

Karwan Fatah-Black, *White Lies and Black Markets: Evading Metropolitan Authority in Colonial Suriname, 1650-1800* (Leiden: BRILL, 2015) 242 p. ISBN: 978-90-04283-329.

Suriname might be thought to be a far-distant European outpost of empire, a place beyond the line, where things that could not be done in Europe could be safely performed without metropolitan scrutiny or condemnation. It was thus a place of violence, especially by white masters against a mass of poorly fed and overworked African slaves. To an extent, the painting by Boston artist John Greenwood, done in the mid- 1750s, with which Karwan Fatah-Black opens this well-written and excellently researched treatment of the commercial life of late seventeenth and eighteenth century Suriname, sums up this aspect of Suriname well. It shows drunken white sea-captains, served by semi-dressed and oddly miniature black slaves, carousing in a tavern. In short, anything goes at the fringes of empire. But there is a deeper message in the painting, a message that frames Fatah-Black's story. These were international traders, mostly North American, relaxing in a Dutch colony at a time when Dutch power to control colonial commerce was waning but when the plantation system was expanding. Fatah-Black is interested less in the moral depravity that these men represented, although he is careful to note that the integrating economic system based on plantation agriculture was based on an immoral and brutal social practice of slavery, than in the "lies, deceit and smuggling that went on below the surface of the slave-based plantation system."(p.3)

What he describes is far from new – many historians have outlined how plantation agriculture was a highly profitable and heavily contested trading activity that made a putative Atlantic economic system of circulation of goods, people and things real. But the wealth of detail that he provides on Dutch America and on Suriname especially highlights both how certain aspects of plantation economic development were similar in every part of the southern Atlantic trading world of the eighteenth century and also how unofficial and often illegal trade was important in making this economic system hang together. The lies and deceit that he writes about were not marginal but vital to the system, as the carousing sea captains well knew.

Fatah-Black's book is a useful addition to other books that use the Dutch Atlantic as a means to examine illicit trade and plantation development. He complements Wim Klooster's work by providing a close case study of the things that Klooster analyses; he deepens and updates Gert Oostindie's authoritative treatment of the growth of Suriname as a plantation region; and he underscores the arguments made by Johannes Postma about the nature of Dutch Atlantic trade. He follows Postma in particular in stressing the deep connections between the Dutch Wild Coast and British America. Suriname depended upon Barbados for its start

and was linked strongly to New England and New York and then to the United States for its provisions and to an extent for all of its trade.

But, in an important contribution, Fatah-Black argues that the founding of the United States was crucial in diminishing the ability of the Dutch to control their part of the Atlantic slave trade. That trade was the pulse that not only kept the plantation stocked with fresh inputs of labour but which provided the economic foundation of the Suriname Company and underpinned all of Dutch Atlantic trade. The takeover of this part of the slave trade by North Americans and the tumults of the French revolutionary wars in Europe and in the Atlantic meant that the explosive and seemingly sustainable growth in plantation agriculture from the 1760s through to the 1780s faltered in the 1790s, leaving Suriname much weaker economically and more vulnerable to military occupation. A system of economic production that had served the Dutch well for over a century and which seemed to work as part of an integrated Atlantic system that was cross-imperial fell apart remarkably quickly once the Dutch lost control of slave trading. In 1799, the British took over Suriname, leading to a new and less economically productive phase in Suriname history, especially after the British-imposed abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

As befits a work that concentrates on how colonial commerce intersected with larger imperial currents, Fatah-Black puts a lot of emphasis on the role of Paramaribo as a place of interaction and as a vital Atlantic node. This emphasis on a town often ignored or seen as a colonial backwater is significant and interesting. It adds to a growing tendency among Caribbean scholars to see urban towns as more than just adjuncts to the plantation economy and as places important in their own right. It was probably in Paramaribo where North American sea captains let down the hair. Fatah-Black's work is important and valuable in moving this interesting phase of Surinamese history away from being thought of in terms of colonial or frontier history and seeing it instead as the study of Atlantic nodes of interaction in an integrating Atlantic economic network of trade, both legal and illegal.

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