
Historians of Jamaica have two main printed sources originally written before 1800 that provide a comprehensive guide to the society, economy, politics, and institutions of Britain’s largest slaveholding island and colony. First and foremost is Edward Long’s *The History of Jamaica or, A General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island* (1774), a widely consulted three-volume work that has been reprinted in two modern editions over the past half century. The second is David Buisseret’s *Jamaica in 1687: The Taylor Manuscript at the National Library of Jamaica* (2011), which includes many details not covered by Long on Jamaica’s history in its first three decades as a British conquest. These volumes are now joined by Jack P. Greene’s edition of James Knight’s *The Natural, Moral, and Political History of Jamaica*, compiled between 1737 and 1746, which nicely intersperses itself chronologically between the accounts by Long and Taylor. Not a great deal is known about Knight, who was a merchant, factor, planter, Crown official, and legislator in Jamaica. His history of the island, deposited among the Long Papers in the British Library, is available to scholars in a manuscript version but this new edition will ensure that it is much more widely consulted in the future.

Knight gathered comprehensive material on numerous aspects of Jamaican history up to the 1740s. Although he lacked access to Board of Trade material, which partly explains the paucity of hard economic data in his history, he did consult pamphlets, reports, and other relevant printed material he could lay his hands on. He divided his account into two volumes, with 13 parts altogether. The first volume covers the etymology of the word Jamaica, the discovery of the island by Christopher Columbus, a description of the Taíno (referred to as “Native Indians”), the Spanish occupation of the island, the British military conquest of Jamaica, the era of the buccaneers, and the administration of Jamaica’s governors between 1660 and 1742. The second volume describes the geography, climate, and inhabitants of Jamaica; the position of the Maroons (referred to as “gangs”) and the treaty made with them in 1738; the island’s civil and military government, laws, revenues, church affairs and public offices; the production of crops such as sugar, rum, coffee, ginger, and cocoa; the island’s animals, birds, fishes, and insects; and the trade between Britain and Jamaica “with some Observations and Proposals, for the Encouragement, Improvement and Security” of the island (p. viii).
Readers will dip into the volume to search for subjects in which they are interested; no one is likely to read the edition from cover to cover. A short review can only draw attention to a few topics covered by Knight, but it is worth noting some sections of particular interest. Knight includes more information on the Taíno than Taylor and Long do in their histories, commenting especially on the role of the caciques as leaders of the community, the organization of Taíno settlements and agriculture, and the death rituals associated with these people. He provides detailed material on the human geography of each Jamaican parish, on the gastroenterital diseases that afflicted Jamaican slaves, and on the complicated political history of the island. He defends the deployment of privateers from Jamaica in the 1660s against charges that the vessels and their crew were pirates. He outlines the different stages in sugar and coffee production. And, as Greene summarizes well in his introduction, Knight specifies the various ways in which White owners kept slaves under control through separation of individual leaseholdings, the heterogeneity of the slave population, the division of the slave community into hierarchical groups based on their degrees of privilege, and public displays by military forces to remind the enslaved about who controlled Jamaica.

The only caveat to this scholarly edition is that, as Greene notes, production costs have reduced the amount of footnoting possible, which is regrettable in a volume of this kind. Some good referencing is included, but there are many pages without notes. Otherwise, this is a splendid addition to the printed primary sources available for Jamaica’s history. The references are accurate save for one wrong date concerning Oliver Cromwell (p. 57). A spot check on names in the index indicates that this has been done thoroughly and accurately. The inclusion of a helpful short essay by Trevor Burnard on the historiography of Jamaica in the first half of the eighteenth century, though emphasizing substantial gaps in knowledge yet to be filled, enhances the volume’s usefulness.

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