

British Merchants in Nineteenth-Century Brazil: Business, Culture and Identity in Bahia, 1808–1850. By *Louise H. Guenther*. Oxford: Centre for Brazilian Studies, 2004. xi + 211 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. Paper, £20.00. ISBN: 0-954-40703-2.

Reviewed by Cyrus Veese

This brief, interesting, and accessible study offers a microcosmic counterpoint to macroeconomic studies of British informal empire in Latin America. Taking as her focus the minuscule British merchant colony that formed in Bahia after the opening of Brazil's ports in 1808, Louise Guenther offers an "anthropological examination" of the early expatriates and the self-consciously isolated community they created. Guenther argues throughout that the legendary British refusal to "go native" helped establish an outward image of cohesion that belied the settlers' preoccupation with minute gradations of social status. To the Brazilians of Bahia, at least, the British became a distinct and unified community.

Early chapters set up the rather awkward position of British merchants in Brazil after 1808. The first British wholesalers arrived in Bahia to profit from their mother country's commanding position in world trade and diplomacy. A favorable commercial treaty, signed shortly after emperor Dom João VI arrived at Rio de Janeiro following his escape from Napoleon's army in Portugal, allowed British manufactures to enter Brazil at a rate even lower than Portuguese goods. The treaty also included a special court system that amounted to extraterritoriality for British citizens. These privileges helped British merchants gain control of 60 percent or more of Bahia's import and export trade by 1855 (p. 13).

Naturally, British commercial preeminence aroused jealousy among Brazilians and other European merchants. Even more prickly was Britain's pioneering opposition to the Atlantic slave trade, a trade that Brazilian planters considered essential to their survival. Guenther shows that many British residents in Bahia ignored London's policy, supplying goods and credit to slavers and in many cases owning slaves outright. Nevertheless, to the *senhores de engenho*

(sugar planters) who dominated Bahia's economy, the merchants embodied a Great Power bent on their destruction. Together the policies of free trade and antislavery "have united all descriptions of the inhabitants of Brazil in one sentiment of detestation . . . of the British subjects," one Englishman reported to Lord Castlereagh in 1812 (p. 22).

This animus toward Britain explains the bunker mentality among the expats that is essential to Guenther's depiction of the colony. The later chapters of the book move beyond diplomacy and trade to reconstruct the process by which the British created their own "social, cultural, and psychological" community (p. 4). The enclave that emerged by mid-century from the early, mostly male, settlers was not simply an organic accretion, Guenther argues, but "to some extent a deliberate strategy of the British merchants for ensuring personal and commercial survival on several levels" (p. 62). The author makes use of the insights of Edward Said, Mary Louise Pratt, and a few other critics concerned with the construction of "the Other," but this is not by any means a densely theoretical work.

The British settled in their own neighborhood, Victoria, in the healthy highlands just outside the main city, where "a never-failing breeze" refreshed their tropical mansions (p. 91). By the 1820s they had built an Anglican chapel (though by law it had to look like a private home) and a hospital, staffed by British chaplains and surgeons. The new institutions made the merchants more respectable in the eyes of Brazilians, even as they served as ongoing reminders of British difference. The enclave certainly held itself aloof from intermarriage with locals. The archives of Bahia's Roman Catholic Church "do not yield a single British name in its marriage records," according to Guenther (p. 68). And it remained very small, numbering a mere 150 men, women, and children at mid-century.

The sense of being *in* but not *of* Brazil defined the British enclave and resulted in a kind of schizophrenia, although Guenther does not use the word. As merchants, the British necessarily understood Brazilian customs. One cloth merchant from Leeds rejected a shipment of drab fabric, exclaiming: "We want no dismal colours suitable for an English November We live in a lively climate, and with people who love to laugh" (p. 76). But the enclave's own preferences remained decidedly

Quaker. The British worked through the siesta, ate heavy foods, drank immoderately, walked long distances under the tropical sun, and scorned the light, loose clothing favored by Brazilians. Although the climate of Bahia was unusually healthy for the tropics, by refusing to adapt at all the British rendered it toxic. “Pooh! pooh! sun can do me no harm,” one tropical sojourner exclaimed (p. 93). As a result, “the British residents of Bahia fell sick often” (p. 104).

The British were as much at odds with their social milieu as they were with the climate. They saw themselves “as uniformly superior to the Brazilians in practically every way” (p. 112). The British found Bahia’s high society wanting, without ever realizing that they had failed to penetrate its upper reaches, Guenther asserts. The true elite, military and government officials and sugar barons, rejected the self-regarding merchants as crassly commercial (p. 116). Even so, ordinary Bahianos seemed to admire the British without necessarily liking them. The colony’s reputation for honesty, thrift, and practicality lives on today in expressions like *palavra de ingles*, meaning word of honor, and *hora inglesa*, signaling punctuality.

The English Bahianos were not perfect, however, and neither is this study. Its main weakness is a dearth of primary sources, which leads the author to base her arguments on relatively few documents. Her main sources are published memoirs and travel accounts, along with some British consular records. Had Guenther unearthed a bit more private correspondence about the merchant elite in Bahia, her effort to put a human face on Britain’s informal empire would have succeeded better. Even so, this is a valuable counterpoint to econometric studies of the role of British trade in nineteenth-century Brazil.

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