Kit Candlin & Cassandra Pybus

Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015. 241 pp. (Cloth US\$49.95)

Free women of color who accumulated considerable wealth during slavery in the British Caribbean have already been the object of historical inquiry. What distinguishes *Enterprising Women* from previous studies is its geographic reach beyond Barbados to Grenada, Trinidad, and Demerara, where such women emerge from anonymity. Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus offer fascinating glimpses into the world of these women, most of whom were once slaves to become wealthy, influential entrepreneurs largely through their own efforts, without the assistance of white males that has been commonly presumed in Caribbean historiography.

Based on archival and secondary sources, the book begins with a brief introduction outlining the geographic parameters and aims of the study. Chapter 1 deals with British expansion in the Caribbean. Chapters 2–5 focus on the lives of elite free women of color. Chapter 6 takes up the way they perceived their long-term relationships with white men, and Chapter 7, one of the most interesting, deals with the choices made by their children and grandchildren.

Candlin and Pybus posit that some women were willing “to provide intimate companionship and facilitate the wheels of domesticity, but it was not their sole or primary aim” (p. 97). They were not “grasping, manipulative and dependent” (p. 36). Many were prominent enterprising women, among them Rachael Pringle Polgreen, owner of the Royal Naval Hotel, “the life of Barbados” (p. 36), which catered to the elite, even British royalty, in the 1780s. Rachael Polgreen accumulated real estate and owned 38 enslaved people, most of whom she distributed to white acquaintances upon her death in 1791. Likewise, the mixed-race Susannah Ostrehan, “the most enigmatic entrepreneur” of her time (p. 89), bought and manumitted members of her family (including her own mother), accumulated considerable wealth, owned enslaved people, and left generous bequests to her white male friends and extended family.

In Trinidad during the late 1790s, Rosetta Smith, a woman of color, became the lover of the British governor, Thomas Picton, and bore him four children. Together, they managed a profitable slave-catching enterprise, and a large government contract. Considered an astute businesswoman, she conducted business in Grenada and Venezuela, and acquired houses, land, plantations, and many enslaved people. The mixed-race Judith Philip of Grenada, more flamboyant than Smith, was a member of the plantocracy who owned a great deal of land, as well as cocoa and coffee plantations and enslaved people. She became “one of the most successful slaveholders in the Caribbean” (p. 57). A mark of her

success and standing in Carriacou—the base of her economic operations—was the influence she wielded at the level of the judiciary, as evidenced by her intervention in a case brought against Jose, one of her enslaved men, who became embroiled in a domestic dispute and was charged with malicious wounding in 1834. Judith Philip hired an English defense lawyer and solicited the help of white planters. In spite of a spirited defense, the judge found Jose guilty, which led to a death sentence. She intervened by organizing a petition for clemency signed by major planters and well-placed elites. The file was sent first to Barbados and then to London, where the colonial secretary decided that a period of hard labor would suffice.

Of the free women of color discussed in *Enterprising Women*, the mixed-race Dorothy Thomas, “The Queen of Demerara,” stands out. Born a slave in Montserrat around 1756, Dorothy Thomas purchased her freedom and that of her three children in Dominica from her owner who fathered two of her children. She and Joseph Thomas, a merchant from Grenada engaged in inter-island commerce, established an intimate relationship, but it appears that she was financially independent. In Grenada, Dorothy Thomas opened a hotel and pursued other business enterprises. She employed enslaved women to huckster merchandise door-to-door. In time, she moved on, first to the more lucrative Barbados, and later to the new frontier, Demerara, where she established her fortune buying and selling property, hiring out enslaved people, using others as hucksters, and managing a prestigious hotel, charging patrons exorbitant rates. She purchased her mother’s freedom and passed on her wealth and extensive personal connections to her extended family.

The fragmentary state of the data notwithstanding, Candlin and Pybus are on solid ground in presenting free women of color primarily as strong, independent, and savvy entrepreneurs who fashioned their own destinies. What matters is not whether they profited from their relations with white men, but how they used their ingenuity and wit to construct their empires. *Enterprising Women* is an excellent, well-written book. That said, it would certainly have been enhanced if it had included black women and drawn on “Women and Property in Bridgetown: Barbados at Emancipation,” the 2007 dissertation (UWI, Cave Hill, Barbados) of the late Cheryl Ann King.

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