

Caribbean Rum: A Social and Economic History. By *Frederick H. Smith*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xvi + 339 pp. Illustrations, tables, figures, references, notes, index. Cloth, \$59.95. ISBN: 0-813-02867-1.

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Since the publication of Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), historians have emphasized sugar as the factor that drove Britain's colonial program during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The evidence to support this case is immense in terms of revenue and human cost, for sugar firmly integrated the economic activity between the Caribbean, Africa, and the mainland North American settlements. World System historians claim that the early modern sugar industry succinctly illustrates one way in which the core economies of Europe grew rich by underdeveloping the periphery: stolen American lands were tilled by African laborers who were purchased by European capital. In the twenty-first century, historians still find much to say about the centrality of the sugar-plantation complex to colonial history (see Stuart Schwartz, ed., *Tropical Babels: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World* [2004]). In *Caribbean Rum*, however, Frederick Smith attempts to reorient this half-century focus away from sugar and toward its seemingly irrelevant byproduct. He argues that this beverage offers a much better window for understanding the development of Caribbean society, for, unlike muscovado sugar, which was sent to European sugar bakers for further processing, rum was finished on the plantation both for local consumption and for export. Smith posits that, in comparison to sugar, one can learn much more about West Indian life across both space and time through an examination of the production, marketing, and consumption of rum.

A central theme of this book is the heterogeneity of both the consumption and the production of rum. In terms of technical production, rum is a messy commodity to study because of the considerable range in its production strategies and techniques, which Smith describes in precise detail. The ratio of rum produced per hundredweight of sugar, the quality, and the proof of the spirit varied greatly from estate to estate, crop to crop, island to island, and century to century. Because British sugar planters did not have to

contend with a brandy lobby back at home, they were early leaders in rum production. But after the Seven Years' War, France loosened its trade restrictions on rum production, allowing French sugar planters to market their spirits to North Americans via St. Eustatious and other free ports. The destruction of St. Domingue (Haiti) in 1791 fostered the rise of Spanish rum production as Cuban sugar output accelerated. In order to describe these various production centers at different points in time, Smith relies on an impressive range of printed and secondary sources and presents numerical data from both familiar and hard-to-find sources.

The heterogeneity of rum did not stop at manufacturing. A central theme of this book is the variety of consumption patterns and the complexity of rum's social meaning for Caribbean drinkers. During the slavery era, for example, many Africans are said to have incorporated rum into their belief system, using the spirit in order to enhance their connection to the spirit world. Practitioners of Vodou, Myalism, and Obeah incorporated rum into their rituals, and rum had symbolic meaning for slave conspirators, who concocted blood oaths with a rum base in order to secure loyalty. Planters responded to these syncretic religious practices and direct threats to their hegemony in contradictory ways. Ritualistic rum drinking was a threat, but planters still used rum as both an incentive and an antidote for hard work. In the postslavery period, planters became less conflicted about their workers' rum consumption and attempted to use alcohol as a cheap form of pay that would discourage worker thrift, thereby facilitating debt peonage or worker dependency on the plantation. This unusual management strategy was challenged by low-church groups like the Baptists, who preached the gospel of temperance.

Smith explains how rum served, and continues to serve, as a palliative to stress, shock, and the anomie experienced by newcomers to the West Indies. While present-day rum manufacturers market the Caribbean as an escape from the regimen of the modern world, Europeans, Africans, East Indians, and Chinese migrants who came to the West Indies during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries faced a multitude of psychological stresses and did not think of the Caribbean in the dreamy terms of travel brochures. Places like Jamaica, in the words of one historian, were "charnel houses" for all migrants, no matter what race they belonged to. Smith suggests that the high death rate actually encouraged drinking among recently arrived sailors, soldiers, slaves,

servants, laborers, and planters, who turned to rum as a coping mechanism to deal with the islands' harsh realities. It is cruelly ironic that the temporary escape rum offered only enhanced the death rate of recent arrivals. Poorer migrants, drinking a beverage that was known as "new rum"—an inferior, low-cost rum distilled at low temperatures that was more likely to be adulterated—may have experienced ill health due to lead poisoning. Furthermore, all heavy drinkers would have risked "renal and hepatic failure, which compounded . . . tropical diseases, such as yellow fever" (p. 147). Perhaps one of the most controversial arguments in the book will prove to be the proposition that the failure of slave populations to reproduce themselves was directly linked to excessive rum drinking and fetal alcohol syndrome.

As an anthropologist, Smith approaches the subject of economic history based on "thick description." Rather than presenting neat economic models, or formally outlining and testing hypotheses, he showers the reader with well-documented examples. Business and economic historians will appreciate his generous use of tables and graphs, but the strength of the book is in its explanation of the development of rum-manufacturing techniques and its analysis of variation in consumer preferences for the drink. Smith's heavy emphasis on rum's exceptionalism, however, might offend economists who view the substitutability of spirits as elastic. Smith himself notes the price sensitivity of European consumers, who eagerly drank rum whenever brandy or whiskey prices were on the rise. Challenges to Smith's emphasis on taste for the drink, however, only testify to the strength of a book that will generate more interest in the subject. *Caribbean Rum* certainly widens our understanding of the role of alcohol in West Indian society and opens new avenues for more quantitative research. It will be regarded as an important contribution to the economic history of the Caribbean.

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