.

In chapter 3, Menard investigates the sources of capital which enabled the sugar boom to take place. The establishment of large sugar plantations and the entire trade complex required huge sums of funding—where did this capital come from? Menard argues for the importance of London merchants and the (protective) Navigation Act of 1651. The credit environment was important too. Early Barbados, like other English colonies, legislated a creditor-friendly environment wherein the right of creditors to claim insolvent properties as debt repayment was upheld. Creditors were therefore more likely to offer loans to prospective planters of the 1630s-1640s. However, this situation reversed as planters gained the upper hand in Parliament, and so Barbados became more and more secure for debtors and thus more favorable to the established planters. Menard also argues that counter to popular myth, the Dutch did not provide capital to the sugar planters of Barbados, finding no evidence to

support such a claim. Further, the activities of London merchants in the seventeenth century prompts a call for the re-evaluation of the role of the English in the slave trade at large, particularly with reference to the Royal Africa Company. Menard contends that the role of English merchants in the slave trade has traditionally been downplayed in relation to the role of the Dutch (p. 60). Finally, this chapter shows that there were still small planters left in Barbados after the so-called revolution. However, the big planters dominated in terms of land occupation, ownership of capital, and positions in government and the militia.

Chapter 4 discusses the last decades of the seventeenth century, countering the argument that sugar production declined in the eighteenth century. Complementing his archival sources with a wide range of secondary studies, Menard suggests that planters were producing increasing amounts of clayed sugar (in which muscavado was set in a sugar mould and smeared with moist clay, which purified and whitened the sugar through a series of percolations). Clayed sugar gained a higher price and reduced volume, thus reducing relative freight costs. Clayed sugar also yielded more molasses which could be made into rum. Hence, Menard argues that sugar planters of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were increasing productivity and not as "hidebound and conservative" (p. 81) as is often portrayed. He argues that "improvement, by reducing the volume of sugar exported, created the illusion of an industry in trouble, when in fact the total value of the product of the Barbadian industry rose impressively over the eighteenth century" (p. 90). This chapter is useful for those interested in technological change and innovation, and the interplay between production, consumption, and price (p. 78).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the influential role of Barbados in the colonial world and the wider significance of the Barbadian sugar boom. Chap-

ter 5 identifies four key institutions that developed in the context of the Barbadian sugar boom and subsequently became the hallmarks of pre-emancipation British colonies. Menard argues that if anything at all can be said about revolution and sugar, we can say that Barbados revolutionized the sugar industry. Menard highlights the development of the integrated plantation, gang labor, the slave economy, and the commission system as gradual reorganizations that originated in Barbados over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These four key institutions are understood as attempts to increase efficiency and productivity in response to falls in price. Chapter 6 discusses how these four ways of organizing production migrated along various routes, with various peoples, to inform colonial life in North America, the Caribbean and far beyond. Along with the institutions explained in chapter 5, Menard discusses how the Barbados Slave Code of 1661 became the cornerstone of legislation in slave societies across (Anglophone) colonial America. The early development of a dense population of enslaved peoples in Barbados and the ways in which the white colonists guarded themselves against the social instability and unrest that inevitably resulted, had wide implications for the treatment of slaves in other places. Indeed, Menard argues, this early legislation signals the development of a racial ideology, referred to as "an ideology of whiteness" (p. 120), which firmly positioned black enslavement against white superiority as the white planters in power vied to secure their position by inculcating social solidarity along a racial rather than class-based axis. The book therefore highlights the island's importance, with events of the seventeenth century having implications reaching far beyond the 166 square miles of Barbados. This, I would argue, is what makes this book a key reading for students of colonial America.

I found the pictures illustrating sugar technologies to be very helpful, together with the various archival maps. I also appreciated the compre-

hensive appendix containing source data, which will no doubt be of use to students. The detail and notes provided regarding sources, and the Menard's clear expression of uncertainty (where appropriate), is also commendable. Although I would argue that the argument is well articulated and clearly presented, I did find the chapters to be a little repetitive when read in one sitting. However, there are advantages for those wishing to dip into single chapters. I would especially recommend this book to students and scholars of Caribbean, American, and transatlantic history.

Menard pays close attention to the importance of location and environment, attending to the geographical specificity of Barbados without being deterministic. However, my main concern in reading this book was the lack of reference to the wider significance or implication of probing the so-called sugar revolution. Although it is interesting to consider the chronology of events that took place in the seventeenth century, throughout reading this book I was constantly asking myself—what difference does this make to our understanding of the impact of these events? What can reconceptualizing the "sugar revolution" as a more gradual process teach us? In my opinion, the question of revolution, or rather the question of transition, is important because it has implications for the way we can think about socioeconomic change more broadly. Menard reminds us that transatlantic economies, racial ideologies, and national consumption patterns cannot and do not change overnight. Rather, transformations of social life are contingent upon very specific spatio-temporal circumstances and the material and political connections that emerge therein.

Notes

[1]. For examples, see Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (London: Cape, 1973); Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England and New York:

Penguin Books/Viking, 1985); Keith Albert Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623-1775* (Barbados: Caribbean University Press, 1974); and Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[2]. B. W. Higman, "The Sugar Revolution," *The Economic History Review* 53 (2000): 213-236; quotations on 213.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-caribbean>

Citation: Pamela Richardson. Review of Menard, Russell. *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados*. H-Caribbean, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13085>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.