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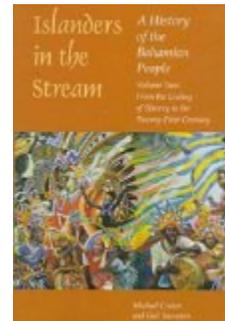


Michael Craton, Gail Saunders. *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People, Volume Two: From the Ending of Slavery to the Twenty-first Century*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1998. xvi + 562 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1926-1.

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History, Historiography and Narrating the Bahamian Nation

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Michael Craton and Gail Saunders conceive *Islanders in the Stream* as an exhaustive assessment of primary sources, “a comprehensive narrative aimed to be the definitive national history of the Bahamas” (Vol. 1, p. xvii). Their ambitious intent is to offer the narrative reference and source index for all future Bahamas scholarship, and in this they have succeeded masterfully. Craton has tilled this ground for over thirty-five years, and Saunders, Director of the Bahamas Department of Archives, is the author of two books on island history. They have striven to produce “an authentic national history” (Vol. 1, p. xvii), one that is simultaneously social and popular in perspective, yet explicitly without grand theoretical claims. They seek “to give recognition to ordinary Bahamians and to tell the story of their long struggle for self-realization against those same elites to whom history has hitherto belonged” (Vol. 1, p. xx).

Favoring a chronological, thematic approach, seeking to produce a “thick narrative” in the Geertzian sense, the authors offer “a text in the traditional meaning of the word rather than in the negatively limiting sense used by the deconstructionists.” They continue, “It is, though,

an artfully fashioned and soundly supported story, not a formal thesis or a set of theses, analytically driven” (Vol. 2, pp. xiii-xiv). Craton and Saunders craft an account that, in their words, “relies almost exclusively on primary sources, honestly chosen and simply deployed, along channels they themselves suggest and determine” (Vol. 2, p. xiv).

There is, however, no avoiding the matter of interpretation in historiography (Geertz, after all, inaugurated the interpretive turn in anthropology), and whether primary texts can in any sense “speak for themselves” or “determine” their own significance remains a critical point of theoretical contention. Readers will not encounter that kind of discussion here, however.

Craton and Saunders move directly into a monumental “traditional” text, proceeding on the assertion it is possible, indeed necessary, to write an objective social history along the lines they propose. As they observe, “Above all, we have sought to enliven and illuminate the narrative with what might be called emblematic testimonies, that is, substantial sections of description or comment that seemed to us to provide authentic viewpoints that go beyond mere subjectivity and shed light where statistics are unavailable, irrelevant, or inad-

equate" (Vol. 2, p. xiv).

Craton and Saunders proceed largely in chronological fashion, while also developing some important thematic concerns, including Afro-Bahamian demography and lifeways; African resistance and emancipation; the Loyalist elite; piracy; the development of urban centers; the police; education; the saga of the Haitian Bahamians; and the twentieth-century political project of forging an independent Bahamian national identity.

Several prevailing themes recur: human adaptation to the demanding Bahamian marine environment; the conditioning role of the sea in Bahamian history; Bahamian marginality in the broader hemispheric and global context; endurance in the face of socioeconomic, political and environmental challenges; persistent Bahamian socioeconomic and racial divisions; the sustained struggle of a subaltern majority for cultural, social and political recognition; and the general vicissitudes of what might be termed the national project.

Volume One comprises three sections, the first and shortest devoted to the Lucayan Arawaks who occupied the islands in the period A.D. 500-1525, based on evidence from archaeological reports, early travel narratives, and contemporary ethnological sources. In keeping with their thematic approach, the authors suggest that "the Lucayan aboriginals were, in every sense, the purest Bahamians. Their achievements and their experiences—including their tragic demise—provide a model, and a moral, for all those who in the subsequent five hundred years have tried to make the Bahamas their home" (Vol. 1, pp. 58). In the authors' view, Lucayan adaptation to the Bahamian environment stood as "an effective, even impressive culture" (Vol. 1, pp. 59), an observation seems well-suited to the purposes of forging a national identity rooted in a deep sense of local history.

