Colleen A. Vasconcellos


While the history of enslavement in the Caribbean has received much attention over the past years, historians have not sufficiently studied the experience of enslaved children in the region. Slavery, Childhood, and Abolition in Jamaica, 1788–1838 is the first book committed exclusively to exploring their experiences. Through an examination of the “growing abolitionist movement unfolding in Europe” (p. 7) and the responses of Jamaica’s sugar planters, Colleen Vasconcellos has delineated the changing interpretations of childhood, but mainly from the point of view of the planter class. The book consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion.

Her work builds on unpublished studies of enslaved children in Jamaica conducted between 1987 and 1990, and on broader studies of gender, family, sex, health, mortality, and nutrition that feature children. These studies have been carried out by a number of prominent specialists in Caribbean history, including Richard Sheridan, Kenneth Kiple, Lucille Mathurin Mair, Douglas Hall, Elsa Goveia, B.W. Higman, Hilary Beckles, Trevor Burnard, and Verene Shepherd. At the same time, Vasconcellos’s work offers an introduction to children’s acts of resistance deduced from archival and printed primary sources. Slave court records, for instance, are used to indicate various means of child resistance such as “acts of theft, violence, vandalism, arson” (p. 33). Analysis of the ways that parents and other adult slaves factored into such acts is lacking in this analysis, making it difficult to decipher the extent to which the children may have acted independently. Nevertheless, the book covers a critical period in British Caribbean history, marked by amelioration of conditions, the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, and the notorious apprenticeship system, which bore resemblance to slavery.

During 1788–1838, slaveholders grappled with the challenges of slave resistance and pressure from abolitionists, and eventually introduced measures of improvement designed to prolong slavery and adopted to thwart the efforts of abolitionism. Planters in Jamaica had long resisted amelioration, which resulted in the introduction of harsher slave laws, including those enacted in the years after the 1760 slave uprising led by Tacky. Consequently, violent resistance remained an endemic feature of the second half of eighteenth-century Jamaica, a situation that became even more urgent for the island’s planters, especially in light of the revolutionary effects of the 1791 slave uprising in neighboring Saint-Domingue. Vasconcellos stresses that the planters decided on
amelioration without adequately exploring the input of enslaved people, particularly children.

Of special interest to abolitionists was the fact that enslaved people were having children in spite of the harsh realities of slavery and the high infant and child mortality rates on the plantations. However, Vasconcellos’s discussion of the way abolitionists helped to introduce amelioration facilitates an understanding of decisions that impacted enslaved children, including mass baptism and indoctrination by clergymen. But pace Vasconcellos’s assertion that Protestant missions led the attempts to convert and indoctrinate enslaved children, it was the Anglican Church, the church of the state and the planters, that was tasked by the majority of the planters, as they called on Christianity to pacify enslaved children. Planters grappled with the ineffectiveness of baptism and church schooling as a means of pacifying children, who, like their parents, transformed these into potential routes to a “negotiated” and “conditional” freedom. Clergymen and catechists reported that enslaved children challenged their authority as teachers and rejected their indoctrination.

Chapters 2 and 4 are particularly intriguing. Chapter 2 discusses mixed-race children and is extended to revisit access to manumission. Planters more frequently manumitted these children, but as Vasconcellos asserts, viewing the frequency of such manumissions requires a sophisticated interpretation of race and paternity in relation to the plantation economy. Manumissions in such situations resulted from tying racist viewpoints and paternity to the economic prospects emanating from black bondage. Chapter 4 highlights the way planters attempted to limit the socioeconomic prosperity of children immediately freed by the terms of apprenticeship and the way they were bonded to the plantations after slavery. Vasconcellos also offers an interpretation of the resistance of parents to the restrictions on their children, which builds on the discussion of apprenticeship as a contested system of domination after slavery.

Using primary sources available in Jamaica, the United States, and Britain, Vasconcellos has produced an important contribution to history writing on Caribbean slavery. There is certainly sufficient research to encourage interest in further attempts to understand the experience of children during slavery in the Caribbean, hopefully not only nonwhite children and mainly from an elite perspective. Considering that this study was done primarily from the point of view of the slaveholder, an important stimulus has been presented for further research.

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