

Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450–1680. Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xiii + 347 pp. Illustrations, maps, figures, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$22.50. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82875-0; paper 0-807-85538-3.

Reviewed by Kenneth Morgan

The production, marketing, and consumption of sugar have been analyzed in many books, but most studies concentrate on sugar cultivation in the Atlantic world between the mid-seventeenth century and the First World War; publications dealing with the history of sugar before the age of the plantation are thinner on the ground. The first four chapters of J. H. Galloway's synthetic study *The Sugar Cane Industry: An Historical Geography from its Origins to 1914* (1989) provide a helpful starting point for scholars interested in the pre-plantation phase of sugar cultivation. *Tropical Babylons* now joins that study as the handiest volume on the subject of sugar during the formative centuries of the commercial Atlantic world. The book is well produced. It displays several interesting contemporary drawings of sugar mills and their implements and has useful maps of the sugar-producing areas of some Atlantic islands and colonies. Stuart B. Schwarz has written a good introduction and has edited the book to produce clear, readable prose. However, although endnotes are provided for the chapters, there is no consolidated bibliography at the end of the volume, which researchers would have found useful.

The coverage of *Tropical Babylons*, which comprises nine chapters by different authorities, is mainly confined to the Iberian Peninsula and its colonies. Thus there are contributions on the early sugar industry in Spain and Portugal and in Madeira, the Canary Islands, Hispaniola, Cuba, and Brazil, but there is no consideration of Puerto Rico, Mexico, or New Spain. Nor is there any detailed treatment of the sugar economy of São Tomé and Príncipe, though those islands are frequently cited as progenitors of the system of sugar slavery in the New World. A final chapter on the seventeenth-century Barbados "sugar revolution" is linked to the Iberian theme because of the importance of Brazilian antecedents for the beginning of sugar

cultivation by Bajans. Two broader chapters consider the history of the Atlantic slave trade before 1650 and the expansion of the sugar market in western Europe. However, their placement, as Chapters Seven and Eight, does not work well. A better solution would have been to insert Chapter Seven before the case studies of individual colonies, keeping Chapter Eight for the end. This would have enabled the reader to establish the dimensions and distribution of the slave trade in space and over time before looking at sugar in different Atlantic areas. The conclusion could then have taken up the subject of European consumption as the final stage in the production, shipment, and marketing of sugar.

Various comparative themes can be gleaned from considering the essays together, as they provide considerable evidence of the importance of foreign investment in the early sugar manufacture of the Iberian Peninsula, Madeira, the Canary Islands, and Brazil, and of the circulation of specialist technicians in sugar milling from one setting to another. Several authors highlight the rise to prominence of sugar cultivation in certain areas, such as Cuba and Hispaniola, where it remained ascendant for decades after their economies shifted from a prior concentration on activities like gold mining or cattle ranching, but it then declined in the face of internal problems and greater international competition. The collapse of these economies is a reminder that some places where sugar flourished before 1650 could not sustain the industry permanently. Individual chapters describe the involvement of both the state and private entrepreneurs in sugar manufacture. Some chapters offer useful data on the profitability of sugar, the technology of milling, the deployment of laborers in the industry, and fluctuations in sugar output in response to Atlantic-wide patterns of demand.

The book's omissions, however, will be frustrating to historians interested in the business history of sugar-cane cultivation. Some of these oversights undoubtedly stem from limited source material—though it should be noted that most essays in *Tropical Babylons* are grounded in original research. Nevertheless, the omission of these topics is not explained as being the result of limited data, so it is not clear whether they have just been ignored. Thus, with the notable exception of Schwartz's piece on sugar in Bahia and Pernambuco, matters related to the shipping

of sugar are barely discussed, so we find out little about either the vessels themselves or arrangements for their insurance. The different types of cane sugar produced, and in what proportions, are left vague. The complex sequence of the production of sugar, from the planting of the cane through the milling, boiling, crystallization, and further refining, is discussed adequately only in the case of Brazil, though one essay has an interesting section on sugar refining at Antwerp. The deployment of specialist technicians and field workers is referred to only in passing. Mercantile arrangements with captains and factors for the shipment of sugar are barely mentioned. And more could have been included on the arrangement of sugar sales in European port cities. Readers of *Tropical Babylons* will find interesting discussions of heretofore overlooked aspects of the international sugar economy, but business historians will be disappointed to find that a number of matters of interest to them have not been covered.

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