The next paragraph, however, calls into question the authors' interpretive strategy. They assert that "in the structure of the Lucayans' beliefs and in their ultimate behavior [resided] a sense of dislocation, anomie, and failure...displayed in the pervading nostalgia for a forsaken world..., in the passive acceptance of whatever fate held in store, and in the wish-fulfilling belief that death would be followed by a return to the paradise lost...Such characteristics made them pliant victims" of the Spanish (Vol. 1., p. 59). Indeed, they continue, "the Lucayans seem a people doomed from the beginning, and thus, despite their many admirable qualities, hardly an absolute ideal for any later Bahamians" (Vol. 1., p. 59).

This remarkably reductive assertion constitutes a wholesale denial of human agency. Is there no other way to read the evidence? The absence of Lucayan voices—a silence enforced, after all, by the power inequities of colonial history and historiography—hardly supports the conclusion that Lucayan "nostalgia" somehow "structured" a people's "passive" paralysis and sense of "failure," somehow automatically producing the fate of the preordained "victim." It hardly means that Lucayan people were incapable of responding in recognizably human ways; it only means that no one transcribed Lucayan perspectives.

Beyond the theoretical question, there is a logical breach in portraying Lucayans as a model for Bahamians on the one hand, while simultaneously extrapolating from their imputed "passivity" and pliant victimhood to their unsuitability as an "absolute ideal" for constructing a unifying sense of national consciousness and identity. The precariousness of this interpretation of Lucayan history undercuts the narrative authority of Section One, making it the least satisfying of Volume One.

Section Two concerns early settlement for the period 1647-1783, drawing primarily on documentary sources well known to scholars of the English-speaking Caribbean (the Calendar of State Papers Colonial, and the governors' correspondence housed in the Public Records Office, London). Craton and Saunders trace the emergence of local elites from the dual influences of piracy and a formative political economy based on chattel slavery. In the authors' view piracy "bears examination as a more formative period in the evolution of the Bahamian national character: one in which a tendency toward opportunistic self-reliance reached its most extreme, even a brutal form but was at the same time lastingly imprinted" (Vol. 1, p. 104).

Some caution seems warranted here, however. To reify "national character" by elevating roguishness to a prevailing cultural feature reduces the apparent diversity of the population to a caricature that may obscure at least as much as it reveals. The anecdotal appeal of picaresque ways would seem to favor a tendency to enshrine such stories in popular history. But one wonders about those many less colorful residents who—without engaging in rapscallion thievery, prodigious drunkenness, buggery, brawling and general loutishness—may have contributed in their own less spectacular but equally important ways to the forging of palpably national sensibilities.

Craton and Saunders highlight a recurring predicament of the Bahamas' marginal position within the larger economic and geopolitical system in which the islands

remain embedded. They write, “Poverty, lack of resources, and the heartbreaking drudgery of alternative occupations meant that Bahamians would recurrently be tempted by the chance of instant or easy riches, irrespective of legal prohibitions or abstract morality” (Vol. 1, p. 114). As forms of primitive accumulation, piracy, privateering, wrecking, smuggling, blockade-running and allied shady pursuits have enjoyed an enduring attraction. Indeed, they undermined the Proprietary government’s “high-sounding principles [which] evaporated before the profit motive” (Vol. 1, p. 92).

Here the authors’ chronological narrative strategy makes no explicit analytical connection between past and present weaknesses in governance. Today’s political debates instead revolve upon public concern with scandal and corruption in pivotal enterprises such as tourism, immigration, offshore banking, insurance underwriting, money laundering, and the international drug trade. What historical relationship exists between such phenomena and the strategies of “the normal run of Bahamian settlers, [who resisted] any form of official regulation, particularly when it involved taxation on persons and land, and duties on key imports and exports” (Vol. 1, p. 138). What relationship is there between historical and modern forms of authority-evading behavior? Absent a theoretical perspective, a narrative approach seems incapable of answering such questions in other than anecdotal ways.

Returning to the narrative chronology, regarding chattel slavery, Europeans imported involuntary African labor in growing numbers beginning around 1620. By 1675 African descent peoples comprised a third of the population, which encouraged slavery’s legal codification, thereby dramatically reducing the social mobility that prevailed earlier in island history. This also signaled the emergence of a more rigid, racialized social hierarchy, one based on notions of racial supremacy whose pervasive social effects prevail in modified form into the present.

