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Reseña de "Caribbean Rum: A Social and Economic History" de Frederick H. Smith
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women in the past, this work makes a contribution to the Caribbean historiography.

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Smith’s rich account is indebted to Sidney W. Mintz’s classic *Sweetness and Power* (1985). A historically-minded anthropologist, Smith attends to the economics of rum production and the social significance of alcohol consumption in the Caribbean without losing sight of dynamics that cut across the Atlantic world. Smith’s analysis, however, does not connect production to consumption as seamlessly as Mintz did when he proposed that sugar planters and merchants created a mass market for their product through the cultivation of British workers’ sweet tooth. Smith argues that an abundance of rum throughout the region contributed to the popularity of the drink with poor whites, African slaves, Caribs, and even planters. But Smith cites numerous factors beyond the planters’ designs to explain rum’s hold on Caribbean peoples. He argues that the first drinkers to acquire the taste for an alcohol distilled from the by-products of sugar making had long acquaintances with fermented drinks, wines, and European brandy. Rum reportedly displaced older beverages with celebratory, religious, and medicinal uses. Nevertheless, Smith insists that the conditions that prevailed in the Caribbean promoted the use and abuse of the new spirit. A scarcity of potable water, a monotonous and often insufficient diet, the threat of epidemic diseases and hurricanes, the brutality of slave-holding regimes, and the prospect of rebellions gave rise to anxieties that rum assuaged.

The first chapters, which deal with rum production and markets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are the broadest in scope and the most persuasive. Smith shows that a combination of economic considerations, sugar manufacturing practices, and metropolitan trade policies determined when and where rum was produced and drunk. Between the 1640s and 1650s, distillation took hold in Martinique and especially in Barbados. In that British colony the “claying” of molds used for drying sugar resulted in greater amounts of molasses for rum
making. A local market dominated by sailors, African slaves, and native peoples accounted for a per capita consumption that Smith estimates at 8.9 gallons per year (p. 24). By the eighteenth century, production had expanded and the market for rum had widened to include imperial frontier zones. Jamaica joined Barbados as a leading producer in the British Caribbean, and French production rose dramatically, especially after the Seven Year’s War. Rum became a staple in North American and Caribbean ports, a necessity in Caribbean plantations, a key commodity in the North American fur trade, and a requisite for conducting business in West and West Central Africa.

Rum production and consumption in the Spanish colonies followed a different course. According to Smith, the Spanish monarchs discouraged distilling to protect Spain’s grape industries. For that reason, Cuba and Puerto Rico acquired much of their rum through illicit manufacture and contraband before becoming major producers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, residents of the Spanish Caribbean reportedly drank in moderation, a pattern that Smith explains in terms of Spaniards’ reputation for abstemiousness and the symbolic value that Catholics accorded to wine. It is worth noting that production and consumption grew throughout much of the Caribbean following emancipation. Competition from beet sugar encouraged planters to favor rum at the expense of sugar output. Further, planters in some locales supplemented wages with allotments of rum in an effort to limit the mobility of laborers. Moreover, as Mintz points out in his review of Smith’s book, the rise of the United States as a neocolonial power ensured a continuous flow of rum as American interests revitalized struggling plantations (See Mintz 2007).

Smith’s analysis of the place of rum in Caribbean societies makes important contributions to a number of scholarly debates from the role of alcohol in the conquest and settlement, to the functioning of the Atlantic trade and labor systems, to the impact of missionary-led temperance movements. Specialist in the Caribbean, however, will mark Smith’s intervention in the polemic regarding cultural change in American societies. Chapters four and five underscore continuities in West and West Central African practices and the uses of rum among African slaves in Caribbean colonies. Citing John Thornton’s work, Smith proposes that Mintz and Richard Price exaggerated the heterogeneity of American slave populations in their articulation of the rapid early synthesis model (p. 109). Smith argues that most slaves came from societies with strong traditions of alcohol use, that they understood the religious and secular
meanings of alcohol in similar terms, and that they “presumably had a major impact on the drinking behaviors that developed” in the Caribbean (p. 111).

To build a case for the resilience of African ways, Smith explores practices surrounding alcohol use within the four African ethnicities—Akan, Igbo, Kongo, and Aja-Fon—that contributed the highest proportion of slaves to the British, French and Spanish colonies. Drawing on travel accounts, plantation records, ethnographic and archeological evidence among other sources, Smith characterizes the secular and religious purposes that rum served among slaves. Though Smith makes the most of suggestive evidence, his account lacks the proximity to African testimonies that make James Sweet’s *Recreating Africa* (2003) so compelling among recent works that affirm the abiding Africanness of African-American societies. One also wishes for a systematic discussion of how place and context may alter the meanings of analogous practices found on both sides of the Atlantic.

Smith’s is a pioneering book dealing with an unpardonably neglected aspect of Caribbean history. Provocative analysis, imaginative use of sources, and the breadth of the synthesis make this history particularly valuable to students of the region’s economies and cultures. The book is best suited for advanced students and area specialists who are sure to find a good deal to ponder and debate.

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References
