

Paul M. Pressly

On the Rim of the Caribbean: Colonial Georgia and the British Atlantic World.

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013. xi + 354 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

Scholars studying British America have sometimes had a difficult time finding an appropriate context for the early history of Georgia. While Georgia's status as one of the thirteen colonies that became part of the United States and its development into a prosperous plantation society connect it to familiar long-term narratives, the early decades of colonization in Georgia were somewhat of an anomaly. Because it was not founded until at least half a century later than most British American colonies, came into being as a distinctive project motivated by unusually philanthropic designs, and underwent a dramatic change of direction in less than a generation, the colony seemed destined for a different fate from that of other British mainland colonies. At least some historians have long recognized, however, that much of the story of early Georgia ties into the expansion of slavery and plantation agriculture in the British Atlantic World. Paul Pressly now develops and explains this context.

Pressly conceptualizes Georgia as a colony modeled on the British West Indies and thus focused on the development of profitable plantations worked by slave labor. He describes how the "plantation complex that stretched from Brazil to the Lower South sank deep roots into Georgia's soil within a very short period of time" (p. 6). The colony's efforts to emulate Caribbean slave societies and its ties to other British plantation colonies help to explain Georgia's rapid and extraordinary transformation from a newly settled "economic backwater" into one of the most prosperous colonies on the mainland of North America. Of course, scholars have often acknowledged that the West Indian plantation system shaped Georgia's history by way of the neighboring South Carolina lowcountry. Pressly argues, however, that early Georgia must be understood as more than an extension of South Carolina. Instead, he depicts it as a distinct colony, influenced by a variety of forces from the broader Atlantic World as well as by the Carolina lowcountry. Some readers may quibble with his effort to draw an important distinction between the connections to Carolina and connections to the British West Indies, but he makes a good case that scholars need to give more specific consideration to Georgia, which offers a different opportunity to see how plantations developed even in seemingly unpromising locales, "on the rim" of sugar producing areas. And while Georgians could not grow sugar, the colony's economic development was impressive by mainland standards.

The book has eleven concise and interrelated chapters. The first outlines a central theme of the book, describing the geographic division into "Three

Georgias,” focused on the coastal towns of Savannah and Frederica and the inland trading post of Augusta. Chapter 2 describes the “merging” of plantation elites, not only from the wealthy and expansive Carolina colonists across the Savannah River but also from persistent Georgia settlers who had taken advantage of limited early opportunities and access to capital. Chapter 3 focuses on the importance of Georgia’s early trade connections with the British West Indies, which helps to explain the colony’s growth and gives more substance to Pressly’s argument. In its early years Georgia’s trade concentrated primarily on providing Caribbean colonies with resources that were harder to come by in the islands, especially lumber, but also including a variety of provisions. Throughout, Pressly emphasizes the most commercial, Atlantic, and connected elements of Georgia’s culture and society, underscoring comparisons to the West Indies and even describing Savannah as a “Caribbean” town. Many readers will be especially interested in Chapters 6–7 about the slave trade to Georgia and the development of plantations, but Pressly also discusses a number of other important economic issues, such as the marketing of rice, consumer attitudes and behavior, and trade with Native Americans (Chapters 8–10).

On the Rim of the Caribbean makes an important contribution to the study of British mainland plantation colonies. The book is so relentlessly comparative that at times the connections Pressly draws can become heavy-handed or tenuous, but these quibbles should not diminish his broader point about the importance of Georgia’s links to the West Indian plantation complex. Not all readers will warm to the book’s emphasis on economics or appreciate its empiricism. But the remarkable transformation of Georgia during this period has to be understood in a context dominated by the determined pursuit of wealth despite rampant exploitation and considerable brutality. Economic matters were especially important in early Georgia and better documented than other aspects of life in the colony. Moreover, Pressly’s rich foundation of evidence and thorough research enable a fuller and more detailed history of an often neglected colony. He has both situated colonial Georgia appropriately in the British Atlantic World and described it unusually well. While his work could conceivably signal the beginning of a wave of new scholarship on Georgia, at least for now Pressly has given us a most valuable book by putting the history of an understudied and seemingly marginal mainland colony in the broader context of the British circum-Caribbean.

Bradford J. Wood

Department of History, Eastern Kentucky University,

Richmond KY 40475, U.S.A.

Brad.Wood@eku.edu

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.