

“Bridget Brereton’s Gendered Historiography of Caribbean History”

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Introduction

The contributions of Professor Emerita Bridget Brereton in securing an autonomous space for the study of women and gender in Caribbean history have been phenomenal. She established, developed and taught a full-fledged women and gender history course. She constructed a much-needed Caribbean historiographical survey of the scholarship involved in the engendering process. She advanced the women authored text approach as a sound methodology for making women visible in the region’s history. Additionally, she published several scholarly treatises carefully tracing the experiences and roles of Caribbean women in the past and she produced a number of postgraduate MPhil and PhD students who successfully completed gender centric dissertations. Consequently, to deepen the understanding of, and appreciation for, Caribbean women and gender history while paying homage to Professor Brereton’s critical role in this academic field, these achievements will be closely scrutinized in this paper.



Professor Emerita Bridget Brereton

Caribbean Women and Gender History Course

When Brereton began her career as a history lecturer at The University of the West Indies (The UWI), St Augustine Campus in 1973, none of the faculties had developed courses to include women and gender studies in their programmes. Brereton (2011) was greatly perturbed by this exclusion and expressed the view that St Augustine as a tertiary level institution of learning was trailing behind. In light of the fact, among other developments, that the formal struggle for equal rights and respect for women in the United Kingdom and the USA had been ongoing since the mid nineteenth century as well as the fact that from the 1960s in both countries tertiary level institutions had taken steps to recognize the critical importance of gender studies, Brereton just could not accept the then present state of affairs at The UWI (2011). She was determined to bring about the much needed curriculum revision armed with the conviction that gender is “a hugely important part of Caribbean history and a way of understanding the evolution of our societies” (Alake 2008: 2). Thus, early in her career along with other gender conscious academics such as Marjorie Thorpe and Verene Shepherd, Brereton campaigned for women and gender to be taught as an autonomous discipline.

The first fruit of the gender lobby was the 1979 launch of an informal league called the Women and Development Study Group with units on the three main campuses of the UWI. It was through this body

that Brereton and her colleagues at St Augustine designed and co-taught the interdisciplinary gender course, "Introduction to Women's Study." This was an important, initial step in searching for the "invisible women" of the Caribbean past. Further strides were made in 1990 when Brereton introduced an undergraduate third-year history course, "Women and Gender in the English Speaking Caribbean," which located women and gender at the center of the historical analysis process. The course interrogates the gender systems of men and women inhabiting the Caribbean such as the Tainos and Kalinagos, European, Africans, Indians, Chinese and various mixed-race groups. It also examines ideologies of gender domination and subordination in various aspects of social life, including education, employment, trade unionism and politics in the Caribbean. The course is built on the scholarship of such gender-conscious Caribbean historians as Lucille Mathurin Mair, Verene Shepherd, Hilary Beckles, Bernard Moitt, Barbara Bush, Mary Butler, Trevor Burnard, Marysa Navarro, Marietta Morrissey, Nicole Phillip, Rhoda Reddock and Bridget Brereton. Women and Gender in the English Speaking Caribbean has significantly impacted the study of Caribbean history and is still taught on all three campuses of the UWI.

Survey of Caribbean Women and Gender Historiography

Brereton has been astute in mapping the evolution of feminine and gender discourses on Caribbean history. To date she has published four articles on the subject, namely "Searching for the Invisible Woman", "Gender and Historiography of the English-Speaking Caribbean", "Recent developments in the historiography of the post-emancipation Anglophone Caribbean", and "Women and Gender in the Caribbean (English Speaking) Historiography: Sources and Methods." (Brereton 1992, 2002, 2012, 2013) The most comprehensive of these surveys is her 2002 publication entitled "Gender and the Historiography of the English Speaking Caribbean". In this work Brereton clearly identifies both the thematic advances and gaps evident in women and gender historiography of the region by the dawn of the new millennium. She notes, for example, that the first major breakthrough in engendering Caribbean history was Lucille Mathurin Mair's 1974 PhD dissertation, "A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica, 1655 – 1844." This work was "the first full length work on Caribbean women's historical experience" and "the first to explicitly raise issues about slavery and gender" (Brereton 2002). Although the work is limited to one territory, Brereton affirms that it is an invaluable reconstruction of the Caribbean past, because Jamaican women's experiences were in many ways representative of other women in the region (Brereton 2002). Brereton and other Caribbean gender pioneers were also influenced by Mair's *Women Field Labourers in Jamaica During Slavery* (1986) and *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies During Slavery* (1995), a seminal study of enslaved female resistance to enslavement.¹ Mair's *Women Field Labourers* revised West Indian historiography by insisting that contrary to the traditional view, particularly from the end of the eighteenth century, it was enslaved females who dominated the work gangs in the sugar cane fields; similarly, *The Rebel Woman* compelled historians to confront squarely Mair's construct of gynecological resistance. Collectively, Mair's publications, pioneered a new approach in reconstructing the Caribbean past, not in the usual gender-blind tradition set by the androcentric colonial writers such as Richard Ligon of Barbados, Edward Long of Jamaica and John Stedman of Suriname, but with sufficient and appropriate sensitivity to the past experiences of women.

