

Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640-1700

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As the bicentenary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade approached, the past few years saw a great outpouring of scholarship on subjects related to the relationship between Britain, slavery, race and empire, with particular focus upon Britain's entry into participation in the slave trade and plantation agriculture, and upon the rise of popular opposition to slavery. Yet despite this intense interest in the English, and then British, encounter with slavery, and in the ways in which slavery affected both Africa and the plantation colonies, little emphasis has thus far been allotted to the important question of how England itself was changed by its encounter with slavery. It is this issue upon which Susan Dwyer Amussen centres her new monograph, limning the nature of the new ideas, practices, objects and people which English colonists brought back with them from the West Indies, and exploring the place which these islands assumed in the metropolitan imagination over the course of the 17th century. In so doing, Amussen contributes to the 'new imperial history' theorised by, among others, Kathleen Wilson, Antoinette Burton, and particularly Paul Gilroy and Catherine Hall, all of whom emphasise the necessity of placing 'the histories of colony and metropole ... in one analytic frame, as separate histories that are deeply intertwined' (p. 11). [\(1\)](#)

According to Amussen, slaveholding did not come 'naturally' (p. 10) to 17th-century Englishmen and -women; it was a practice which they learned to manage via trial and error over the half-century which separated the beginnings of slavery and sugar production in Barbados and Jamaica from the maturation of that system towards the close of the century. In her view, not only the slaves but their masters found themselves transformed by the experience of bondage, which soon altered the latter's ideas about social order, labour management, agricultural productivity, racial identity and political authority. Moreover,

because many West Indian colonists returned, temporarily or permanently, to the metropole, a two-way traffic in people 'made the experience of the West Indies a more real and visible feature of English society than that of England's mainland colonies' (p. 7). In six chapters and an epilogue, *Caribbean Exchanges* explores the effects of West Indian slavery and colonialism on Englishmen both at home and abroad.

In Amussen's view, it is crucial to understand 17th-century English metropolitan society in order to see how its values and practices shaped those of the West Indian settlements, and this goal is the principal concern of the book's first chapter, 'Trade and settlement'. In this period, England experienced both rapid population growth and increasing social polarisation. Labour and its management was a vexed issue both at home and in the colonies, linked as it was to questions of law, individual liberty and social hierarchy. But while in England 'slavery was a metaphor frequently used as the antithesis of freedom to condemn the illegitimate use of power' (p. 19), in Barbados and Jamaica, and elsewhere throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world, it became a day-to-day reality, at the same time that the expansion of trade relationships meant that English people came into contact with people of other races and cultures. The interplay of labour requirements and emerging ideas about ethno-racial hierarchy encouraged first Virginia, then Barbados, and finally Jamaica, conquered from the Spanish in 1655, to turn to African captives held in lifelong, heritable bondage as the ideal workforce for plantation agriculture. Beginning around 1660, sugar was the principal commodity produced by England's Caribbean colonies, and it not only generated enormous profits for both the islands and the mother country, but soon became central to England's commerce and existed as a 'constant reminder' (p. 40) to English people at home of distant, seemingly exotic colonial possessions. Amussen emphasises the complexity and the improvisational nature of the processes which created these sugar-producing colonies, and the extent to which their white inhabitants 'drew upon and reshaped English ideas of identity' (p. 42) - these settlers hoped to recreate England, or at least a recognisable version thereof, but their reliance upon tropical staple agriculture and African slavery meant that they were called upon to create new, intensely exploitative, and overtly un-English social relations in Jamaica and Barbados.

