



Selwyn H. H. Carrington. *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xxii + 362 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2557-5; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-2742-5.

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The Caribbean Strikes Back: Eric Williams Redux

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In one of the latest books in a long historiographical tradition, Selwyn Carrington tackles the relationship between the abolition of slavery and the rise of capitalism. Carrington's book should contribute to a scholarly debate that will likely intensify, as the bicentenary of the British abolition of the slave trade will be commemorated in 2007. His study builds upon the foundational work of Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), which argued that Caribbean sugar plantations funded British industrialization that, in turn, made slavery an outdated mode of production. Subsequently known as the "Williams Thesis," the Trinidadian-born and Oxford-educated historian delivered the coup de grace to studies that explained emancipation through hagiographies of British abolitionists. Williams powerfully concluded: "The commercial capitalism of the eighteenth century developed the wealth of Europe by means of slavery and monopoly. But in so doing it helped to create the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, which turned round and destroyed the power of commercial capitalism, slavery, and all its works. Without a grasp of these economic changes the history of the period is meaningless." [1] While other scholars had been working on economic explanations for abolition prior to Williams, none had stated the issue so bluntly and with such bold confidence as the Caribbean nationalist and future president of Trinidad and Tobago, much to the vexation of his imperial colleagues in Britain. [2]

After sixty years it is difficult to underscore the importance of the "Williams Thesis" for the study of Caribbean, Latin American, British Empire, African, African-American, and Atlantic World history. Carrington's book is yet another testament to its ongoing relevance. From a survey of the literature, there have been at least two edited books assessing Williams's work and more than three dozen scholarly articles, and in the massive 950-page *Methodology and Historiography of the Caribbean* (1999), edited by B. W. Higman, no other scholar receives as much attention. [3] The most direct and enduring challenge to the "Williams Thesis" runs through the influential publications of Seymour Drescher, most notably *Econocide* (1977), *Capitalism and Antislavery* (1987), and *The Mighty Experiment* (2002). [4] Drescher has consistently argued that the abolition of the slave trade and slavery was not the result of British Caribbean economic decline with the rise of industrial capitalism, but what he terms "econocide," economic suicide as slavery remained extremely profitable. According to Drescher, slavery fell under the weight of a massive mobilization campaign in Britain founded on individual rights and new forms of political organizations. Selwyn Carrington's *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810* is the product of the author's ongoing published debate with Drescher. [5] Twenty years ago the editors of the *Boletín de estudios latinoamericanos y del caribe* apparently spoke too soon when they wrote the debate was closed after providing a forum for Drescher and Carrington to square off. [6]

Carrington's purpose in this book is to defend the "Williams Thesis" from past and future assaults by focusing his analysis on the declining profitability of British West Indian sugar plantations following the American Revolution. His analysis is built upon an impressive collection of sources from more than thirty years of research at the Bodleian Library, the British Library, the National Archives of Scotland, and most importantly the Public Records Office, among numerous others, dealing with the statistical, financial, and managerial aspects of slavery and sugar production. Carrington recognizes his analysis and argument follow that of Williams and the even earlier work of Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833* (1928), but "Williams never had the opportunity to examine the wealth of plantation papers that can help us to resolve the matter" (p. 107). Consequently, the book's overall thesis and argument are not particularly innovative, but based upon a much larger documentary foundation than past works.

Carrington's book is organized by explaining the causal and sequential events that created West Indian decline. He opens by documenting the economic interdependence that linked the British Caribbean with the North American colonies as sugar, rum, and coffee left the West Indies in exchange for imported foodstuffs that fed the plantations. Once Britain severed the link between the colonies with the 1775 Prohibitory Act, the plantation complex had to be reorganized as sugar producers searched for imports from nearby Caribbean islands, Canada, and contraband trade sources. After the revolution, masters in Jamaica attempted to re-establish the old imperial relationship, but mercantilist policies frustrated their attempts to link the independent United States once again with Caribbean slavery. The remainder of the book deals with the failed strategies by masters and colonial officials to restore the profitability of West Indian slavery from diversifying production, dodging debt and insolvency, supplying their own food sources, reducing dependence on the transatlantic slave trade, and hiring out laborers during peak labor periods. In the end, Carrington argues the North American colonies provided a crucial link in the production chain that secured profitable returns on Caribbean sugar investments. Once the American Revolution severed the relationship between the two regions, the chains of British Caribbean bondage began to corrode.

Despite Carrington's detailed argument on decline following the American Revolution, scholars will undoubtedly continue to debate what type of "decline" caused abolition as the epicenter of Caribbean sugar pro-

duction hopped from island to island starting in the seventeenth century. Ultimately, this must be a question for the "New Economic History" of profits and productivity as many have looked at the same data and drawn radically different conclusions. Carrington's focus on Jamaica to the neglect of other thriving British West Indian sugar colonies, such as Demerara, only acquired in 1803, would refine some of his conclusions. Quantitative historians will be quick to point out that while slave imports did not return to their mid-eighteenth-century levels, from 1780 to 1808 over 400,000 slaves arrived in the British Caribbean despite interruptions in transatlantic trade caused by the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. Moreover, if analysis were expanded beyond the British Empire, more weight would have to be accorded to sugar production in Saint Domingue up until 1791 and then in Cuba for the nineteenth century to explain decline.

