

# Rechtsgeschichte Legal History

[www.rg.mpg.de](http://www.rg.mpg.de)

<http://www.rg-rechtsgeschichte.de/rg25>  
Zitiervorschlag: Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History Rg 25 (2017)  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.12946/rg25/366-367>

Rg **25** 2017 366–367

**Helen McKee\***

## The Complexity of Settler Colonialism in Jamaica

---

\* Max Planck Institute for European Legal History, Frankfurt am Main, [mckee@rg.mpg.de](mailto:mckee@rg.mpg.de)

Dieser Beitrag steht unter einer  
Creative Commons cc-by-nc-nd 3.0



**Helen McKee**

## The Complexity of Settler Colonialism in Jamaica\*

The title of this book might appear to focus on a relatively short period and, therefore, be almost microhistorical in approach; however, Jack P. Greene's monograph on the development of settler society in 1750s Jamaica offers insights relevant beyond both the time period and region. Greene's primary aim is to establish how settler society developed politically, legally, economically, and socially in the 1750s, the period often regarded as the »golden age« of planters. Further than this, Greene's nuanced analysis provides a quantitative base for exploring Jamaica's political economy in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, arguably the colony's most dominant period. Whilst the previous scholarship on the development of Jamaican society is detailed and varied, there is still plenty left to do. Still, after decades of research, there is only limited historical work published on the pre-amelioration era of British Caribbean history. Eminent scholars such as Richard S. Dunne and Richard B. Sheridan have contributed valuable publications but these tend to focus on the wider British Caribbean. Kamau Brathwaite's excellent input moved the scholarship forward but lacked a quantitative base; whilst Barry Higman's numerous works extended our quantitative knowledge but focused primarily on the 19<sup>th</sup> century and did not track variations within Jamaica. Jack P. Greene's *Settler Jamaica* follows these pioneering publications and complements them by filling various gaps left by previous scholars.

Greene uses a wide range of sources including historical lists and maps, along with a variety of other contemporary materials to provide a much-needed exploration of the character of Jamaica's settler society. Intricate analysis of the data gleaned from this material permits a nuanced analysis of landholding, economic activity, land use, social organisation, and wealth distribution among the free population of Jamaica. *Settler Jamaica* takes advantage of a unique collection of contemporary sources to enrich and amplify existing knowledge

and to provide a new level of detail on the many subjects on which those documents shed light. Each of the documents selected by Greene forms the basis of one or, in two cases, two of the volume's eight substantive chapters, each of which is tightly focused on the analysis of the data contained in the relevant documents and other supplementary materials. The opening chapter examines other contemporary sources to situate the substantive chapters within a larger contextual framework; whilst the epilogue uses the data from the substantive chapters to discuss the portrait that emerges from the analysis and how it relates to historical and contemporary understandings of 1750s Jamaica.

Greene expertly draws attention to local variations by examining data from both rural and urban areas such as Kingston, St. Andrew, Spanish Town, and St. James. Such an approach allows Greene to demonstrate the complexity of Jamaica's settler population, the island's economic and social diversity, the ubiquity and adaptability of slavery, the character and size of settler households, the range of urban professions, the value of urban housing, and the gender and racial dimensions of wealth-holding. There is little here that has not been discussed by other scholars; the great strength of this work is not of new theories but of systematic quantitative analysis which supports existing knowledge of the time and region.

Whilst the author himself identifies the work as social history, there is much that legal historians can learn from this study. In particular, Greene's demonstration of landholding and land use by Jamaica's settler population is of much use to those interested in the specific elements of common law which were employed to strengthen the British stranglehold of the island. Indeed, in a limited field, particularly for the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century period, works such as *Settler Jamaica* are invaluable for the study of how laws regarding land ownership were implemented. Of particular interest to legal his-

\* JACK P. GREENE, *Settler Jamaica in the 1750s: A Social Portrait*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 2016, 304 p., ISBN 978-0-8139-3831-8

torians are the sections on property ownership in Jamaica. Greene utilises contemporary sources such as »A List of Landholders in the Island of Jamaica together with the number of Acres each Person Possesses, taken from the Quit Rent Books in the Year 1754« and Governor Charles Knowles' form »A form ... for coming at a knowledge of the Cultivated Lands etc.« to provide invaluable insights into property ownership with details on divisions by race and gender. As the dearth of legal scholarship on 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jamaica continues, legal historians have to make the most of books such as Greene's to tease out aspects relevant to their work, such as implementation of property laws and the development of taxation.

Rather unusually for a work subtitled as »a social portrait«, Greene does not shy away from sustained statistical analysis. Indeed, this is one of the unique points of his book. Nonetheless, the author balances this heavily quantitative approach with his commentary and that of other established scholars. The overall method might dissatisfy some quantitative and qualitative historians alike. The qualitative scholars particularly expecting more vernacular sources to back up the vast array of tables and graphs and quantitative historians perhaps preferring more discussion of the statistical methods used. However, this criticism would be unfair. Greene expertly moves between the two approaches to build a picture of economic, legal and social life in 1750s Jamaica. A portrait of such detail is severely lacking for this region and period. Such a statistical examination allows points to emerge which would perhaps remain hidden in many qualitative sources. For example, property ownership by Afro-Jamaicans in urban areas was significantly higher than previously allowed for – almost a quarter of all properties were owned by free blacks. Further, of this property, women owned a disproportionately high percentage. Systematic analysis of the sources is the tool that reveals these important findings.

Greene has chosen to concentrate on the 1750s in Jamaica and, therefore, this book cannot be used to trace change over time or differences between islands. Also, as the title demonstrates, the focus is

on the settler element of the population rather than the much-larger enslaved population. None of these points, however, prevent the monograph from being a valuable work. Rather, they allow Greene to delve deeper into the sources and the resulting issues than if he had taken a wider time-frame or included documents which deal with the vast enslaved population. The key, as with most texts which are microhistorical in approach, is to use them in conjunction with other works.

Many of the limitations of this book come from the limitations of the sources themselves rather than Greene's interpretation. For example, the quit rent rolls of 1754 that Greene utilises for his chapter on patterns of landholding in Jamaica only provide details for rural land as quit rent was not paid in urban locations. Further, landholders often underestimated the land they held in order to save on taxes, so the records are not as accurate as they could be. Greene, however, acknowledges these drawbacks and does his best to work with them. Conversely, other limitations actually reveal intriguing aspects of Jamaican history. For example, Greene utilises a form created by Governor Charles Knowles which he issued to all 19 parishes to provide details of landholders, acreage, crops, and so on. The only parish to return the form was St. Andrew. The lack of sources from the other parishes reveals the political tensions within Jamaica in the 1750s and the lack of authority the government had over planters.

If, by reading this book, a scholar hopes to find completely new theories based on qualitative sources over a large timespan and area, then they would be disappointed. If, however, they are seeking a detailed, systematic, close analysis of fascinating sources which deepen our understanding of 1750s Jamaica, then this book delivers. Greene closes his book by saying, »the assumption that drives this volume is that every colonial British American society was unique and complex, and that each one's peculiarities and complexity merit detailed scholarly attention.« In this goal, Greene has undoubtedly succeeded.

