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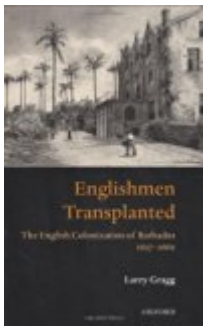

Larry Gragg. *Englishmen Transplanted: The English Colonization of Barbados, 1627-1660.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xiii + 192 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-925389-0.

Reviewed by Sarah Barber

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It is not long since I returned from Barbados, having engineered another frustratingly slow trawl through the extensive documentation which survives on early English settlement on the island, while my partner watched some cricket. Barbados was overrun that Easter with eager Brits turning purple in the sun and overdoing the seductiveness of a rum cocktail. Not many took the opportunity to discover whether their ancestors had built this island paradise, or had employed or owned those who did. Larry Gragg's example of the extreme English planter, George Marten, enjoyed his sojourn on Barbados. He liked the temperature, reaped the profits from his modest estate, entertained well, and called on his brother in the English government to supply him with hampers of "excellent Canary."[1] One assumes he left progeny behind; his wife, Frances, remained in England, while he had a relationship with his "butter-box."

If Marten is Gragg's extreme, the author is concerned to expel a few myths regarding Barbados's historiography. Not all English people who went to Barbados in the seventeenth century were idle, feckless, greedy, cruel, or exploitative. They may have been, but they also built a society on unsettled land, doing their best to give birth to something workable. Despite the publication of studies by Richard Dunn, Richard Sheridan, Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh, Gary Puckrein, and Hilary Beckles, as well as the work done outside the universities by Peter Campbell and others, it seems that an image of seventeenth-century Barbados is still shaped by perceptions of the island a hundred years later.

Gragg's contribution--pushing scholars into viewing the seventeenth-century experiments in societal construction on their own terms--has been long awaited. The *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society*, in which he has been a regular publisher for over a decade, has a limited readership. Not enough universities teach Caribbean history, especially in the early-modern period, and the journal suffers a little in that it falls between three stools, publishing the research work of established academics, that of enthusiastic amateurs, and transcriptions of documentary sources. One tentatively asks whether such schol-

arship tends to become self-contained, each scholar referring to the work of others rather than stripping the research back to the primary documents. In some cases, this is not possible. Many documents do not exist as primary sources, but as nineteenth-century transcriptions of the originals. The Barbados transcripts are good (the Jamaican ones are not), but Gragg is prone to rely on transcriptions when the originals are available. What, for example, was the thinking behind the decision to consult the Hay papers of the earls of Carlisle, but not other collections in British archives?

Gragg's study is constructed thematically, which lends it some purchase, even narrative purchase, which a strictly chronological account would not. There are some cases in which the chronological account might run in parallel with the thematic. For example, it would seem to have made sense to start with what is actually chapter 3, outlining the first footing, the rival claims to the island, and the early attempts to construct communities in the 1620s and 1630s. Gragg instead wants to top-and-tail his book with a chapter, after the introduction, outlining English perceptions of Barbados, which is then reflected in a final chapter explaining what they actually did make of their new home and what subsequent historians have made of them.

Between these are a number of chapters which are colorful, clear, readable, and informative. Chapter 3, as intimated above, outlines the battle for control of the island. Generally speaking, the comings and goings of proprietors, agents, servants, and supporters of rival groups is of such Byzantine complexity that we are asked to accept merely rival Corteen syndicate and Carlisle interests, operating in a settling-down prelude to the main period of island growth in the 1640s. Here, in glorious detail--and Gragg aptly prevents it from ever becoming dull--are all of the petty but still power-hungry men trying to exploit an opportunity for uncharted territory under weak, mercurial domestic oversight. Gragg is less convincing on the English context, when he explains how it was played out in the island, than he is on the Barbados context, which he handles very well. It is a relief to get it all in black and white. As demonstrated by the building of the first church on the island (St. James's in "The Hole") and a survey delineating pasture, the big house, and the lands of George Briggs and Edward Collinson, these were people building a functioning community, as well as the pawns of grasping exploiters of English political uncertainty.

Gragg then goes on to discuss how the law and the church were transplanted, and to describe the institutions that these settlers developed. Perhaps due to my own interest in the subject matter, this was the most disappointing chapter. Possibly the material does not exist or it is not possible to deduce from the extant documentation what I want to know, but this seemed a missed opportunity. As Gragg states, the vestry minutes exist only for the parish of St. John. However, St. John was one of the most important for the nature of settlement, particularly the second flush of major planters who established sugar enterprises in the area of the Cliff. This is where Christopher Codrington and Humphrey Walrond had their estates, as well as the hedonistic George Marten. The fact that the vestry minutes reveal the debates over the building of St. John's church, might lead us to expect a discussion of the way in which settlers established, delineated, and maintained their institutions. This was also a chance to discuss just how closely the institutions of law and religion resembled those in England. Barbadian settlers may have come from England with expectations of how things should be, but familiar institutions were those with which they had been raised. In the West Indies, they had a chance to establish a society and its institutions from scratch. There are hints of it here--the JPs in Barbados left administrative duties to the Council, unlike at home--but the discussion tends more to the personnel of office.

The following chapter concentrates on the economic development of the island and, in particular, the search for a profitable cash crop--tobacco, indigo, cotton and finally sugar, muscovado and then white. This is followed by a discussion of the workforce which made the economic transformation of Barbados possible. Sugar is then explored in greater detail, with interesting sketches of the leading planters and the ways in which their fortunes were made.

Particularly given the view that Bajan society was, at best, unconcerned and, at worst, antipathetic towards order, a chapter on the "ordered society" is welcome. Here, Gragg explores questions of gender and the transformation of a predominantly male island into one in which the generations became self-sustaining. There is no better illustration of the tension faced by historians of the early colonial settlements. The men who formed the earliest settlements were undoubtedly still connected to their mother country, but the society in which they found themselves was very different--in this case because of gender disparity--and in order to make it more recognizable, autonomous, and sustainable, they had to generate families. Some brought their families from home, some created new ones; merchants were apt to do both.

Even at the end, Gragg is keen to stress that it was only "occasionally, visitors and residents remarked on the degree to which they had created a society which departed from English ways" (p. 189). This study follows the more recent, anti-Whig trend in colonial historiography. Gragg is not looking to explain the desires for independence manifested in the mid-eighteenth century, the triangular slave trade which characterized those hundred years, or the abolitionist movement which ended them. His sources describe life in the first half of the seventeenth century and there is no need to do more. If anything, he leans a little too far in the other direction, so keen to explain these men (usually) in terms of what they had been in England. Perhaps that explains the reluctance to push the questions and the analysis as far as he might. For example, what Henry Winthrop meant, by describing the Arawaks on the island as "slaves," is "not entirely clear" (p. 114). The reader would prefer to see Gragg attempting to explain what Winthrop meant, because the complexity of relations between Arawak, African, Irish, Scots, English, German, and other laborers explains one key point about Bajan society, namely the value it placed on human life.

Still trawling through thousands of images from Barbados's records, I am not sure that answers to such questions exist. Gragg's is an excellent explanatory narrative and a welcome addition to studies of the early colonial settlements in the Americas. There may well be much more to be said, or even speculated about the earliest European experiments, but perhaps the evidence does not survive the heat, humidity, and vitality of Caribbean life, in some ways little changed over three centuries.

Note

[1]. University of Leeds, Marten-Loder MSS vol. 84/10.

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