B.W. Higman


Scholars of the Caribbean have long been familiar with the work of Barry Higman. Indeed it is hard to think of any other historian who has had such a profound impact on the history and therefore our contemporary understanding, of that complex region. What is remarkable about Higman’s work is not merely its range—embracing every specialist aspect of historical research, from archaeology to oral history—but his ability to breathe new life into areas that seemed settled and indisputable. The end result has been a string of invaluable books, from his early pioneering demographic studies to Jamaican Surveyed (and its brilliant recreation of the mapping of a complex geography) through to Montpelier Jamaica—a local case study which is a total study, bringing together findings across the historiographical range. Not satisfied with his work on the Caribbean, Higman has made similarly important contributions to the history of his native Australia (on domestic servants) and recently more global studies (on food).

Anyone embarking on a history of the Caribbean is faced with a complexity of problems. What, for a start, do you mean by the Caribbean? And how do you provide a chronological and analytical narrative that embraces widely divergent geographies, nationalities, and peoples over, say, a millennium? If any single historian is qualified to tackle the topic, Higman is surely the best. A Concise History of the Caribbean represents his earlier work, projected onto a wider regional canvas, and gives a clear sense of the impact Higman has had both on the written historiography and the way the teaching of that history has been transformed over the past thirty years—in large measure because of his work.

In some respects Higman has chosen what appears to be a conventional approach. He divides the book into its obvious major historical themes, beginning with regional topography, native peoples, and successive settlement of
outside peoples and flora and fauna. But throughout he weaves a persuasive narrative, part social, part political, which locates the local island stories within their regional and hemispheric setting. And at every turn he reveals himself not only to be a master of the literature but a critical guide to issues that others have missed or merely referred to in passing. The book is also a masterly feat of compression: Higman manages to pack a great deal of information into a concise volume without ever giving a sense of cutting historical or evidential corners. There is little that eludes his critical gaze, from foodways to architecture, from names to clothing.

This is as fine a single volume study of the region as we are likely to get. And if we set this volume alongside Higman’s earlier work it is possible to make some assessment of his remarkable contribution to historical scholarship. His work has a resonance which ought to be recognized on a much wider platform. As a scholar who has ranged far and wide across the historical discipline, he has emerged as one of the most distinguished historians of his generation: a master craftsman both in the most minute of historical case studies, and a historian able to handle the grand sweep of historical narrative with aplomb. A Concise History of the Caribbean is a rare book—an important study for all students of the Caribbean, but with a resonance that goes well beyond the Caribbean itself.

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