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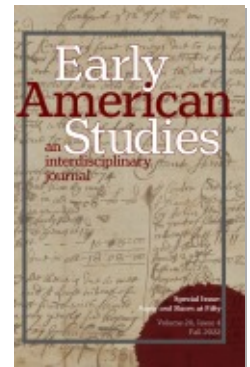
## Introduction: *Sugar and Slaves* after Fifty Years

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# Introduction: *Sugar and Slaves* after Fifty Years

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In June 2021 the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies cohosted a workshop in honor of the forthcoming fiftieth anniversary of the publication in 1972 of Richard S. Dunn's field-changing work, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713*.<sup>1</sup> This special issue of *Early American Studies* results from that occasion. The nine articles and two research notes in this issue, all focused on the seventeenth-century English Caribbean, illustrate the many vital research questions Dunn's book opened for subsequent inquiry and the important transformations in the field of Caribbean history in the past five decades. Dunn joined us for the workshop and delighted in the papers that were shared, especially those from graduate students and early career scholars. He eagerly anticipated this special issue. It is a bittersweet occasion to bring the volume to completion without the opportunity to share it with Richard, who died on January 24, 2022, at the age of ninety-three.<sup>2</sup>

A fortuitous archival discovery led to *Sugar and Slaves*. Dunn had initially embarked on what he envisioned as a book about the Glorious Revolution of

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1. Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

2. For remembrances of Dunn, see <https://oieahc.wm.edu/richard-s-dunn/>; <https://www.mceas.org/news/2022/02/03/memorium-richard-slator-dunn-1928-2022>; [https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2022/richard-s-dunn-\(1928%E2%80%932022\)](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2022/richard-s-dunn-(1928%E2%80%932022)).

1688–89. Eager to include the Caribbean colonies alongside the North American ones in his study, Dunn immersed himself in the manuscript sources for the islands, both during an initial year in the archives in England in 1961–62 and when he went to Caribbean archives in 1968. His discovery of the extensive and detailed 1680 Barbados census in England made him realize that he could write a social history of the sugar islands; he explained at the 2021 workshop that a political climate shaped by the Black Freedom movement and civil rights legislation convinced him it was urgent to do so.<sup>3</sup> The result was *Sugar and Slaves*, published in 1972 alongside another important work of Caribbean history by Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh and two years before the publication of Richard B. Sheridan's *Sugar and Slavery*.<sup>4</sup>

Dunn focused on the English Caribbean at a time when the region was largely neglected by historians of early North America, whose scholarship emphasized the mainland colonies (especially those of New England and the Chesapeake). The study of the seventeenth-century English Caribbean still fell in the purview of imperial historians, who did not share Dunn's interest in the social structures that the planter class created and benefited from, nor his concern with a close examination of the institution of slavery as it developed in the English islands. The situation in 2022 reveals a transformed historiographical world in which works on Caribbean history are both high profile and prize-winning. The quality of *Sugar and Slaves*—both its literary verve and its scholarly heft—played a significant role in drawing people to the field. The work, moreover, demonstrated that the history of the seventeenth-century English Caribbean mattered beyond the region itself and the confines of the early English empire; it transformed how scholars

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3. Richard S. Dunn, "Reflections on Sugar and Slaves," remarks delivered at the workshop, June, 2021.

4. Carl Bridenbaugh and Roberta Bridenbaugh, *No Peace Beyond the Line: The English in the Caribbean, 1624–1690* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Important contemporary works from Caribbean scholars on the social and economic history of slave societies include Elsa Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) and Edward Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). For a review of scholarship on the British Caribbean from the period, see Jack P. Greene, "Society and Economy in the British Caribbean during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *American Historical Review* 79, no. 5 (1974): 1499–1517.

