

Claudius K. Fergus. *Revolutionary Emancipation Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-8071-4988-1. (CLOTH), xiv + 271 pp.

Revolutionary Emancipation is an insightful and piercing addition to the longstanding polemical on abolitionism in the English-speaking Caribbean in the early nineteenth century. To date, the abolition debate branches off into three distinct directions: humanitarian shaped largely by Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (1933); economic popularized by Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944); and revolutionary, given centre stage by several historians such as Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery: Blacks in Rebellion*, vol. 2 (1985); Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Women in Barbados* (1989); and Gelien Matthews, *Slave Rebellions and the British Abolitionist Movement* (2006). Fergus' *Revolutionary Emancipation* is also located within the tradition of enslaved agency but the freshness of its scholarship lies in its new emphasis on the critical imperative of enslaved warfare not just in promoting the abolition of slavery but also in crafting decades of British West Indian colonial reform from the second half of the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century.

Fergus argues convincingly that revolutionary emancipation created the problem of colonial security and dictated the need for colonial reform. He is the first to connect the emergence of the late eighteenth century metropolitan campaign against the trade in captured Africans to Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica in 1760. Fergus declares that while servile warfare was common, "Tacky's War was the pivotal point that informed the pragmatic rationale for abolitionism" (36). The rebellious conduct of the enslaved throughout the Caribbean, Fergus concludes, informed British government and abolitionist policies to end the traffic in volatile humans (95), creolize and Christianise enslaved labour (100), embrace black military conscription (95), decree military emancipation (114), establish Colony Negroes (106-07), insert task work into enslaved labour (103) and, of course, proclaim the emancipation of the formerly enslaved (199). Fergus insists that all of these policies were born out of fear of black militarism and linked to the desire to secure internal security.

Another major position that Fergus adopts in *Revolutionary Emancipation* is that the enslaved did not merely acquiesce in the reforms that their colonizers shaped in response to servile warfare. They jostled and negotiated to arrive at terms which they deemed satisfactory. Fergus asserts, for example, that "the enslaved transformed amelioration into a contestation between privileges and rights as the ethos of power relations between the proprietary class and the labouring class" (164).

Furthermore, while most scholars accept the dominant and traditional interpretation that amelioration failed because of the contumacy of the plantocracy, Fergus' Afrocentric perspective logically explains that credit ought to be attributed to the enslaved who persisted in sabotaging all attempts to keep them in bondage under a sanitized system of slavery. Fergus shows clearly that amelioration "failed to curb the restless yearning of enslaved persons to subvert the authority of the slavocracy" (170-71).

The dual connection that Fergus establishes between the insurrectionary enslaved labour force and the British imperative for internal security is a thread that runs right throughout this monograph even to the last stages of the framing of the British Emancipation Act of 1833. Fergus supports the validity of his interpretation by noting that the abolitionist parliamentary leader, Thomas Fowell Buxton, was "convinced that if discharged improperly, statutory emancipation could unleash as much bloodletting as an emancipation war itself" (183).

Not surprisingly, *Revolutionary Emancipation* profiles a wide cross section of enslaved African revolutionaries such as Olaudah Equiano the African, Mary Prince enslaved in Antigua, the Turk Islands and Bermuda (2), Tacky from Jamaica (5), members of the 1786 British based anti-slavery Sons of Africa (41), Toussaint L'Ouverture of St Domingue, Julien Fédon of Grenada, Chatoyer the Garifuna Chief of St Vincent (79) and Maria del Rosario of Trinidad (163). Fergus includes among these profiles Eshu and Anansi, African legendary folk heroes, who symbolized the ethics of enslaved African resistance and provided the energy for its endurance (163).

Fergus' reading of British abolitionism clashes with perspectives presented by Eurocentric historians such as Seymour Drescher, Roger Anstey, Brion David Davis, Howard Temperley and Peter Marshall whose consensus is that enslavement of Africans in the Americas was a civilizing and redemptive mission and that violent and destructive enslaved resistance hindered rather than commandeered abolition (xii, 73). Fergus provides the irresistible counterpoint that the plantocracy's psychopathic fear of Africans and dread of revolutionary emancipation were fundamental to the selection of reform strategies by colonials and metropolitan abolitionists alike (xii).

With regards to the geographical spread of the scholarship while due attention is given to the British Leeward Islands of St Vincent, Grenada, St Lucia and Dominica, the French Islands of Haiti, Martinique and Guadeloupe as well as to Jamaica, Barbados, Berbice and Demerara, the spotlight is on Trinidad. This might seem odd

since Trinidad was a relatively quiet colony while this work highlights enslaved uprising. Fergus justifies his selection, however, by showing that as a crown colony by the turn of the nineteenth century Trinidad became the test piece for several of the reforms that enslaved revolts necessitated. He argues, for example, that the British policy of closing Trinidad's ports from enslaved African labour was premised on the fear that the colony would become another black republic like Haiti (98-100).

The sources upon which this scholarship is established run deep and wide. Fergus is abreast of the current state of the literature of his chosen field. He is aware for instance that while Roger Buckley and Michael Duffy give currency to military emancipation, Howard Temperley and Peter Marshall renounce the thesis (72). He shows that while Pieter Emmer questions the role of enslaved wars in abolition, Richard Hart celebrates the thesis of emancipation from below (75). He also underscores the fact that the Haitian Revolution remained the best kept secret of European scholars during the 19th century and that John William Fortescue was one of the first scholars to end the conspiracy. Fergus' review of the primary sources is as thorough and sound as his survey of the secondary literature. As already seen, he combs through evidence generated by African sons and daughters and their descendants in the diaspora. He delves into masses of materials left by abolitionists such as James Ramsay (19), Granville Sharp (54), Elizabeth Heyrick (57), Thomas Clarkson and James Cropper (61). The documented testimonies of planter writers like Richard Ligon (2), Thomas Thistlewood (11) and Edward Long (41) have also been consulted. Fergus has also interrogated official correspondence floating between the colonizers in the English Caribbean and the Colonial Office in England such as Assembly enquiries into the causes of major rebellions (2), registrars of the enslaved (116) and reports from the Protector of the enslaved (162). Other kinds of sources upon which the credibility of the book stands include nineteenth century newspaper articles, the writings of European philosophers and acknowledged experts in the field of slavery studies.

Without question, Claudius Fergus' *Revolutionary Emancipation* is a welcome and necessary addition to the historiography of British abolitionism. Founded upon a wide variety of relevant sources, it argues convincingly that enslaved rebellion seriously threatened colonial security and insisted on the need to change the origin, organization, treatment and, ultimately, the legal status of the colonial labour force.

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