

**Edward B. Rugemer.** *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. 400 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-98299-4.

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In his exciting new study, *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World*, Edward Rugemer offers a concise, riveting account of the influence of active resistance to forced labor on the evolution of slave law in the British Atlantic. Using Jamaica and South Carolina as his principle locations for comparison, Rugemer discusses the reactive nature of slave law to slave resistance within the British Atlantic from the dawn of forced labor in Barbados through the abolition of slavery throughout the British Atlantic. Through this comparison, Rugemer gives a concise and careful analysis of the evolution of forced labor in the British Atlantic, including analyses of forced indenture, the Native American slave trade, and enslaved Africans.

By carefully considering how all of these systems of forced labor interacted with each other and the politics of slavery and resistance, through a comparative lens, Rugemer reveals the evolution of a race-based slave system in the British Atlantic supported by terror. He then focuses on the divergence of South Carolina from its Caribbean neighbors during the Age of Revolutions, arguing that South Carolina attempted to “domesticate slavery” while the Caribbean turned to an ever more militant system. Throughout this impressive chronology, Rugemer highlights moments of active resistance, revealing that those held in bondage were

not passive participants; rather, they actively participated in the evolution of slavery within the British Atlantic. He argues that these moments are key to our understanding as “rebellions were critical events of profound social crisis that not only laid bare the exercise of power but also generated precious documentation of the actions and ideas of enslaved rebels” (p. 3).

Rugemer relies heavily on the documents produced by rebellions and resistance, basing the majority of his study on his own interpretation of the source material and archival discoveries regarding the rebellions he focuses on. Throughout the work, however, Rugemer touches on concepts that have produced extensive historiographical debate, such as the origins debate, yet he does not actively engage with the historiography. This is perhaps the greatest drawback to this work. The lack of historiographical engagement is likely due to the fact that he is attempting to cover a very large topic in a short work. The size of this work also necessitates that the endnotes remain brief and on point; however, it would have been nice to have a more active engagement with some of these debates and sources within his endnotes. As it is, most of the endnotes are kept to a bare minimum, offering no dialogue regarding different interpretations or debates within the historiography over the core topics he presents, or over differing opinions

on the transcription and interpretation of many of his key documents.

Rugemer begins his analysis by using Barbados as the stage for the development of slave law in the Caribbean, and rightly so, as the Barbados slave codes were directly adopted by both Jamaica and South Carolina. Rugemer traces the evolution of slave and servant laws during the seventeenth century as Barbados wrestled with the distinction between indentured labor and those enslaved for life. Due to active resistance from its white indentured population, legal distinctions had to be made between what it meant to be an indentured servant and enslaved for life. Rugemer shows how the development of a distinction between “Christians” and “Negros” in the slave codes “laid the empirical foundation for racial ideology” (p. 32). He argues that this distinction led to the ideological construction of race, as race served as an exercise of power in the legal system, leading to the development of a slave system based on the enslavement of those who were not “white.”

Rugemer emphasizes the early distinction of being “Christian.” He discusses the growing inadequacy of using this as a distinguishing legal feature with the spread of Christianity among the enslaved population, and the debates on how to deal with this inadequacy, to show the evolution of a race-based society defined by color. Rugemer then traces the transfer of this legal racism to Jamaica and then South Carolina, a transition often instigated by men who had investments in both locations. Rugemer argues that the emergence of powerful colonial assemblies, which were dominated by the interests of the planters, not only allowed for the consolidation of the slave system but also allowed the planters to become the dominant political class in Jamaica and South Carolina, which became the wealthiest Caribbean and North America colonies in the British Atlantic. Rugemer places the impetus for a race-based system on the language of the slave codes, which were written in response to resistance movements, rather than on

preconceived notions of racial superiority. This discussion offers a slightly new angle on the origins debate; however, Rugemer never directly interacts with this debate. Instead, he synthesizes much of the historiography on the topic, interspersing his discussion with his own transcription of key archival sources. This is one of the key areas where the reader would have liked to see Rugemer actively engage with the historiographical debates, even if only in the endnotes. He does not address the discussions stemming from Winthrop Jordan's famous work, which he cites in the endnotes, nor does he mention more recent works, such as Michael Guasco's *Atlantic* study, which also deals extensively with the origins debate.<sup>[1]</sup> Rather, Rugemer lays out his argument in a narrative form and moves on.

From the latter half of chapter 2 up to the discussion of the American Revolution in chapter 5, Rugemer discusses the solidification of slave systems in South Carolina and Jamaica, examining the connections, both politically and within familial networks, between the two locations. Rugemer reveals how those in power in one location often had considerable power in the other. These men transferred slave codes from Barbados to Jamaica and then to South Carolina, at times, copying the codes almost in their entirety, as with the South Carolina Assembly's 1691 adoption of the Jamaica Slave Act of 1684. These politically connected men secured their own financial futures by using their political power to ensure the stability of an economy based on slave labor in both locations. This is a fascinating and excellent discussion of the interconnectedness of the British Atlantic and demonstrates the necessity of an Atlantic perspective if one is to truly appreciate the history of Jamaica or South Carolina. However, an even greater strength of the middle section of the book is the inclusion of West Africa and Native American slave networks in the discussion.

