Edmund Burke and the British Empire in the West Indies: Wealth, Power, and Slavery

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Throughout his lengthy career as a leading historian of 18th-century Britain, Peter Marshall has written extensively on, to quote the title of one of his many books, ‘the making and unmaking of empires,’ and he spent more than a decade editing the correspondence of Edmund Burke. But, as he admits on this monograph’s opening page, ‘the West Indies only feature in a perfunctory way in my attempts to survey Burke’s view of empire’ (p. 1). In this intensively researched study, Marshall’s aim is to emphasise the importance of these colonies within the first British empire, but particularly within Burke’s political philosophy and governmental activities. Throughout his life Burke believed that the West Indies—or, more precisely, the wealth which they produced—were essential to the Britain’s continued ability to compete with European rivals of far greater geographical size and, as a member of Parliament from 1766 to 1794, he devoted much of his energy to ensuring that this ‘great imperial asset’ was managed to maximise its benefits to the metropole (p. 6). Yet this deep and abiding interest is largely absent from Burke’s published speeches and writings, and thus Marshall has tasked himself with revealing the extent and nature of Burke’s engagement with these colonies through the effortful process of scouring his personal correspondence and the records of the administrative entities with which he was involved. Marshall acknowledges that this ‘structure of politics’ approach, which was pioneered a century ago by Lewis Namier, has been the subject of continuing criticism by intellectual historians, but he argues that, although Britain’s West Indian colonies, prior to the rise of the abolitionist movement, ‘provided few opportunities for high oratory, important issues were at stake’ in their relationship to their mother country (p. 9).

Marshall divides his analysis of Burke’s engagement with the Caribbean into two parts: the first analyses his responses to the attempts of his kinsmen and friends to improve their fortunes through government service in the islands which Britain acquired from France as a result of the Seven Years War; while the second explores the role that he played in the formulation of imperial policy for the nation’s West Indian colonies. In the introduction to this first section, ‘The Spoils of the Seven Years War,’ Marshall describes the possibilities and challenges which these settlements faced in the mid-18th century. At that time, Britain had benefitted enormously from the profits of the ‘sugar revolution’ which Barbados and the Leeward Islands had undergone a century earlier, but these islands were experiencing sustained agricultural decline as their...
soils wore out. Meanwhile, Jamaica’s planters had amassed immense tracts of land, but they cultivated only a small part thereof. In An Account of the European Settlements in America (1757), which Burke co-authored with his close friend William Burke (no relation), he argued that, while the West Indian colonies had long been ‘the great source of our wealth, our strength, and our power’, they required both territorial expansion, which would open up more land for sugar cultivation, and an increase in the volume of the African slave trade, which would significantly enlarge the labour force, as mortality rates were high and natural increase low on sugar plantations (p. 19). When both William and Burke’s brother Richard were appointed to public offices in the former French colonies of Guadeloupe and Grenada, Burke made an unsuccessful attempt to become the London agent for these and the other ‘Ceded Islands.’ (2) It was a combination of his desire to aid his brother and friend and his belief that the West Indies could, if their economic and political affairs were properly managed, generate greater wealth for Britain than Saint-Domingue did for France, that led him into an engagement in the business of this part of the empire which would occupy him for the rest of his life.

This section’s three chapters examine Richard’s and William’s endeavours in the West Indies, and Burke’s responses to their experiences. In 1760, William was appointed Secretary and Registrar for Guadeloupe, which had been captured by British forces the previous year. Reappointed to this post in 1761, he retained it until the terms of the Treaty of Paris returned the island to France two years later. Although William’s career in the West Indies was brief, in the course of his sojourn in Guadeloupe he became convinced that this colony, a significant producer of sugar with enticing prospects of expanding its cultivation, offered far greater advantages to Britain than France’s Canadian territories did, and he wrote several pamphlets which urged British diplomats to prioritise the former over the latter when negotiating the peace. Although he failed to overcome policy-makers’ preference for colonies of settlement to those of plantations, William succeeded in convincing Burke of the importance to Britain of West Indian trade, ‘a belief that [he] was to retain for the rest of his life’ (p. 45).

