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Review of Jenny Shaw, *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean*

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Published in:
Slavery & Abolition

DOI:
[10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009249](https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009249)

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Thompson, M. (2015). Review of Jenny Shaw, *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference* (2013). *Slavery & Abolition*, 36(1), 202-204.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009249>

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Slavery & Abolition

A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies

ISSN: 0144-039X (Print) 1743-9523 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fsla20>

Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference

Mark L. Thompson

To cite this article: Mark L. Thompson (2015) Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference, *Slavery & Abolition*, 36:1, 202-204, DOI: [10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009249](https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009249)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009249>

Published online: 24 Feb 2015.

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area where overlapping imperial designs created a space where border crossings and intercultural exchange were frequent, along with the circulation of revolutionary ideas.

Millett also devotes a chapter to the environmental history of Prospect Bluff and three chapters to aspects of everyday life that illuminate the cultures, routines and subsistence strategies of the maroons. Because the community began as a fort and enjoyed British support until Nicolls's departure, it was 'materially the wealthiest maroon settlement in the history of the Western Hemisphere' and boasted an impressive supply of tools, arms and implements (175). Unlike the deprivation that many maroons experienced in other parts of North and South America, Prospect Bluff maroons benefited from 'an advantageous combination of natural setting, quality infrastructure, and bountiful supplies' (146) that resulted in 'a remarkable version of freedom' (255). As a result, Millett asserts that the lives of Prospect Bluff residents 'can perhaps tell us more about slave consciousness than an examination of formal free black communities who lived surrounded by white society' and faced graver material, political and economic constraints (256).

Millett reminds us that not all maroons, in their struggle for freedom, fought against the institution of slavery itself. Mid-eighteenth-century communities in Suriname and Jamaica, for example, signed treaties with European powers that allowed them to coexist alongside plantation slavery with varying degrees of autonomy, as long as they returned future runaways. Unlike Jamaican maroons, who were therefore 'pro-slavery' and negotiated a more conservative relationship with the British, Millett argues, residents of the later Prospect Bluff community were largely creole and modern in their outlook and saw in their claim to British identity certain unalienable rights that underpinned their 'anti-slavery' project and their personal liberty (124).

By 1816, Prospect Bluff was home to 300–400 maroons who represented, remarkably, 'Spanish Florida's third largest and best-defended town as well as the largest free black town in North America' at the time (298). When attacked, many residents fled to surrounding settlements, including Miccosukee, Angola (along East Florida's central Gulf coast) and even to Andros Island in the Bahamas, where refugees symbolically named their new village Nicholls Town.

At times repetitive and overly speculative, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff* is nonetheless a major contribution to the current renaissance in North American maroon studies. Millett's groundbreaking analysis of the Florida maroons is sure to spark additional book-length investigations of understudied sites and generate productive debate over what, exactly, constitutes a maroon community within the Atlantic–North American borderland context.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009248>

Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference, by Jenny Shaw, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2013, xviii + 259 pp., US\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8203-4662-5

In this ambitious and provocative study, Jenny Shaw explores how a wide range of actors understood cultural difference in seventeenth-century Barbados and the Leeward Islands. Specifically, she seeks to interpret the 'indeterminate place of Irish Catholics' in the (nominally) English Caribbean. Shaw claims that previous scholarship has focused too closely on the history of 'race and slavery alone' and has been too quick to accept 'the overarching narrative of race as the central definition of difference'. She proposes instead a broader understanding of 'difference' that 'encompasses the myriad cultural and ethnic markers that individuals used to understand what made themselves similar to, or distinct

from, one another'. By examining how Irish, African, and English subjects interacted with one another, she aims to offer a more complete account of the ways 'hierarchy and difference' were constructed in England's early Caribbean settlements (2–3).

In her first two chapters, Shaw documents the ways elite Englishmen constructed the Irish as 'perfidious papists' and 'barbarous heathens' in printed legal debates, travel accounts, and political discussion (30). She uses these elite discourses as a baseline for exploring 'nonelite ideas about difference', which she admits are considerably more difficult to recover (7). Shaw addresses this problem in two related but different ways. The first is to offer a creative reconstruction of everyday life through close readings of diaries, correspondence, inventories, wills, court records, censuses, and printed accounts from archives in Barbados, Bermuda, Ireland, England, and the USA. In the third and fourth chapters, especially, she skillfully pieces together these disparate materials to demonstrate that while Irish and African workers had their own distinctive cultural practices, they also shared much in common in terms of social space, labor, food, clothing, and even religion. She suggests that these forms of everyday life offered servants and slaves many opportunities for 'finding solidarity in their status as unfree laborers' (154).

Shaw's second method is to offer a series of fictive mini-narratives about an Irish-African household on Barbados – an exercise in what she calls 'informed imagination' (9). The introduction, six chapters, and epilog each conclude with a fragment of narrative, set off in italics and about a page long, providing a view into the subjectivities of Irish servant-turned-planter Cornelius Bryan and two of his female slaves, Pegg and Old Pegg. These microhistorical fictions allow Shaw to connect the analytical themes of the chapters to real people's lived experiences, but she argues that they also serve to 'offset the inequities of the archive', in which '[a]bsences . . . proliferate as silences' (8–9). Here Shaw draws not only on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's work on the politics of the archive but also on the theoretical writings of French philosopher Michel de Certeau, whose essay collection *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) is indirectly cited in her title.