understood the history of early America too.<sup>5</sup> Dunn's extensive research in an array of qualitative and quantitative sources, both in archives in the United Kingdom and in archives in the Caribbean, made it clear that sufficient sources existed to write the history of the English Caribbean and to take many different approaches in doing so. Although Dunn did not neglect the experiences of enslaved people, his primary interest lay in the English planters who dominated the island. It is different now. The scholarship on slaves and slavery in the Caribbean has been especially robust and innovative since Dunn's publication in 1972, and Dunn himself was a part of that historiographical transition. His long-term comparative project on slavery in Jamaica and Virginia, initially sketched in an early article in 1977 and fully in 2014 in *A Tale of Two Plantations*, showed Dunn's own interest in finding a way to write the history of enslaved people with the same rich detail typically lavished on their white owners, continuing the social history perspective that he helped pioneer for the region nearly forty years previously.<sup>6</sup>

These essays demonstrate in varied ways both the long tendrils of Dunn's magnificent book and the impact of fifty years of scholarship on the seventeenth-century English Caribbean in the years since 1972. Some authors return to topics Dunn investigated in order to provide a deeper or transformed understanding of the subject; others draw on methodologies from fields such as environmental history and gender history that barely existed when Dunn wrote; others deploy innovative reconceptualizations of the region, knitting the English West Indies into the larger region and taking seriously the experiences of all of its diverse inhabitants. Together they demonstrate a field of scholarship in a very healthy state and one that connects in vitally important ways to understanding the origins of English colonization (and responses to such colonization from Indigenes, European rivals, Africans, and others) in an early America in which the Caribbean is central, not marginal. Moreover, it is a field in which scholars challenge, reframe, and extend older understandings of the English Caribbean that were important to Dunn, such as the region's history being best understood through a study of the plantation system, the lens of sugar, and the contestation between a rising planter class and a subordinated and oppressed enslaved Black majority.

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5. Trevor Burnard, "'Wi Lickle but Wi Tallawah': Writing Jamaica into the Atlantic World, 1655–1834," *Reviews in American History* 49, no. 1 (2021): 168–86.

6. Richard S. Dunn, "A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life at Mesopotamia in Jamaica and Mount Airy in Virginia, 1799–1828," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1977): 32–65; Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

This special issue commences with articles by two scholars who revisit and topple familiar old verities of Caribbean historiography. In “Distance and Blame: The Rise of the English Planter Class,” Carla Gardina Pestana offers a fresh perspective on one of the most frequently quoted observations about the early English Caribbean: Henry Whistler’s claim that it was populated by the dregs of humanity. Pestana analyzes the context that produced Whistler’s remark while simultaneously assessing the centuries-long impact this observation had, both in historical scholarship but just as fundamentally in how British people came to think about their own relationship with slavery. Part of the context she analyzes was that of Dunn’s own work in the 1960s and 1970s and the disgusted moralism that infused his assessment of the English planters he studied. For Dunn, Whistler’s comments about the lowly social origin and poor character of early white settlers to Barbados accorded with his estimation of the terrible things that such Barbadians wrought. Pestana disagrees. She concludes that Whistler’s observations say more about him and about social and political assumptions of the mid-seventeenth-century English empire than they do about the actual origins and orientations of early settlers. In a similar way, in “The Rise of ‘King Sugar’ and Enslaved Labor in Early English Jamaica,” Nuala Zahedieh analyzes the Jamaican economy in the second half of the seventeenth century, suggesting it was diverse, not especially dominated by sugar, and with the potential to have developed in different ways than suggested in Dunn’s account. She challenges an argument long central to the study of the Caribbean and of sugar economies in the Americas more broadly: that sugar required slavery and that the dominance of the crop explained the prevalence of this labor regime in the region. Zahedieh argues that Jamaica did not need sugar to become a slave society. The road to slavery in the English Caribbean, she suggests, had many different paths, and only one of those paths, albeit an important one, was sugar planting.