Brereton's historiographical survey also acknowledges the critical contribution of demographic and medical historians such as Richard Sheridan, Michael Craton and, above all, Barry Higman whom

¹ Mair first presented *Women Field Labourers* as the 1986 Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture at The UWI, Mona Campus.

Brereton credits for having “elucidated the basic parameters of the enslaved woman’s existence ... birth, death, fertility, reproduction and infant and child mortality...and laid the ground work for more ambitious studies of enslaved Caribbean women” (Brereton, 2002: 132).

Brereton has also highlighted in her survey of gendered publications in Caribbean history that “...the slavery era has been the major focus of research on Caribbean women and gender history” (Brereton, 2002: 133). As example, Brereton contends that Arlette Gautier (1985), Hilary Beckles (1989), Barbara Bush (1990) and Marietta Morrisey (1990) “have given us a solid picture of the historical experience of enslaved women especially in the later decades of slavery,” especially in the areas of labour organization, population stagnation and resistance experiences. Despite the proliferation of gendered sources, however, Brereton remains dissatisfied in general with the extent to which the past experiences of Caribbean women have been included in mainstream Caribbean historiography. She insists that more research needs to be conducted with regards to free women (indigenous, European, African, and African-European) during the slavery period as well as Caribbean women’s inclusion in politics and religion in the decades following the abolition of slavery. She posits that while the post-slavery history of the Caribbean is under-explored “there is a rapidly growing body of work scattered widely in one or two books and many articles, conference or seminar papers and theses” (Brereton, 2002: 139). Additionally Brereton laments that there is a dearth of historical studies on the smaller immigrant communities of Chinese, Portuguese, Syrian, Lebanese and Jewish women of the post emancipation era. Brereton also expresses the view that from a specific women’s history or gender history perspective, most of the work accomplished thus far concentrates heavily on Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad, while relatively little is written about Guyana, Belize or the smaller English speaking islands as well as the Spanish, French and Dutch Caribbean (Brereton, 2002: 138).

Methodological Approaches

Central to Brereton’s engendering of Caribbean history is her analysis of five major methodological approaches to the discipline. Brereton points out that historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn has offered an Afrocentric methodology to make women visible in the history of the region (Terborg Penn 1997). The approach is useful, Brereton admits, since people of African descent dominated most Caribbean populations during the slavery and post slavery periods (Brereton, 2002: 130). Nevertheless, Brereton cautions that one cannot ignore the obvious limitations of an approach to history that is blind to the varied multi-racial historical experiences of our Caribbean region (Brereton 2002: 130).

Gender specialist, Patricia Mohammed, pioneered a second methodology. She advocates that past relationships between Caribbean men and women could be gauged by assessing the extent to which women accepted, negotiated with and/or challenged patriarchy (Mohammed 2001). While Mohammed applied her schema exclusively to women in the Indian Diaspora, Brereton believes that it has the potential as an analytical tool to critically interrogate gender systems from as early as the Taino and Kalinago communities (Brereton 2002: 130).

Thirdly, there is Blanca Silvestrini’s oral history method (Silvestrini 1998). Brereton embraces the possibilities which can be wrested from oral sources both for solving the problem of inadequate sources on women and gender and for yielding first hand interpretations of the past. The serious drawback of Silvestrini’s method, Brereton perceives, however, is that it can only be employed to retrieve accounts of the fairly recent past (Brereton 2002: 131).

Brereton identifies the American historian and feminist, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988), with the fourth methodology in Caribbean gender history, the creative-writing source approach. It argues that literary works inspired in part by historical events are authentic sources of historical research. Brereton, however, cautions that while many literary reconstructions are at least in part founded on actual historical occurrences, the historian must exercise due care in separating fact from fiction, which is often blurred in these sources (Brereton 2002: 131).

Brereton is a strong advocate for and ardent practitioner of a fifth methodology, the gendered testimony approach that can be used both to make women visible in history and to analyze their gender roles in relation to men. Brereton insists that while diaries, journals, memoirs, autobiographies and private letters produced by women who have lived in and written about the Caribbean, are small in number, previously ignored and sometimes even scorned, they are dynamic repositories of gendered testimony (Brereton 1994). Brereton delineates this methodology in her bibliographical survey of texts written by or about nine women; Mary Prince (1831), Mrs. A. C. Carmichael (1833), Frances Lanaghan (1844), Mary Seacole (Alexander and Alexander 1857), Elizabeth Fenwick (Fenwick 1927), Janet Schaw (Andrews and Andrews 1939), Lady Maria Nugent (Wright 1966), Yseult Bridges (Guppy 1980) and Anna Mahase (1992) spanning the pre and post emancipation periods. The voices represented in these largely private texts are indeed rich and varied. They represent the four major ethnic identities of Caribbean women; the European, African, Indian and racially mixed. The selected texts are also diversified in terms of social classes; the poor enslaved and descendant migrant worker from India, the middle class mixed race and the wealthy enslaver. The geographical range encompasses several of the Leeward and Windward islands of the English Speaking Caribbean. These are the texts of women who lived and worked in Trinidad, St Vincent, Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, St Kitts, Bermuda and the Turks and Caicos Islands. With regards to Mary Seacole, the text provides useful insights into her adventures in Panama, the United States and Europe. In terms of the subject matter, the collective work of these female authors represents a trove of invaluable information all from a woman's perspective on slavery, anti-slavery, Indian indentured labour and other post emancipation experiences. Such variety makes possible historiography based on a diverse interrogation of the history of women and gender systems of the region. The only major group that Brereton's survey does not include is the First Peoples. This is understandable considering that Brereton's agenda was to search out female authored texts. The first peoples of the Caribbean, both males and females, left no written records. The documented evidence of their past that has survived were penned by European male observers.

