

Kathleen Monteith, *Plantation coffee in Jamaica, 1790-1848*. (University of the West Indies Press, 2019. pp. xv+250. ISBN Pbk. 9789766407261. Pbk \$60.00)

There is some irony in the fact that Jamaica, once the leading sugar producer in the British Caribbean, is now probably better known for its Blue Mountain coffee, one of the most expensive varieties now available. Such a development would likely have been inconceivable to planters in 1750, when coffee exports were negligible, and perhaps equally inconceivable to the remaining planters in 1848, when they were once again negligible. Monteith offers a detailed study of the rise and fall of coffee cultivation in Jamaica the intervening years, thereby making an important and useful contribution to a literature which still focuses mainly on sugar production. Though several article-length studies have been published on coffee production in Jamaica and other islands in the British Caribbean, most notably by S.D. Smith, Monteith's volume is among the first to bring these together into a comprehensive overview of its economic and social importance. Drawing mainly on the Accounts Produce in the Jamaica Archives, she shows that coffee plantations expanded rapidly during the 1790s into the vacuum left by the collapse of production in Saint Domingue due to the Haitian Revolution, but enjoyed only a brief peak between 1800 and 1805 before falling prices and external competition cut deeply into profits. Although Monteith holds back from fully engaging with the query posed by Eric Williams and Seymour Drescher over whether the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 reflected economic decline or caused 'econocide', her conclusion that the sector was already having difficulties by 1805 tends to support the former. That said, the limitations of the Accounts Produce – which Monteith acknowledges – suggest that further studies based on plantation accounts might usefully test these conclusions about wider levels of profitability and the impact of more costly inputs and reduced demand.

Besides tracking the changing level of exports and profitability and providing a useful guide to the mechanics of cultivating and processing coffee for export, the book also intervenes in a number of other areas of interest. Work on pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, John Garrigus and others has demonstrated how coffee cultivation provided an economic foundation for the community of free people of colour, which in turn supported their social and political pretensions. In Jamaica, Monteith shows, various factors meant that this did not occur to quite the same extent, so coffee plantations – like the pens examined by Verene Shepherd – mainly served to provide opportunities for smaller white proprietors, including in some cases women. She also confirms that within the plantations, the intensity of work for slaves tended to be less than in sugar plantations, potentially offering a greater level of economic and social autonomy than the norm. At the same time, coffee planters proved no less open to innovation than sugar, indigo and cotton planters elsewhere in the Americas. Some invested in drainage and fertilisers to improve cultivation, experimented with new ways of organising labour and built water-powered mills and new kilns for pulping and drying coffee, supporting a growing historiography which emphasises that tropical plantations in this period were not backward but among the leading sponsors of innovation. Finally, the book shows that coffee planters benefitted from their connection with the Jamaican colonial state, which built roads, promoted innovation and generally attempted to

provide a secure environment for slave-driven agriculture, though because her chronology begins in 1790, Monteith misses the earlier efforts of the Jamaican assembly to promote coffee cultivation in 1774 by sponsoring competitions for growers and sending samples to the Island Agent in Britain to promote sales.

Taken together, Monteith therefore provides a comprehensive and useful guide to the rise and fall of coffee cultivation in Jamaica in this period, one which supplies a general framework into which the more specific and detailed studies which will hopefully follow – of the coffee planters themselves, their connection with the colonial state, levels of profitability, the experience of slaves – can be fitted. As a result it is essential reading for understanding the economy of Jamaica under slavery.

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