Perry Gauci


To contemporaries, absentee planter and London politician William Beckford (1709–70) was a vibrant, dominating figure who straddled the empire. Born and raised in Jamaica where he owned some of its largest sugar plantations, he moved to England where he became an M.P. for Shaftesbury and Petersfield, and later an alderman of London, an M.P. for it, its Sheriff, and twice its Lord Mayor. To historians, however, he is a shadowy character, alluded to in passing or more often ignored. Oxford historian Perry Gauci redresses this undesirable situation with his remarkably full-bodied biography. The challenges were great: few family and estate papers have survived to detail Beckford's family life, and few manuscripts have surfaced to probe his inner state. Yet Gauci perseveres, offering not only “the first full biographical treatment, committed to exploring the many sides of this multifaceted man,” but also a case-study of the impact of empire (p. 2).

By design, the book is equal parts Jamaican history and English history, and that turns out to be one of its great strengths. “As one of the very few politicians to have experienced the growth pangs of empire at first hand on both sides of the Atlantic,” Beckford’s life “offers a privileged view of the process at a key stage, presenting a most informed perspective on how empire challenged Britain’s political, social, and cultural norms” (pp. 1–2). It was, Gauci argues, Beckford’s “multifarious businesses [that] led him to construct far reaching networks that ... illuminate societies on both sides of the ocean” (p. 3). Refreshingly, Gauci does not mislead. Beckford was a true “transatlantic man.”

No mere “life and times” study, this biography presents Beckford as “a transatlantic figure at the center of networks that helped to sustain imperial development at a critical stage” (p. 5). The first two chapters focus on Beckford’s Jamaican origins and early years; remaining chapters analyze the years he resided in England. Chapter 1 introduces his family—his grandfather Colonel Peter Beckford; his father Speaker Peter Beckford; and the Speakers’ eleven children, the second of whom is Gauci’s subject. The rise of this family in Jamaican planting and politics was not based on enterprise and endurance alone, but also on connections overseas, chief of which were with distant cousins in the City of London, where Caribbean trading and government contracting grew substantially in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Education also mattered. William Beckford was sent to Westminster School in London at the age of ten. Mixing with Scots and the sons of other Caribbean planters, he did not suffer “any acute crisis of identity” there; indeed, early schooling “helped to confirm
his trajectory as a transatlantic figure” (p. 25). From there he moved up to Balliol College in 1725 and, for the study of medicine, the University of Leiden in 1732. On completing his education, he interned in a Parisian hospital. Still, as things transpired, personal success depended less on education than on supervision of Jamaican estates, management of Atlantic networks, and shuttling between Kingston and London (which he did at least six times). Time and again, plantation crises drew Beckford back to the island; in turn, colonial issues drove him back to England, in search of governmental support.

Beckford’s return to Britain in 1745 opened a new chapter in his life, marked by the purchase of the large Fonthill estate in Wiltshire. Thereafter, advance was swift. Aristocratic connections, bribes, and adoption of popular positions furthered his political career, as did the promotion of both colonial and metropolitan agendas. Indeed, Gauci stresses “the interconnectedness of his ambitions in Jamaica and Britain” (p. 53). London, of course, stood at the center of his life, as it would have to if he was to rise politically. By the mid-1750s, he was a prominent speaker in Parliament, on matters dear to the hearts of City constituents (such as Jewish naturalization or the construction of Blackfriars Bridge) and fellow planters (such as island security, the location of the capital, or the misfeasance of Governor Knowles). Alliance with Pitt the Elder in 1756 further fueled the rise. During the Seven Years War, issues of national and regional security and ideas about individual liberties of legislators overlapped, first as Beckford and Pitt stood in opposition to the Newcastle ministry and then as Pitt ran the war. During the 1760s Beckford emerged as a preeminent radical spokesman, “one of the first and most strident movers for parliamentary reform” (p. 107). As Pitt’s ability to manage affairs firsthand declined, he entrusted their care to Beckford, who led the Chatham Whigs in the Commons. Throughout his chronologically-driven narrative, Gauci emphasizes the relationship between province and metropole, especially the influence that creole roots and interests exerted on absentee. In and out of Parliament, Beckford could never divest himself of his affiliations. In particular, “his conception of rights and liberties” (p. 107) was forged in battles fought between governor and assembly and deployed in parliamentary debates over the Stamp Act, general warrants, and the Townshend Revenue Act.

What may be of greatest interest to readers of the NWIG will be the book’s depiction of absentee planters. Gauci posits that Beckford “epitomized the predicament of his fellow Caribbean absentees as they adapted to life in the mother country. Although blessed with considerable financial resources, which secured access to elite circles, their path to social acceptance was often problematic [so that Beckford faced an] uphill battle … in attempting to assimilate himself fully into the national hierarchy” (p. 162). The absentee would not, per-
haps could not, “shed his Creole colors completely and actively sought the company of ... fellow absentee [and although] education, cultural tastes, and raw patriotism helped him to blend into British society, he retained an exotic character, which his controversial political profile did little to diminish” (p. 162). “Any advancement of his metropolitan interest could only be built on the success of his plantations, and this ensured that he remained transatlantic in outlook even as he immersed himself in British society” (p. 163). It was, if true, a frustrating predicament for Beckford. Whether it was the fate of other absentee must await further study.

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