Trevor Burnard

Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650-1820.

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Like *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Edward E. Baptist's 2014 study emphasizing the economic centrality, immense profitability, and extreme exploitation characterizing antebellum U.S. cotton plantations, Trevor Burnard's ambitious synthetic study chronicles the origins and implementation of highly profitable, exploitive, integrated plantations in Barbados, Jamaica, British Guiana, the Lowcountry, and the Chesapeake from the mid-seventeenth century to the early nineteenth. "An extraordinary mechanism for generating wealth and prosperity," the system (characterized by large-scale landholdings and slave-based labor forces, hierarchical and race-based management systems, export orientation, high-value per capita output, and application of scientific management techniques) "generated wealth for its owners to a greater extent than any other American or British institution prior to the Industrial Revolution" (p. 3). Burnard argues that the system, devised by "forward thinking entrepreneurial risk takers," was "internally coherent, economically adaptive, politically and socially acceptable, and beneficial for most white people" (p. 5). Until challenged by attacks on slavery from outside the system and a successful slave revolt, the large integrated plantation was "a primary means whereby empire could be made to pay and bring profit to the homeland" (p. 1).

Burnard follows the spread of the system from its invention under ideal conditions in Barbados in the mid-1640s through its more halting adoption in other tropical and subtropical colonies, ably summarizing findings of scholars of individual regions. He focuses primarily on elite planters and merchants who created the system, and on the perspectives of metropolitan officials. Burnard offers a detailed account of the system's development in Jamaica, bringing together his research on comparative demography, the rise of the planter class, wealth accumulation and composition, and the slave trade. He also examines the relationship of ordinary Whites to the developing plantation system in each region, arguing that satisfaction with rewards from small-scale farming or urban employments made many white men initially hesitant to take on the unpleasant duties of overseers. Compensation with high wages, maintenance of relative prosperity and security in nonplantation sectors, and recognition of universal privileges of whiteness were required to enlist enough ordinary free men to work within the system.

Scale economies generated the immense rewards that large integrated plantations afforded. In 1774, for example, the West Indies, with just over 2 percent of the total white population, produced nearly one third of total wealth in

British America, with average wealth of over £1,000 per capita, ten times that of other regions. Planters' most significant innovation was solving "intractable problems of discipline over enslaved Africans" with gang labor. This required men experienced in warfare or the slave trade who were willing "to employ extreme violence against adult African men" (p. 6). Consequently, understanding how slaves "were treated, exploited, and governed, and working out how they responded to such poor treatment" is also essential to the study (p. 3).

The American Revolution was "a pivotal event in the history of plantation America," creating an artificial division of staple-producing societies into two sections (p. 211). This weakened commitment among imperial authorities to the slave trade and then slavery itself, and to the ability of loyal plantation colonies to fight outside opposition. Mainland slaveholders correctly concluded that a slaveowner-controlled national government offered better protection for property rights in slaves. West Indian planters were "increasingly isolated and beleaguered," their political clout fatally weakened (p. 261). Burnard considers gang labor key to the system's extraordinary productivity and profitability, but not all may be persuaded by his assertion that it was fully developed in Barbados by the 1660s. He relies heavily on a purported transcription of manuscript instructions to an estate manager, attributed to Barbados planter Henry Drax around 1679, which William Belgrave published as an appendix to his 1755 *Treatise upon Husbandry*. The only known copy of the original instructions, apparently dating to the late seventeenth century, however, describes a division of labor in sugar processing, but says little about the organization of field labor. It is therefore uncertain whether Belgrave copied the detailed description of gang labor from a variant set of instructions that was circulating in manuscript in Barbados, or composed the material himself based on later labor management practices. This evidentiary ambiguity should have been acknowledged.

Overall *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves* is a masterful synthesis of decades of scholarship on the development of plantation societies, integrating original research on the immense wealth created, the relationship of those societies to nonplantation sectors, the extreme violence required to sustain them, and the reasons for their eventual collapse, despite their continuing profitability, from forces arising outside the system. Anyone interested in the significance of slavery and the plantation system for the rise of early modern capitalism; patterns of social, political, and economic development in slave societies; or the widespread violence required to sustain that system will find much to admire in this insightful contribution to Atlantic World history.

Lorena S. Walsh

Independent Scholar, Middle Haddam CT 06456 U.S.A.

lorenapeterwalsh@sbcglobal.net