These social relations are the subject of the next chapter, 'Islands of Difference,' which centres its analysis upon two principal contemporary depictions of 17th-century Barbados and Jamaica: Richard Ligon's *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657) and John Taylor's 'Mulum in Parvo', an unpublished manuscript which narrates the author's sojourn in Jamaica in the late 1680s. Both Ligon's narrative, which has been extensively analysed by historians and literary scholars, and Taylor's much more obscure text are 'saturated with [the] perceived difference and strangeness' (p. 43) which the two writers saw in the islands, and thus their accounts 'provide a useful framework for examining both the journey and the world that English men found when they arrived in the West Indies' (p. 46). Both men were impressed by the islands' warm climate and exotic flora and fauna, and by the *tremendous* agricultural productivity of the land, but they struggled to understand these tropical societies and to explain them to their English audiences. They found the social life of the islands alarming, particularly in relation to the treatment of both slaves and indentured servants; the evident unhappiness and constant threat of rebellion of these unfree labourers rendered island society deeply unstable, and threatened to undermine the planters' prosperity because the production of greater wealth necessitated still worse exploitation of the workforce. Ligon and Taylor differed in relation to the question of blame: the former, who did his best to believe that Barbadian society was recognisably English, and that slavery and servitude were not inherently wrong, insisted that it was only a few bad masters who mistreated their labourers, and simultaneously contributed to the hardening of racial stereotypes by arguing that Africans were bestial and that it was their innate inferiority, rather than slavery, that prevented Barbados from being an exact facsimile of the mother country. Taylor, by contrast, came to believe that cruel treatment of slaves and servants was not limited to a couple of evil masters, but rather permeated the institutions of chattel slavery and indentured servitude, both of which were based on greed and its attendant exploitation of supposed inferiors. To Taylor, Jamaican society, and its prosperity, was entirely based upon this greed, which corrupted every aspect of life in the colony and would always prevent it from replicating the benefits of English ideals and institutions.

The next two chapters of *Caribbean Exchanges* examine the methods by which Barbadian and Jamaican planters developed 'well-established agricultural and social systems' and 'entrenched governments' (p. 74)

over the course of the 17th century, and draw heavily upon the papers of the Helyar family, Somerset landowners who were closely involved in the early economic and political development of Jamaica. The Helyar papers make clear the many challenges inherent in establishing and running a plantation, as well as the 'many differences between the colonies and England and the manifold problems English planters encountered in Jamaica' (p. 75). The production of sugar was an extremely complicated process, one which called for enormous capital investment in land, slaves, buildings, and machinery, in which English agricultural expertise was usually not applicable, and in which things very often went disastrously wrong. Moreover, the tremendous mortality in the islands, due largely to the fact that malaria, smallpox, and a variety of fevers were endemic there, meant that many planters died before their estates had become profitable. Those who survived were forced to cope with the loss of slaves and servants to diseases whose origins and treatment were little understood, and with the fact that sugar cultivation quickly exhausted the soil. The result was that, although tales circulated in England of the great riches to be reaped from sugar planting, success was rare and hard-won, and at any time the majority of planters lived with crushing anxiety regarding their futures. They also were all too aware that 'all our estate here ... depends wholly upon the frail thread of the life of our Negroes' (p. 91), as demographic and political changes in the metropole, combined with gruesome accounts of the miserable lives of white labourers, made it increasingly difficult for planters to recruit indentured servants for Jamaica and Barbados. The presence of ever-increasing numbers of black slaves was the foundation of the planters' hopes for prosperity, but at the same time it caused them great anxiety, not only about the prospect of slave rebellion, but because slavery, far more than the tropical climate or the physical distance, was what marked the islands as definitively un-English.

As the planters struggled to render their estates profitable, they also contended with how best to adapt English forms of government to tropical realities. The development of 'right English government' was a great challenge to Jamaican and Barbadian colonists, not least because the islands were, in political terms, extensions of England, but sufficiently unlike the metropole, particularly because of the presence of slaves and slavery, that many aspects of English political practice simply could not work there. English and colonial interests were often at loggerheads, as the former emphasised the importance of upholding imperial authority, while the latter centred on maintenance of English rights and liberties. West Indian planters prided themselves on their Englishness, and their sense of benefiting from a long struggle for liberty, but at the same time they resented paying taxes to the metropole and were convinced that sovereignty should reside with them, not at Whitehall; they went so far as to claim that their local houses of assembly possessed powers parallel to those of the House of Commons. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, metropolitan and colonial office-holders clashed repeatedly over issues such as taxation, the recruitment of white servants, and the religious conversion of slaves. Within the islands, controversies also raged within local government, and particularly over questions of legal identity and individual rights, which were complicated by the presence of slaves. By the end of the 17th century, the Jamaican and Barbadian legislatures had developed legal codes which differentiated sharply between white and black, free and enslaved, creating a separate judicial system which redefined slaves, and in many cases free people of colour, as a new category of legal persons lacking the vaunted English rights associated with white settlers. These laws helped planters maintain control over the often restive slave labourers who by the end of the 17th century significantly outnumbered the islands' white inhabitants, and gave formal recognition that the liberties the planters enjoyed depended upon the denial of liberty to the slaves, but simultaneously served as evidence of just 'how far from English experience the enslavement of other people was' (p. 144).