The next essays in the special issue turn from a focus on the fundamental features of the seventeenth-century English Caribbean to a close investigation of specific issues within Caribbean life. Paul Musselwhite, in “‘Plantation,’ the Public Good, and the Rise of Capitalist Agriculture in the Early Seventeenth-Century Caribbean,” invites readers to discard whatever assumptions they might bring to the word “plantation,” a term that has come to signify privately owned property devoted to agricultural production by an enslaved labor force. Musselwhite provides a deep history of the word, showing us different manifestations of “plantations” in diverse English settings in the Caribbean and beyond. He argues that a word that once described a corporate entity came to define and protect an individual’s private property

rights—with profound implications for the habitations created in the Caribbean and for enslaved laborers too. In “Not ‘Beyond the line’: Reconsidering Law and Power and the Origins of Slavery in England’s Empire in the Americas,” Holly Brewer looks at the operation of law in the early English Caribbean and argues, in contrast to Dunn, who saw the practice of slavery as emerging prior to laws mandating it, that although custom was important in shaping the growth of slavery, customary practices followed legal precedents created by English and colonial courts and enforced by imperial officials. Slavery required a military and legal infrastructure, one backed by empire. Legal coercion was always part of the structure of colonial power and racial plantation slavery emerged within such hierarchical political and legal structures. Brewer insists that customary slave law was never merely “local” but was always imperial. In “‘Greater Numbers of Fair and Lovely Women’: White Women and the Barbadian Demographic Crisis, 1673–1715,” Emily Sackett returns to the Barbados census of 1680 to offer an analysis of women, gender, and the family in seventeenth-century Barbados. Sackett deploys the source that first led Dunn into a social history of the English Caribbean and overturns his interpretation of English family life on the island. By focusing on the presence of women in extant census data, she argues that it was white women who sustained and reproduced English family life on the island while white men left in droves. Sackett’s reconstruction of early Barbadian demography shows that our assumptions about the island as particularly masculinist need to be adjusted to account for considerable and rapid changes over time, as men left and as women remained.

Sackett’s interpretation of the census from the perspective of the history of women, gender, and the family suggests how developments in the discipline of history as a whole have offered exciting new possibilities for the study of the English Caribbean in the decades since the publication of *Sugar and Slaves*. Justin Roberts and Mary Draper similarly draw on the methodologies of a field that was only in embryo when Dunn wrote *Sugar and Slaves*—environmental history. Each scholar tackles a different aspect of human interactions with Caribbean environments. In “‘Corruption of the Air’: Yellow Fever and Malaria in the Rise of English Caribbean Slavery,” Roberts explores the many ways that yellow fever and malaria shaped why, when, and how slavery developed in the seventeenth-century Caribbean. The disease environment spurred landowners to rely on enslaved Africans, many of whom had a relative immunity to yellow fever, and affected practices ranging from the gang system used on sugar plantations to the creation of orphan courts to protect the estates of dead white parents and their progeny. Roberts’s analysis provides a new interpretation about one of the more

important developments in early American history—the adoption of chattel African slavery in the mid-seventeenth century—that places as much importance on disease, climate, and environment as on the social and economic features of this transition which have preoccupied other scholars. In “Aeolian Geographies, Daily Life, and Empire Building in the English Caribbean,” Draper looks at breezes—the daily rhythm of winds that shaped local commercial, maritime, and military practices—to analyze how the English learned about the winds and painstakingly sought to transmit this knowledge to authorities in England. She argues that there was a gap between Caribbean understandings of how the realities of aeolian geography constrained what they sought to do and metropolitan ignorance of those realities, which led imperial officials to try to implement policies that geography made impossible. Draper shows how English knowledge of local winds ultimately shaped not only regional ties but also imperial strategies of warfare and defense.

For Dunn, the English operated in the early stages of colonization pretty much alone, shaping land and people to their will in dramatic and often dreadful ways. Rejecting this emphasis, Jordan B. Smith and Casey Schmitt show that it was not just English colonists who were the driving force in the mid-seventeenth-century English Caribbean, as was the case in *Sugar and Slaves*. Offering both a new geography of the “English” Caribbean and a broader cast of characters, Smith and Schmitt argue that the English did not act alone and that what they did was influenced by Indigenes, Africans, and Spaniards. In “‘Brought from the Palenques’: Race, Subjecthood, and Warfare in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean,” Schmitt shows how essential it is for historians of the Caribbean to read multiple languages, to do research in multiple archives, and to be conversant with different historiographies. Whereas Dunn did his research for *Sugar and Slaves* almost exclusively in English-language archives in Anglophone countries, Schmitt extends her research to the rich records in Spanish archives, materials that provide, as in her case study of the fate of a group of Spanish subjects of African descent from Jamaica who were ensnared in the turmoil of the English invasion of the island, a startlingly different perspective than that offered in English sources. Smith focuses on the importance of considering the diverse populations of the region—European, African, and Indigenous—to explain the emergence of rum, an iconic beverage of the Atlantic world. Rum is an alcoholic beverage made by distilling refuse from the sugar production process. The drink emerged first on Barbados, but, as Smith argues in “‘The Native Produce of this Island’: Processes of Invention in Early Barbados,” it did so only in the context of a constellation of people who had their own varied traditions and tastes connected to alcoholic beverages and who

converged on Barbados by the mid-seventeenth century. Cultural change, such as new forms of drinking, came, Smith argues, not from one origin but from the productive if sometimes combustible interactions between different groups of people—in this case European, Indigenous Caribbean, and African. Rum can be thought of as an American (or Caribbean) product, one that came out of the peculiarly American and Caribbean contexts of contested colonization.

The final essays in this volume revisit Dunn's work and especially its European context by focusing on a single incident in one case and the power dynamics and racial hierarchies forged in the region in another. Both similarly anchor their work in English print culture—a pamphlet and newspapers. Natalie Zacek's departure point is the murder of the Antigua governor Daniel Parke in 1711, a violent episode that Dunn treated briefly in *Sugar and Slaves*. Zacek's attentiveness to marginalia in a surviving pamphlet has enabled her to connect this work to an event—the execution of the Earl of Strafford, Charles I's adviser, in 1641—with which it would otherwise seem to have no relationship at all. In “‘Sad as Horrour, Black as Hell’: The Parke Murder, the Catiline Conspiracy, and the Wentworth Execution,” Zacek analyzes this pamphlet to situate the Parke murder in an English political context. Simon P. Newman, in “Sugar Planters and Freedom Seekers in Seventeenth-Century London,” revisits the connection between enslaved Africans and people of African descent and their English owners. For the most part, Dunn addressed owners and enslaved people in general terms and only in the Caribbean. Newman offers a new geographic vantage point by looking at the experiences of enslaved people when their English owners forcibly transported them from Barbados to London in the seventeenth century. Newman's close analysis of runaway ads in London newspapers provides a springboard for a series of ruminations on both the experiences of these enslaved laborers in domestic service in England who subsequently sought their freedom by escaping and the significance their presence had in the creation of English ideas about what slavery entailed. Zacek and Newman show how closely the history of English (and in Zacek's case early British) colonization in the Caribbean was tied to and shaped by the history and historiography of England and then Britain. Their works reinforce one of Dunn's major points, one he might have made even more strongly if he had continued his original plan to write about the Glorious Revolution of 1689 as a trans-Atlantic event, which is that Caribbean and English (British) history are intensely entangled and that to understand the histories of both places, one must know something about the history of the wider world in which each region was enmeshed.

We hope readers enjoy and learn from these articles that express the best of contemporary scholarship in a field that Richard Dunn helped make early American scholars appreciate as essential to their own region's development. Very few scholarly monographs have much of a shelf life and very few continue to be read, appreciated, contested, and celebrated fifty years after first publication. *Sugar and Slaves* reads as vibrantly and urgently in 2022 as it did in 1972, because the themes it outlines and the place it studies resonate deeply today, even if in new ways that Dunn would not have thought about when writing his masterpiece in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It might be, as Dunn started his book, that it is a sad and even tragic story about what English people did in the Caribbean. It is also a story crucial to engage for anyone wanting to understand the early modern Atlantic world and the many lingering ways in which that world still has contemporary relevance.