

6-7-2019

No God But Gain: The Untold Story of Cuban Slavery, The Monroe Doctrine, and the Making of the United States, by Stephen Chambers

Matthew David Childs
childsmd@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/hist_facpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Brill*, Volume 93, Issue 1-2, 2019, pages 162-163.

© Matt D. Childs, 2019

This Article is brought to you by the History, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Stephen Chambers, *No God But Gain: The Untold Story of Cuban Slavery, The Monroe Doctrine, and the Making of the United States*. London: Verso, 2015. 256 pp. (US\$ 26.95)

The story of U.S. involvement in Cuba, which stretches well over two centuries, has been told with particular emphasis on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Stephen Chambers argues that this focus obscures America's early interest in the history of Cuba. By narrowly examining the influence of New England politicians and merchants in Cuba following the ban on importing slaves to the United States from 1808 through the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, he shows that ports such as Boston and Providence were thoroughly connected to Cuba's plantation boom following the Haitian Revolution, and profited from it.

Chambers focuses on the activities of James D'Wolf, the Rhode Island merchant, slave trader, and U.S. senator, and John Quincy Adams, the Massachusetts politician, diplomat, and secretary of state. From a documentary perspective, the strength of his book rests on his thorough consultation of D'Wolf's personal papers, the published and unpublished papers of John Quincy Adams, and U.S. consular reports from Havana housed in the United States National Archives. From this source base, supplemented with additional archives located in the northeastern United States, Chambers is able to analyze in detail how New England's economy became interconnected with Cuba through merchants such as D'Wolf, citing his involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade to Cuba, his purchase of sugar and coffee plantations, and his ability to persuade U.S. politicians such as John Quincy Adams to protect U.S. slavery interests in Cuba.

Chambers concludes from looking at the slave trade to Cuba that involvement by American politicians such as D'Wolf and Adams paved the way for the Monroe Doctrine, which declared in 1823 that Europe should stay out of hemispheric affairs. He recognizes this broad sentiment embedded in the Monroe Doctrine, but more importantly he argues that it was specifically about protecting U.S. slave trading interests in the region. The United States feared that its slave trading activities to Cuba would come under British regulations during the era of abolition. This detailed attention to the political machinations operating between New England, Cuban slavery, and Washington results in Chambers's historic lessons echoing across two centuries, which often read as if they are taken from today's headlines. The skillful telescoping from specifics to larger and more universal points makes this an engaging read for non-specialists.

That said, the book is aimed primarily at U.S. historians who specialize in the Early Republic, especially those interested in what Chambers labels the

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© MATT D. CHILDS, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09301032

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication.

political and economic elite of the “Generation of 1815,” which came into their own in ruling the United States at this time. Many *NWIG* readers will be asking “what about Cuba?” Or “what about the Caribbean?” Anticipating these sorts of questions, Chambers states that his book is not “intended to reconcile the actions of long-dead slave traders ... [nor is it] a study of the slave trade per se [adding that it] cannot touch on every—or even most—aspects of this system” (pp. 8–12). While a clear statement of the book’s focus is helpful, listing so many topics that will not be investigated makes it all the more clear that a lot of material is unaddressed. Secondary sources from Cuba are sprinkled throughout the notes, while primary sources are scarce. Consequently, the Cuban side of this story involving the enslaved, the slave traders, and most notably the Cuban politicians interacting with and shaping the “Generation of 1815” interests remains largely unexamined. Perhaps this is too much to ask for a historian of the Early Republic, but, unfortunately, the story of Cuban slavery, the Monroe Doctrine, and the making of the United States (as the book’s subtitle puts it) remains largely untold.

Scholars interested in U.S. involvement in the slave trade to Cuba from a Caribbean perspective should consult Dale Graden’s, *Disease, Resistance, and Lies* (2014) or the still informative 1980 book by Jose Luciano Franco, *Comercio clandestino de esclavos*. Reading Chambers’s *No God But Gain* in dialogue with these works will serve to reinforce many of his findings, and also to single out his specific contributions in clearly demonstrating that U.S. slavery had long been part of a much broader Atlantic system. For example, even though historians still mainly use the 1820 Missouri Compromise to narrate the coming of the Civil War, Chambers shows that “when Americans looked west to Missouri, they envisioned Havana and the booming illegal slave trade that supported it” (p. 81). Turning over such long-standing explanations of historical events narrowly focused on the nation-state is no easy task, and Chambers has usefully taken up the challenge.

Matt D. Childs

Department of History, University of South Carolina
childsm@mailbox.sc.edu