Androcentric Liberation

Brereton's gendered testimony methodology is all the more critical when it is realized that it liberates researchers from the strangled monopoly that male authors exercised over Caribbean records prior to the scholarship of Lucille Mathurin Mair.² Brereton observes that while these androcentric texts are very

² The monopoly was in the hands of such male writers as Edward Long, Thomas Thistlewood, Bryan Edwards and Matthew 'Monk' Lewis of Jamaica, John Gabriel Stedman of Suriname and Richard Ligon of Barbados. See Long, Edward. *The History of Jamaica*. 2 Vols. London: T. Lowndes, 1774; Burnard, Trevor. *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; Edwards, Bryan. *The History Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies: To which is Added, an Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St Domingo*. 5 Volumes. Glasgow: B. Crosby for Mundell and Son, 1798; Lewis, Matthew Gregory. *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor Kept During a Residence in the island of Jamaica*. London: John Murray, 1834; Stedman, John Gabriel.

useful primary sources of Caribbean history in general, they were problematic for scholars who wished to come to terms specifically with Caribbean women and gender history. At best they were desultory in capturing womanhood in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while their commentary on gender systems was sparse. The list of female-authored private texts, which Brereton has proffered, has gone a long way and will continue to do so in filling the gaps that male writers have left. Of course Brereton does not dismiss out of hand male narratives of the past. On the contrary, her gendered testimony is intended to widen the range of materials at the historian's disposal but it also questions the androcentric bias of earlier Caribbean historical writings, insists on revisionism and engenders a Caribbean historiography cognizant of women and gender experiences.

Women and Gender Publications

As previously indicated, an important avenue through which Brereton fueled the advancement of women and gender studies in Caribbean history is her scholarly publications. Her profound contribution to the field includes "Caribbean Women in the Post Emancipation Century 1838-1938: Agenda for Research", "Women and Slavery in the British West Indies" and "Family Strategies, Gender and the Shift to Wage Labour in the British Caribbean" (Brereton 1999). She is also a contributor to the two major texts that currently feeds the study of women and gender historiography in secondary schools of the region and at the three major campuses of the UWI. The first of these texts published in 1995, for which Brereton also served as an editor with Verene Shepherd and Barbara Bailey, is *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*. The work emerged out of the 1993 International Symposium on Caribbean Woman and was the first collection of essays by historians writing primarily through the lens of women and gender. The second work is *Engendering Caribbean History: Cross Cultural Perspectives*. Brereton's scholarly expertise on the labour and social experiences of enslaved females and of the lives lived by the free colored, white women and other ethnic groups during and after slavery are evident in these publications.

Supervision of Post Graduate Theses

Brereton's successful supervision of MPhil and PhD history candidates at The UWI St Augustine Campus is yet another manifestation of her sterling contribution to the development of women and gender study in the Caribbean. Five of the students who were awarded postgraduate degrees under her tutelage from 2008 to 2013 incorporated distinct gender perspectives in their dissertations; Nicole Laurine Phillip (2008), Shameen Ali (2008), Bronty Liverpool Williams (2008), Fiona Rajkumar (2011), and Karen Eccles (2013).

Narrative of a Five Year Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname, in Guyana, on the Wild Coast of South America from the year 1772 to 1777 elucidating the History of that Country and describing its Products. London J. J. Johnson, 1806; Ligon, Richard. *From a True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados.* London: Peter Parker, 1673.

Conclusion

As educator, commentator, historical analyst, methodologist and publisher, Professor Emerita Bridget Brereton has been strategic in crafting an autonomous space for women and gender studies in Caribbean history. In the early years of her academic career at The UWI, she was instrumental in inserting the discipline into the curriculum. As the numbers of scholars working in this area of academic study increased, Brereton surveyed their work and reported on the state of the scholarship. She remained vigilant, critiquing the different methodologies that were in use in the research and writing of women and gender history. She also offered her own solid approach to this relatively new field of academia. From time to time she published her research and co-edited a substantial volume upon which the discipline could stand firmly. She also produced a number of young and promising scholars in this field of academic pursuit. Bridget Brereton, Professor Emerita of the History Department of the UWI, continues to champion gender pedagogy as an indispensable analytical tool of Caribbean history.

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