

Book review of sugar and slaves



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The story *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies* paints a clear picture of the English life in the Caribbean about four centuries ago. Using a variety of sources available, Richard Dunn explores the origin and the development of the plantation slave society in the region. He focuses on the sugar production techniques, the violent nature of the slave trade, the hurdles faced in introducing and adapting English culture in the tropics, and the disgusting mortality rates for both blacks and whites enriched these colonies.

A summary of the book

The narration begins in 1624, when the English took control of the tiny island of St. Christopher. From that lonely outpost emerged a “cohesive and potent master class” of tobacco and sugar planters that spread to Barbados, Nevis, Montserrat, Antigua, and Jamaica. The book vividly portrays how the English planters created a living hell in a Caribbean Garden of Eden and how they accommodated themselves to the human wreckage involved in turning the islands into highly successful sugar-producing colonies.

An analysis of the book

The author brings to light the plight the natives of the Caribbean had to endure when the English invaded and conquered the islands. He points out cases of rape, forced labor, displacement from one's homes and deculturalization. The English ruled this colony with brutality. At the book's beginning, the author points out how the early English planters "made their beautiful islands almost uninhabitable" on page (xxiii). Midway through his story, he expresses he highlights that it is appalling and distressing that "from New England to Virginia to Jamaica, the English planters in seventeenth-century America developed the habit of murdering the soil for a few quick crops and then moving along. On the sugar plantations, unhappily, they also murdered the slaves" on page (223). Most tragic is his exacting account of how English colonizers "turned their small islands into amazingly effective sugar-production machines, manned by armies of black slaves" (xxi) and how this altered English cultural values, and ideas. In the author's perspective, this is a dejecting story of human degradation; brutalizing Africans, and of the self-brutalization of the English planters and overseers. He sums up by writing that the English sugar islands, were "disastrous social failures" by the early eighteenth century on page (340), expressing his contempt for the sugar planters.

The brutal treatment the enslaved Africans went through had to trigger some form resistance to the British planters ways as the author highlights on page (256) of the book by writing "The acid test of any slave system," writes Dunn, "is the frequency and ferocity of resistance by slaves". However, even in Jamaica, Britain's most rebellious colony, African revolts had little

effect in bringing an end to slavery. Much more important in destabilizing the British death-dealing sugar economy were hurricanes, earthquakes, malaria epidemics, and French mercenaries. Ironically the authors points out that, “the English planters, who treated their slaves with such contemptuous inhumanity, were rescued time and again from disaster by the compassionate generosity of the Negroes” (262). He goes on to argue that, the enslaved Africans lived indefinably difficult lives, dying prematurely, their attempts to resist brutalization were exercises in futility, and in the end awaiting redemption from of the British oppressors. This is a very saddening experience.

The question of objectivity can be pointed out in regard to the author’s judgment in this book. Richard Dunn seems to be outraged and impatient with man’s inhumanity to man, with unconscionable behavior, and quite pointedly with numerous inconsistencies of freedom-loving British planters making life a living hell on for Africans.

In addition the author delineates the land owner ship and concentration of power. Land is owner by fewer individuals than before. The process began in Barbados with switch from small scale cotton and tobacco production to extensive sugar production in 1640s. Power too was vested in the hands of few belligerent British planters during this period. Moreover inherited ideas and values continued to matter in the British Caribbean but only in limited ways. The writer notes on page (264) that “ In their basic living arrangements–food, clothing, and shelter–the early settlers,” he explains, hung on to English customs. However the author only sees only cultural stubbornness or stupidity in clinging to English habits that did not conform to

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the tropics. They foolishly wore cool-weather garb, ate the wrong food, and built houses absurdly. In all other matters, the English planters tragically abandoned what might have rescued them from the human catastrophe they were creating: they rejected the idea of representative assemblies in order to convert the assemblies into platforms for the master class, sabotaged the militia system because it interfered with sugar production, censored religion in order to prevent slave unrest, made common law a mockery by withholding due process from three-fourths of the population, and discounted education.

Illustrating how the English adapted painfully to the strange new tropical world they labored to control, The writer points out on page (40):

Seventeenth-century Englishmen attuned their lives to the weather, to seasonal change, and to the annual cycle of birth, growth, maturity, and death. But in the West Indies, they found a year-round growing season, year-round summer, and year-round heat. They were used to a moderate climate: moderately warm, moderately cold, moderately rainy and moderately sunny. But in the tropics they had to adjust their eyes to brilliant sunlight, and a palette of splashing colors: vegetation startlingly green, fruits and flowers in flaming reds and yellows, the mountains in shimmering blues and greens, shading to deep purple, the moon and stars radiant and sparkling at night, and the encircling sea a spectrum of jeweled colors from cobalt to silver. They found the Caribbean atmosphere to be volatile: blazing heat suddenly relieved by refreshing showers, and soft caressing breezes capriciously dissolving into wild and terrifying storms. In climate, as in European power politics, the Indies lay “beyond the line.”

The author's stylistic ingenuity especially his to paradoxically narrate and describe the happenings in the Caribbean during the tumultuous era of the British planters, broadens the reader's analytical view of the English invaders who did not go to Virginia or Massachusetts but forced their way into their tiny islands. On pages (337-38) He writes:

Despite . . . close contacts, the islanders rapidly diverged from the mainlanders, most particularly from the Puritan colonists in New England. . . . The New Englanders, through their numerous elective offices and frequent town meetings, encouraged (indeed almost required) every inhabitant to participate in public life, but in the Indies the big sugar planters completely dominated politics. . . . In New England the young were deferential to their elders, repressed their adolescent rebelliousness, and often waited into their thirties to marry and set up on their own, while in the islands there were no elders, the young were in control, and many a planter made his fortune and died by age thirty. In short, the Caribbean and New England planters were polar opposites; they represented the outer limits of English social expression in the seventeenth century.

Conclusion

This story clearly illustrates the dehumanizing experience the Africans in Caribbean had to endure at the hands of the English colonizers. The English planters did not only invade the Caribbean, they conquered every aspect of life the natives had. They did away with the culture, they rejected the idea of representation in the assemblies in order to convert the councils into platforms for the upper class, dismantled the militia system because it interfered with sugar production, censored religion in order to prevent slave

unrest, made common law a mockery by withholding due process from $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population, and discounted education.

The story is same on the mind and lips of many Africans in the world over as it is an actual representation of the happenings in broad African society during the invasion and colonization era. The authors shock and dismay at the brutal treatment meted on the Africans in the Caribbean by the British is totally agreeable. It was dark period in the history of mankind although some have argued that the colonizers introduced civilization in the African society and I totally disagree. Their invasion did more harm if this story is anything to go by.