Mary Chamberlain

Empire and Nation-building in the Caribbean: Barbados, 1937–1966. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2010. vii + 216 pp. (Cloth US\$ 89.95)

The focus of this book is on nation building. It is as much about British visions of the colonial nation as it is about the Caribbean's sense of independence. Mary Chamberlain argues: "The histories which prioritise the labour movement in the struggle to build a nation tell a limited story, for trade union membership was not a mass membership" (p. 160). Unfortunately, this claim misses the point that class consciousness developed as a result of labor struggles, that members of the labor movement were among the most politicized groups of people, and that the level of organization and regional solidarity was located nowhere else at the time. Nevertheless, Chamberlain is careful to address the labor conditions of Barbados in the early 1930s. For her the economic conditions in the 1930s were gloomy. Labor conditions were poor, few were educated, and malnutrition was rampant. "Barbados was one of the poorest of Britain's territories in the Caribbean, the slums of Bridgetown among the worst" (p. 1). These problems were compounded by a pernicious racial system and a powerful plantation oligarchy to which many black Barbadians were beholden.

Chamberlain places the problems of labor in Barbados, and the consequent unrest in the island, in the broader context of the industrial climate of the Caribbean, as well as the regional and international calls for Federation and independence. In the case of Barbados, she examines the labor scene through the mobilization of the fiery, political figure of Clement Payne, the Trinidadian labor organizer, who became a leader in the movement to improve conditions of work in Barbados. It was Payne's arrest and subsequent deportation for an immigration violation that set off days of rioting and looting. If Payne has come to symbolize a radical tradition in Barbados, readers who are unfamiliar with the existence of such a tradition on the island would benefit from Chamberlain's discussion of other radicals such as Richard B. Moore, Ulrick Grant, Clennell Wickham, and Wynter Crawford. It may be her perspective on labor militancy that leads her to neglect the significant contribution of the labor organizer T.T. Lewis in her coverage of leading radicals in Barbados, most of whom subscribed to notions of regionalism and Federation. She stresses however, that the concept of Federation was born in the transnational imaginary of Caribbean people in the diaspora "and soon acquired status as a kind of mythical homeland" (pp. 184–185). In addressing these matters, she also manages to take some of the gloss off the more conservative Grantley Adams, the first and only prime minister of the Federation.

In "Gender and the Moral Economy," Chamberlain provides insights into the way women manage scarce resources and juggle the demands of work and family. Rural women lived at the mercy of the planters and the world market (p. 76). Despite these strictures, women were able to reproduce themselves outside of the plantation. Chamberlain embraces what she describes as the "moral economy"—a buffer between planters and laborers. Women were chief guardians of this moral economy. Chamberlain claims that "lawlessness" and praedial larceny could be considered a collective political response to what was a violation of the moral order on the part of the planters and their agents (p. 89). The moral economy took much of the edge off harsh conditions at the time and served as a strategy of survival. For Chamberlain, this strategy explains why deplorable conditions did not always lead to rioting in Barbados, where people explored other available options.

The book's strength is its analysis of the system of race relations in Barbados, demonstrating the deep-seated racism of the time. So pervasive was this racism that it was often experienced as normal. Chamberlain concludes that the racial "rupture in Barbados required suturing if a nation was to be created" (p. 111). *Empire and Nation-building* also provides some historical background to the cultural life of Barbados, and the role played by the development of the arts in the creation of the nation. In this regard there is a useful discussion about the contribution of a fledgling theater guild and *BIM* magazine, which provided an outlet for budding writers, not just in Barbados, but also in the rest of the Caribbean.

The import of this work is at times marred by inattention to detail. For example, on three occasions, Chamberlain refers to Hugh Springer as Huw Springer, and she describes Hubert Harrison as a St. Croixian instead of a Crucian. She notes that Barbadians became less enthusiastic about Federation because they feared attracting migrants from "smaller islands" such as St. Lucia. St. Lucia is actually bigger than Barbados. Chamberlain also refers to Errol Barrow as the premier of the newly independent country of Barbados, not the prime minister. But perhaps the most egregious error is to mistake Derek Walcott, the St. Lucian Nobel Laureate (p. 178), for Frank Walcott, the well-known Barbadian trade union leader.

Empire and Nation-Building in the Caribbean is an attempt to analyze a familiar narrative using a different approach. In some cases the project achieves its desired objective, while in others, its realization is a bit more illusive.

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