

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: Tony Martin 2012 Caribbean History: From Pre-Colonial Origins to the Present. Boston: Pearson Pages 366

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The call to write a textbook on Caribbean history for College and University students in North America with large Caribbean populations has been churning for some time. However, that call has become a reality only in recent times. Franklin Knight's book *The Caribbean: The Genesis of Fragmented Nationalism*, (2012) comes readily to mind, as do contributions from Stephen Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano, *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples* (2011), as well as a few others. The late emeritus Professor of History Tony Martin's book joins this short list of Caribbean history texts written primarily for Caribbean Studies Programs within departments in colleges and universities in North America. Martin declares that his book is a survey of the Caribbean but warns that he "tried to manage the delicate balancing act of a readable undergraduate narrative which nevertheless avoids the temptation of degenerating into a series of bland sound bites, some accurate, some not." (xi). In so doing, Martin divided his book into sixteen chapters designed to coincide with the regular semester in North American academic institutions. Each chapter is also divided into several sub-themes. Readers will find this organization very useful. However, the book can be divided into four broad sections of Caribbean history: (1) indigenous Caribbean and European contact, (2) African slavery, resistance and emancipation, (3) post-emancipation and (4) the modern period.

Section one examines the history of Amerindians before contact with Europeans. Martin calls the Amerindians the first "Nations" of the Caribbean and elaborates on their social, economic, political and religious systems and organization. He believes that the Amerindians also lived in Kingdoms (6) rather solely into chieftains. He shows that the Amerindians had a positive system of living which boded well for them. The Europeans, however, disturbed and devastated the Amerindian way of life through enslavement, warfare, new diseases, and stress. The result was not merely a decimation of the Amerindians but genocide. The section also documents Spanish monopoly over and the colonization of the Caribbean islands as well

as the entrance of Northern Europeans into the region through piracy and warfare.

Section two shows why and how Africans were forcefully brought by Europeans to the Caribbean. During this process, Africans suffered enormously in the holding Forts in Africa, the Middle Passage and on the Caribbean plantations. Martin states that not only were European traders and African collaborators involved in capturing Africans for the New World but also "mulatto chiefs" and "Mulatto traders" in Africa (59). In the Caribbean, the life of the enslaved was analyzed primarily with the use of slave narratives from Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince and Esteban Montejo. The latter lived to be 103 years old in Cuba and died in 1963. The author also used the narrative of John Stedman, a European, visiting Surinam in the late eighteenth century. This section elaborates extensively on slave working and living conditions, the hierarchy of slave society, enslaved family life, and African cultural retentions (93–116). A sizable part of this section (117–194) is also dedicated to what Martin calls "The Big Fight Back", namely, the resistance of Africans to plantation slavery. The general discussion is that while Africans were subdued during slavery, resistance was a constant feature of enslaved life that lasted until the institution of slavery collapsed in various time periods in the nineteenth century. Wherever and whenever slavery existed so did African resistance to it. Resistances were carried out in covert and overt forms as well as in flight or marronage either on land or over water. The most well-known slave resistance, of course, is the Haitian Revolution. But the author ensured that other revolts in the less known Caribbean islands were examined such as in Dominica, St. Vincent and St. John, among others. Acts of resistance, Martin argued, allowed Africans a measure of freedom before slave emancipation occurred in the nineteenth century. He also acknowledged that while help for emancipation came from Europe, the final push came from the enslaved.

Section three examines the "obstacles and progress" (195) that Africans experienced in the post-emancipation period. On the one hand, the planters implemented new restrictive labor systems and policies such as the apprenticeship and unrealistic land purchase prices to stop the out-migration of newly freed Africans from the plantations to independent survival. On the other hand, the post-emancipation period provided limited opportunities

for African socio-economic upward mobility. However, from the readings, it appears that the lash of whip during slavery was replaced by the letter of law designed to benefit the planter class. The reason for this stern position was the overarching concern as to what would become of the plantations without slave labor. The planters argued that the Africans were reluctant to work on the plantations and that they were “lazy, thriftless and would work only enough to satisfy their immediate daily needs” (211). The reality was that the planters wanted to retain pre-emancipation circumstances and conditions on the plantations by offering poor wages to the laboring class. The outcome of these diverse views led to the importation of over 500,000 contract laborers, a majority of them East Indians. The arrival of these new immigrants helped to revive the sugar industry but also led to ethnic tensions. The Africans thought that the new immigrants were undermining their bargaining power for better working conditions by accepting low working and living standards. These ethnic tensions continued beyond the post-emancipation period when about a third of these indentured immigrants did not return home but stayed mainly in Guyana, Trinidad and Suriname. More detailed post-emancipation ethnic tensions are discussed in chapter eleven, “Immigration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century” (211–251).

Section four documents the rise of black consciousness, United States and Caribbean relations, labor riots, the formation of labor unions and political parties, the collapse of the British West Indian Federation, Caribbean revolutions, decolonization and independence. Rastafarianism, Black Power and CARICOM are also discussed. The author provided background information on these Caribbean events. The reason for this position is best explained by the author himself. Martin writes: “Survey textbook writers on the Caribbean have all grappled with the problem of what to do as the narrative approaches contemporary times. It is usually more difficult to take the entire region as a single entity because the nearer one gets to the present. This has usually meant a country-by-country or region-by-region approach as the text gets into the twentieth century” (xv). Martin adds that he tried to avoid this approach because it is “dreary and boring” (ibid).

Apart from the introduction of Amerindian names of the Caribbean islands and a couple of revised original maps, section one adds little new to what has already been written about the Amerindians and their contact with Europeans as well as European warfare and colonization of the Caribbean. However, students who are unfamiliar with Caribbean history will find this initial section of the book informative and interesting and may even

be able to make comparative analysis with the North American and Latin American indigenous experience. Section two is really the strength of the book. The author provided new and valuable information on African slave experience in the Caribbean. Some graphic photos of slave life support the analysis of slavery in the Caribbean. Like section one, section three reiterates the already well-documented typical planter and working class opposing views in early post-emancipation period and the subsequent immigration of foreign contract workers. Some of the analyses in this section, especially the relations between Africans and Indians, are not sound and substantive but anecdotal. The final section is the weakest. The author just listed some major events during the modern period of the Caribbean without applying much in depth analysis. For instance, the modern out-migration of Caribbean nationals to North America and Europe and the formation of Caribbean diasporic communities are sketched. This is a major flaw since the book is expected to be used in colleges and universities with Caribbean populations, who are primarily the product of the modern out-migration. Likewise, and so often noticed in the writing of Caribbean history, is the peripheral treatment of the non-sovereign Caribbean islands in the modern period. Yet, there have been some important events going on in this region such as the rewriting of the constitution in the United States Virgin Islands, the collapsed of the Dutch Antilles Federation, secession movements, the British suspension of the constitution in Turks and Caicos as well as massive intra-regional migration to the micro non-sovereign states in the middle and northern Caribbean. In the final analysis, however, one must thank Tony Martin for producing a textbook on the survey of the Caribbean. An instructor’s manual, a study guide and power point slides will not only be appreciated but also support the use of this book in any classroom anywhere in the world.

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Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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