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Reviews: Jay E. Kinsbruner, The Colonial Spanish-American City: Urban Life in the Age of Atlantic Capitalism and James Robertson, Gone is the Ancient Glory: Spanish Town, Jamaica

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Abstract

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Comments
These book reviews are from Itinerario 30, no. 2 (2006): 183–185.
St. Méry, and Raimond. Garraway argues that in these texts, colonial society is figured as a patriarchal family, with white men as the fathers and mulatto women as the sexy yet forbidden daughters, objects of incestuous desire.

This book displays an impressive command of French colonial history, an intrepid willingness to engage with rich and complex texts and a theoretical sophistication that will challenge most readers. What historians will like most about this book is its deepest scholarly grounding of particular texts and contexts. Yet, historians will experience a certain frustration with the polemical style of the postcolonial critic. While it is no doubt true that French culture has, until recently, repressed its historical connection to Caribbean slavery, President Chirac declared May 10 a national day for the remembrance of slavery. Those of us working in the history of French slavery no longer find ourselves rare or marginal and to claim so is a little disingenuous. The postcolonial stance runs a danger of collapsing the particularities of site (there is little distinction made here between Guadeloupe, Martinique, or Saint-Domingue), of position (missionaries are elided with colonists and administrators), of gender (the distinctive experiences and social positions of mulatto men and women do not receive sufficient differentiation) and, through its singular focus on white creole culture, the work tends to elide the agency and perspectives of the slaves themselves.

What will make Garraway’s insightful and serious study all the more relevant and widely read will be an explicit comparison with the dynamics of desire and violence in alternative sites of the Americas. Why did the seductive mulatress not emerge in the same way in British North America, the British Caribbean or Brazil? To what extent is the creolization of the early French Caribbean an extension of Frenchness—or is it emblematic of a wider dynamic within the sexual imaginary of Atlantic slavery?

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Note


Throughout its 447 pages Gone is the Ancient Glory submerges the reader in the distinctive past of Spanish Town, the urban centre of Jamaica for nearly 500 years, since it was founded as St Jago de la Vega by Spanish settlers. Robertson’s historical reconstruction of Spanish Town analyzes urban spaces and city monuments whose stories lead to the larger historical perspective of the town itself, and, to a lesser degree, the island of Jamaica: ‘a history of Spanish Town examines a town whose experiences have lain near the centre of much of the island past’ (8). It should be mentioned, however, that this is not a general history of Jamaica (for that purpose the author provides a list of references in the first endnotes of each chapter), but rather concentrates only on Spanish Town.

Since its founding, Spanish Town was built as a continuing succession of overlapping towns through five centuries. A strong candidate to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Robertson explains how Spanish Town’s important landmarks (buildings, streets, town squares, monuments, houses, etc.) trace its five centuries of history as ‘a political and social hub’ (1). As Robertson explains, some of the most important historical events in Jamaica were staged around these same landmarks:
‘History was made in Spanish Town’, and despite the fact that some of its oral history is now lost, the city is largely understudied as a historical entity (3). As the seat of the government for the island up to 1871 when it was transferred to Kingston, Spanish Town was unique in offering a mixture of ethnicities and therefore was known as ‘Creole town’.

In chronological order, through eight chapters, Robertson shows how Spanish Town bore witness to important political, economic, and social changes indicating its relevance in the larger Jamaican history. The city was established in 1534 as St Jago de la Vega, ‘the town in the fields’, a settlement at a remote river crossing. Robertson describes how the city was constructed based upon particular geographical needs, such as a good location for farming and a needed centre for public administration. In 1655 the English fleet attacked Jamaica as part of Oliver Cromwell’s ‘Western Design’, a plan to control trade in the Caribbean by gaining a foothold in several islands. With the English occupation several Spanish buildings were raised, changing the urban landscape forever. During the first 40 years under English rule the town remained the ‘Seat of Government’ for the English colony, and large-scale construction changed the urban landscape. In spite of the English occupation and the subsequent changes imposed by them, the urban plan designed by the original Spanish founders survived even through the earthquake of 1692: ‘Spanish Town reverted from being an English town erected on older Spanish footings to a townscape where the most substantial surviving buildings were inherited from the earlier Spanish settlement’ (62).

