Bram Hoonhout, *Borderless Empire: Dutch Guiana in the Atlantic World, 1750–1800*.

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020. xvi + 271 pp. (Cloth US\$ 59.95)

Until the publication of this book, the scholarly research on plantation slavery in the Dutch Caribbean was limited mainly to Suriname in spite of the fact that the Dutch Caribbean also included three smaller plantation colonies: Essequibo, Berbice, and Demerara. After the British takeover in 1796, their historical records were split between London, The Hague, and Georgetown, and that might explain why researchers have shied away from using them. This book is the first modern survey study of these colonies during the Dutch period. In six chapters, Bram Hoonhout discusses all the relevant issues: the political conflicts among the planters and the colonial officials, the resistance, insurrections and marronage of the slaves, the Dutch variety of mercantilism, the eighteenth-century speculative “bubble” of investments, as well the international character of the colonial elite. Unfortunately, the index is not of the same high quality: it mentions Berbice, but not Essequibo or Demerara.

In addition to the information specific to the three colonies, *Borderless Empire* contributes to some overarching issues. Did the “maroon escape hatch” of Suriname also work in the colonies under review, inversely relating the percentage of runaway slaves to the number of insurrections and rebellions? The answer is yes, but the reference to a “maroon escape hatch” should be replaced by a “Spanish Catholic escape hatch,” because most runaways in this study fled to Spanish colonial territory and were not returned, as they were (or pretended to be) Roman Catholics. Their numbers were rather smaller due to the fact that the Amerindians in the Spanish-held hinterland were more cooperative in returning the runaways than those in Suriname. Yet, the escape hatch did not seem to have functioned in Berbice, where, in 1763, the most dramatic slave uprising in all of the Dutch Caribbean occurred.

Hoonhout also discusses the problem of “Dutch mercantilism,” with an open market for colonial products in the Dutch Republic, but a closed market in the colonies. Thus, the plantation owners in the Dutch Caribbean had to compete with foreign producers in selling their crops, but could not profit from competitive prices when buying slaves, food, and equipment. The slave trade is a case in point, as admitting foreign slavers would have increased the supply and reduced the price of slaves. Hoonhout argues that foreign slavers were excluded in order to protect those from Zeeland. However, there was another stimulus to exclude foreigners. The Dutch investors had poured substantial amounts of money into these plantation colonies and in order to get their money back, the investors needed to obtain all of the proceeds of the yearly coffee and sugar crops. Payment in kind to foreign slavers would have reduced the volume of

sugar and coffee shipped to the Netherlands. Nevertheless, in defiance of these rules many slaves were bought illegally.

Because the illegal economy was so large, Hoonhout concludes that the three colonies he treats should be labelled the “Wild West” of the Dutch Caribbean. Only more mercantilism could have made the planters loyal to Dutch rule. That conclusion is supported by the planters’ warm welcome for the British takeover in 1796. Inclusion into the British empire enabled them to sell their products on the protected home market in Britain. No wonder that after the change of imperial masters the three colonies experienced unrivalled economic growth financed in part by the British consumers, who paid on average a mark-up of 25 percent for their sugar over the price elsewhere. Another financial windfall remains unmentioned in the book: the fact that many planters stopped repaying their Dutch debts due to the severed connection with the Netherlands during the Napoleonic Wars. These advantages were available to all, but it was only the British planters in the former Dutch colonies who were the instigators of the remarkable economic growth spurt during the first decades of the nineteenth century. They had access to more credit facilities, innovated more by producing a new crop (cotton), and were able to reduce their operating costs by increasing the size of their plantations.

This study tackles all the relevant questions. Hoonhout should be complimented for answering them with new information collected from all the relevant archival repositories.

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