

Brief Histories: The Caribbean

Review Number:

549

Publish date:

Tuesday, 31 October, 2006

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ISBN:

9780340763636

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£14.99

Pages:

256pp.

Publisher:

Hodder Arnold

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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The Caribbean is not only made up of the islands in the Caribbean Sea but also of the mainland territories of Belize, Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana. The region is marked by diversity. Some territories are very small, such as St. Martin, which has a surface area of thirty-seven square miles and a population of 73,000. Others are much larger, such as Jamaica with its more than four thousand square miles and a population of nearly three million. And while some territories are forested, such as Suriname, others have very little vegetation, like Barbados. The region is not only marked, however, by geographic differences but also by linguistic and cultural differences. The main languages spoken are English, French, Spanish, and Dutch. Cultural differences, such as religion and sport, cannot only be explained by the nations that colonized the region but also by recent migrations. Indentured migration from the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century, for example, explains why Hinduism is one of the main religions practised in Guyana today.

Because of its diversity, it is very hard for scholars to write a history of the Caribbean. Slavery, for example, was abolished in the British Caribbean in 1834, the French Caribbean in 1848, the Dutch Caribbean in 1863, and in Cuba in 1886. And while most territories became independent in the 1960s and 1970s, some became independent much earlier and others are still (semi) dependent. By not adopting a strict chronological order, Heuman has been able to demonstrate that the territories ‘experienced similar histories of slavery, colonialism and exploitation’ (p. xii). The first chapter explores the encounter between the native inhabitants and the first European nation in the region—the Spanish—and describes the establishment of the English, French, and Dutch island colonies. This is followed by a chapter that describes and explains the development of slavery in the region. The next four chapters examine the main features of Caribbean slave societies. They not only set out the living and working conditions of the slaves, but also look at the lives of the whites and the free coloureds and blacks.

Because it played such a crucial role in the abolition of slavery in the region, an entire chapter is devoted to the Haitian revolution. This is followed by three chapters that survey the ways in which slavery was abolished in the other colonies. Chapters 11 and 12 provide various examples to illustrate that emancipation did not bring freedom. In Cuba, for example, blacks were not admitted to secondary schools and many public places were segregated. These chapters also convey that the ex-slaves and their children and grandchildren did not passively endure their status as second-class citizens. Their methods to achieve full equality included not only strikes and riots but also organization. In 1914, for instance, the Jamaican Marcus Garvey set up the Universal Negro Improvement Association, an organization that tried to instil race pride and racial solidarity among blacks and became the largest organized mass movement in black history.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the United States intervened in some territories in order to enhance stability and prevent European nations from increasing their hold over the Americas. Chapter 12 examines US interventions in Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, which ranged from military occupation to financial controls. This is followed by a chapter that explores a series of labour riots that took place in the Anglophone Caribbean in the 1930s, and put this part of the region on the road to independence. An even more important upheaval in the twentieth-century Caribbean was the Cuban Revolution. Chapter 15 provides a summary of the Revolution and investigates its implications for the region. The next chapter looks at some contemporary issues in the Caribbean that have a long history, such as economic dependence on the United States. The last chapter deals with the creativity of the Caribbean people from 1492 till the present and focuses on the region’s most notable export product: music.

Heuman demonstrates most clearly that a struggle for self-determination runs as a consistent thread through the history of the Caribbean. He shows not only that slaves used a variety of methods to resist their masters and that strikes and riots were only some of the means used by African Caribbean people after emancipation to achieve full equality, but also that the US influence in the region in the twentieth century called forward fierce resistance. Heuman also conveys another and related theme in Caribbean history: movement. He discusses the arrival of Europeans and Africans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the influx of indentured migrants from India in the nineteenth century, and the migration within and outside of the region in the twentieth century.

Contrary to other historical surveys of the Caribbean, Heuman’s book does not concentrate on economic and political developments but on the social history of the region (1). As a result, it pays considerable attention to the social structure of the territories during slavery and freedom. The chapters on slavery, for example, illustrate that there was a hierarchy amongst the enslaved based on occupation and colour and that white society was divided along class lines. These chapters furthermore illustrate that during slavery a tripartite structure was formed, with blacks at the bottom, whites at the top, and coloureds in the middle. Heuman suggests that after emancipation this colour hierarchy became entwined with a class hierarchy. A few more examples to illustrate how colour and class intersected in the post-emancipation period would have been helpful, as it enables readers to understand not only Garvey’s calls for racial solidarity but also the fact that unions in some territories were led by white or coloured men. I would also have appreciated a stronger focus on the social history of the region in the chapters on the twentieth century. These chapters largely ignore, for

instance, the poor provision of health care and education in the early-twentieth century that in many places was caused not only by economic changes but also by colonial status.

The book also differs from previous surveys in that it engages with the most recent studies in the field. For example, while earlier surveys have attributed the development of sugar in Barbados to Dutch money and expertise, this book argues that English investors and merchants also played a crucial role, as has recently been suggested by John McCusker and Russell R. Menard (2). The emphasis placed on the role of women in slave resistance and in the strikes and riots in the post-emancipation period reveals most clearly the book's engagement with recent scholarship. It was not until the late 1980s that historians began to pay attention to the lives and representations of slave women. In recent years, they have also begun to adopt a gender focus in their work on the post-emancipation period (3). As scholarship on the Anglophone Caribbean is more developed than that on the French, Hispanic, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean, it is not surprising that this part of the region features more prominently in the book than the other constituent parts. Heuman, however, tries in each chapter and also in the 'suggestions for further reading' to pay attention to all parts.

Heuman, then, has managed to write a history of the Caribbean that does justice to its enormous diversity. He has brought the history to life not only by including visual illustrations but also by providing quotes from primary sources. This and the 'suggestions for further reading', which include primary sources and the monthly list of new publications on H-Caribbean (<http://www.h-net.org/~carib/> [2]), make it a very student-friendly book. As it lacks engagement with important historical debates, such as the question of whether ex-slaves were pushed or pulled off the plantations, the book lends itself more for introductory than specialized undergraduate courses on Caribbean history.

Notes

1. See, for instance, J. H. Parry, P. M. Sherlock, and A.P. Maingot, *A Short History of the West Indies*, fourth edn. (Oxford, 1987); and J. Rogozinski, *A Brief History of the Caribbean: From the Arawak and Carib to the Present* (New York, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. J. McCusker and R. R. Menard, 'The sugar industry in the seventeenth century: a new perspective on the Barbadian "sugar revolution"', in *Tropical Babels: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450–1680*, ed. S. B. Schwartz (Chapel Hill, 2004), 289–330. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For a good overview of the emergence of studies on slave women, see B. Brereton, 'Searching for the invisible woman', *Slavery and Abolition*, 13.2 (1992), 86–96. On women in the post-emancipation period, see, for instance, R. E. Reddock, *Women Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History* (London, 1994); M. Sheller, 'Quasheba, mother, queen: black women's public leadership and political protest in post-emancipation Jamaica, 1834–65', *Slavery and Abolition* 19.3 (1998), 90–117; and various articles in *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, ed. P. Scully and D. Paton (Durham, 2005). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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