

## **Book Review: The Sugar Industry and Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775–1810**

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Carrington, Selwyn H. H. *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775–1810*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. 394pp. \$59.95 (cloth).

Sixty years after the publication of Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* the debate over the cause of the British anti-slavery movement still rages. Did the decline of the profitability of slavery in the British West Indies provide the material conditions necessary for an effective abolitionist movement to rise? Or was abolition caused a moral revolution in the English populace that overcame a profitable trade and the West Indian interests that represented it? The writings of revisionist historians Seymour Drescher and David Brion Davis have argued strongly against the Marxist interpretation. Selwyn H. H. Carrington's *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775–1810* suffers from a repetitious argument style and a lack of long-term, macro-economic data on such important matters as the volume of slave importation into the British West Indies and the change in sugar prices over time in England, but it nonetheless offers a meticulously researched and convincing rebuttal to these scholars. Carrington's use of plantation papers to analyze the impact of British economic policy on West Indian planters illustrates the mounting losses that planters increasingly incurred as the eighteenth century progressed.

Carrington argues that British economic policy worked to disadvantage West Indian planters from the American Revolution through the era of abolition. Following the lead of Williams and Lowell J. Ragatz, Carrington views the golden era of West Indian profitability as ending with the Prohibitory Act of 1776 that criminalized trade with rebel controlled areas of the mainland colonies. The British West Indies had traditionally relied on the mainland colonies to provide provisions so that they could concentrate their slaves on producing sugar for export. Cut-off from its suppliers by the British parliaments attempts to suffocate the nascent rebellion, planters scrambled to find new suppliers. But they failed to prevent massive hunger and material shortages and the islands spiraled into depression. The end of the American war, and the later promise of plantation revival after the destruction of Saint Domingue's sugar industry, did not fundamentally change this situation. In 1783 the British government ordered that American ships continue to be excluded from West Indian ports. British officials remained more

concerned with punishing the new American nation than reviving West Indian economies. British suppliers in England, Ireland, and Canada were not able to meet the West Indian demand for cheap provisions and the result was high prices that eroded planter profits. The collapse of the plantation economy in Saint Domingue raised sugar prices briefly but rising shipping costs, increasing trade duties, and the English willingness to accept cheap East Indian sugars at their wharfs combined to render planter hopes illusory. As the English embraced Smithian free trade principals for the colonial metropolis, the idea that West Indian planters should have a guaranteed market for their sugars, and high prices, was consistently attacked.

The strength of Carrington's work is his use of plantation records, neglected by Davis and Drescher, to detail how British policies affected individual planters. His linkage of English policies with the experience of planters on the ground in the West Indies is methodologically sound and convincing. Carrington marshals so many examples of planter distress that it is hard not to be convinced of his thesis. Dozens of planter voices fill Carrington's pages with complaints about their lack of profits, worries about losing their plantations to English merchants, and their plans to reorganize plantation production in a bid to make it pay. One of the most interesting stories these records reveal is how planters tried to ameliorate slave conditions in a desperate attempt to make slavery profitable. Planters put more emphasis on fostering the natural increase of the slave population because they could no longer afford the capital expenditures necessary to maintain their labor supply. Chronic shortages and epidemic disease, however, undercut these efforts and this strategy did not pull the planters out of their economic tailspin.

Despite the broad importance of Carrington's arguments *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775–1810* will probably find its readership among specialists. These pages turn slowly, mainly because of Carrington's meandering, circular writing style. The same topics repeat, particularly in the later chapters, even though he has ostensibly adopted a chronological framework for his study. Topics such as the impact of the Haitian Revolution on the sugar industry are dealt with in passing throughout, rather than forcefully at one place in the narrative. The conclusion simply restates his thesis, which is clear from the opening pages of the book. A better approach, that would have increased the value of the book as a teaching tool, would have been to

try to suggest some comparisons between the causality of the demise of slavery in the British West Indies with other New World cases. How unique were the declining profits from sugar and slaves in the British West Indies?

The book would also have been livelier if it had more thoroughly incorporated the actions of slaves. How did the slaves become agents in the decline of sugar slavery's profitability? Carrington mentions events such as Tacky's revolt in Jamaica but overall slave resistance is not figured in to his story as prominently as it might be. Major issues in the literature such as the radicalizing impact of the age of

revolution on the Caribbean slave community are not thoroughly discussed. Carrington does show that planters feared bringing too many young Africans into their colonies, who they thought were particularly prone to resist, but such insights are not fleshed out with details from the slaves' perspective.

These criticisms notwithstanding, this is an important contribution to a distinguished historiography. Selwyn H. H. Carrington has served notice that even in our era of conservative retrenchment that Marxism still has much to offer the history of slavery and abolition.