Burke’s brother Richard served between 1764 and 1779 as Collector of Customs and Receiver of the Crown’s Revenue in Grenada, a French island which, unlike Guadeloupe, remained in British hands after the Treaty of Paris. Throughout this period, he was accused of a host of offenses, including the withholding of significant sums of money from the Customs Commissioners in London. Although Burke was extremely critical of the often slipshod and sometimes unethical practices of public officials in Britain’s colonies, Marshall describes his response to his brother’s activities as that of ‘a man of business rather than a critic of imperial misgovernment’ (p. 48). Burke was similarly supportive of Richard’s later attempt to purchase a large tract of land in the island of St. Vincent from its indigenous “Red Caribs,” a plan frustrated by the British imperial administration’s decree that the Caribs were not the lawful owners of the lands they occupied, and that any property transactions between them and Britons were thus invalid. Defending his brother’s actions, Burke asserted that the Caribs had become British subjects when the British annexed the island in 1763, and thus had the right to dispose of their lands as they chose. This claim was widely interpreted at the time as being motivated by fraternal loyalty rather than political belief, and Marshall admits that Burke’s ‘uncritical support to his brother’s ill-conceived scheme…does not reflect much credit on him’ (p. 90). Nonetheless, he asserts that Burke’s subsequent actions and writings prove that ‘high principles of imperial governance,’ such as his assertion of the Caribs’ rights to their lands, were integral to his attitude toward these colonies, and were not mere justifications of his brother’s ‘unedifying land speculations’ (p. 92).

The second section, ‘Managing and Interest,’ focuses on Burke’s relationship with the ‘West India interest,’ a well-organised London-based group of planters and merchants who, throughout the latter half of the 18th century, lobbied the government to support any project they considered to be to the benefit of the island colonies. As noted earlier, Burke was convinced that the West Indies were of enormous value to Britain, and, as secretary to the Whig Lord Rockingham during his ministry of 1765-1766, he took a leading role in drawing up the legislation and ensuring the passage of the Free Ports Act; by opening up ports in Jamaica and Dominica to all shipping, this piece of legislation offered West Indian planters numerous advantages while protecting their chief crop, sugar, from foreign competition. And although, in the course of the
American Revolution, the Rockingham faction altered its position from a close alliance with the West Indian colonists to a willingness to sacrifice their interests to those of the metropole, Burke spoke on several occasions in the Commons in an attempt to gain recompense for the British subjects, notably merchants from St. Kitts and landed proprietors in Grenada, whose property had been confiscated when Admiral George Rodney—whom Burke considered a ‘Poltroon’—seized the Dutch free port of St. Eustatius in 1781 (p. 148). Although Burke failed in this initiative, he ‘succeeded in investing a West Indian issue with high moral principle’, railing against what he considered to be a violation by the British military of the law of nations (p. 125).

Burke’s ‘high moral principles’ were complicated by his position as MP for Bristol, a city that had long been associated with the Atlantic slave trade; it was this relationship which encouraged him to lead the successful parliamentary opposition to a Jamaican act of 1774 which levied duties on African captives imported into the colony. But his ongoing support of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa is, as Marshall admits, ‘not in fact easy to conceive’ (p. 167). Burke appears to have involved himself in Company matters in an attempt to ‘protect a man to whom he was closely attached’—the London merchant and Company member John Bourke—but in so doing he was acting in support of both the Atlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery itself, practices that he had pronounced deplorable two decades before in his *Account of the European Settlements in America* (p. 169). According to Marshall, Burke was able to resolve this contradiction through his belief that, while slavery was reprehensible, it was essential to the economic success of Britain’s West Indian colonies; he hoped that it would at some future time fade away, but until then the best possible outcome would be its reform.

In support of this endeavour, in 1780 Burke wrote, but did not publish, a document known as ‘Sketch of the Negro Code.’ In it, he proposed offering enslaved people certain protections from the worst abuses of their owners, and urged the latter to facilitate marriage and family formation among their bondspeople, to educate them in the Anglican faith, and to offer them the possibility of self-purchase. These options, he claimed, would not only improve the day-to-day lives of the enslaved, but would help them to rise above the ‘barbarism’ innate to their African origins and to move towards civilisation (p. 188). But as the abolitionist movement rose in influence towards the century’s end, Burke’s advocacy of reform rather than replacement of the institution put him at odds with many anti-slavery activists. This, in tandem with his anxieties regarding the sympathy between some British abolitionists and advocates of the French Revolution, appears to have diminished his enthusiasm for the issue. He made his final parliamentary speech related to slavery on 19 April 1791, just four months prior to the outbreak of the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue. Ironically, a few years later Burke’s financial future was assured when George III granted him annuities paid for from Crown revenues from West Indian taxes; these funds not only ‘staved off a crisis for Burke’ but after his death were paid to his widow, and then to the executors of her estate, until 1838, the year in which emancipated slaves were liberated from the apprenticeship system (p. 222).

