Race, Class, Politics and the Struggle for Empowerment in Barbados, 1914-1937. David V.C. Browne. Kingston: Ian Randle 2012. xxv + 185 pp. (Paper US$ 24.95)

David Browne’s mission to analyze the historical fundamentals of race relations in Barbados in order to clarify issues in contemporary Barbadian race relations is mostly successful. Finding the historiography lacking in analysis and Eurocentric in its sources and historical methodology, he introduces his own radical interpretation of the background to the events of 1937.

The book begins by analyzing the impact of World War I on Barbados and ends with the 1937 labor upheaval. The labor rebellion (one of several throughout the contemporary British West Indies) resulted from the confrontation between the black Barbadian working class and the white Barbadian merchant-planter elite whose racial attitudes and practices increasingly frustrated the Barbadian working class.

Browne dismisses the myth that benign white planters brought positive sociopolitical change to Barbados. On the contrary, he argues that the sugar plantocracy was racist and that it controlled the legal, administrative, and electoral apparatus of the country in order to keep the black working class in subordination to planter-merchant capital, and to discourage and crush all protest. Planters were indifferent to nagging social problems, including residential discrimination, poor housing, long working hours, urban slums, disease, and rising infant mortality. The struggle between planters and workers was based not only on class but also on race because the oligarchy was firm in its belief that blacks constituted an inferior race. As whites and blacks went to fight for the British Empire, white Barbadians objected to membership in the same regiment as humble black Barbadians. The Vestries were also intractably parsimonious in expenditure for welfare and health. Protests, acts of violence, and systematic potato-field raids perpetrated by alienated black Barbadians reinforced the racial stereotypes and hardened the attitudes of the oligarchy that opted for police repression, harsh legislation, recommendations for emigration, and moral reform of “lazy” blacks.

Browne’s analysis of the impact of World War I on Barbados closely parallels that for other Caribbean territories such as Jamaica, Trinidad, and St. Lucia. In Barbados, the war aroused anticolonial sentiment because
black veterans received neither material rewards nor social acceptance for their military service. The race and class divide remained as sharp as it had been before the war. Thus, “the indignity suffered by war veterans was channeled into political protests on their return to the West Indies” (p. 41). The white elite, who had used war-time prosperity to clear their debts and consolidate the plantation economy, continued to ignore worsening social conditions. A bad situation was aggravated by falling sugar prices in the 1920s and by drought conditions.

The confrontation of 1937 was not, with a handful of exceptions, a product of middle-class agitation either. The Barbadian middle class, whom Browne equates with Weber’s status groups, had an agenda for constitutional reform comparable to those of Trinidad and Jamaica. It was, however, politically divided between a moderate to radical corps (led by Dr. Duncan O’Neal’s WMA, Fabian socialists, and the UNIA) and a conservative sector that Browne condemns as lethargic, opportunistic, and paralyzed by the nonconfrontational English value system. The conservative sector was unsympathetic and sometimes hostile to the rioters of 1937. Browne’s radical interpretation approves the orientation of the more progressive elements of the middle class. He credits the efforts of Duncan O’Neal and the leaders of Marcus Garvey’s UNIA for politicizing, energizing, and raising black consciousness among the working class. O’Neal’s entry into the House of Assembly introduced a spokesman for the workers. However significant the middle-class contribution may have been after 1937, it was limited in scope prior to 1937. The middle class was the political beneficiary of the struggles of the black working class.

Political, economic, and social change prior to 1937 was not, therefore, the achievement of the plantocrats or of the middle class. Change came through subaltern action in 1937. Adopting a “bottom-up” approach to Barbadian history, Browne argues quite convincingly that it was the direct action taken by Barbadian workers that forced a new era in Barbados’s history.

Racial and class consciousness and Pan-Africanism (fed by the UNIA, the WMA, and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935) joined social and economic desperation to produce a significant upheaval in 1937. An incipient workers’ press led by The Barbados Herald and The Barbados Observer, petitions to the governor and the Colonial Office, and social and cultural clubs, as well as mass political meetings and public demonstrations, were
the fruit of increasing worker mobilization before the 1937 flashpoint. Even the lull in working-class political activity that followed O’Neal’s death in 1936 ended with Clement Payne’s arrival in Barbados in 1937. Payne’s ready grasp of institutional racism in Barbados spread his influence rapidly within the aroused working class. Browne argues that Payne’s subsequent deportation, intended to stall unrest, had the opposite effect. It triggered the outbreak of July 1937.

I found Browne’s treatment of the crisis of overproduction in the world economy after World War I, the Great Depression, and the impact of crisis on the Barabadian planter class underdeveloped. And a discussion of the tendency for ideological divisions to exist in the middle class would have been helpful. But the book is an important, well-written, and well organized analysis of the background to the 1937 upheaval. It offers a useful point of comparison with other Caribbean territories and successfully relates the experiences of “ordinary” people to the political superstructure. It should be of interest to all students of Caribbean history and political change.

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