Ironically, scholars may find Carrington's book much more useful not for its stated purpose of proving the "hypothesis that the British sugar islands declined at the end of the eighteenth century" (p. xx), but for documenting changing labor and production strategies in Caribbean slavery. Carrington's discussion of debt underscores the often-minimized precarious position of planters, as historians tend to describe them as a homogeneous "elite." The so-called "amelioration" policy of fostering natural increase among the slave population reflects masters' recognition of slavery's horrific human cost that literally worked laborers to death. Given that both planters and abolitionists championed the policy of "amelioration," scholars should investigate more closely how these avowed ideological enemies shared many similarities. The interdependence between the Caribbean and British North America emphasizes the two regions need to be studied as a single unit, rather than separate colonies projected backward through the modern nation-state model.[7] His chapter on planters' diversification of crops and adoption of the Otaheite and Bourbon canes indicates the widespread use of science in the service of sugar. The detailed chapter on the system of "hiring-out" slave laborers demonstrates that many slaves likely worked on multiple plantations and in urban areas during their lifetimes. The decline in foodstuff imports from North America placed greater need for slaves to produce and market their own crops, a decisive step toward freedom recognized by various scholars.[8] On all of these topics Carrington brings new evidence to the table, inviting other scholars to elaborate and expand on his insights.

These widespread changes in sugar production at the end of the eighteenth century indicate much more than simply that “[s]lavery as a labour system undoubtedly had run its course” (p. 221). Other scholars could easily regard them as indications of an innovative, dynamic, and adaptable institution, rather than simply signaling an inevitable decline. In explaining Cuban abolition, historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals also regarded many of these similar innovations as decline, despite the fact that the plantation system survived and slavery fell only after a long and protracted death, as emphasized in the work of Rebecca Scott.[9] Part of the reason that these issues are not explored more deeply is that Carrington is tied to a dependency model of historical explanation in which individual actions, dilemmas, and crises matter little in the overall analysis. His own approach to abolition echoes Williams’s belief that “[t]hese changes are gradual, imperceptible, but they have an irresistible cumulative effect. Men, pursuing their interests, are rarely aware of the ultimate results of their activity.”[10] Carrington’s argument that decline occurred long before the end of the slave trade leads him to an anticlimactic conclusion: “In reality, not much occurred in the colonies with the passage of the act abolishing the slave trade” (p. 220). What the abolition of the slave trade meant for masters, colonial officials, slaves, and abolitionists in 1807 is not explored in detail by Carrington.

In a telling and honest statement aimed at showing the difficulty of extrapolating a causal argument for abolition from evidence that illustrates how contemporaries understood the problem, Carrington remarked, “observers always considered measuring the income and profitability of West Indian plantations a very tricky enterprise” (p. 241). After more than sixty years of scholarly debate surrounding the “Williams Thesis,” the issues remain as sticky as Caribbean molasses for many historians. For some readers, the polemical debate over the numbers will call to mind Benjamin Disraeli’s adage that “there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.” Only time will tell if Carrington’s book will live up to the high expectations of Colin Palmer’s foreword as “likely to be the most important work on the economic history of the Caribbean” since *Capitalism and Slavery* (p. xvi). Or, if it can stand against what will undoubtedly be another critique from Drescher and others. While Caribbean scholars no longer focus only on abolitionists to explain the end of the British transatlantic slave trade in 1807, these ideas still circulate widely in the general public and even surprisingly among numerous academics. Even in the popular press that would be

labeled “leftist” or “radical,” British abolitionists continue to occupy center stage in discussions of emancipation. In only the most recent example (“Against All Odds” by Adam Hochschild in the January-February 2004 issue of *Mother Jones*), little attention is given to economic forces with most of the explanation detailing the heroic acts of the abolitionists. The ongoing persistence of these ideas indicates that Carrington is justified in arguing that the “Williams Thesis” still has its place as a critique of British imperial historiography. As the latest advocate in the historical debate, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810* deserves to be read widely.[11]

Notes

[1]. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. 210.

[2]. See for example Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833: A Study in Social and Economic History* (New York: Century, 1928); and William Darity, Jr., “The Williams Abolition Thesis before Williams,” *Slavery & Abolition* 9, no. 1 (1988): pp. 29-41.

[3]. See Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Heather Cateau and S. H. H. Carrington, eds., *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams: A Reassessment of the Man and His Work* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); Seymour Drescher, “Capitalism and Slavery after Fifty Years,” *Slavery & Abolition* 18, no. 3 (1997): pp. 212-227; and B. W. Higman, ed., *Methodology and Historiography of the Caribbean*, vol. 6, *General History of the Caribbean* (London: UNESCO Publishing, 1999).

[4]. Seymour Drescher. *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); idem, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in a Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987); idem, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in the British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[5]. See Selwyn Carrington, “The State of Debate on the Role of Capitalism in the Ending of the Slave Trade,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 22, nos. 1-2 (1988): pp. 20-41; idem, “British West Indian Economic Decline and Abolition, 1775-1807: Revisiting Econocide,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 14, no. 2 (1989): pp. 33-59; Seymour Drescher, “The Decline Thesis

of British Slavery Since Econocide,” *Slavery & Abolition* 7, no. 1 (1986): pp. 3-23.

[6]. See the articles by Carrington and Drescher in “Debate: Econocide and West Indian Decline, 1783-1806,” *Boletín de estudios latinoamericanos y del caribe* 36 (June 1984): pp. 13-67.

[7]. For a recent example showing the possibilities of connecting the two historiographies, see Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy. *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

[8]. The literature on this subject is vast; for an

overview see Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan, “Introduction,” in *The Slaves’ Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas*, eds. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (London: Frank Cass, 1991), pp. 1-27.

[9]. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *El Ingenio: Complejo, económico social cubano del azúcar*, 3 vols. (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1978); Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[10]. *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 210.

[11]. Adam Hochschild, “Against all Odds,” *Mother Jones* (Jan.-Feb. 2004): pp. 66-73.

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