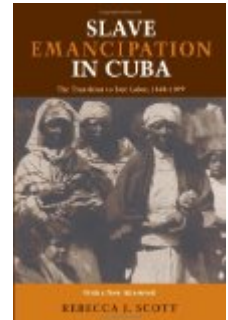


Rebecca J. Scott. *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000. xvi + 319 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8229-5735-5.



Reviewed by James A. Lewis

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Great Scott! It's Back!

Scholars and students alike will welcome the republication in paperback of Rebecca Scott's now classic work on the end of slavery in Cuba. First appearing in 1985, this book was a revision of Scott's 1982 dissertation at Princeton under Stanley Stein. While showing its age in a few minor ways, what *Slave Emancipation* did was to sharpen and revise the type of questions that historians asked about slavery's abolition on the Forever Faithful island. Heavily influenced by the rapidly changing historiography of North American slavery, Scott succeeded admirably.

As can be seen from her title, the most significant point of Scott's work is her exhaustive and sophisticated look at the transitional stages from slavery to freedom. Human bondage in Cuba disintegrated in bits and pieces, not in one dramatic event. In examining the process, Scott looked at one of the puzzles of Cuban history that had to be addressed: sugar producers increased production during this period and continued to need rural labor no matter what was happening to slavery. Moreover, Afro-Cubans already freed or on their

way out of slavery--needed to work to support themselves. The end of Cuban slavery thus came in stages, the speed of its demise determined by both the consumers and suppliers of labor. What might be questioned in Scott's approach were her framing dates of 1860 and 1899. Did a free labor system finally exist in rural Cuba in 1899? Probably not. Did island slavery begin its fall in 1860? Again, probably not.

One of Scott's frustrations stemmed from the type of historical records that she had to deal with. Since managing slave labor was a business, slave owners generated abundant records that allowed Scott to track individuals and groups of individuals over the concluding decades of the nineteenth century. During the various intermediary stages ending slavery, the slaves themselves produced complementary documents by engaging local officials and regulatory boards in questions of proper treatment, freedom eligibility issues, and requests for documents certifying a new social status. With the advent of free labor, however, most of the records disappeared under a book-keeping entry of generic wages paid to unnamed

individuals. The documentary light that explained so much about plantation labor in the 1870s and 1880s grew dim in the 1890s and then disappeared.

As one might expect in such a pioneering work, Professor Scott's book reinforced an historical trend that has found many advocates in recent years: an interest in local and regional history. Cuban slavery varied dramatically according to the plantation, date, type of labor, and region of the country being discussed. Beyond the old distinctions of eastern from western Cuba and urban from rural slavery, *Slave Emancipation* showed that social history must build on a host of sophisticated local studies. The ending stages of slavery near Havana were substantially different than those of the same institution near Sancti Spiritus and in turn significantly distinct from those around Santiago. These studies will eventually emerge and test the assertions of national history against local conditions.

While suggestive, informative, and enormously influential on later studies of Cuban slavery, *Slave Emancipation* left a lot to be done by subsequent scholars, many of whom would be students of Professor Scott. For example, scholars desperately wanted to follow the steps of former slaves after the 1890s. What did they do? Where did they live? Were their economic and social positions significantly changed? Perhaps the growing accessibility of notary archives in Cuba, slowly being digitalized by a team from the University of Florida, will provide new tools to do these type of studies. In the meantime, people interested in the history of Cuba will want to read and reread Professor Scott's magisterial work.

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