Book Reviews


This ambitious book is a massive, sprawling collection of forty 10-15-page essays and an introduction by the editors. Thirty-three of the forty contributors work in universities or other institutions outside the region, and thirty-one are men. Most (but not all) are noted authorities in their fields and display easy familiarity with recent scholarship.

Palmié and Scarano state that their book is aimed at “students and other readers not yet acquainted with Caribbean history” who will find “an accessible and thorough introduction to the region” (pp. 1-2). It provides, they write, an “overview of the best of contemporary scholarship on the region for readers who are new to the field,” with cross-disciplinary contributors who present the state of knowledge about their topics in “accessible prose” and with “a minimum of scholarly clutter” (p. 3). This last promise means that there are no notes. Most chapters include a few references to cited works, though some have no references at all; there is an overall bibliography, as well as a glossary and useful maps. I’m not sure how a 660-page compilation by many hands will compare—as a text for students and other novices—with a shorter narrative by a single author, such as Barry Higman’s *A Concise History of the Caribbean* (2011).

Any general work on Caribbean history must decide on the appropriate definition of the region. The editors sensibly go for the definition most generally accepted by scholars, at least from the Anglophone world: all the islands, including the Bahamas, plus those continental “enclaves” whose history is so closely bound up with the region (the Guianas and Belize). This contrasts with Higman’s book, which excludes the enclaves—the only serious flaw (in my view) in an otherwise fine general history. In the Palmié & Scarano volume, Suriname attracts considerable attention, Guyana and Guyane much less. Chapter 33, on the Caribbean during the cold war, for
example, makes no mention of the “Cold War Tragedy” (to quote the title of a book on the subject by Stephen Rabe) of Guyana between 1959 and 1964; Guyana is also absent in Chapter 35, which looks at the postindependence trajectory of Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, and Jamaica. Guyane and Belize are barely mentioned anywhere. Still, in principle the enclaves, especially Suriname, are (correctly) comprehended within the scope of this book.

The book is organized in seven parts, delineated on chronological and thematic lines. Part 1 deals with the region’s geography and ecology, the precontact indigenous societies and the Mediterranean antecedents to the sugar-and-slavery complex. Part 2, “The Making of a Colonial Sphere,” considers the Greater Antilles during the era of conquest and early colonization. The third part focuses mainly on the seventeenth century, including the sugar revolution in the Leewards. Part 4 looks at the classic slave societies, the Haitian Revolution, and the dismantling of slavery elsewhere in the region. Part 5 is essentially on the long nineteenth century and the developments after the end of slavery in the various territories. The major theme of Part 6 is the rise of U.S. ascendency in the region and the crises of the twentieth century. Finally, Part 7, “The Caribbean in the Age of Globalization,” discusses key topics in the second half of the last century, starting with the Cuban Revolution, and taking the narrative up to the Haitian tragedy of 2010. This periodization is sensible and appropriate, though hardly novel.

My major peeve with this book is the amount of duplicated material between the chapters. The editors admit the existence of “overlaps” but say that they often reveal “scholarly disagreements” (p. 3). Some overlaps there must be in a multi-authored work of this kind, but too often it’s a matter of straightforward duplication and repetition, at times involving large chunks of individual chapters. It would be tedious to cite examples, but I do think that more rigorous editing would have produced a leaner volume with much less actual repetition. Of course it may be that few will read the whole book from cover to cover, as this devoted reviewer has, and so will hardly notice the amount of duplication.

In fact, few of the chapters deal with “scholarly disagreements” or issues of historiography, a good decision in my view; they do, however, for the most part, present the most recent findings on their topics. Those chapters that attempt to discuss scholarly controversies, such as Chapter 13 on the Sugar
Revolution or Chapter 20 on “econocide,” are not in my view particularly successful and are likely to confuse readers unversed in the subject. It is of course difficult to treat such issues in very short essays aimed at students or people new to the field. Most of the chapters sensibly eschew any such aim, and provide instead brisk narratives with contextual analysis, appropriate for the book’s intended readership.

It may seem perverse, since I’ve implicitly criticized the book’s length, to argue that two subjects were, in my view, underrepresented. There’s no chapter on gender, the theme of quite a lot of recent, high quality work. (There are two specifically on race, and race, class, and labor themes permeate the whole book, as we would expect.) Of course there’s material on gender and on women in many chapters, but not much. Another omission is the arts and culture, barely mentioned anywhere. Of the three Nobel laureates in literature the region has produced, Derek Walcott merits one passing reference, Saint-John Perse and V. S. Naipaul none at all. (Neither does Arthur Lewis, for that matter.)

But, clearly, the great strength of this book is its comprehensive coverage of the whole region, as well as its presentation of up-to-date research findings. It is a genuinely pan-Caribbean history, especially strong on the Hispanic Greater Antilles, where some 64 percent of the region’s population live; but it’s also good on Haiti and the French Antilles, with 22 percent of the population. Even the Dutch-colonized territories, which so often fall between the cracks in regional histories, get decent coverage. The tendency of some English-language general histories of the region to concentrate, at least after about 1620, on the British-colonized places, with only some six million people out of a total of around forty million—exemplified in a recent book by Tony Martin (2011)—is completely absent here. Palmié and Scarano have sought to present a balanced history of all the region’s diverse peoples, from the earliest times to the present; the last section (Chapters 34-39) takes the narrative up to 2010-2011.

Nearly all the chapters are authoritative and accurate—notwithstanding some inevitable but mainly small errors of fact or date—and present state of the art research on their topics. Most are very readable and written in an engaging style. Sound analysis is embedded in the narrative of events, and the tone is generally balanced and sober. This is an interesting, well-written, and ambitious book. Few, I suspect, will read it all through, but the
chapters should prove valuable for classroom materials, and non-student readers will enjoy browsing.

Bridget Brereton
Department of History, University of the West Indies
St Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago
bridget.brereton@sta.uwi.edu

References
