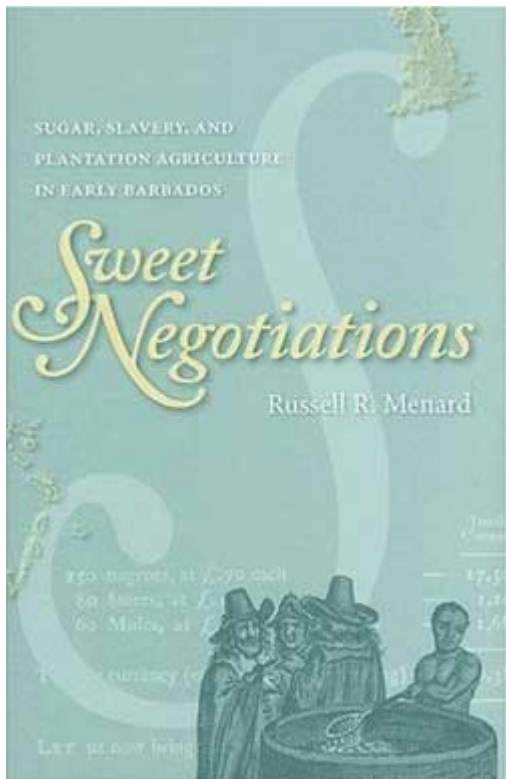


Another Revolution in Need of Revising



Russell R. Menard, *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006. xvii+ 181 pp., cloth, \$39.50.

In the slim but weighty *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados*, Russell R. Menard confronts one of the most enduring and widely accepted claims in the history of the Atlantic world: that the arrival of sugar in Barbados was the key transformative moment in the development of that island, the British empire, and the Atlantic economy (check the index to any U.S. survey textbook). In a matter of just 181 pages, Menard disassembles this 350-year-old thesis and in its stead suggests the more “prosaic term *sugar boom*” (4). This change is not simply an exercise in semantics. Rather, Menard uses it to reconceptualize the nature of sugar itself, the role of colonial planters as innovators, and the development of this “hub” of empire.

Menard does not deny that sugar took hold in Barbados very rapidly. Experimented with in the island’s early years, colonists reintroduced sugarcane at the end of the 1630s and after a decade of improving planting and processing techniques succeeded in producing valuable harvests by the mid-1640s. African slaves who had learned highly technical skills in Dutch or Portuguese plantations in Brazil were most likely key in Barbados’s planters’ eventual ability to produce palatable muscovado. Once established, the crop flourished.

By 1649 sugar was the chief commodity used in local exchange, and by the mid-1660s, 60 percent of the island was planted with sugarcane and the crop accounted for 90 percent of the value of all Barbadian exports. By 1680 the island looked dramatically different than it had forty years earlier as large plantations replaced small and African slaves replaced mixed forms of free and unfree labor. For those familiar with Caribbean history, little of this is new. What Menard questions is the assumption that there was something inherent in sugar itself that caused it to revolutionize "Barbados [and the Atlantic] by introducing African slavery and large plantations" (123-4).

Menard contends that sugar did not inaugurate these changes. Instead he argues, "Barbados was already on the way to becoming a plantation colony and a slave society" when planters reintroduced sugar, thanks to an ongoing export boom. The critical crops in this earlier period were the "minor staples" tobacco and cotton (12). In general, forward-looking innovative planters vacillated between these crops during the 1630s and early 1640s as prices fluctuated, supplementing their production with indigo and ginger. This crop diversity was important because, as Menard shows, it enabled planters to respond to international price swings and thus allowed an export sector independent of any one commodity to develop. Barbadians' experiments with plantation agriculture and the success they had with these commodities (cotton more than the others) made it possible for them to accumulate capital and to enhance their reputation as planters, both elements that then allowed their subsequent investment in sugar at the end of the 1640s.

The argument that a mixed export sector, as opposed to monoculture, was pivotal in the early stages of the development of a profitable, extractive colonial economy is a significant and important corrective to single-staple models of colonial economic growth.

Beyond critiquing the sugar-revolution thesis for its failure to explain Barbados's economic development, Menard also argues that the socioeconomic implications of the thesis—namely that large, integrated plantations worked by gangs of slaves "simply emerged fully developed" in Barbados with sugar cultivation—oversimplifies the complexity with which Barbadians constructed a sugar economy (91). In its place he offers a much richer picture of Barbados's early history in which small and large planters coexisted, experimented with new technologies, and utilized both European and African sources of labor through the early years of the sugar boom. Menard's analysis emphasizes the innovativeness of colonial planters and metropolitan merchant investors who turned to integrated plantations worked by large numbers of African slaves, not (to borrow from Winthrop Jordan) because of the unique properties of a selected crop, but in response to changing market conditions. The inability of the English indentured market to supply the voracious needs of planters during the general export boom, for example, prompted them to increase their purchases of African slaves. Here Atlantic markets, not sugar itself, stimulated a reorganization of Barbados's social make-up.

Menard is not alone in arguing for a reevaluation of the sugar revolution. But what he, as one of the most esteemed historians of the Atlantic economy, offers is a lucid and at times devastatingly simple case that makes it unmistakably clear that sugar alone did not revolutionize Barbados in the seventeenth century. But where do we go from here? How should such a conclusion change the way we think about the history of the Caribbean? Though Menard often reminds readers that Barbados was part of a larger empire and oceanic system, his work remains rooted firmly in Barbados. *Sweet Negotiations*, therefore, only offers hints of how scholars can apply this revision of the sugar revolution to a wider spatial field.

One promising hint is Menard's emphasis on the importance of minor staples and the colonists who produced (and I might add, distributed) them. By dating important innovations to the pre-sugar period, Menard suggests that sugar was not the only crop that mattered in the Caribbean. There is still much to learn from diverse agricultural production, and historians of the Atlantic economy could profitably concentrate our energies on colonies such as the English Leeward Islands. Recent interest notwithstanding, scholars have largely neglected these colonies, assuming their histories mirrored Barbados's, albeit with a slightly later and less spectacular sugar revolution. But seen through Menard's prism of a diverse export boom and innovative planters, places such as the Leewards, where planters cultivated a wide variety of tropical commodities through the first decades of the eighteenth century, have much to teach us. Only by more fully understanding both why colonists chose to produce minor staples and how they—together with merchants, imperial agents, servants, and slaves—financed their enterprises, organized labor, and constructed supply and distribution networks can we get a firmer grasp on the evolution of seventeenth-century plantation societies. By moving from a narrative centered on the revolutionary nature of a single commodity to one that focuses on the ability of colonists to shape local economies, Menard has shown us that we have much still to learn about the foundations of Atlantic empires. It is time to get to work.

Further Reading:

The classic studies of the sugar revolution are Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; reprint, London, 1964); Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1972); and Richard Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623-1775* (Barbados, 1974). For several works that have also recently questioned the accuracy of the thesis, see B. W. Higman, "The Sugar Revolution," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 53 (2000): 213-236; Larry G. Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted: The English Colonization of Barbados, 1627-1660* (Oxford, 2003); and the essays in Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004). Meanwhile David Hancock has called for a renewed focus on "the agricultural nature of the colonial economy, and its decentralized, indeed

opportunistic evolution through the efforts of individual adventurers and entrepreneurs” in David Hancock, “‘A World of Business to Do’: William Freeman and the Foundations of England’s Commercial Empire, 1645-1707,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 57 (2000): 3-34.

This article originally appeared in issue 7.2 (January, 2007).

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