

## RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

GUILLERMO BARALT: *Buena Vista: Life and Work on a Puerto Rican Hacienda, 1833-1904*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

This monograph is the English translation of Guillermo Baralt's *La Buena Vista: Estancia de frutos menores, fábrica de harinas, y hacienda cafetalera*, originally published in Puerto Rico in 1988. The translation was facilitated by the Association of Caribbean Historians after Baralt's book won the Elsa Goveia Prize for best book in Caribbean history in 1992. *La Buena Vista* is the story of the transformation of a 'truck farm' (*estancia*) selling fruits for the local market in Ponce in the 1830s into a coffee *hacienda* producing for the international market by the close of the century. It is also the story of the owners of the hacienda, the Vives family.

One of Baralt's main arguments is the singularity of the Buena Vista. And indeed, during the first half of the nineteenth-century, this *hacienda* was different from the typical contemporary Puerto Rican agricultural unit: the sugar plantation. Another element which differentiates Buena Vista was that the destination of the corn flour and plantains produced in the *hacienda* was the local market and not foreign markets, as was the case with sugar. Yet, upon further scrutiny, how different really was the Buena Vista? Was the way the Vives family acquired its land different from how other sugar planters acquired theirs? Or were the lives of the fifty-some slaves in the *hacienda* and the Vives family members very different from those in the sugar plantations? Although the author seems to imply that the slaves in Buena Vista were treated better than in other plantations, there is little evidence in the book to substantiate this claim. Furthermore, can Buena Vista's singularity be better explained by the fact that historians have neglected to study *estancias* and thus know little about other agricultural units producing foodstuffs for the local Puerto Rican market? Finally, the moment the *hacienda's* production started to focus on coffee exports, around 1876, Buena Vista actually became more typical of post-1860s coffee-processing *haciendas* rather than an anomaly.

A major contribution to Puerto Rican and Caribbean historiography are the sections dedicated to discussing the technological innovations implemented in Buena Vista. Baralt does an excellent job of unearthing the

informational, technological, commercial and financial ties that connected the owners of the Buena Vista with New York, Paris, London, Madrid, and St. Thomas. The Whitelaw hydraulic turbine, installed in 1854 to power the cornmill, was an example of the cutting-edge technology available at Buena Vista. Puerto Rican *hacendados* had access to the most current trade journals and tried to keep up with technological changes. Baralt also documents how the Vives family tried to have access to the most modern corn-milling technology in Europe.

Baralt's chapter on the "hired workers" (1873-1898) is one of the few examples in Puerto Rican historiography of how the transition from slave to wage labor occurred. In Buena Vista, the sixteen slaves left on the *hacienda* at the time of abolition decided to remain as *alquilados* working for the Vives family. *Alquilados* had both agricultural and industrial jobs in the plantation. Their work seems to have been extremely sexually segregated, for almost all the coffee pickers were women. This chapter provides a solid, descriptive account of some of the changes in the Buena Vista workforce after 1873. Unfortunately, we do not get a sense of how the transition from slavery into wage labor in Buena Vista fits into the larger regional and national picture.

As detailed and evocative as are Baralt's descriptions of the quotidian aspects of the Vives family patriarchs conducting business—the Vives women are invisible in the text—, there are some unexplained lacunae. Don Salvador Vives was Ponce's *alcalde* several times during the 1840s. Although the reader can assume that such a political position would be important to the Vives' commercial fortunes and connections, there is no reference to the Vives' involvement in politics. We are told nothing, for example, of the ideological and political impact of the education received by Guillermo Vives and Carlos Vives in Paris, starting in 1877. Although the author shows that the Vives operated their *hacienda* through a thick international and local web of commercial and technological networks, the political aspects of this web are conspicuously missing from the story.

There is no doubt that Buena Vista is an important contribution to our understanding of how different farms and plantations operated in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico. Baralt's attention to detail and his careful use of the rich documentary sources provided by the heirs of the Buena Vista are the key ingredients of this fine monograph. One can only hope that other scholars will follow in Baralt's footsteps and begin to explore the records of small and medium-size *estancias*, so that we can better place Buena Vista within the larger picture of Caribbean estates in the nineteenth-century.