Christer Petley (ed.)

Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class. London: Routledge, 2016. ix + 128 pp. (Cloth US\$155.00)

One of the central themes in the historiography of British Caribbean slavery has been the so-called “fall” of the sugar planters from great wealth and political power in the eighteenth century to their increasing marginalization in the Empire over the course of the nineteenth century. This master narrative was introduced in Lowell J. Ragatz’s *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833* (1928) and elaborated in Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). Historians ever since have debated the various degrees to which planters’ downfall stemmed from “decline” in the sugar industry, mounting abolitionist pressure, or slave resistance and other contingent factors. *Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class*, an edited volume comprised of six essays by five historians (originally published 2012 in *Atlantic Studies*), nuances and at times overturns older interpretations of the rise and demise of the planters and briefly suggests new conceptual approaches to the study of the group.

In an introduction that will interest scholars of British imperial as well as early modern Atlantic history, Christer Petley provides an overview of the relevant literature and positions the topic in wider historiographical frameworks. He notes that the defense of slavery by British planters, the first group of colonial slaveholders to receive sustained metropolitan political assault, holds special significance in the history of the dismantling of the plantation complex in the Americas. On this point, he demonstrates a firm grasp of the voluminous scholarship done in response to Williams’s “decline” thesis. More broadly, Petley builds on insights from Catherine Hall, Christopher L. Brown, Nicholas Dirks, James Epstein, and others about the relationship between abolitionism and notions of British identity in order to suggest that contemporary humanitarian and political criticisms of the planters were emblematic of metropolitan concerns over the governance of an increasingly diverse and global empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Petley’s introduction and the subsequent chapters of original research persuasively make the case for emphasizing the durability of British planters’ wealth and political power alongside the challenges they faced from abolitionists and unstable markets. Trevor Burnard examines the consolidation of Jamaican proprietors from “a group of primarily small planters to a group of big planters who had wealth and slave-ownership levels unprecedented in the British Atlantic world” (pp. 21–22) from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century. Burnard’s impressive quantitative research allows him to contend that Jamaican planters’ debts were “manageable” for most of the eigh-

teenth century and that even “well-run” properties were profitable into the 1810s (p. 33). David Beck Ryden analyzes the lobbying activities of the London Society of West India Planters and Merchants during the glut in the British sugar market from 1807 to 1815, highlighting the effectiveness of the group at securing some favorable government policies despite having lost recently in Parliament on the issue of the slave trade. Complicating scholarly tendencies to view British slaveholders as a monolithic group, Nicholas Draper examines wealth accumulation among proprietors of estates in Demerara and Trinidad from 1807 to 1833. He demonstrates that profits derived from slavery remained considerable in these territories, which helps explain how an “apparently decayed planter class mounted so effective a rearguard action in defense of slavery” (p. 80).

Chapters by Petley and Daniel J. Livesay show how cultural and social methodologies can enrich our understanding of the politics of abolition on both sides of the Atlantic. Petley traces how metropolitan perceptions of white creole colonists’ “gluttonous” consumption of food and alcohol contributed to their reputation as people who lacked “civility” and were “perpetually half in and half out of the boundaries of British identity” (p. 86). Livesay’s essay on interracial households in Jamaica will interest scholars of race, gender, and family in the Atlantic world. Intriguingly, he argues that interracial unions did not greatly “destabilize” white supremacy in eighteenth-century Jamaica, but that *de facto* and *de jure* segregation of the mixed-race community fostered social and political conflict on the island in the nineteenth century.

Short books such as *Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class* often suggest more avenues than they can explore. Here, the contributions focus heavily on Jamaica (Draper’s chapter excepted), begging for research on similarities and differences among slaveholders throughout the British Caribbean as well as comparisons to planters in other imperial regimes. More problematically, with the exception of Livesay’s essay, slaves themselves are generally represented as abstractions underpinning planters’ fortunes, rather than as historical actors inextricable from colonial society and politics. Nonetheless, the volume reflects serious engagement with previous scholarship and deep archival research on the part of the contributors. It should invite fresh approaches to the study of a well-trod yet still-vital topic.

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