This summary, though lengthy, is insufficient to the task of exploring the depth of Marshall’s research and analysis. This book is not an easy read; it goes into extreme detail about little-known political controversies and makes reference to a huge cast of often obscure figures in both Britain and the West Indies. The typeface is small, the prose is dense, and many of the paragraphs are very long indeed. But for anyone who is interested in expanding their understanding of how politics worked in Britain and its West Indian colonies in the latter half of the 18th century, Marshall’s study will be a source of enlightenment. His depiction of the political machinations of the colonists, and of the dialectic between a centralising state and its often rebellious overseas possessions, presents a detailed and insightful view of phenomena which have thus far received surprisingly little scholarly attention, and make this monograph essential reading for anyone who seeks a clearer sense of the day-to-day work of statecraft in both metropolitan and colonial contexts.

That said, on the whole *Edmund Burke and the British Empire in the West Indies* reads as something of an historiographical throwback. It is very much a work of history from the top down; the reader does not hear a word regarding the seismic Jamaican slave rebellion of 1760, widely known as Tacky’s Revolt, or learn about the Carib War of 1769-1773 beyond its connection to Richard Burke’s attempt to purchase lands in
Grenada. The experiences limned here are those of the elites of London and the islands; enslaved and indigenous people feature here almost entirely as subjects of Burke’s political ideology, and even Englishmen (not to mention women) outside the sphere of Parliament and the island assemblies are essentially invisible. Of course, this book was written a work of political and intellectual history; Marshall makes no claims that he is contributing to scholarship on race, gender, or culture. But the fact that he does not cite, let alone mention, any of the most acclaimed recent works on the history of the 18th-century British West Indies, such as those of Marisa Fuentes, Daniel Livesay, Brooke Newman, or Sasha Turner, is surprising, especially in a study that is as intensively researched as this one. The overall sense for the reader is that the island colonies and the great majority of their inhabitants, whether free or enslaved, are important primarily because Burke took an interest in them, and because they generated profits for the metropole.

I suspect that this issue arises at least in part due to what comes across as Marshall’s discomfort with Burke’s statements on, and policies towards, the West Indies, particularly in relation to slavery. While he convinces his readers that Burke expended considerable political and intellectual energy on these colonies over several decades, he struggles to rationalise many of the latter’s ideas and actions. This tendency is problematic enough when he offers apologies for Burke’s less than innocent support of his friends, kin, and political associates in their various shady dealings, but he has a far more difficult time in excusing his racism. In the conclusion, he admits that Burke was far more diligent in revealing imperial malfeasance in India than he was with regard to the West Indies, because of ‘his capacity to sympathize with…peoples whom he believed to possess a high civilization of great antiquity’, a group which did not include Africans (p. 231). Marshall points out that Burke’s ideas about the intellectual and moral capabilities of people of African descent did not differ substantially from those of many abolitionists of the era, but he feels compelled to characterise Burke as a ‘practising politician’ and an ‘extremely conscientious man of business,’ whose ‘fallibility on slavery [was]…due to his sense of the public interest and of his duty to further it’ (pp. 231, 233). I leave it to other readers to decide how convincing they find this defence.

This book is the result not only of a huge amount of research but of decades of intellectual engagement with the question of 18th-century Britain’s relationship—both desired and actual—with its colonies. For those who wish to learn in meticulous detail about how these arrangements worked, *Edmund Burke and the British Empire in the West Indies* will be immensely illuminating. But readers whose primary interest is in an enhanced understanding of the nature of West Indian societies at the height of their economic and geopolitical importance may wish to look elsewhere.

Notes

2. For the sake of clarity, throughout this review I refer to Edmund Burke as ‘Burke,’ and to others of that surname, whether his kin or not, by their first names. Back to (2)

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