

The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire and War

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A brief survey of the recent academic literature on global history reveals an academy that is still trying to define a historiographical movement. Definitions abound, ranging from the vague – connecting world history, international history, transnational history under one ‘global history’ umbrella – to the extremely specific – narrowing its study down to the structural changes that have affected world history, for instance.

While in academic circles the debate about what global history ‘is’ or ‘isn’t’ continue, in popular history, there is little question. The commodity histories that swept the popular market a few years ago have been replaced by increasingly complex social histories, intertwined with imperial politics, commodity exchange, and the movement of peoples. Matthew Parker’s *The Sugar Barons* is in some ways a classic, old-fashioned Atlantic history: imperial politics; British, North Atlantic, and creole elites; and military battles all feature heavily. But in other ways, this book shows how popular global history can incorporate the diverse elements of a number of different historical styles and source-bases to create a compelling narrative which complicates a picture of ‘progress’ or ‘ascendancy’ in European history and demonstrates the interconnectedness of global phenomena.

The book concentrates on the English ‘barons’ of the title and their descendants: the Drax family, the Codrington family, and the Beckfords, with other characters playing prominent roles as they emerge in the book’s 200-year focus. These families are interconnected with one another, with the development of sugar plantations on these islands, and with the local and imperial politics that defined the region during this period. The book is divided into three sections: the pioneers, the grandees, and the inheritors. It also has helpful maps, family trees, and a chronology at the beginning of the book, as well as two sections of images that help to illustrate the narrative. Although the sections are roughly chronological, individual chapters shift

from narrating the course of events – particularly when discussing a war or a particular family's fortunes – to more thematic approaches when discussing the development of the sugar plantation economy, or the rise of the slave system, or describing an island's society at a particular time.

The first section covers the period from the first British settlements in the West Indies in the beginning of the 17th century through the English Civil War to the 1660s. In this period, the Drax family is dominant, setting up the first sugar plantation in Barbados and manipulating island politics during the Civil War. The whole British West Indian enterprise was unstable, however, with a precarious balance of power between the Caribs, the various European colonists, and the free and indentured populations regularly descending into violence. Although there were European empires involved in the region, there is little sense that they were all-powerful, or even interested in these fragile settlements. Communication between the metropolitan centres and the colonists reveals the gaps in their expectations of one another.

These chapters also cover the development of the sugar industry in the Caribbean, the emergence of slave society in Barbados, and very detailed accounts of the localized raiding, regional military campaigns, and imperial wars that saw islands passed back and forth between the Spanish, Dutch, French and English in the 17th century. Chapter six, 'The English Civil War in Barbados', encapsulates the major weaknesses of the book, but also its ability to redeem itself. Some of the military and political back-and-forth – described in excruciating detail – seems to exist for its own sake without too much attention to, or analysis of, *why* this matters or what in the description is important for later understandings of the family fortunes of these actors. However, the chapter then ends with a well-written and compelling analysis of the Navigation Acts (pp. 74–5) that emerged from the Civil War, explaining why they were important, and how the Civil War – presumably something the average British reader would have some basic knowledge about – fits into a global picture.

The second section covers the period from the restoration of the monarchy through to the Seven Years' War. This is the largest section of the book, and covers the most time and variety of history. In this section, it becomes clear that, while there are still significant communication gaps between metropole and colony (gaps that allow for an incredible range of corrupt and authoritarian behaviour on the part of the colonists), the interests of the wealthiest planter elite and the British establishment are beginning to converge. The growth of British planter societies in Jamaica and Antigua in this period also poses a significant challenge to the older elites of Barbados and changes the demographics of the British West Indies again.

Some of the chapters in this section seem less cohesive than others as they try to cover large amounts of time or broader themes. Chapter 20 ('Piracy and rum'), for instance, does little justice to either topic. The strongest chapter in this section is that focused on Thomas Thistlewood, an overseer in Jamaica (chapter 23). Parker has an incredible source here for investigating the life of a non-'baron' in a slave society and, although Thistlewood has been studied before (and Parker relies on monographs on his life as well as the Thistlewood diary itself), Parker skilfully uses this individual to explore the larger questions and themes that pervade the book. Thistlewood's relationship with Phibbah, his enslaved 'mistress', is examined both as an individual relationship, with moving descriptions of Thistlewood's feelings about her from his diary, and as a potential source for understanding the role of black mistresses who 'blurred the rigid distinctions of race and slavery' (p. 282). However, Parker is careful to present a complex picture in which individual power relationships are negotiated, but still dominated by societal expectations and norms. Thistlewood was unable, for instance, to immediately 'lease' Phibbah from her masters after he left their employment for another plantation, leaving them both bereft. And of course, during their 30-year relationship, he continued to rape other slave women and inflict horrendous punishments on people in Phibbah's exact situation even as he bemoaned her 'miserable slavery' (p. 281). Parker handles these themes and subjects deftly, using a detailed case to paint a nuanced and well-researched picture of individuals behaving in contradictory, but very human, ways.

