

of “strategies of resistance” versus “tactics of opposition” (212). Burnard argues that we can no longer look upon slaves’ activities that did not support the system of slavery (e.g. intentionally slow work, running away) as resistance. Resistance required that slaves be able to operate outside the system of slavery and maintain some level of agency that was outside the control of whites. Citing Michel Foucault’s theoretical work on power, Burnard argues that “there can be no relations of power unless subjects are free” (212), which was certainly not the case in Jamaica. Burnard suggests that “opposition” is a more analytically persuasive view to evaluate slaves’ abilities to exploit gaps within the system of slavery. Denied the ability to act outside slavery by virtue of whites’ physical power and violence, slaves worked within the system to blur the social and racial boundaries of slave society and acquire, as Thistlewood’s lover Phibba did, a degree of social independence and economic advantage.

Historians of the colonial British Atlantic, new-world slavery, and Jamaica, as well as those studying the implications of the unhindered application of violence and tyranny within a society, should read this interesting and well-written text. Burnard situates his study of Thomas Thistlewood not only within Jamaican slave society, but also within the British Atlantic world that valued sensibility, liberty and enlightenment. For modern readers this would seem to create a rather confused individual who was at once a proponent of liberty, independence of spirit and enlightenment, but who could in the next instant visit on his slaves the most dehumanizing and vicious violence that one human being can inflict on another. Burnard’s final comment on Thistlewood as a “tyrannical and cruel despot” should come as no surprise to those familiar with Thistlewood’s diaries. What should provoke further discussion is Burnard’s sweeping assessment of eighteenth-century Jamaican society, where “tyranny... accompanied whiteness,” a fact which, according to Burnard, ultimately “undid the pretensions of whites wishing to create Albion in the Tropics” (271).

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BONHAM C. RICHARDSON: *Igniting the Caribbean’s Past: Fire in British West Indian History*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Fire is inextricably bound up with the development of human society. The use and abuse of this source of energy, fire, has served extremely important functions in the socio-economic, political and religious life of a people. These include: the clearing of land for settlement and agricultural plots for food production, the

development of transport, the provision of light and warmth, the engendering/fostering of social gatherings. Fire also served for the destruction of conquered cities; for example, when conquering the Native American civilisations, the Europeans burnt not just the cities, but everything that they conceived as pagan. Furthermore, History is replete with instances in which fire was used freely in acts of revenge, reprisals or protests of the offended against the alleged offenders. In religious life the god(s) are often manifested and worshipped with fire. Volcanic eruptions are worshipped as God, YHWH revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush; He led the children through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. With fire The Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. In worship, incense and sacrifices are burnt and light –bonfires, lamps, or candles— is used. Thus in the history of every nation and among all peoples, fire has been man’s constant companion. As Bonham Richardson in *Igniting the Caribbean’s Past* attempts to demonstrate, the role of fire in the history of the Caribbean is no different. He argues that the subject of fire in the Caribbean context has hardly been examined in any detail, although the use of fire is highly significant in the region’s history. “Fire played a variety of daily and seasonal roles there, and as in all human societies, the people of these small islands resorted to the use of fire at different times, for many reasons, and on different scales, in both utilitarian and symbolic ways in living out and attempting to improve their individual and collective existence” [xi]. This work will fill that void.

In this fairly interesting and informative text, Richardson uses early West Indian newspapers as his major source of evidence in order to provide us with “a historical geography of how the common people of the region –inhabiting a string of tiny, hazard prone, depression racked, economically and environmentally worn out British island colonies used, modified and contemplated fire” [xi]. The discussion focuses primarily on the Eastern Caribbean Islands, namely the former British possessions stretching from Antigua to Trinidad, during the period from about 1885 to 1910. Jamaica, a former British colony situated outside this geographical chain of islands, is omitted. However, for comparative analytical and illustrative purposes, references are regularly made throughout the work to this island and to other non-British territories in the region.