A key strength of this study is Rugemer's ability to take a holistic approach to forced labor and

the evolution of slave law throughout the British Atlantic. Rugemer carefully considers the influence of the Native American slave trade and indigenous resistance on South Carolina's slave system, and the military culture of the Akan states on slave resistance in Jamaica. Rugemer reveals the economic significance of the Native American slave trade to South Carolina and how the abuse of this system led not only to resistance from those enslaved, but also to resistance and war with Native American nations, such as the Yamasee. Rugemer convincingly argues that the Yamasee War, which nearly ended the South Carolina colony, not only brought an end to the Native American slave trade in the colony, virtually annihilating the Coastal Tribes of the region, but it also drastically changed the way South Carolina approached slavery: "Beginning in 1722, the laws of slavery in South Carolina, which had hitherto fostered a vicious brutality, became, in the hands of wary planter-legislators, a set of tools to domesticate the system of racial slavery" (p. 76). While South Carolina reacted to the devastating Yamasee War, and subsequent rebellions such as the Stono Rebellion (1739), by reevaluating its slave system, Jamaica had the opposite reaction.

Rugemer demonstrates that to fully understand slave resistance in Jamaica, one must first understand Akan politics. Rugemer offers the reader a concise overview of the warfare taking place within the Akan states, tracing many of the rebel leaders of Jamaica back to West Africa. He reveals the profound impact the highly skilled military cultures of the Akan states had on the enslaved population of Jamaica and on the development of the resilient Maroon communities on the island, which consistently defied the attempts of the British military to subdue them. Rugemer demonstrates that, rather than reevaluating, as South Carolina did, Jamaica militarized its slave system, using both the British military and Maroon communities, which had gained formal recognition from the colony, to enforce it. Rugemer relies heavily on the historiography of West Africa for his dis-

cussion of Akan politics and military history, synthesizing this information into a brief but informative summary of the events taking place within Africa. He then draws on an impressive array of accounts of the rebellions and efforts to subdue the Maroon communities of Jamaica to connect this synthesis to his analysis of the events taking place in Jamaica and their subsequent effects on Jamaica's militarization.

Chapters 5 through 7 discuss the transformation of slave politics during the Age of Revolutions, focusing on the momentous changes brought about by the Somerset case of 1772 in London and the political and social forces released by the American Revolution. Rugemer demonstrates that the enslaved populations of Jamaica and South Carolina were aware of these momentous changes and the political instability they brought to the slave system. Acting on this knowledge, enslaved Africans organized resistance in both South Carolina and Jamaica, shaping the course of slavery within their respective locations. Rugemer argues that the politics of slavery defined the direction of the two colonies during the American Revolution, leading South Carolina to leave the empire and Jamaica to rely ever more heavily upon it. These reactions defined the future of slavery in the two colonies, allowing the planter class in South Carolina to seize even more power and ensure the continuity of their system for generations, while limiting the power of the planter class in Jamaica, turning them into dependent colonists lacking the power to effectively fight the British abolition movement.

Rugemer does a masterful job of tracing the evolution of slavery in the British Atlantic through his comparative study of Jamaica and South Carolina, covering more than two centuries in seven concise and readable chapters. Any study such as this is prone to leaving something out, and while he does briefly discuss the Haitian Revolution, this reader would have liked to see a more critical analysis of how this seminal moment in Atlantic

slavery shaped South Carolina and Jamaica, especially as the theme of the book is the politics of resistance in the early Atlantic world. Rugemer offers a quick summary of South Carolina and Jamaica's reactions to the arrival of refugees from Haiti, giving a bit more attention to the Revolution's influence on the further militarization of the slave system in Jamaica. However, his discussion of the influence on South Carolina feels a bit rushed and could have benefited from a more detailed discussion. This limited discussion is likely due to the brevity of this work and Rugemer's focus on demonstrating the rise to political power within the United States of the planter class of South Carolina. While the title of this book states the "Early Atlantic World," this is a comparative study within the British Atlantic and, aside from the direct interaction with the Akan states and Yamasee nation, does not have room within its parameters to fully discuss the influence of major events taking place within the Atlantic world outside of the British Atlantic.

Overall, this is an excellent example of what a comparative analysis in the Atlantic world can offer and an important addition to the historiography of slavery in the British Atlantic. Rugemer is able to cover a vast amount of territory while bringing to life the various resistance movements, keeping the reader actively engaged, while demonstrating how the two colonies could begin with the same slave system and emerge in very different positions of power by the nineteenth century through slave laws and the politics of resistance. This is sure to become required reading for graduate students studying slavery or the British Atlantic. Chapters of this book could easily, and should be, incorporated into both undergraduate and graduate courses on a variety of topics related to slavery in the Atlantic world.

#### Note

[1]. Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press, 1968); and Michael Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

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