

**Dave St Aubyn Gosse.** *Abolition and Plantation Management in Jamaica: 1807-1838.* Jamaica: University Of West Indies Press, 2012. 248 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-976-640-269-3.



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**Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Dave St Aubyn Gosse's central goal throughout *Abolition and Plantation Management* is to assign responsibility for the economic decline of Jamaican sugar plantations in the early nineteenth century. For Gosse, blame is certainly spread across many involved parties (absentee owners, colonial government), but the lion's share belonged to residential managers and was a direct result of their racist and sexist attitudes as well as their shortsightedness and ignorance of global economic trends.

*Abolition and Plantation Management* is primarily an economic history, and the author utilizes several case studies and relies on the acquisition of statistical data and quantitative presentation of that data in the form of several tables through the monograph. He chooses Jamaica as the focus of the study because it was the largest British West Indian sugar colony and nearly half of all the enslaved Africans in the West Indies resided on Jamaica. He explains that his sources were a "random" sampling, as opposed to being representative, because he selected plantations

based on the availability of crop reports and correspondence between managers. This random sampling supports his arguments well, and however random the selection process was, Gosse's presentation of data reflects extensive archival research as he engaged the materials of several plantations, housed in both Jamaica and the United Kingdom, and was able to extract copious amount of information from which to construct several interesting arguments.

Gosse explains that the combined actions of the planters in their failure to diversify operations in the midst of changing global demand for goods as well as their refusal to treat their slaves more humanely, especially after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, led to the rapid decline of plantation productivity and therefore diminished the plantations' economic sustainability. He illustrates how the planters could not see past racist and sexist assumptions about Africans, and how they placed blame for the decline squarely on the backs of the Africans, denying any need for reform on the part of man-

agement. Gosse argues that, after 1807, the planters either did not understand or refused to acknowledge the rising difficulty of replenishing their labor force with new and healthy Africans. This was indicated by their resistance to initiate and follow ameliorative reforms that called for more humane treatment of the enslaved Africans. The planters continued as though there would always be a plentiful supply of new plantation labor.

In chapter 1, Gosse explains that prior to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, planters agreed to amelioration in order to head off rumors of the impending abolition. He shows, however, that these agreements were most often no more than empty promises, as they were rarely put into practice. He offers this argument in direct challenge to historians who have claimed there was a measure of success in ameliorative reforms, based on the number of legislative documents historians have come across. The relative number of laws passed, Gosse argues, are meaningless in investigating the on-the-ground operations of the plantation when the laws were clearly never actually followed. He continues in chapter 2 to explain that one of the central problems with plantation management was its unwieldiness and confusing hierarchy. Since many absentee owners living in Britain were not the original owners but rather had inherited the plantations, many of them had never even been to the islands and had no concept of the realities of the West Indian plantations. They relied on residential managers, attorneys, overseers, and clerks living in Jamaica to report back and advise them, with their focus always on the bottom line and profitability and having little concern for anything else. This disconnect, along with a confusing hierarchy and an unclear assignment of responsibility, led to a game of pointing fingers and deflecting blame as profitability began to decline.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the most informative and interesting parts of the book because Gosse

interrogates the role of racist and sexist stereotypes in the actions of plantation management. Chapter 4 examines the various types of labor available to managers and their reluctance to pay Africans for task labor and their oversight of the entrepreneurial spirit of the Africans. He argues this was to the detriment of the plantations because racist assumptions about Africans as lazy or unable to contribute to plantation productivity limited the supply of knowledgeable labor and made it very difficult to diversify their operations into other ventures. Chapter 5 presents a quantitative analysis of health and reproduction with specific focus on managers' beliefs about African women. Gosse shows how they blamed high infant mortality rates on the backwardness of African women, but argues that was unfair to the women, because it was the fault of the plantation that children were not able to bond with their mothers and not afforded adequate nutrition and clothing. Most interesting in his presentation of statistical data is that the weak and sickly were often young Africans, not older slaves, as the management had often tried to argue. Gosse asserts that the trend of sickly youth who should have been the strong, primary workers of the plantation is indicative of poor managerial decisions regarding the health and well-being of the work force.

While these chapters present some interesting information regarding racist and sexist stereotypes and how they played out in plantation management, one would have liked to see Gosse take it even further. With the wealth of information that the correspondence between managers surely provided, it would have been very interesting for Gosse to utilize these sources to analyze how racism and sexism affected everyday life on the plantation. Gosse largely presents acts of racism and sexism as statistics on a table, removing the human element from such acts. There is very little offered from the perspective of the slaves and, at times, the heavy economic and quantitative focus seems as though it is leading the reader to consider the slaves as commodities rather than human

beings. While they were certainly viewed this way from the perspective of the management, it would be a fruitful and important project to use these same sources in a way which revealed more about the struggles for power (amongst management and between management and labor), as well as the resistance and/or accommodation of the slaves themselves to these managerial actions.

In all, this is an economic history of Jamaican plantations that seeks to interrogate the role of management in economic decline. To that end, it is successful and informative. This is not, however, a book for scholars without background in economic and social history, as the presentation of data via statistics and tables can be a bit overwhelming, and the limited use of gender, race, and power as categories of analysis in a study on treatment of West Indian slaves may be difficult for some cultural historians to accept.

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