In a detailed approach sustained throughout Volume One, Craton and Saunders show just how integral slavery was in the fabric of both private and official life. And unlike their account of the Lacayans, on this score the authors acknowledge the agency of the enslaved, their resourcefulness and wit in resisting wholesale domination.

Slavery garners further treatment in Section Three, which addresses the critical impact of the influx of North American Loyalists and their slaves. Craton and Saun-

ders reject the popular notion that the “progressive” Loyalists transformed Bahamian life. Instead, they document that “it was probably the slave and free black majority of newcomers who most indelibly shaped the social history of the Bahamas” (Vol. 1, p. 179). In a pattern found elsewhere in the West Indies, free people of African descent congregated in urban centers. This gave rise to new racially segregated settlements whose populations would comprise an emergent social sector, one with which white elites were forced to reckon, especially in the wake of the African revolution in (uncomfortably) nearby Haiti.

The authors devote chapters to the lifeways of Loyalists and the enslaved alike, through which accounts run the countervailing strain of an emergent free black population, one whose growing social vigor and embrace of Christianity could not be ignored or turned aside. Another chapter offers a case study of the socioeconomic symbiosis between Loyalist expatriate Charles Farquharson and his slaves, based on the only known day-to-day record of a Bahamian plantation. Detailing the marked interdependence between master and slave in a remote settlement, the authors observe, “[Farquharson] was at least as dependent on the slaves as they were on him, and his relationship with them was more an implicit informal contract than one of absolute domination. The slaves would labor steadily, if not with enthusiasm, as long as the master observed well-established limits on hours and tasks, did not expect work curing sickness or bad weather, scrupulously observed the official requirements as to issue of food and clothing, and rewarded extra effort as far as his means allowed” (Vol. 1, p. 357). In broader perspective, the patently negotiated character of the relationship the authors document is found in varying forms of New World plantation slavery. While the scope of the work precludes parenthetical comparative analysis, this instance offers an important new case study to be factored into a broader assessment of common patterns in and distinctions between local forms of Caribbean slavery.

Volume One’s final two chapters examine growing resistance to the slave regime, formal abolition and the intended transition of the apprenticeship period ending in 1838. The authors argue that emancipation festivals were “increasingly well orchestrated occasions controlled by more subtle agents of social order themselves” (Vol. 1, p. 395). They hold that “the missionaries, and through them the officers of the colonial government (if not members of the local ruling regime), had *captured* the emancipation celebrations from the people actually freed—just as

metropolitan philanthropists (and social conservatives) took over the emancipation movement and its subsequent historical interpretations from more dangerously radical and revolutionary forces and theorists" (Vol. 1, p. 395, emphasis in the original). The evidence presented supports this contention, indicating the freedmen's "real doubts about what the occasion meant and whether the future held any real improvement" (Vol. 1, p. 395).

Volume One closes by way of anticipating a theme taken up in Volume Two, the vexed relationship between the formerly enslaved and the free Africans who continued to arrive in some numbers into the 1860s, in an interaction that singularly conditioned the formation of a creolized Black Bahamian people. In the broader sweep of Caribbean history, these are core matters for cross-cultural comparison, as suggested in this meticulous localized description.

Volume Two's first section, "From Slavery to Unfreedom: 1834-1900," addresses how, in a colony increasingly marginal within the British empire, ex-slaves and former slave-owners adapted to a free wage-labor regime after emancipation, in an economy based on subsistence fishing and farming. It details the oligarchy's efforts to contain the black majority by playing locals against liberated Africans, and by exercising close control of the economy (banking, commerce, land tenure, labor law), the legislature, the courts and magistrates, the militia, the police, religious life, and the privatized educational system.

An examination of the status of African-descent wage laborers in the salt, sponge, sisal and pineapple industries reveals techniques familiar throughout the Caribbean intended to control and exploit workers. In the sponge industry, for example, Nassau merchants imported Greek Aegean spongers to establish a racial hierarchy in the industry. Workers, paid advances in truck goods, were at the mercy of merchants and agents at the aptly named Nassau Sponge Exchange. Sharp bookkeeping practices ensured that workers would take home but little cash against their extended credit when they delivered their sponge cargoes.

