Spencer Mawby


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I agree with the series editors for “Britain and the World” that Spencer Mawby’s carefully researched book is “the most comprehensive study of the end of empire in the Anglophone Caribbean yet written” (p. vii). Mawby mentions that Gordon Lewis’s *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (1968) remains the “most effective critique of British policy in the Caribbean” (p. 21). In this outstanding contribution to the scholarship on decolonization in the Anglophone Caribbean Mawby shows how the British ordered independence on a territorially-based, constitutionally uneven playing field, intensifying a contradictory process in which the nationalist leaders reaffirmed their “loyalty to British traditions” (Chapters 2–4) which owe much to global white supremacy that morphed into a power relation to become the dominant norm of world order.

Mawby identifies four “broad strands” in Anglophone Caribbean historiography—“vindicatory writings” by British officials or their sympathizers, “inculpatory accounts by critics of the nationalist leadership” of the postcolonial moment, “contextual interpretations” that emphasize international factors such as U.S. influence and the Cold War, and “critical narratives which focus explicitly on the inadequacies of policymaking.” He employs the “critical narratives” approach (p. 17) to show that in the “20 years before independence, British policymakers prioritized the notion of an orderly transition in a way that pointlessly delayed the implementation of constitutional reform, encouraged the development of authoritarian politics, and neglected the economic conditions which stimulated local discontent” (p. 3). He also criticizes the ways many Caribbean observers of the independence struggles repeat the British refrain which misrepresented the “era of decolonization by exaggerating the stability of the colonial condition” (pp. 3, 9).

Mawby meticulously documents the process that resulted in independence starting in 1962, elaborates on the British implementation of Associated Statehood in the Windward and Leeward Islands (Chapter 5), and documents the subtle ways British racism operated in the Anglophone Caribbean. He shows how U.K. authorities interpreted nationalist demands for “demotic power” which involved labor and working-class struggles over wages, working conditions, and political rights as proof of racially-motivated behavior toward Whites, repeating the hackneyed pluralist refrain that “mixing of the races was likely to lead to disorder” (p. 26). Hubert Rance from the Colonial Office viewed colonial leaders as children, remarking disparagingly that Grantley
Adams behaved like a schoolboy who “had not studied his papers” (pp. 38–39) during the federal negotiations. Manley summarized nationalist sentiment by saying that “the most liberal-minded members of a world-governing country do not believe in the effectiveness of any colonial people to govern themselves, except ... where they are people of their own race” (p. 52). Realistically, “it is not racial differentiation that has led to the denial of equality, but the social constraints placed on the scope of equality that has led to the racial categorization of humanity” (Malik 1996:39).

Mawby accounts for the role of ideology in shaping the outlook of Manley and Bustamante (Jamaica), Gomes and Williams (Trinidad), Adams and Barrow (Barbados), Bird (Antigua), Bradshaw, Southwell, and Webster (St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla), Marryshaw and Gairy (Grenada), and Compton (St Lucia). He credits “small islands” leaders with making important contributions to the independence struggles by using the labor movement to force capitalists to bargain with workers which typically roiled British officials (pp. 125–80).

In analyzing the “bitter controversies that raged between Adams, Manley and Williams” over the federal negotiations, Mawby explains why neither Manley nor Williams was keen on becoming prime minister of the West Indies Federation; constitutional reform at the territorial level was ahead of the federal process, and the British refused to provide realistic financial commitments to the federation. The United Kingdom showed favoritism to Manley because his “desire for a weaker federal center facilitated the Fabian tactics of the British” (pp. 150–51). The Colonial Office also informed Manley that Jamaica would “face no threat, undue pressure or punitive action ... should they pursue unilateral independence” (p. 160). Jamaica’s role in the collapse of the federation was facilitated by the United Kingdom.

Mawby explains how the British Labour Party, organized labor and Conservatives in British politics collectively undermined Cheddi Jagan and boosted Burnham’s political fortunes to secure Cold War and other objectives (pp. 80–92, 180–205). He discusses Williams’s opportunistic behavior on Chaguaramas and his opposition to freedom of movement within the federation, Manley’s opposition to a customs union, the United Kingdom’s sponsorship of Errol Barrow’s attempt to promote the Little Eight option, and the impact of Gairy’s manipulation of the Grenada working class via party and labor politics.

His analysis of “order and disorder” (pp. 181–232) implies that the U.S.-led hegemonic (postimperialist) strategy was attractive to British economic and geopolitical interests around the world. However his argument that British policy in British Guiana signaled a “more realistic view of Jagan’s programme than did the Americans” (pp. 231–32) is inattentive to the way this reflected British business anxiety in the face of the rapid expansion of American geopo-
political and economic power in the Anglophone Caribbean. Mawby’s analysis of authoritarianism misses the point that it was impossible to achieve “demotic power” by dividing the working classes along lines of ethnicity, gender, party politics, and labor unionism. His silence on the contributions Anglophone Caribbean women made to the independence struggles via the political parties and labor movement and beyond is unfortunate.

This benchmark study should appeal to political leaders, scholars, college students, and others interested in the strategy the British devised to supervise the termination of their Caribbean empire.

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Reference