Like Certeau, Shaw argues that powerful actors and institutions dominate 'everyday life' through various routine and mundane practices, including making legal distinctions between groups of subjects (chapter one), taking censuses and imposing arbitrary categories on different populations (chapter two), seeking to control the labor and daily lives of workers (chapter three), attempting to monitor and control laborers' religious beliefs and practices (chapter four), putting down attempts at resistance and rebellion (chapter five), and rewarding deferential subjects who imitate themselves (chapter six). Yet, as Certeau posits and Shaw shows, everyday life is also a contested zone where the 'strategies' of the powerful are met by the 'tactics' of the weak. These forms of action included Irish and African laborers 'forging their own ideas about difference' (10) and, most dramatically, conspiring with one another to overthrow the English colonial order.

Such tactics were not always, or even necessarily, aimed at such dramatic change, however. Shaw presents a sympathetic defense of an enslaved domestic worker named Anna who helped to reveal and disrupt a revolt on Barbados in 1675, noting that her 'decision to speak up provide[s] an . . . understanding of enslaved politics' that was 'equally valid' to those of the rebels who sought to unite all the island's slaves under a Coromantee king (139). Likewise, she narrates the rise of the central character in her book, Cornelius Bryan, from rebellious indentured servant to confident planter and slave owner in a way that shows how tricky and uncertain such a climb to social respectability could be.

In the end, Shaw's book sometimes seems to be divided in itself, just as its subjects were. While she is eager to show solidarity between Irish and African workers in everyday life, the limited evidence she uncovers often suggests that their differences, reinforced by English law and social practice, may have been more significant – not just at the end of her story but also at the beginning. Indeed, as Shaw shows in the final chapter, Irish servants and settlers recognized that their future prospects hinged upon emphasizing their difference from Africans and their likeness to the English. As English subjects inhabiting colonial territories bound to England and the English Crown, they had every reason to latch on to this colonial Englishness, and imperial administrators in need of a stable, loyal (and white) settler population often had an interest in permitting them to do so.¹ In

this respect and in others, 'elite English men' engaged in empire may not have been as single-minded as Shaw suggests. Of course, as Shaw ably shows in this stimulating book, these tensions and contradictions are exactly what one should expect from the 'messy and complex' world of everyday life in the Caribbean (190).

Note

- [1] For a sensitive discussion of this process, see Natalie A. Zacek, *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), which engages some of the same themes and sources as Shaw but focuses instead on the ways white settlers struggled and succeeded in creating English societies in the Caribbean.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1009249>

Abolition and Plantation Management in Jamaica, 1807–1838, by Dave St Aubyn Gosse, Kingston, Jamaica, University of the West Indies Press, 2012, xii + 236 pp., \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9789766402693

Dave Gosse's *Abolition and Plantation Management in Jamaica* is one of several recent works that seek to intervene from new angles into the long-running 'Williams debate' about the causes of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. Gosse's focus is plantation management, specifically the extent to which slaveholders were able and willing to adopt new modes of management in order to maintain and develop the profitability of plantations after the abolition of the slave trade. Gosse seeks to show that plantation managers were inefficient, and that they failed to meet the new challenges of managing a slavery-based economy when it was no longer possible to import new captives. In many ways, this argument reinstates the image of the plantation that developed over the course of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates about the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery. Gosse's work is most significantly directed against that of Barry Higman, who in a series of studies, particularly *Plantation Jamaica 1750–1850* (2005), argued that the managerial structure of Jamaican plantations, particularly the attorney system, was at the same time modern, efficient and brutal.

Like Higman's, Gosse's work focuses on Jamaica, and draws its evidence primarily from plantation papers and crop accounts. Gosse is particularly interested in the impact on plantations of the abolition of the slave trade, and thus discusses a shorter period than is covered in Higman's book. Chapters in *Abolition and Plantation Management* attend to the managerial structure of Jamaican plantations, particularly the significance of absentee ownership and attorneys; the recruitment of labour in a non-slave-trade context, demonstrating the importance of jobbing gangs; health and reproduction; and management initiatives such as technological innovation (primarily steam engines) and diversification into new crops. One chapter is a case study of Worthy Park, the subject of Michael Craton and James Walvin's 1970 book, *A Jamaican Plantation*. Gosse positions his book against Craton and Walvin's, but in many respects he and they are in greater agreement than *Abolition and Plantation Management* allows. Gosse's emphasis on the extent to which Worthy Park's owner, Rose Price, went into debt in order to purchase additional enslaved labourers is a point also made by Craton and Walvin, while his claim that his predecessors 'are guilty of falsely conveying planter benevolence' by suggesting that manumissions rose after 1825 due to