Regarding more general Bahamian fortunes, Craton and Saunders write, "The fading of the metropolitan philanthropic impulse after slave emancipation, the onset of the era of *laissez-faire* and 'free-trade imperialism', and the Bahamian oligarchy's ability to entrench its hegemony more or less without impediment resulted in a general lack of concern for the ordinary Bahamian people" (Vol. 2, p. 55). An exhaustive examination of census data reveals an extended period of demographic and socioeco-

nomie depression extending into the twentieth century. Indeed, strong policies against vagrancy, squatting and petty crimes sprung from poverty speak to analogous conditions elsewhere in the post-emancipation West Indies. As such, societies with similar sociopolitical contours resulted region-wide, marked by class and racial divisions, sharp cultural and socioeconomic distinctions between rural and urban areas, and a degree of isolation from one another, typically greater than their respective isolation from Europe and North America.

Geographic proximity and socioeconomic factors would increasingly link the Bahamas with the United States after steamship service inauguration in the mid-1850s, the Union naval blockade of the Confederate states, and the winter tourism linkage with Florida in the 1880s and thereafter. These developments fueled Nassau's growth, but only by enforcing a marked social division between black and white, and between Nassau and the rest of the Bahamas. The authors detail this process in chapters devoted to post-emancipation life, and to the insular life of the generally segregated settlements of the Out Islands.

Section Two, "On the Margins of a Modernizing World, 1900-1973," documents the colony's continued peripheral status in the British West Indies, which fostered local responses similar to those pursued elsewhere in the region, including tourism development, military service in the world wars, Prohibition-related bootlegging (1919-1933), labor emigration, and the emergence of populist politics.

The twentieth-century impact of these trends was both material and ideological, as the authors demonstrate. "Travel, along with steadily improving communications media, opened windows to a far more rapidly developing outside world and increased awareness of disparities and of what Bahamians could, and should, do to redress the balance. The influence of the nearby mainland was more critical than ever, though equally ambiguous. The United States seemed to Bahamians a land of economic opportunity, the front-runner in modernization, and the fount of democratic ideology. Yet the relative economic benefits of a U.S. connection were tainted for nonwhite Bahamians by the sociopolitical disadvantages of racial discrimination" (Vol. 2, pp. 173-174). These and allied trends, including the post-World War Two demographic explosion, unfolded in the context of rising grassroots political activity, the move to independence (achieved in 1973), continued tourism expansion, and the growth of a Bahamian middle class. Impeded by

the lack of industrialization, limited access to education, and a legacy of colonial neglect, the Bahamian experience shares much with other Caribbean ex-colonial territories.

Section Three, “On the Eve of the Twenty-First Century: The Present and Future of the Bahamian Past, 1973-1999,” addresses the post-independence period. It catalogues trends in demography, diplomacy, politics, economics, tourism, standard of living, health, education, illegal immigration (primarily from Haiti), crime, and the drug trade. At its core is “the crucial question of what it is to be a Bahamian at the end of the second millennium” (Vol. 2, p. 366). The closing chapter, “The Bahamian Self and Others: Achievements, History and Mythology in the Creation of a National Identity,” notes that “more than a quarter-century of political independence, even a conscious policy of Bahamianization by the two counterpoised political parties, have not been enough in themselves to provide Bahamians with a coherent sense of national identity. Internal divisions (of color and class or even between the subcultures of different islands) and powerful external influences (of modernization in general and the United States, Britain, and the West Indies in particular) confuse and diffuse” (Vol. 2, p. 435).

Yet, the authors continue, “The uniqueness of the Bahamian people,...we believe, is immanent” (Vol. 2, p. 435). However, the notion that every territory sustains a coherent, overriding national identity is today a matter of considerable debate, especially given the transnational trends the authors so thoroughly document. Efforts to keep Bahamian resources and real estate in national hands, to limit the granting of legal immigration status, residency status and permission to work are all predicated upon models of the nation whose ruptures and contradictions—confronting the cultural, socioeconomic, commercial and political dynamics typically glossed as globalization—reveal themselves around the world in dramatic and locally particular ways. But Craton and Saunders seem to suggest that the problems besetting the Bahamas can be solved locally. They write, “The chief impediment to the efficient working of the citizenship, immigration and work permit system was that, inevitably in a small and young country, it depended on unsophisticated bureaucrats and the ultimate authority of a very few overworked individuals” (Vol. 2, p. 437).

