

Book Review

– *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean*, by Randy Browne. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017

When opening Randy Browne's *Surviving Slavery* we stare straight down at the depths of hell. The book starts out with the story of the burial of Harry, an enslaved Berbician man, while he was still alive, sealed in a coffin. The story testifies to the brutality and dehumanization which accompanied the management of the plantation colonies in the Atlantic world that were based on racialized slavery. The story paints us a picture of the world where the slaves were trying to survive. In Berbice any attempts at survival were made in dramatically adverse circumstances since the slaves in Berbice 'had the highest morbidity rate in the nineteenth-century West Indies' (p. 24). Their position deteriorated in the nineteenth century during British occupation and even further after the ending of the slave trade.

Berbice history of colonialism and slavery is underexplored, which, as Browne shows, is a real pity. The colony was at the centre of the transformations in plantation slavery in the nineteenth century and has left a wealth of documentary evidence. The colony defies lingering assumptions that the histories of European empires can be neatly delineated along national boundaries. Across the book we see that Berbice carried elements of its Dutch colonial legacy and British colonialism in the decades leading up to amelioration and full abolition.

We encounter the Dutch legacy in the names of the enslaved, like Fortuin, Klaas, and Woensdag and the plantation names such as Herstelling, Overysseel, and Waxhaamheid. As recent work by Gert Oostindie and Bram Hoonhout has shown, the rise of the British planters class in the colony preceded the British take-over of the colony in 1796. Browne's book demonstrates how the Dutch legacy shaped slavery in colonial Berbice in the nineteenth century when the British had taken over the colony. This Dutch legacy in nineteenth century Berbice was especially noticeable in the legal system and in its unique institution of the *raad-fiscaal* (fiscal prosecutor). The *raad-fiscaal* was somewhat akin to the public prosecutor and is central to Browne's book, as the council offered the possibility to hear complaints from the enslaved against their en-

slaver. That we know of Harry's story and many of the others in the book is thanks to the records of this prosecutor, now kept in the archives of the Colonial Office in the National Archive in Kew.

With the introduction of the amelioration policies the *raad-fiscaal* in Berbice also came to hold the office of the 'protector of slaves' where the enslaved were encouraged to go with their grievances. The office remained in the fiscal's hand, until, after a few years, the protector of slaves became an independent office.

Turning to the fiscal or the protector, as Browne shows, often backfired on the complaining slaves. The evidence from the archive shows a mixed result of amelioration: some punishments were changed and the state took a more interventionist approach, but slave chances for survival do not seem to have improved.

Having the archival material to research the attempts at surviving slavery is one thing, using them to construct a story of survival from the perspective of the enslaved is quite another. Browne has done a great job in selecting anecdotes and trial records to illustrate the main themes in slave survival that he explores. The enslaved attempted to navigate the power dynamics between their owners and the state.

What Browne's approach can offer to researchers is shown throughout the book, and works especially well in the chapter *The Slave Drivers' World*. In this chapter qualitative data from the legal sources is used to help us understand the complexity of the position of the slave drivers and how skilled these men were at negotiating plantation politics, drawing on multiple sources to retain their legitimacy as intermediaries between the enslaved and plantation management. Only through the court records are we able to access this world of the drivers and the many other issues that are explored in the book.

The court cases offer flashes of lightening that illuminate a complex landscape for a very short period of time. The empirical strength of the book comes with the drawback that the reader is drawn in to the narrative of a court case and left to wonder how their protagonists fared after the case had ended—if they survived. The nature of the material and the methodological choice not to write a micro history means that the reader is left questioning how these lives continued, as the protagonists of most stories disappear back into the silence that so often surrounds the lives of the illiterate and enslaved in history. Browne has now broken the ground and shows us what is possible when studying Berbice. It is my hope that many will follow in his footsteps.

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