Chapter five, 'Due order and subjection', deals with the 'daily tensions of racial and class relations and the complex processes by which they were negotiated' (p. 145). Here Amussen returns to a theme of her chapter on Ligon and Taylor, stressing the impossibility of replicating English concepts and practices of social hierarchy in the West Indies. Not only did the presence of slaves and of free or enslaved racially mixed individuals complicate ideas about social status, but the high mortality among white settlers forestalled the emergence of patriarchal families and of entrenched local elites. Planters often quarrelled with one another regarding money, political authority, and often seemingly trivial issues of precedence and personal honour, and in these small societies grudges could fester over many years and pass on to subsequent generations. Many servants, and some slaves, were keen to challenge the authority of their masters, and the constant

presence of sailors, particularly in Port Royal, Jamaica, the 'wickedest city in the West', rendered the atmosphere of island towns volatile and sometimes violent. Jamaica was also perpetually troubled by the presence of the Maroons, descendants of runaway slaves who inhabited the island's mountainous, densely forested interior and often emerged to raid plantations or kill unwary settlers. The result of these overlapping anxieties was the creation of a set of extremely brutal punishments, directed largely although not exclusively at slaves, which contributed to the metropole's image of the West Indian planter as a vicious brute, and which 'marks the realization that slavery made the social order of the islands fundamentally difficult from that in England' (p. 174). Amussen raises here a point to which she returns in her epilogue, that the severity of the laws regarding punishment of slaves, though widely decried in England, may have provided a model for criminal law and industrial capitalism in late 18th- and early 19th-century England.

The final chapter of *Caribbean Exchanges* represents a noteworthy break from those preceding it, as Amussen not only shifts scene from the West Indies to England, but moves from analysis of social, political and economic developments to a discussion of artistic and literary representations of Caribbean slavery. As she emphasises throughout this section, many West Indian planters returned temporarily or permanently to England, and in so doing brought with them both ideas about slavery and actual slaves. The visibility of these absentee planters, their imported slaves, and tropical products such as sugar, spices, and fruits, meant that the Caribbean had a 'physical presence' (p. 178) in late Stuart England, one which engendered a significant cultural response in the metropole. The sight of black slaves in the streets of London and Bristol not only encouraged writers such as Morgan Godwyn, Thomas Tryon, and Richard Baxter to pen early critiques of slavery, but also gave rise to depictions of slaves, and of their masters and mistresses, in many of the plays which enlivened the London stage. Many of these works criticised slave-based colonial society, depicting wealthy planters who profited from the cruel exploitation of their labourers, and colonial adventurers who were nothing more than the dregs of English society, yet Amussen finds that even the most overtly critical texts render slaves effectively invisible. Similarly, although more than 70 English portraits of the late 17th and early 18th centuries include one or more black figures, these men and women, and especially boys and girls, are depicted as objects of exotic display, bolstering the power and wealth of the white women and men who are the artists' true subjects, and setting off the literal and figurative whiteness of their owners. Yet perusal of runaway advertisements in English newspapers shows that by the end of the 17th century black people were 'part of the rural and urban landscape' (p. 221) of England, and she argues that it was as a result of a sustained confrontation with colonial 'others,' in colony and metropole alike, that English people at home and abroad came to 'produce Englishness as white' (p. 266).

Amussen follows up on this point in her epilogue, in which she argues that the changes in ideas and practices relating to labour, law and racial and gendered identity in 17th-century Jamaica and Barbados had a similarly transformative effect upon 18th-century England. Referring briefly but insightfully to the major alterations in English life in that period, she claims that most of these changes were foreshadowed, and influenced, by the practices pioneered by West Indian planters. Throughout the 18th century, more and more laws, epitomised by the Black Act of 1723, were put in place to protect the property rights of elites and to disenfranchise the poor, placing them in a legally and politically as well as financially inferior position to their supposed betters. As black female slaves emerged in the popular imagination as drudges and as sexual playthings for white men, middle- and upper-class white English women were encouraged to aspire to 'ladyhood', a status based on leisure, chastity and sexual passivity, while poor women's inability to attain this status encouraged society to view them as depraved as well as deprived. 'Scientific' ideas of race allowed the English intelligentsia to think of particular groups -not just racial 'others,' but also other seemingly undesirable or dangerous people, such as the Irish or the poor - as inherently different, and thus inferior and less deserving of what we now refer to as human rights. In conclusion, Amussen argues that the English experience in the West Indies 'provided a model for a society where the bonds of paternalism had been largely abandoned'- a model which would come to life at home as England entered an era of industrial capitalism and global imperialism.

