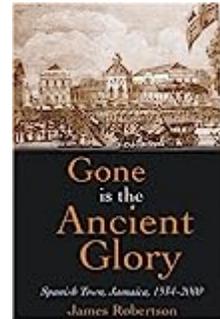


James Robertson. *Gone Is the Ancient Glory: Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1534-2000.* Kingston and Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005. xviii + 477 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-976-637-197-5.



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We owe thanks to James Robertson for writing this book—a comprehensive history of Jamaica’s second city, Spanish Town—on two counts. Plaudits are due in the first instance because, despite being the most economically valuable of Britain’s New World possessions, the Caribbean has still received a woefully small share of historians’ attention in comparison to most other mainland American colonies. Robertson’s volume joins those studies produced by a number of other recent scholars making inroads into the correction of this imbalance.[1] However, by focusing his labors not simply on the Caribbean, but on its urban aspect, Robertson is doing double duty. Throughout Britain’s plantation colonies, the presence and role of large towns remains relatively obscure. Given that during the period before American Independence, this region was home to three of the ten largest cities in the British colonies (Charleston, Kingston and Spanish Town), our comparative ignorance of their character and their importance is even more surprising. Thus, the author has also taken a major step towards correcting this second oversight.

However, Robertson’s ambitious study is not merely concerned with Spanish Town—or St. Iago de la Vega, as its founders called it—during the height of Britain’s colonial adventures in the New World. Rather, *Gone Is the Ancient Glory* seeks to trace the fortunes of Jamaica’s

second city across the entire 450 years of its existence by offering “a historical introduction to Spanish Town” (p.1). In particular, the author wishes to “build on the solid foundations laid by ... local historians” by setting “the changes in the town and townscapes that they knew so well into broader Jamaican and Imperial contexts” (p. 7). As is suggested by the title, those changes are mostly characterized by Robertson as part of Spanish Town’s constant battle to remain at the hub of Jamaica’s politics, culture, and economy in the face of stiff opposition from the other towns that sprang up under British rule after 1658, namely Port Royal and then Kingston. Ultimately, Robertson’s story takes on the quality of a declension narrative, as Spanish Town’s eventual loss of political supremacy, following the classification of Jamaica as a Crown Colony in 1872, sealed its fate; the faded grandeur of Spanish Town’s neo-classical government buildings are the only reminder of long-gone wealth and splendor.

The author tackles his subject chronologically, starting with Spanish Town’s founding as St. Iago de la Vega in 1534. Located seven miles inland, St. Iago would strike English marauders as being oddly placed, but to the Spanish administrators who viewed towns as the nuts and bolts of their colonial enterprise, the site was ideally protected from seaborne attackers, and also stood in the midst of some fertile agricultural land. The town was laid

out according to the regular Hispanic template, with a grid of streets and squares containing principle administrative buildings such as the Audencia, and a plethora of churches. When Oliver Cromwell's troops, pushing his Western Design, took over the town in 1655 (and conquered Jamaica in 1658), this plan was left in place and, over the remainder of the seventeenth century, it was only haltingly "anglicized" with new churches and houses.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Spanish Town was already in competition with the growing towns of Kingston and Port Royal. Despite the growth of Kingston, easy access for planter-assemblymen from other parts of the island and a less deadly disease environment, kept the administrative capital in Spanish Town. The town's status was bolstered by a flurry of public building in the second half of the eighteenth century, which saw English colonists stamp their "modern" classical style on a place that had, up to that point, still looked remarkably Spanish. Spanish Town continued to enjoy its primacy right up until the full emancipation of Jamaica's slaves in 1838; an event that came at the end of a long period of disturbances to its social fabric, which had been first brought on by an influx of American Loyalist evangelical preachers, keen to empower slaves and free blacks through conversion to the Baptist and Methodist faiths.

Following 1838, however, the downturn in world sugar markets and the eventual move of all administrative functions to Kingston, signalled Spanish Town's demise. Despite a new railroad, and an all-too-brief late-nineteenth-century flourishing as a center of banana production and tourism, the town's fortunes never looked like recovering. With fading sugar profits, the planters who had supported Spanish Town's economy through their political activities and leisure pursuits fell from power, taking the town with them. A modicum of bustle would not return until the present day, with Spanish Town increasingly becoming a desirable suburb of Kingston.

Throughout this long sweep of events, Robertson succeeds admirably in weaving Spanish Town's experiences into the larger narrative of Jamaican history; this is never a book about a single town, but is rather a lively account of how larger events—on the island, in North America, and in Britain—affected one place's character and its evolution. There were points, however, at which I was left asking questions about how Spanish Town fit into the broader canvas of urban history. Robertson does not

explicitly explore the role of Spanish Town in a plantation society, a discussion that would have been useful, given past historians' tendency to view urban life as being incompatible with a slave society. How did Spanish Town compare, for example, to Williamsburg, Virginia, or Charleston, South Carolina? Was there such a thing as a "plantation city," or were these towns more distinguished by their similarities to British Atlantic urban society in general?

In one of the most fascinating sections of the book, Robertson describes how slavery affected the geography of Jamaican towns in a similar way. In both Kingston and in Spanish Town, rather than living amongst whites in outhouses, kitchens and attics, the burgeoning population of urban African Jamaicans were confined to slave yards on the edge of town, where they resided in their own huts and (in contrast to the mainland colonies' slaves in Charleston) enjoyed a significant amount of autonomy. This discussion affords a glimpse into the lives of ordinary urbanites, a group who, I felt, were frequently absent from Robertson's story. Of course, this omission may well be due to documentary survival, but all too often the author paints a vivid picture of the architecture and the urban landscape of Spanish Town, only to leave it devoid of people. Overall, the reader is left with an image of a Spanish Town that is practically a ghost town when, as other urban historians such as Christine Stansell and William Cronon have shown, it is the interaction of people with their surroundings that ultimately bestows a city with its character and its structure.[2]

These quibbles are, however, relatively minor ones. Overall, Robertson succeeds in offering a sweeping, yet coherent and engaging, narrative that places urban life firmly at the center of Jamaica's history, and shows us that if we really want to understand the history of the British Caribbean, we need to venture into the town, as well as onto the plantation.

Notes

[1]. Recent works include Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Pedro L. V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City: Bridgetown, Barbados 1680-1834* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003); and Kathleen Monteith and Glen Richards, eds., *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage, Culture* (Mona: University of

West Indies Press, 2002).

[2]. Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois

Press, 1987); and William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

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