But such phenomena are ubiquitous in a new global economy that universally prescribes entrepreneurial and investment activity as a panacea for all social ills. Indeed, the ensuing social challenges have defied the ability and resolve of “larger, older” countries in Western Eu-

rope and North America as well, while fueling recurring xenophobic hysteria. Surely there is more to the failures of the Bahamian immigration office than the shortcomings of a heroic if overburdened bureaucracy? Foreign investment is always accompanied by myriad pressures to grant exceptions that undermine the formal national political project. The authors do not make a convincing case that fostering local bureaucratic rationality is sufficient to redress the issue. A more robust theoretical formulation is needed.

Indeed, the transnational character of deterritorialized peoples everywhere confounds governments’ efforts to contain and capitalize upon their subjects’ activities and political inclinations (as Bahamians living abroad know very well). For example, Haitian immigration in the Bahamas poses challenges that are global in scope. The government’s difficulty in handling the situation, including containing virulent popular discourse regarding the growing Haitian presence, is the case in point. The immigrant presence reflects more general dynamics of international labor migration, and the overriding fact that Haitians in the Bahamas represent merely one local phase of an international human flux that links the Bahamas, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, other Caribbean islands, the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.

Effective policy efforts will require a perspective that treats these diverse and highly adaptive transnational communities as anything but static, homogeneous entities. Sustaining the concept of an essential Bahamian national identity stumbles upon the actual multiplicity of people who can lay claim to that essence for themselves. For instance, a second-generation Bahamian of Haitian descent is surely at least as “Bahamian” as any Bahamian descendant residing abroad.

For the authors, food, sport and the arts reside at the core of a putative Bahamian identity. Certainly, as signal elements of national popular culture, these are powerful symbolic elements, shared repositories of a unifying national sensibility. But here as in all things cultural, such features comprise an invented tradition. Indeed, the vast majority of Bahamians are neither athletes nor artists of international caliber, and the culinary range of most (whether living at home or abroad) far exceeds traditional native fare. In this respect, it is surprising that the book gives scant attention to the role education and socialization could play in forging a stronger, more coherent sense of Bahamian national identity. A discussion of educational history also might also elucidate the influ-

ence of global media, international consumer values and mass aesthetics on national sensibilities, and the conditioning effects of ongoing labor emigration vis-s the classically Euro-American national project the authors seem to posit for the Bahamas.

A work as ambitious and far reaching as this is bound to raise more questions than readers can expect to be answered, as should be the case. In assessing any such work, comparative and theoretical issues naturally arise, emerging as these do from the kind of detailed, carefully crafted narrative that this work represents. *Islanders in the Stream* succeeds magnificently on its own terms, even as the silences inherent in a chronological, thematic historiography pose a challenge to Caribbean scholars more generally. In summary, it stands as the authoritative reference on Bahamian history, and it sets a challenging standard in historiography for the rest of the Caribbean. Apart from the intended popular Bahamian audience at home and abroad, the primary readership will be scholars

of the West Indies, including those working on nearby areas historically linked to the Bahamas, such as Cuba, Haiti and the United States, especially Florida.

At the same time, it is necessary to move beyond narratives crafted—however sympathetically—from “sources honestly chosen and simply deployed, along channels they themselves suggest and determine” (Vol. 2, p. xiv). History does not write itself, no historical narrative stands on its own, and history’s “evidence” never “speaks for itself.” Questions of culture and cultural origins are interwoven as a matter of interpretation and political identification. Any discourse about the past reflects a necessary positioning within the politics and power inequities of the present. To summon the spirit of E. P. Thompson, where there is conflict, there also we find history (made never so precisely as people may choose) and historiography (neither produced nor received so dispassionately as its interlocutors may suppose).

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