Susan Clair Imbaratto, *Sarah Gray Cary From Boston to Grenada: Shifting Fortunes of an American Family, 1764–1826*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. viii + 213 pp. (Cloth US\$54.95)

Sarah Gray Cary's family was one of a few elite merchant families in New England that participated in a trans-Atlantic world of letters, communicating closely despite their far-flung ventures. Over the years, members went to Chelsea, Boston, London, Philadelphia, New York, Bermuda, St. Kitts, Martinique, Demerara, and the Bahamas, as well as to Grenada, where Sarah's husband Samuel bought a plantation, "Mount Pleasant," and at least 71 enslaved people. In their letters, the Carys exchanged ideas about religion, morality, responsibility, and business. Susan Clair Imbaratto shows that the family's correspondence went far beyond the two geographic poles in the book's title.

Married in 1772, the Carys moved to the West Indies for over ten years before returning to the Boston area. Imbaratto points out that they lived lives of uncertainty "against the backdrop of the transatlantic sugar and slave trade, slave revolts, and the early abolitionist movement," and explores the "multivocal conversations of a family at the center of a dramatic period of American history" (p. 11). While Samuel produced detailed plantation manuals and their sons bought and sold enslaved people, the family correspondence treated "a range of topics, from everyday matters to philosophy and literature" (p. 71).

The heart of the book relates a tragic story. After moving to the Caribbean, amidst the growing hostilities of the American Revolution, Sarah left her three-month-old infant Samuel in Massachusetts and didn't live with him again until eight years later, when he spent two years in Grenada. Their short-lived reunion ended when the family dispatched the young Samuel to London to study accounting. When the parents returned to New England, becoming absentee plantation owners, Samuel and his brother Lucius took over the "Caribbean trade." Acting as the family's property managers, the brothers amassed significant profits for themselves, their parents, and their many brothers and sisters—although they never collected as much as they hoped for.

Sarah's letters helped to comfort her faraway children, as did the miniature portraits they carried. But what exactly her sons did in the West Indian lands of "mud, anxiety, and trouble" remains mysterious (p. 186). Did they participate in contraband trade? Did they have illicit lovers? Illegitimate children? While they did not tell Sarah everything, there are hints in their commonplace books. Samuel remarked, for example, "I was reflecting that however agreeable to religion it might be to treat the negroes well, it is improper to have any familiarity with them." And "the best guard against that, would be the having more society than I have,—the having a family" (p. 180). But he never did marry. Rather,

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after his parents discouraged an early marriage proposal, he died young, while sailing back to Massachusetts. Lucius, likewise, died single while searching for a medical cure and social connections in England. Shortly before his death, he wrote, “there is in every place a select, a superior society, who, while they mingle with others, still preserve a distinction. Now it is my desire to be one of these ... because it naturally belongs to me to be so” (p. 187).

Imbarrato is a professor of English and her strengths are helping readers understand how the discussion of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction in letters helped to maintain strong family webs. The dramatic historical moment acts as a backdrop when she presents key turning points, such as the 1795 Julien Fédon Rebellion, mostly from the Cary family’s perspective. She also suggests that the Carys were conflicted slaveowners, even though they participated in the ideology of planter paternalism. For example, Sarah’s granddaughter, Caroline Curtis, reported that when her grandmother attended a slave auction she saw a young child with a “sad expression,” saying, “‘I must own that child.’ And so Fanny became hers and was brought up by her mistress very much apart from the other servants” (p. 95). Fanny Fairweather would travel everywhere with Sarah, including to New England, where Sarah’s mother “undertook to teach [Fanny] to read, and she did make some progress” (p. 63). Imbarrato even suggests that Samuel’s inclusion of dried fish in his recommended food rations might “indicate abolitionist sympathies” (p. 63). Yet the Carys did not promote antislavery in their many letters; instead, they wrote about punishing, leasing, buying, and selling enslaved people to further their financial interests.

The Carys did live in a time of tremendous change. One of Sarah’s best friends was the patriot, antifederalist, and author Mercy Otis Warren. Although Sarah was hardly a republican patriot, Imbarrato shows that she nonetheless participated in the innovative spaces that privileged female education and voices.

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