Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. viii + 279 pp. (Cloth US\$ 41.80)

Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean is another in a slowly emerging set of books on the former Dutch colony of Berbice which the British seized in 1796 and retained at the peace treaty that brought an end to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in 1814. In 1831 the British merged this colony with its sister colony of Demerara/Essequibo to form the colony of British Guiana (known as Guyana since it achieved independence in 1966). These new colonies did not enjoy nearly the same degree of autonomy that the older British Caribbean colonies did, and so the Imperial Government was able to implement legislation and regulations with less difficulty than in the other colonies. Thus they became somewhat experimental colonies for “slavery amelioration,” especially in the decade or so before Emancipation.

Drawing on a wide range of unpublished sources, largely from the British National Archives, and a small but increasing number of published studies, Randy Browne has created a rich tableau of events and experiences that enriches our understanding of what slavery meant for the downtrodden inhabitants of Berbice, and by implication the rest of the British Caribbean. As he states clearly, his emphasis is on the mechanisms that the enslaved people employed to “survive” rather than to “escape” (that is, physically liberate themselves from) the most draconian system of human oppression and degradation. He delves into the public and private *personae* of the enslaved people, demonstrating clearly how their enslavers sought to control almost every aspect of their lives. This is true of all slave societies in the Americas. However, what makes this study of special importance is the large assemblage of archival records that elucidate the subject. We know from these records that there was absolutely no aspect of the lives of enslaved people that did not come in for scrutiny and regulation on a continuous basis. Putting it baldly, enslaved people had no real “private lives.” At the same time Browne shows how their personae came to the fore on a daily basis, as they challenged through disobedience, complaints, and the use of the legal system (mainly the offices of Fiscal [forerunner to the Attorney General] and Protector of Slaves) the fiat of the enslavers. More often than not they lost their cases, especially when they sought legal redress against those in authority over them. However, in doing so they chipped away gradually at the system of oppression, forcing the colonial officials to issue regulations on a number of issues—clothing, food, rest hours, “dancing days,” number of lashes, and the like.

The study also addresses, in two substantial chapters, two important aspects of slavery that have been accorded only modest attention in the published

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© ALVIN O. THOMPSON, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09303006

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literature—the role of “drivers” (enslaved persons who acted as subalterns to managers and overseers), and day-to-day conflicts (sometimes leading to litigation) among the enslaved people themselves. It also engages the cultural life of enslaved people, especially in relation to their traditional religions (usually simply termed “obeah” in the contemporary literature), and helps to reinforce our appreciation of the role of the African “mystic” in their daily lives.

I have a few quibbles about this otherwise solid piece of work. Too often Browne uses term “slaves,” instead of “enslaved people” and “slave owners” in place of “slaveholders.” The distinctions are important, at least to black scholars, who are striving to get the reading public to appreciate that the workers were first and foremost people rather than chattels—as the law commonly defined them. He also views the main focus of the enslaved people as survival within the slavery system rather than escape from it. It is true that only a small number of them managed to escape, except through death, but any careful reading of the ultimate, if not the imminent, desire of these people was to throw off the system of slavery with all its burdens. As a young girl in Berbice replied, when she was asked whether she wanted to be free, “Everybody want free.” This is why “Emancipation Day” is still regarded as a celebratory event throughout the erstwhile “slave colonies”—indeed, increasingly so as time passes. Finally, it is unclear to me why “British Caribbean” appears in the title, since almost the entire text is about Berbice and very little about the wider Caribbean.

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