

Book Reviews

Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848. Bernard Moitt. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001; xviii + 218 pages; maps, tables; ISBN 0-253-21452-1; \$19.95US.

In the late seventeenth century a young slave known as La Pucelle des Isles, of the French colony of Guadeloupe, refused to marry the male slave her owner had chosen for her because she was "miserable enough as it is without having to bring children into this world to be more miserable" (81). In the early 1840s, the former slave Virginie, also of Guadeloupe, won a protracted court battle to have her children freed as well, but by then her son was dead and her daughter already an adult. These are two of the women whose lives Bernard Moitt reconstructs in *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848*. Moitt's thoroughly researched study has two purposes. First, it is an attempt to bring gender to bear in the historical investigation of slavery in the French Caribbean and thus "bring slave women out of the shadows of the slave plantation world and into full view, where they belong" (173). Moitt's second purpose is to stress the resilience, agency, and defiance of slave women and the remarkable strategies they devised to survive in dehumanizing conditions. Moitt sees his book as a "lesson" relevant in "a day and age when the young in particular have a tendency to give up rather quickly" (176).

The eight thematic chapters cover the period from the beginning of French colonization in the Caribbean to the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1848. Moitt first establishes the early presence of African women in the French Caribbean and their growing numbers as a result of the development of the sugar economy. Despite their low status in the racialized and patriarchal society of the colonies, black women filled a need (created by the lack of white women) and caused great anxiety (demonstrated by the authorities' efforts to curb miscegenation). Moitt argues that slave women's labour represented a crucial contribution to the Caribbean economy. Whereas, in their expectation that black women perform the same hard labour in field gangs and sugar manufacturing as black men, slaveowners apparently disregarded gender, in fact, because most of the specialized (and relatively lighter) tasks were given to slave men, women were disproportionately allocated the most exhausting and dangerous occupations. Domestic slaves (often mixed-race women involved in conjugal relations with their owners) and midwives enjoyed better conditions but

could be punished, sold, or transferred to field gangs nonetheless. Concerned with low birth rates (compounded by high mortality) among slaves, slaveowners suspected that women deliberately controlled their fertility and went as far as to kill their children as a form of resistance. But Moitt contends that most infant deaths were due to overwork, malnutrition, ill health, and lack of sanitation.

Because the French and Caribbean archival sources on slave women are "highly fragmented, spotty, and often in poor condition" (ix), Moitt's first chapters rely heavily on secondary sources and printed reports by plantation owners, government authorities and travellers. The reader is reminded of the inconclusiveness of the data (and the need for inference and extrapolation) by phrases such as "it is likely," "it is not farfetched to suggest," and so forth. The last three chapters, which draw on the richer documentation surviving from the nineteenth century, are the most lively and satisfying. Moitt ably exploits court records to show the physical brutality regularly endured by slave women and their brave attempts to force the authorities to intervene against slaveowners. He explores how women resisted slavery, together with men (armed revolts and *marronage*) and in gender-specific ways (poison and indiscipline), and considers the small number of slave women granted freedom by slaveowners or the state.

Moitt, who was born in Antigua, received a PhD from the University of Toronto, and now teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, has largely succeeded in his intention to produce a book useful to specialists and accessible to general readers. A valuable addition to the historiography of women and gender in the early modern period, this book should also inspire historians to continue probing the issue of gender and slavery and serve as a point of reference for comparative studies of slave women's experiences in the entire Caribbean region.

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A Gregarious Culture: Topical Writings of Miles Franklin. Jill Roe and Margaret Bettison, editors. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001; xxiii + 251 pages; ISBN 0-7022-3237-8; \$27.95US (paper).

A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected