

Book Reviews

A. MEREDITH JOHN, *The plantation slaves of Trinidad, 1783–1816: a mathematical and demographic enquiry*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. xxi, 259, illus., £25.00, \$39.50.

In the words of the author, this study is a “demographic and mathematical analysis in a historical setting, rather than a historical study that incorporates some demography and mathematics” (xv). As such it is a work that may prove difficult even for those with some knowledge of demographic methods and techniques. Moreover, it will likely not be of interest to most readers of this journal for it has relatively little to say about the diet and diseases of Trinidad residents, whether slave or free, and treats only a brief period of the Island’s history. For the specialist in slavery, however—especially Caribbean slavery—the work is vital, for it addresses vital questions in case-study fashion.

Because of a paucity of data, the question has been unresolved as to whether most Caribbean slave populations failed to grow by natural means because of excessive mortality, low fertility, or a combination of the two. Professor John, using the Trinidad Slave Registers for 1813, 1815, and 1816 as well as archival materials from London and Edinburgh answers the questions at least for Trinidad: “The problem lay in the high mortality of the population, especially among infants and children, rather than in low slave fertility . . .” (159).

Other findings of bio-historical interest include: more than a third of those born to slave mothers did not survive their first year of life and probably fewer than half reached the age of five; male slaves died at significantly higher rates than did female counterparts; the crops tended had much to do with mortality, e.g., a male slave was much more likely to die on a sugar plantation than on a cotton plantation; and slaves who worked on plantations with French and Spanish owners were more likely to survive than those who lived on British estates.

To reach these and other conclusions, Professor John has applied modern techniques to flawed data, and a fair number of pages are devoted to discussing his methods of applying those techniques. His findings will not be startling to specialists, save perhaps for the discovery that the fertility of slave women was not low. But such an effort is crucial in confirming conclusions reached by more traditional methods, and we may hope that other studies such as this will be done for other islands.

The study is marred by a good bit of repetition and leaves the reader wishing for some analysis of, and insight into, the major killers of the slaves. Malnutrition is mentioned as a contributing factor right after the author suggests that “There may have been a fair degree of compliance with the requirements of the slave code . . .”, which prescribed a fairly good diet (102). Neonatal tetanus is mentioned as an important killer of slave infants but no other light is shed on what claimed the lives of more than a third of them during the first year of life.

The work is replete with tables, charts, and graphs. It also contains appendices with other materials, among them still more tables plus the slave codes of Trinidad and some drawings of Trinidad slave life. The bibliography is excellent and the index more than adequate.

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ROGER COOTER (ed.), *Studies in the history of alternative medicine*, Houndmills and London: Macmillan Press in association with St Antony’s College, Oxford, 1988, 8vo, pp. xx, 180, illus., £29.50.

NORMAN GEVITZ (ed.), *Other healers: unorthodox medicine in America*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. xii, 302, £24.00, £8.50 (paperback).

These welcome collections have a shared animus and programme. Both volumes are informed by the new impulse within social history to study groups situated on the fringes of the establishment, in this case adherents of medical belief systems ordinarily marginalized or neglected in traditional histories of medicine. More than this, both editors stress that the mounting skepticism about reductionist medicine and the concomitant surge of interest in alternative approaches to illness and wellness—ranging from homeopathy to New Age medicine—have been key factors in prompting historians to seek out in the past patterns of alternative healing belief and behaviour that might shed light on the present. At the same time,