

http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/96.2/br_15.html

From *The Journal of American History* Vol. 96, Issue 2.

Viewed September 5, 2009 20:51 EDT

Presented online in association with the **History Cooperative**. <http://www.historycooperative.org>

Book Review

The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery. By Vincent Brown. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. xviii, 340 pp. \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-674-02422-9.)

Death was omnipresent in the British slave society of Jamaica, for slaves and slave owners alike. In *The Reaper's Garden*, Vincent Brown makes use of that simple fact to examine what he describes as the "political meaning of death" in the colony (p. 5). He shows that in wills, in funerary rites, in religious beliefs, and even in the disposition of bodies Jamaicans—slave and free—managed death in ways that both strengthened and challenged the structures of slave society. The result is a sophisticated and revealing portrayal of Jamaican slavery. 1

Focusing on the period from the mid-eighteenth century to emancipation in the 1830s, Brown paints a vivid portrait of Jamaica and its society. As he says, Jamaica was probably Britain's most successful colonial venture by the mid-eighteenth century, a place that offered European settlers enormous wealth and opportunities. At the same time, those possibilities depended heavily on the brutal African slave trade and a vicious colonial slave system. 2

Jamaica was also, however, a place where people went to die—Europeans from the ravages of disease, Africans, from not only disease but also from the punishing demands of slavery. Mortality rates were high throughout Jamaica's colonial period, and its population growth was based on immigration and importation rather than natural increase for much of that era. That people had to confront death as a part of life in Jamaica forms the crux of Brown's story. 3

Brown draws on anthropological theory as well as historical documentation to 4

interweave Jamaicans' confrontations with death with larger social and cultural concerns. Thus he shows how funeral customs and patterns of inheritance helped replicate relations of status and wealth for slaves and slave owners alike, while providing distinctive anchors for identity and self-assertion for African and European populations.

Brown also examines how slaves and slave owners evoked the terrors of death and the dead for political ends. Jamaica's elite was never reluctant to use grisly public executions and to display the corpses of slaves to try to inspire submission in the slave population. Slaves invoked the power of the dead for strength to challenge white authority and as a source of unity among themselves. **5**

Particularly enlightening is Brown's exploration of the significance of death for the emergence of the abolitionist movement in Britain in the late eighteenth century, pointing toward its success in achieving British colonial emancipation in the 1830s. As Brown shows, through a persuasive linking of slavery, greed, and death—emphasizing, especially, the willingness of slave traders and slave owners to sacrifice slaves' lives for profit—black and white abolitionists made the system seem increasingly repugnant to the British public. In Jamaica, death symbolism further helped define the meaning of emancipation when it finally arrived. **6**

The Reaper's Garden is an engaging book; its insights should encourage and provide an outstanding model for comparative studies of other New World slave societies. **7**

Dickson D. Bruce Jr.
University of California
Irvine, California

©2009 Organization of American Historians

Content in the History Cooperative database is intended for personal, noncommercial use only. You may not reproduce, publish, distribute, transmit, participate in the transfer or sale of, modify, create derivative works from, display, or in any way exploit the History Cooperative database in whole or in part without the written permission of the copyright holder.