Despite widespread destruction across the island caused by the 1692 earthquake, the reconstruction of Spanish Town was brisk as compared to other urban centres. But, the haste in rebuilding actually did little to modernize the town in the way of other urban centres that took greater care in reconstruction. Therefore, between 1692 and 1754, Spanish Town had problems in competing with the two major harbour towns, Port Royal and Kingston, for administrative and commercial dominance.

In the eighteenth century, the prosperity of the sugar trade made Spanish Town a focal point of the island’s commercial growth, and Victorian town architecture reflected this affluence as the governor, council, and assemblymen took up political positions there. The city also became the garrison for regular troops. With the liberation of slaves in 1838, Spanish Town’s architecture changed yet again as an ecclesiastical building phase took place and several Baptist and Methodist chapels were constructed. Robertson shows how the emancipation of the slaves and aging Victorian infrastructure signalled a complete reorganization of Spanish Town’s administration as the seat of government was transferred to Kingston. Spanish Town would never regain its ‘ancient glory’.

Reconstructing the ancient glory of colonial urban centres is also the topic of Jay Kinsbruner’s *The Colonial Spanish-American City*. According to Kinsbruner, this is the first book published in English on the history of the Spanish-American colonial city (although a few have been published in Spanish). As such, the book is addressed to a broad audience and the number of endnotes has been reduced for ease of reading. It is divided into eleven chapters followed by a glossary, a selected bibliography, and an index.

Through numerous examples taken from across the Spanish-American territories, this book analyzes the structure of the city and the different social classes that emerge as a product of capitalism in the urban setting: ‘This book has a central theme, which is that the colonial Spanish-American city evolved during the age of Atlantic capitalism and was itself a circumstance of that capitalism’ (xi). While it has been generally believed that the Spanish American city was not oriented toward capitalist endeavours, Kinsbruner assures that, regardless of its degree of maturity,
colonial society entered into the world marketplace during this time period. Moreover, even though Spanish American cities were dissimilar in geography, demography, and urban cultures, some cities share similarities related to their morphology and their commercial enterprise, thus supporting the hypothesis that capitalism played a notable role in urban development.

In general, the author focuses on the ‘greatness of the urban habitats, as opportunity and shaper of society and economy’, such as in the areas of employment, education, marriage, and commerce. But the author cautions that the city did not always offer equal opportunities and a hope for a better life. Instead, Kinsbruner emphasizes the darker side of urbanization caused by the concentration of people and the lack of sanitation as well as prostitution, large numbers of children, single female-headed families, illegitimately born children, as well as aspects of social deviance. This was especially acute in urban centres (villages, towns, and cities) and, as such, Kinsbruner considers them urban phenomena, which he believes supports the idea of the Spanish-American city as a by-product of capitalism. The author also describes the administrative and economic aspects of the urban habitat, such as the municipal council, government officials, Indian towns, and ‘free coloured’ towns, and their impacts on centralized urbanization.

The author starts with the founding of metropolitan areas in the Americas, with chapters devoted to pre-Columbian urbanization where special attention is given to Teotihuacán, Tenochtitlán, Cuzco, and several Maya cities. In subsequent chapters, Kinsbruner explains how the history of the Spanish-American colonial city started with sixteenth-century royal decrees, such as The Ordinances for the Discovery, New Settlement, and Pacification of the Indies (1573), that supported a particular spatial organization and design (following Roman urban organization and influenced by the Roman military architect Vitruvius). He shows how, from the beginning, the colonial city was designed as a tool to impose royal authority by means of a central geographic point, the plaza – the ‘locus of power and exploitation’ (25). Surrounded by secular and religious buildings as well as elite private houses, the plaza followed the same urban plan promoted by the Roman Empire:

The main plaza was the centre of administrative, religious, and commercial activity in the colonial urban habitat, whether it was a city, town, or small village. The chief governmental buildings, the cathedral or town or village church, the main public market, and stores of leading merchants all shared this privileged space. Radiating from the plaza were streets that housed important commercial and artisan stores. At the plaza or nearby were the houses of the elite – landed aristocrats, merchants, miners, and government officials (49).

The centralized urbanization of the Romans was also common among the Aztec and Inca empires. However, as Kinsbruner indicates, both indigenous empires fell quickly in great measure because they were highly urbanized and centralized. Similarly, the Spanish empire later would disintegrate as Spanish American independence movements began in urban centres (132).

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Jane E. Mangan deftly explores ethnic and gender roles of vendors, storekeepers, and consumers, especially those of indigenous women, in the colonial Andean city of