Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670-1776. Natalie A. Zacek. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xi + 293 pp. (Cloth US$ 90.00)

Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670-1776 is a significant scholarly study of Montserrat, Antigua, Nevis, and St Kitts in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As her title suggests, Natalie Zacek focuses on the white minority in the Leewards, which comprised about 7,000 people by 1776 when slaves and free blacks in those islands numbered 100,000. She argues that, contrary to the common emphasis on the debauched, unstable, wasteful, philistine white society of the early British Caribbean, one can establish a more positive case for the creation of a successful, functioning white society in the British Leewards before the American Revolution. Drawing on a wide range of primary sources including governors’ correspondence, legal records, census data, and numerous contemporary descriptions of one or all of the Leewards, she produces a portrait of a sustainable white society. Thus she challenges the notion that these colonies were white social failures.

Though it is sometimes difficult to extract this argument from the narratives that form the core of each chapter, Zacek summarizes the book well in her concluding pages: “Leeward colonists, though certainly replete with prejudices, dislikes, and insecurities, were in many instances willing and able to incorporate into society various representatives of initially suspect groups and individuals, including Irish Catholics, Scots, Sephardic Jews, Quakers, unmarried couples, participants in interracial sexual relationships, and others . . . as long as these people did not overtly challenge the norms and ideals that Leeward residents most valued, particularly in terms of what they considered to be their innate Englishness and the natural rights they viewed as an integral component thereof” (p. 234).

Zacek emphasizes the varied and potentially disruptive environment in which white society in the Leewards operated. Natural hazards such as hurricanes, drought, fire, and earthquakes combined with fear of slave rebellion in a society where blacks predominated. Heterodox ethnic and religious affiliations existed among white settlers, allowing for the possibility of religious and political instability. We are left in no doubt about the difficulty of constructing a viable social order among white people in the Leewards. Nevertheless, although examples abound in the book of disputes, conflicts, tensions, and violence among settlers, Zacek argues that a
viable social order was achieved by different groups adhering, despite their differences, to English notions of liberty, property, and loyalty to the Anglican state and parliamentary rule. Thus Irish Catholics in Montserrat made accommodations to Anglicanism to gain positions of status while the ambition and frugality of Scots in Antigua made them trusted employees among established Anglophone planters. Quaker colonists also came to an easy accommodation with the Anglican hierarchy in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. In general, different groups “negotiated for themselves a sense of being at once English and West Indian” (p. 65).

One does wonder, however, how well this situation was sustained. While not wanting to return to the unstable, reckless image of white settlers in the early Caribbean, a further look at Zacek’s evidence suggests that the Creole social order created was quite fragile. If settlers had fully accepted their role as both English and West Indian, there would have been less absenteeism, which in fact increased markedly during the eighteenth century. It did so because settlers felt more attached to the mother country than to the Caribbean islands; they were, in Michael Craton’s phrase, “reluctant creoles.” This would suggest that a constructive social order in the British Leewards is an overly rosy view of the social situation there. On the contrary, many settlers were always looking for opportunities to quit the Caribbean once they had made money. Zacek could have used the extensive family and business papers of prominent absentee families such as the Tudways and Codringtons of Antigua or the Pinneys of Nevis to explore their views on this matter. But it is a virtue of Settler Society in the British Leewards that it will allow historians to continue the debate on the degree of success and cohesion amongst the white population in the early British Caribbean by evaluating and extending the material Zacek has ably brought together.

Kenneth Morgan
Department of History, Brunel University
Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, U.K.
Kenneth.Morgan@brunel.ac.uk