

Plantation Jamaica, 1750–1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy. By B. W. Higman. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2005. xiv + 386 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$65.00. ISBN: 9-766-40165-9.

Reviewed by Kathleen E. A. Monteith

Plantation Jamaica offers a fresh perspective on the issue of management of agricultural enterprise, principally the sugar-producing properties of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the British-colonized Caribbean. The author, B. W. Higman, focuses on Jamaica, where absenteeism and attorneyship were most often represented. The management of property by a planter class that was given the power of attorney by absentee proprietors has long preoccupied historians of Caribbean history. The scholarship on the prevalence of absenteeism among the planter-owner class in Jamaica during this period was based on opinions expressed by eighteenth-century contemporaries. Early twentieth-century West Indian historiography emphasized the negative consequences of the arrangement, which were blamed on the poor management practices of the attorney class. The failings of these attorneys and the prevalence of absenteeism were said to have had long-term implications for the social and economic development of the colony. One historian in particular, Lowell Ragatz, was especially condemnatory of the arrangement, but his views were eventually challenged by another historian, Douglas Hall, who argued that management by an agent was not necessarily inferior to the oversight provided by a resident proprietor. Richard Sheridan echoed Hall's view a few years later. And, while subsequent works have tackled the topic of plantation management, Higman notes that no systematic work has been done on attorneyship, leaving "many questions yet to be asked and answered":

What were the sources/origins of the separation of ownership and management that came to typify Jamaica in the period between 1750 and 1850, and how did it affect the profitability of plantations and the growth of Jamaica's colonial economy? How were West Indian plantations managed before and after the abolition of slavery? Who were the managers and how did they relate to the

proprietors, workers, and merchants? What were the costs of communication and exchange? What was the economic and social impact of absentee-proprietorship? Was the system efficient in economic terms? (pp. 8-11)

Plantation Jamaica effectively addresses these questions, utilizing a variety of source materials located in American, British, and Jamaican archives, such as attorneys' letters, plantation papers, manuscripts, journals, maps and plans, slave registers, accounts current, and accounts produce records. The result is a compelling, well-structured, and clearly written presentation.

Higman's central thesis is that the emergence of attorneyship was a positive innovation in plantation Jamaica. The attorney represented a distinctive managerial type, who was assigned to head a hierarchy of managers, supervisors, and workers and was authorized to make major business decisions on behalf of the owner. The attorney therefore represented "a unique product of the separation of ownership and management that typified Jamaica between 1750 and 1850, with the role being a product of the period of slavery, but which remained in place following its abolition" (p. 11).

Part One demonstrates Higman's mastery of the wide field of related scholarship and provides the conceptual framework for Part Two. In this first section, made up of four chapters, he examines the extent of absenteeism and the emergence of attorneyship in Jamaica. He argues that the development of attorneyship was not only related to the growth in absenteeism among plantation owners in the seventeenth century but was also linked to the development of the managerial hierarchy whose members were required to cope with large-scale production and trade. Such a hierarchy, he states, effectively illustrated "the essential modernity of the plantation in slavery" (p. 8).

Higman compiles a demographic and social profile of the typical attorney in Jamaica that illuminates the character of the Jamaican planter class. He discusses at length the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century methods of keeping accounts and the effectiveness of communication technologies of the period, thereby revealing the context in which plantation management was conducted. These are areas that have been overlooked in previous discussions of management in Jamaica and the West Indies. Higman emphasizes their importance, pointing out that the "profitable operation of the

system depended on more than just finding men willing and able to exploit the human and physical resources through harsh management. In order to monitor and ensure profitability, the absentee proprietor needed also efficient modes of accounting and communication” (p. 93). The discussion in Part One also emphasizes the inextricable link between the colony and the metropolis as revealed through the profile of the attorneys, the accounting practices, the passage of legislation, the issuance of regulations, and the creation of terminology.

The three chapters that make up Part Two contain detailed case studies of the management practices of two attorneys operating in different eras. The first, Simon Taylor was in charge of the Golden Grove sugar estate in the second half of the eighteenth century. Taylor’s letters to his employer cover the years 1765 to 1775, a period regarded as the “silver age” of sugar. Isaac Jackson, the subject of the second case study, was in charge of the Montpelier sugar estate, and his letters from 1839 to 1843 cover the immediate postslavery period. From these letters written by the two attorneys to their respective employers we learn the details of the challenges these men faced in managing the two respective properties. Higman concludes the section by assessing their performances through a series of questions based on the theoretical constructs established in Part One.

Their letters show that, far from being irresponsible, neglectful, and wasteful, Taylor and Jackson served their employers well. “They took a positive approach to the making of profits and the exploitation of the resources and technologies available to them. They proved themselves assiduous in visiting the estates regularly and provided detailed accounts to their employers. They understood the details of sugar production and trade, recruited and dismissed supervisory personnel and did what was in their power to increase the work force” (p. 280). Higman convincingly argues that it was not in the attorneys’ interest to defraud their employers. “As social predators, the proprietors and the attorneys had entered into a pact that rewarded them for being honourable and loyal to each other for the sake of robbing other people (the enslaved and exploited free), who were not parties to the ethical contract” (p. 281).

Although we may never know to what degree Taylor’s and Jackson’s management practices were typical of their eras, *Plantation Jamaica* effectively

challenges earlier stereotypes and generalizations about attorneyship and plantation management in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The book is essential reading for scholars of Caribbean economic and business history, and it will surely take its place as a standard text against which future scholarship on this issue will be judged.

Kathleen E. A. Monteith is lecturer in history at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. She is the author of several articles and a forthcoming book entitled Depression to Decolonization: Barclays Bank (DCO) in the West Indies, 1926–1962 (2007) and coeditor of Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage, and Culture (2003). She is currently working on manuscripts concerned with West Indian business history and a history of plantation coffee in Jamaica from 1790 to 1850.