The major aim or “the principal virtue of studying fire in Caribbean history,” according to the author, “is that it emphasizes and underscores the material circumstances of lives lived there in the past.” Accordingly, he hopes to “throw light, using fire as a window or point of entry on understanding better what things were like on the ground in the islands one century ago...[and] represents an appealingly specific and fresh perspective different from the approach and subject matter normally found in the conventional socio-economic histories of

the region based on political correspondence and officially published government commentary...although many of the studies...are richly and imaginatively interpreted, they offer only indirect insight into the lives of the vast majority of the people who inhabit the island and whose activities shaped and directed local histories of these places. The approach taken here...is intended to exemplify or to fit in with recent academic thinking that tries to remedy or offset the structuredness of colonial history and the partial truths often contained in conventional archival records" [4-5].

With the establishment of plantations owned by whites and a few privileged coloured persons from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Caribbean territories captured/conquered by the European powers quickly became colonies of exploitation producing for Europe needed tropical products, especially sugar. The Caribbean soon became the most valuable/profitable region for Europe's economy, the "hub of European mercantilism," financing, according to some political economists, the Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century [Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944)]. Fire, the author reminds us, was an essential ingredient in this development; it was used in clearing the land, establishing settlements, planting and reaping crops, manufacturing produce, providing light, etc.

With the annihilation of the native Amerindian population by the invading Europeans and the ensuing demand for labour, blacks from Africa were forcefully transplanted to the region as slaves to work these lands. They were to become the 'natives'. Later on, with slave emancipation, Asians were imported as indentured labourers to augment the labour force and the 'native' population. This black majority population was essentially oppressed, and had no property and few human or civil rights. White racism dictated the social structure of the region. Obviously, with a minority of a different race oppressing and repressing the majority, class conflicts generating fear and tension became the essential element of the social order. The strong dependence on fire, the use of which was ironically in the hands of the oppressed labouring masses, intensified this fear among the official and propertied classes. As Richardson states, "Caribbean fire carries with it a strong social connotation, a distinction created by the region's human history of remarkable and persistent social oppression exerted by local planters and other officials, oppression that has in turn been met by the resistance and creativity of the region's working people. Slavery, insurrections, threats and planned destruction in the region all have been accented by fire or threats of fire" [5, 6].

In this racist society, the 'natives' – essentially the black population – were blamed for most of society's ills, including destructive fires, and understandably so, since they had no other recourse for hitting home their demands or making their voices heard. Indeed the oppressed black population never hesitated to set

fires to press their claims for social and economic justice, and there was some correlation between fires deliberately set by incendiaries and economic depression. Recognizing the importance of fires as acts of protests, Richardson has indeed dedicated an entire chapter to the discussion of this topic. However, he debunks the general view – that the ‘natives’ were responsible for destructive fires – by pointing out that incendiaries spanned all social classes. In several cases, financially strapped proprietors in rural and urban areas (including plantation owners) set fire to their establishments to obtain compensation from insurance companies. This became a boom. The fact that incendiaries were rarely apprehended indicates that there was strong collusion among the population.

Although necessary and useful, fire did indeed have a destructive side. Whether set accidentally or deliberately, fires were the real bane of Caribbean societies. Millions of pounds were lost over the period on account of destructive fires across the region. But apart from this, fire served a very important purpose for the lower classes. As Richardson aptly concludes: “The human use of fire as a symbol of protest called attention to the social inequities that underpinned British colonialism... Fires ignited in passion and anger over particular local events on individual islands brought regional problems to London’s attention. Always in the background, sometimes in the foreground, and never under complete control, Caribbean fire invariably accompanied the people of the region as it always had in the past, and in some cases it lighted the way” [196].

One issue that has not been fully explored in this text is why, although they were quite aware of the lower classes’ grievances stemming from terrible social and economic conditions, the plantocrats did not attempt to redress the problem by introducing reforms aimed at alleviating poverty. Why did they choose instead to implement tougher punitive measures, which only served to further fan the existing flames of protest?

The reader is warned of several digressions in this book, which can at times become a little overwhelming. An extreme example is Chapter Four. Apart from the fact that this chapter makes tedious reading, the reader is constantly asking himself: “How relevant is this in-depth discussion to the general thesis?” These numerous digressions might have the effect of causing one to lose sight of the central theme. Nonetheless, *Igniting the Caribbean’s Past* is a fairly instructive work and will make excellent reading not only in General History and Geography of the Caribbean, but also in Landscape History, as well as for those interested in environmental issues.

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