There are many reasons to praise *Caribbean Exchanges*. It is a lucidly organised and gracefully written work which builds effectively upon the insights of previous scholars of the English experience in the West Indies,

and which takes a truly 'Atlantic' perspective not only on the development of English settlements in the islands, but upon the influence of these settlements and their inhabitants, white and black, upon the mother country. It contributes not only to the growing historiography of the English Caribbean, but to the flourishing 'new imperial history', which to this point has largely focused upon the period following the Seven Years War, and particularly the 19th century. Amussen's stated goal is to do for the 17th century what Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects* (2002) did for the 19th; that is, to 'place the histories of colony and metropole ... in one analytic frame' and to explore the Atlantic, and specifically the relationships between England and the Caribbean, as 'a site for the operations of power' (p. 11).

That said, the book misses some opportunities for fruitful engagement with other scholars and additional sources. While Amussen is to be praised for her insightful analysis of the Helyar papers, the particular experiences of this one family are not necessarily representative of the planting endeavours of 17th-century English settlers in Jamaica and Barbados - she might have examined the published papers of the Blakes, Irish Catholic planters in Barbados, or those of the Lascelles, whose archive has been so successfully mined by Simon Smith and James Walvin. (2) Her admittedly fascinating ideas about the influence of West Indian legal, economic, and political practices parallel those of Peter Linebaugh and Ian Baucom, but neither the former's *The London Hanged* (1990) nor the latter's *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005) are discussed in the text or listed in the bibliography. Similarly, I found her analysis of the improvisational nature of planters' responses to Caribbean life to be more indebted to Larry Gragg's *Englishmen Transplanted* (2003) than is overtly acknowledged, and her sense of the West Indies as a crucible of modernity follows on Sidney Mintz's concept of 'the Caribbean as *oikoumene*'. (3) Finally, her exclusive focus on Barbados and Jamaica is somewhat historiographically limiting, particularly in its ignoring of the critical role played by the Virginia colony in encouraging metropolitan English people to re-conceive ideas about empire, sovereignty, race, gender, servitude and national identity. As much as the bicentenary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade encouraged an academic and popular acknowledgement of the critical role of slavery in English, and later British, experiences both at home and in the colonies, the simultaneous quatercentenary of the establishment of the Jamestown settlement gave rise to an increased understanding of the centrality of Virginia to English politics, commerce and culture in the 17th century. If England learned many lessons from its West Indian experience, it seems just as plausible to claim that role for an earlier colony which defined its own practices in relation to race, servitude, gender, law and empire.

These caveats aside, though, Amussen is to be praised for her enthusiastic effort to 'bring the Empire home', and to allow scholars of 17th-century England to understand how their own work can be enriched by taking a truly Atlantic perspective on the indubitably important role which the West Indies played in shaping English society, politics, economy and society. *Caribbean Exchanges* is a book which should be read by everyone interested in 17th-century English history, as well as those working in West Indian, North American, and Atlantic history of this period, and will be of interest to anyone concerned with how the English made their empire, and how that empire made, and re-made, them.

Notes

1. See, for example, *A New Imperial History*, ed. K. Wilson (Cambridge, 2004); *After the Imperial Turn*, ed. A. M. Burton (Durham, 2003); P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); and C. Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-67* (Chicago, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Blake Family Records, 1600 to 1700*, ed. M. J. Blake (London, 1905); S. D. Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism: The World of the Lascelles, 1648-1834* (Cambridge, 2006); J. Walvin, 'The colonial origins of English wealth: the Harewoods of Yorkshire', *Journal of Caribbean History* 35 (2005), 38-53. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. M. Mintz, 'Enduring substances, trying theories: the Caribbean as *Oikoumene*', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2 (1996), 289-311. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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