Book Reviews

Edward B. Rugemer, *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. xiv + 384 pp. (Cloth US\$39.95)

In *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World*, Edward Rugemer explores “the dialectic between slave resistance and the laws of slavery” over nearly 250 years in British America (p. 2). After an introductory chapter on Barbados, where the English first codified racial slavery, he focuses on Jamaica and South Carolina. Rugemer’s wide view and comparative approach allow him to examine the way each colony developed “fundamentally different regimes of social control” (p. 8). Despite similar beginnings, lawmakers responded to locally specific geographies, demographics, crop systems, and especially different patterns of slave resistance. This is a compelling and lucid account of the way Anglo-American slavery evolved across time and space, which complements Ira Berlin’s classic synthesis of North American slavery, *Many Thousands Gone* (2000). Throughout, Rugemer illuminates the many ways enslaved people’s resistance prompted their enslavers to enact distinct laws designed to maintain their fragile control.

Caribbeanists will be especially interested in Rugemer’s analysis of the “militarization” of slavery in Jamaica, which resulted from two major problems that planters faced: the constant threat of armed insurrection and the rise of large Maroon communities. Although the Jamaican Assembly adopted the 1661 Barbados Slave Act as the model for its first slave law in 1664, it quickly began revising its laws to deal with severe resistance. Jamaica’s 1684 Slave Act—passed three years after a law that raised the status of European servants and distinguished them as “white”—not only clarified the status of slaves as “chattel” property for the first time in the West Indies but also “strengthened the coercive force of the colonial state,” in part by enhancing the rewards for capturing runaways (pp. 35–36). White Jamaicans’ concerns were well founded: just six years earlier, enslaved rebels killed at least 20 Whites and many of them escaped to Maroon settlements in the mountains. A few years later, it became clear to

many that “slavers had brought so many enslaved Africans to the island that the planters could no longer control them” (p. 70). In response, the 1696 Slave Act set new prohibitions on Sunday gatherings of slaves and drumming—which had both been linked to rebellion—and singled out the Maroon as a specific kind of criminal: a “rebellious slave” who had been absent for a year and would be punished with “a severe lashing” and transported off the island (p. 71). The law also enhanced the power of slave courts by, for example, allowing them to summarily execute any enslaved person who struck a white man or even imagined the death of any white person.

The divergence between South Carolina and Jamaica became most obvious in the early eighteenth century, when Carolina planters decided to combat resistance through legal reforms that “domesticated” slavery, curbing some of its most brutal aspects. Meanwhile, Jamaican slavery became even more militarized, in large part due to the growth of large Maroon communities that raided plantations and welcomed runaways. Rugemer’s detailed account of the Maroon wars is especially strong and charts how decades of armed conflict resulted in “an intractable and debilitating military stalemate” that ultimately led imperial officials and some planters to support a peace treaty (p. 144). A series of military expeditions over nearly 40 years had failed to subdue strong and united Maroon communities with outstanding military skills, and their presence prevented Whites from expanding their settlements. Peace with the Maroons—initiated with a 1739 treaty—allowed sugar production to double between 1739 and 1760. At the same time, the protracted war against the Maroons had fostered the militarization of slavery through harsher laws and the creation of “a three-tiered military structure” to respond to slave resistance: a responsive local militia, imperial troops, and, after 1739, Maroon allies (p. 121). As Rugemer shows, this regime successfully met “its most severe challenge” in 1760, when Coromantee Africans led a massive island-wide rebellion that was brutally suppressed and prompted new legal measures to prevent future insurrections, including the criminalization of obeah (p. 121).

Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World is an important contribution to the history of slavery in the British Caribbean and the American South and a testament to the value of comparative history. In just over 300 pages, Rugemer reveals the central role that resistance played in shaping the politics of slavery in Anglo-America. He also reminds us that the extreme brutality of Caribbean slavery was not inevitable but rather the result of deliberate actions taken by slaveowners—actions taken in response to “deadly struggles with peoples who would not be enslaved” (p. 121).

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