Richard S. Dunn

A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. x + 540 pp. (Cloth US\$39.95)

“I have spent forty years working on this project,” writes Richard Dunn in the prologue to *A Tale of Two Plantations*. It shows. This comparative study of a sugar plantation in western Jamaica (Mesopotamia) and a mixed-farming plantation in northern Virginia (Mount Airy) is simply unparalleled in its detail. Dunn offers biographical sketches not only of individual slave lives but of entire family histories across generations, including detail on 2,076 slaves in Jamaica and Virginia. His attempt to bring “to life some very hidden people” (p. 1) certainly succeeds to a degree that no other historian has managed to do. The book is accompanied by thirty-seven appendixes offering more evidentiary detail and a separate website (www.twoplantations.com) that allows readers to explore individual slaves’ stories and family histories to an even greater degree. Dunn “was determined to present the Mesopotamia and Mount Airy slaves as people rather than as digits” because he was “very averse” to the kind of “mathematical modeling” that he saw with “cliometricians” (pp. 15–18). He certainly deserves credit for taking the time to develop richer biographical sketches of so many enslaved people, tracing individual slave lives from 1762 to 1833 in Jamaica and from 1808 to 1865 in Virginia and Alabama. The records did not allow him to explore parallel chronologies, but they did offer the opportunity to examine slavery in its last sixty to seventy years in the U.S. South and in the Caribbean.

Dunn’s comparative approach contributes to a rapidly growing literature on the diversity of slave systems in the Americas. The two systems he contrasts were strikingly different in terms of the demands of the labor regime, slave fertility and mortality rates, and black to white ratios. He also traces the movement of Mount Airy slaves into the Deep South to work on cotton plantations in Alabama. With this step, he is able to compare, to some degree, three different slave systems albeit at different points in time, engaging with recent work on the Cotton South by Walter Johnson and Edward Baptist.¹ Dunn writes that he tried to avoid the “trap” of determining which slave system was “better” or “worse” (p. 18). He stresses the brutality of the labor regime and the corporal punishments in Jamaica alongside the cruelty of separating families and forcing relocation at Mount Airy, stressing that every slave system had its own horrors.

1 Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams* (2013); Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told* (2014).

Dunn's evidentiary base includes plantation correspondence and business records such as plantation inventories. He does an admirable job of teasing out everything the records can reveal about the lives of the enslaved, but still struggles with records that simply cannot always reveal the day-to-day realities of slavery or the internal lives and the mental worlds of slaves, particularly in Jamaica. For Mount Airy, Dunn was actually able to analyze letters written by slaves or for slaves, and to examine daily work logs. To fill the gaps in the Mesopotamia records, he turned to the rich diary of the Jamaican overseer Thomas Thistlewood, who lived and worked in the same parish (Westmoreland) as the Mesopotamia estate. This diary has been analyzed extensively by Douglas Hall, Philip Morgan, and Trevor Burnard,² but Dunn offers some fresh perspectives on Thistlewood's discussions and uses them to elucidate plantation life at Mesopotamia.

Dunn alternates chapters on Mount Airy and Mesopotamia, examining common themes such as work regimes, racial dynamics, demographics, and family histories. For Mesopotamia, which was home to Moravian missionaries, he examines the role that the missionaries played on the estate and their interactions with slaves. For Mount Airy, he follows the movement of slaves to Alabama, a migration that has no parallel at Mesopotamia.

Overall, this is a beautifully written, deeply erudite, and fascinating study, the culmination of a life's work. It explores a rich variety of slave experiences and recovers the stories of thousands of individual slaves. It is probably too long to assign in its entirety to undergraduates but it should interest specialists and nonspecialists alike, and may even command a more popular audience. It should be required reading for anyone interested in slavery in the Caribbean or the nineteenth-century South. Dunn demonstrates exactly how much a talented historian can uncover with decades of careful research into individual plantation records.

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2 Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery* (1989); Philip D. Morgan, *Slaves and Livestock in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica, William and Mary Quarterly* 52(1) (1995); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* (2004).