

*Jamaica in 1850 or; The Effects of Sixteen Years of Freedom on a Slave Colony.* JOHN BIGELOW. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. lxii + 214 pp. (Paper US\$25.00)

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This book is an insightful first-hand account of postslavery Jamaica in 1850 by John Bigelow (1817-1911), an American journalist who was an editor at the *New York Evening Post* and an organizer of the Free-Soil Party. The introduction by Robert J. Scholnick, a professor of English and American Studies at the College of William and Mary, highlights the significance of the book (first published in 1851 in New York and London, where it received a mixed reception) “for the ongoing transatlantic dialogue on slavery” (p. lii). As Scholnick notes, “Even before its passage on August 29, 1833, the British Emancipation Act became a double-edged sword for American abolitionists, inspiring but fraught with danger if the ‘mighty experiment’ of freeing some eight hundred thousand slaves in the [British] West Indies should be judged a failure” (p. ix). The case of Jamaica, the most important British West Indian colony, was crucial in the debate.

After abolition, the production of Jamaican sugar (the main plantation crop) dropped. Jamaica had to compete with slave-grown sugar from Cuba and Brazil, and many planters abandoned their estates. In the United States, Southern pro-slavery statesmen argued that enslaved Negroes were unfit for freedom and used Jamaica’s economic decline as “proof.” As Scholnick observes, “Bigelow realized that the only way to explode such myths would be to report factually about actual conditions on Jamaica” (pp. xxvii-xxviii). Drawing on his first-hand observations, “Bigelow argues that Jamaica’s economic collapse was caused not by the alleged incapacity of former slaves but rather by the incompetence of largely absentee plantation owners functioning within a dysfunctional colonial system,” challenging arguments of racial inferiority and portraying “heroic black resistance and achievement” (p. xii).

Bigelow constructs his argument through seventeen chapters, which vividly portray continuity and change in postslavery Jamaica (and also sometimes anticipate later developments such as tourism). Chapter 1 remarks on the delights of ocean travel by steamer from New York to Jamaica in winter and provides first impressions of the colony’s color-class system, comment-

ing on the black ex-slave hucksters in the boats that surrounded the steamer on its arrival at Kingston harbor and the Mulatto pilot who guided the ship into port. Chapter 2 portrays the dilapidated state of the commercial center of Kingston, with its predominantly colored population including emancipated slaves and indentured East Indians and where old people and children were most noticeable on the streets. Chapter 3 highlights the Jamaican color-class system, but indicates the prevalence of miscegenation and the easy interaction between Whites and Coloreds (in contrast to tensions between Coloreds and Blacks) and the prominence of colored people in public and professional occupations. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the political system, centered on the British Governor's residence and the House of Assembly in Spanish Town, and identify the ineffectiveness of political representation based on a high property qualification. Chapters 6 and 7 contrast the poverty of the Jamaican plantation economy (with its many abandoned sugar and coffee estates) with the island's rich resources – reflected in the ex-slaves' productive provision grounds and small-scale marketing system (rooted in slavery), the colony's mineral, timber, and water resources, and Jamaica's role in supplying nine-tenths of the global pimento trade.

Chapters 8 to 15 are central to Bigelow's argument. He noted the colonial explanations of Jamaica's poverty as being due to the abolition of slavery, inadequate compensation to slave owners, and the repeal of the protective duty on British sugar. Bigelow advanced an alternative explanation focused on the low status of agricultural labor, the absenteeism of British planters, the inactivity of white Creoles, the hierarchy of inefficient plantation middlemen (attorneys, overseers, and bookkeepers), the mortgaging of plantations from before emancipation, the accumulation of land by large-scale landholders, high imports, the absence of a landholding middle class, and the opposition of planters to the sale of land to the former slaves. For Bigelow, the solution was land sales to the ex-slaves, whose desire to become landholders was evident. Such landholding, he argued, would provide the basis for political participation, food crops, and surpluses for marketing. Indeed, the rapid increase of small-scale landholding and the significance of the related marketing system (conducted especially by women and children) were already noticeable. Another solution for Bigelow was to centralize sugar mills, a development that would later characterize the Caribbean, and to develop the potential of manufacturing resources such as coconuts. Bigelow challenged Carlyle's arguments on the high cost of West Indian labor, revealing instead that such labor was plentiful and cheap.

Chapter 16 identifies the potential of Jamaica, with its healthy climate, as the "Italy of the West" (p. 174), advocates the arrival of American visitors by steamers for winter residence, and highlights the prevalence of well-trained British doctors on the island. Chapter 17 assesses constraints on the sale of land to foreigners, as well as to ex-slaves, who might become "small capital-

ists” (p. 178), notes good postal services, newspapers, and journals on the island, and highlights a transitory population in the colony with no feeling of home. This conclusion, however, begs the question of Creole identities (Besson 2002).

Four appendices report on Bigelow’s visit to the emperor of neighboring postrevolutionary Haiti and on Jamaica’s exports, revenue, and expenditure, and the situate colonial policy in Jamaica within the wider context of the British Empire.

Bigelow’s book represents an early ethnography on the industrious postslavery Jamaican peasantry, rooted in pre-emancipation processes. Scholnick’s introduction indicates some parallels with the work of Sidney Mintz (1974) on peasantization but could have drawn out the implications of Bigelow’s analysis for the current “flight from the estates debate” among historians and anthropologists (e.g., Hall 1978; Smith 1995; Paton 2001; Besson 2002).

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