The final section looks at the period from the end of the Seven Years' War through the American Revolution and the Haitian Revolution to the abolition of slavery. This section takes a strong line on the 'decline' thesis, arguing that not only were the West Indian colonies beginning to be eclipsed economically – by the

increasingly important East India Company – but they were declining morally and politically as well. The ‘inheritors’ of the title are the newest generation of the sugar barons, most of whom were by this point resident in England and had little connection to their West Indian plantations. Chapters focus on their dissipation, the increasing British distaste for their gaudy expenditures, and the rise of the abolition movement. In the arc of the narrative, the sugar barons’ interests and the interests of Britain as a whole have decoupled, and the result is the loss of power for the West India sugar lobby. The bibliography is lighter on the history of abolition and this is revealed in the somewhat cursory handling it receives. However, throughout the book, Parker revealed sources of visitors arriving in the islands and deploring the situation of the enslaved (and proposing ameliorative measures). Therefore, his implicit argument in support of Williams’ thesis is that, while there had been distaste for slavery all along in the British imagination, it was not until the dissipation and decline of the West Indian sugar barons sets in that Britain was willing to ignore their needs in favour of the slaves’.

The Sugar Barons makes a strong case for the role of popular history in communicating academic history beyond the academy. Boasting an extensive and up-to-date bibliography, this book provides a strong synthesis of the major recent historiography. It also reflects the variety of historical approaches necessary for composing a popular history of this period and location: military history, economic and social history, commodity history, and elements of microhistory are all at work here, creating a well-rounded picture of life and politics in the Atlantic world. In order to tell an interconnected history of movement, trade, and power in a ‘global’ world system, command of a variety of types of sources is needed. Parker is also skilful in explaining that a lot is unknown, or unknowable. The variety of primary sources and the shifting historical approaches reveal this; so does his use of phrases such as ‘seems to have been’ (p. 39 for instance), which reveals the particularly patchy primary evidence about individuals or individual families in the Caribbean in the very early 17th century.

This book also reveals that a global history that deals with the role of an empire in producing mobility and exchange, and that – most importantly for the historian – depends on that empire for sources, can still reveal the limitations, weaknesses, and gaps in imperial power. The innumerable wars fought over the Caribbean islands in the 200-year period show that so many of the outcomes relied on circumstance, miscommunication, timing, and illness. In the chapter on the War of Jenkins’ Ear (beginning in 1739), Parker makes an important point about the nature of empire in the Americas: he writes that it was different from what had come before because ‘this was not about European balance of power or dynastic squabbles, but about imperial trade, empire ... it was also started in the West Indies’ (p. 252). In other words, Parker takes the line that ‘imperial’ did not necessarily mean ‘directed from the metropole’, and it could also encompass a number of different motivations, from economic to territorial. But, equally importantly, Parker notes that, in the Caribbean itself, ‘it followed the depressing course of previous conflicts’ (p. 252). Imperial or local motivation aside, war in the West Indies was war, and in the West Indies, war was practically endemic. This was a result of the weakness of empires, rather than their strength, as they were unable to conclusively conquer and defend their territories, even when economies began to rely on colonial sugar production.

Exchange, too, is just as often limited as facilitated by empire; and sometimes imperial power seems not to matter at all. During the same War of Jenkins’ Ear, the North American colonies were infamous for continuing to trade illegally with the French (pp. 256–7). Similarly, the colourful characters that emerge are sometimes made mobile (often against their will) by imperial networks. The shifting demographics of the islands reveal the changing policies and practices of migration from the 17th to the 19th centuries, as a mixed group of Carib slaves and poor English indentured servants were replaced by African slaves; as Scottish and Irish migrants moved into the islands; and as disease and natural disasters took their toll on new arrivals. Parker’s emphasis on mortality statistics and the more qualitative descriptions of death in the Caribbean show that even when movement and investment were facilitated by empires, disease could prevail.

This narrative also goes against a current trend in popular history of this scale to return, in some sense, to the ‘Protestant Work Ethic’ argument for European, and particularly Anglo-American growth. What becomes very clear as the story progresses is that families who enriched themselves in the West Indies did so through

corruption, theft, murder, enslavement, and cronyism. They frequently broke the law. When they returned to Britain, they bought themselves political power. Although Catherine Hall and Nick Draper's recent work on the legacies of the British slave trade is not cited in the bibliography, Parker makes a similar argument, building on the social history of Caribbean slavery and the diaries and family wills of the 'sugar barons' themselves: the wealth that they created through smuggling and corruption, and through enslaving a huge workforce, built modern Britain, just as much as the anti-slavery campaign did. This is not a picture of a gradually democratizing Britain, opening itself up to free trade and promoting liberalism. This is a Britain of family politics, mercantilism, and authoritarianism, and, as the book's epilogue makes clear, it is one that has had a lasting legacy in colonial and postcolonial societies.

If global history is attempting to make connections, this book is the very definition of popular global history. It successfully demonstrates the interrelated development of the Atlantic system, and reveals how regional, local, familial, and even individual history is connected to a wider world of politics, economic changes, natural forces, ideological developments, and migrations.

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