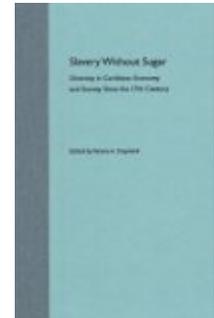




Verene A. Shepherd, ed.. *Slavery without Sugar: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society since the 17th Century*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. x + 296 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2552-0.



Reviewed by William Van Norman

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Breaking the Sugar Mold

With this book, editor Verene Shepherd and her fellow authors have made an important contribution in expanding our understanding of the institution of slavery throughout the Caribbean. The importance of this work lies in the new direction it points its readers, towards a broader understanding of the varieties of slavery that existed, and in its truly pan-Caribbean approach. By crossing colonial boundaries, the reader is drawn to see the many similarities as well as the differences that varied European masters made. The chapters, some of which appeared in *Plantation Society in the Americas* in the fall 1998, are arranged chronologically and also move from the plantation to the urban environment. Shepherd, in her introductory essay, points out the historiographical dominance of sugar that elides the agricultural diversity on the islands and shores of the Caribbean. She does a good job of tracing the problem and situating the essays within the existing debates—a tricky proposition considering the enormity of the task.

Slavery, as Ira Berlin has reminded us, was above all a system of labor.[1] The essays in this volume are all organized around the work that slaves did and the underlying question of the ways in which different types of labor influenced the lives and social structure of the enslaved. Sugar and life on the cane plantation are often invoked as a point of comparison but the wide variety of tasks slaves performed remains at the forefront throughout the book.

David Geggus starts the collection with a compelling argument about the importance of indigo to the economy of St. Domingue. In this fine essay, the author establishes the historical context and requirements of indigo production, creating a broad overview of the crop. Geggus contends that the agricultural economy of St. Domingue was more diversified than has generally been understood, with indigo playing an ongoing role throughout the colonial era. The author, albeit with what he admits is incomplete evidence, makes a convincing case that the demography of indigo plantations was significantly different from that of the population on sugar plantations.

There was not only more gender balance but also higher fertility rates and more children in indigo farms (pp. 28-29). In this short piece Geggus cannot explore the implications of these differences but it is nevertheless an important starting point.

O. Nigel Bolland directs attention to Belize and the enslaved who harvested timber during the British colonial period. This essay does an outstanding job of showing the connections between labor and social structure. Bolland shows how seasonal patterns and the rigors of harvesting mahogany delimited the possibilities of the workers' lives and shaped their experiences. A stronger conclusion would have enhanced the piece.

The essays by B. W. Higman on Jamaican pens, Verene A. Shepherd and Kathleen E. A. Monteith on the pen-keepers and coffee farmers of Jamaica, and S. D. Smith on Jamaican coffee farms and class complement each other and form the conceptual centerpiece of the book. Higman establishes the long-term economic viability of the pens while explaining the interdependent relationship they had with the dominant sugar plantations of the island. While the owners of the pens were largely dependent on the sugar farms to buy their products, they proved to be a valuable resource to cane growers. In addition the pens were able to adapt to changing conditions over time to ensure their survival. Shepherd and Monteith reveal the class and status difficulties with which the owners of the pens and the coffee growers had to contend. Significantly we see that pen-owners had a symbiotic relationship with sugar while coffee farmers had substantial independence. This shaped the ways they interacted with the sugar elites and colonial authorities, seeking out government appointments and lobbying for favorable tariffs, for example. Smith explores the dynamic that drove coffee farmers. The geographic and demographic differences the author explains provide a striking comparison to the nearby sugar farms. Smith explores the motivations for investing in coffee but most importantly

demonstrates how the size of the plantation labor force mattered in many ways. The typically smaller size of the coffee work force meant that the ways in which the slaves labored was structured differently from their counterparts on sugar plantations. The authors of these three pieces challenge the historiography by complicating the idea of the white property owner, showing how those in the second tier of Jamaican society made a space for themselves in a sugar-dominated landscape as well as how Jamaican slaves experienced work and bondage.

Gail Saunders's essay on slavery and cotton in the Bahamas acts as segue to the following essays on urban slavery and the free black population. The author explains the short-lived plantation system and how it shaped the Bahamian slave population. The quick rise and demise of plantations in the Bahamas resulted in a rapid buildup of population followed by a glut of laborers when the system collapsed. This led to some interesting adjustments in slave usage, such as owners allowing their slaves to work in jobs that took them to sea, as well as suggesting a range of possibilities in post-emancipation Bahamas. The focus shifts to urban life and the work slaves performed in the context of the city for the balance of the book. Evelyn Powell Jennings explores the understudied urban slavery environment in Cuba and shows how the state influenced labor patterns in Havana prior to the plantation boom on the island. The author highlights an important contradiction between the state's professed ideal of a society made up of free subjects and its quick turn to the use of slave and coerced labor. Jennings suggests that this tension points toward a need to rethink the chronology of slavery in the Spanish state, shifting the beginnings of the tougher slave regime from 1790 to the 1760s. This essay clearly shows why it is important to look beyond the sugar plantation to understand not only the variations of slavery but also to see the various factors that influenced shifts in attitudes and policies.

The concluding four essays of this collection by Pedro L. V. Welch, Hilary McD. Beckles, Franklin Knight, and Felix V. Matos Rodriguez all address the interactions between enslaved and free blacks and the ruling class in urban spaces. These essays show the utility of looking at the margins to reveal how the whole system functioned. In Barbados urban slaves exercised more agency than rural slaves while their presence complicated the lives of free blacks who lived in the urban environment. Welch and Beckles show that the day-to-day lives of the free and enslaved differed little while free blacks suffered more abuses at the hands of the law. This is contrasted with the exploitation slaves endured from their masters. Using family stories of success and redemption, Beckles powerfully shows how free blacks could adapt and work within the system to subvert the aims of the elite. Through Knight's exploration of free blacks in Cuba we can see that their lives reflected the experiences of free blacks elsewhere in the Caribbean. Time was the major difference as Knight shows that free blacks lived within a slave system much longer in Cuba. Each succeeding rebellion or movement altered their relationship with the state and the ruling class. The portrait of the transition from slavery to freedom drawn by Matos Rodriguez illuminates a situation much like that in Barbados. The focus on women workers is especially valuable because it both offers insight into domestic urban life and also penetrates a world not seen in many studies.

The strength of this volume is the coverage in time, geography, and perspective that the authors are able to achieve. This is a welcome addition to the growing number of works on slavery that look beyond the sugar plantation. All the essays are well crafted, solidly researched, and are grounded in rigorous analysis. The work would be useful in any classroom studying slavery and the ideas advanced here should prove to be springboards for new research in the field.

Note

[1]. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, Carter G. Woodson Institute Series in Black Studies (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

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