

Jack P. Greene, *Settler Jamaica in the 1750s: A Social Portrait*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. 304 pp. (Cloth US\$39.50)

When Jack Greene first began, in the 1960s and 1970s, to collect the materials for this study of Jamaican society and economy in the mid-eighteenth century, the profession was in the midst of a methodological revolution that looked to cliometrics to suggest how the slave societies and plantation economies of the Americas had functioned. Forty years later, the profession is now asking different questions about the nature of culture and society in the Americas during the era of slavery, and the systems of thought and practice that helped to maintain and then to undermine racial hierarchies. What then does this richly-detailed study of the society and economy of selected Jamaican parishes in the 1750s, framed mainly in the terms set by the debates of the 1960s and 1970s, and based largely on the methodical quantitative study of tax rolls and parish censuses, have to offer?

Each historian will inevitably find specific points of interest in this work, but three seem to me to be of particular importance. First, Greene's figures lend empirical weight to recent work highlighting the economic diversity of Jamaica. By careful comparison of various surveys he shows that even in this powerhouse of the sugar economy, only a quarter of estates may have specialized in this crop, including in the "harvest years" of the 1760s. Although previous historians have made use of individual surveys, Greene is the first to bring them together to generate a more accurate assessment. His work confirms a line of argument going back to Sidney Mintz via Trevor Burnard, Verene Shepherd, and Barry Higman that even Jamaica was no sugar monoculture, and that the economic, social, and cultural experiences of labor and work among both its free and enslaved populations were correspondingly heterogeneous and diverse.

Greene's work will also provide an important context for much recent work on society, gender, childhood, and family in Jamaica, complementing more detailed studies of individuals or plantations by offering a broader perspective that takes in entire parishes and towns. He shows that profiles of land ownership varied widely across the island, and sometimes produced surprising results, as in the capital of Spanish Town in 1754, where over 30 percent of proprietors were black and more than half were women. Once again, this lends a definitive empirical base that can help to contextualize these case studies, to confirm the diverse and heterogeneous nature of black and white experience within Jamaica, and to provide a quantitative measure of the varying chances for agency that it offered to different social groups.

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© AARON GRAHAM, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09301005

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication.

Most importantly, this careful study provides the necessary detail to reassess the process of knowledge production and transmission in the eighteenth century. Although there is a growing interest in the importance of empires in the Americas and elsewhere as mechanisms for the production, management, circulation, and employment of knowledge, much less is known about how this knowledge was produced, and how much reliance can be placed on its accuracy. By bringing into fruitful collision the multiple overlapping forms of knowledge created by the Jamaican state during this period, including tax rolls, censuses, and maps, Greene shows that considerable variation occurred. Data were shaped by the terms and circumstances of their collection and by the priorities of imperial and colonial officials, frequently in omissions so substantial as to create systemic distortions. He therefore highlights the fragile foundations on which previous work has been based, the mounting ambitions of the imperial state to control the production and circulation of knowledge, the imperfect realization of these ambitions and the challenges that historians must acknowledge in using them.

Perhaps the only frustration with *Settler Jamaica in the 1750s* is that many of these important historiographical implications are not laid out explicitly, but instead are left implicit in the text. Although Greene draws on recent historiography and sometimes engages with it directly, this tends to be addressed mainly to points of detail rather than broader analysis, and even the introduction leans more toward a potted survey of the recent literature that does not fully flag up the important analytical implications of the succeeding chapters. As a result the book will probably have its greatest impact on historians who are already familiar with the literature on Jamaica and the West Indies, rather than the wider audience that it undoubtedly deserves.

Aaron Graham

Department of History, University College London

aaron.graham@ucl.ac.uk