Sarah Barber

The Disputatious Caribbean: The West Indies in the Seventeenth Century. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xiii + 267 pp. (Cloth US\$95.00)

Sarah Barber characterizes the seventeenth-century Caribbean as a “disputatious” arena, where local forces and imperial ambitions clashed in a fight for control over one of the early modern world’s most contentious zones of colonization. Rather than seeing the “controversy, active doubt, and confusion” (p. 1)—or “disputatiousness,” as she puts it—that shaped society on the islands during the Stuart monarchies as an accidental byproduct of the period before British imperial ambitions were fully realized, she views these traits as foundational elements of early modern colonialism. Focusing solely on the British colonies, she reframes personal animosities, local and metropolitan political contests, and resistance from servants and slaves through this prism, insisting that “conscious design” (p. 7) drove the competing interests of her subjects. Metropolitan officers’ intentions manifested as a determination to create a strong London-centric empire; for colonists their desires were more “libertarian” (p. 196), centered on achieving local control and maintaining a level of independence from the metropole. Using a methodology that concentrates on the lived experience of a range of colonists and imperial officials, Barber claims that “the importance of the seventeenth-century Caribbean is reinstated” (p. 7) in the broader framework of British colonialism in the Americas. Ultimately, she concludes that increased factionalism in the islands, caused by constant “disputatiousness,” led to the demise of local power, allowing the imperial design of London to win out by the first decades of the eighteenth century.

Barber’s attention to the circum-British Caribbean (in which she includes Suriname, the Carolinas, and Bermuda, as well as Jamaica, Barbados, and less prominent British islands) and to a wide range of colonial sources provides readers with a strong sense of the contentiousness that existed at all levels of society. Mining national and local archives in the West Indies, England, and the United States, she is attuned both to narratives commonly associated with the British colonies and to less familiar actors and events. She juxtaposes famous incidents (such as the assassination of the Leeward Islands’ Governor Daniel Parke at the turn of the eighteenth century, or the Civil War era disputes over land grants on Barbados) against the disruption caused by the marriage of Jane Long, a white woman, to Peter Perkins, a free man of color on Barbados in the 1680s, and Mary Pole’s social elevation into the Caribbean elite via a series of strategic marriages at the end of the seventeenth century. Similarly, Barber places accounts of the rise of sugar production, the development of maroon communities, and the influence of piracy alongside the role of lace importation

in connoting women's status, the dichotomous nature of gardens as places of both tranquility and production, and the significance of scarification in demonstrating belonging or exclusion across African, European, and Native American populations.

For all that these rich examples demonstrate about the various levels of "disputatiousness" that characterized the seventeenth-century British Caribbean, Barber does not provide the strong analytical framework that would make clear the significance of the events she describes. While the introduction promises to break down "existing orthodoxies" and show the emergence of "new patterns" (p. 6), she never explicitly states how she is engaging current scholarship on the region. Neither does her account live up to her claims that she will avoid "Euro-hegemonic structural concepts" (p. 7), given her focus on the machinations of elites, and elite ideologies, on both sides of the Atlantic. Her assertion that she brings a "multidisciplinary fluidity" (p. 7) to this subject is also unfounded; despite her analysis of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* in her discussion of race, Barber rarely strays from historical analysis. And her concluding point—that the independent streak in the British Caribbean was ultimately undone by its "disputatiousness," while on mainland North America the colonies "continued uppity and unruly" (p. 196), leading eventually to the American Revolution—is confused by her inclusion of the Carolinas as part of the British Caribbean. Why did these continental colonies break with Britain rather than following the rest of the Caribbean, remaining cowed by the imperial project? In the end, the most successful aspect of Barber's approach to the Caribbean may be that she gives her readers a sense of the confusion and doubt that characterized the region in the seventeenth century. Specialists will find her approach nuanced and appreciate her attention to a broad range of West Indian actors, but others may struggle to place this work within the broader history of British colonialism in the Americas.

Jenny Shaw

Department of History, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa AL 35487, U.S.A.

jenny.shaw@ua.edu