

Archaeology Below the Cliff: Race, Class, and Redlegs in Barbadian Sugar Society

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Candid, yet sensitive, methodologically rigorous, and conceptually fresh, *Archaeology Below the Cliff* is a noteworthy book. In it Reilly expertly guides us on a tour into the shadowy underbelly of colonial Barbadian sugar society, where this time we are not presented with new archaeological perspectives on the lives of the island's enslaved, but rather, with the unfamiliar lives of its poor whites — the Redlegs. Much maligned throughout the centuries and cast off to the rugged margins of the plantation landscape, the Redlegs have been widely misrepresented and misunderstood. By carefully weaving together archaeological evidence with documentary and oral sources, Reilly provides an inclusive interpretation of the poor whites and sets their record straight, returning them their rightful dignity in Barbadian and Caribbean history.

In the introduction, the author lays out his research strategy and reveals that his original research design underwent significant reimaginings in the field by virtue of his interactions with Barbadians and his growing awareness of the local political climate. This resulted in a nuanced and organic project that was attuned to and shaped by local contingencies. Navigating local politics, colonial/postcolonial legacies, and past and present conceptions of race and class that have stigmatized poor whites, Reilly negotiates an archaeological analysis that is “careful to avoid reifying stereotypes” or to “legitimate discriminatory ideologies” (p. 18). He sets a firm decolonializing tone to his study in which, as an outsider, he prioritizes self-reflexivity and

situated openness and stresses the importance of treating people in the field as *people* and not as data. This scholarly yet refreshingly human sensitivity permeates the book.

The premise of the book is that, even though they have been presented as an anomalous and exceptional case, the Redlegs have been inextricably bound up with local plantation society. In Chapter 1 Reilly questions *why* the Barbadian poor whites have been viewed as idle, isolated, and exceptional. Interrogating this “poor white problem”, he reveals how the overbearing designs of modernity and top-down ideologies of race and class have shaped this portrayal. He mobilizes a broad range of local and global anthropological, historical, and postcolonial scholarship to challenge these dominant discourses. By going beyond the tired planter/enslaved dichotomy in historical archaeology to explore the heterogeneous white population and non-enslaved laborers, he suggests that the Redlegs, living in tenancies on the margins of the plantation landscape, did not neatly fit the colonial logics of how plantation society was to function.

The following chapter provides a history of Barbadian poor whites beginning with English settlement in 1627. Here the author explains how poor whites, originally brought as indentured servants to work on the island’s plantations, were eventually cast off to the “rab” or unproductive lands once the sugar and slave society had taken shape at the end of the 17th century. Living in marginal tenancies, the poor whites worked as small farmers, with many also employed as militia to protect the planters from slave revolts. Following emancipation in 1834, the “poor white problem” deepened as many poor white ex-militia members became squatters and sank further into poverty. By that time, stereotypes already depicted them as idle, destitute, and marginalized. By the 20th century, relocation to Bridgetown and emigration beyond the island resulted in a shrinking rural poor white population, with the last vestiges of Redleg communities remaining in the Parish of St. John.

In Chapter 3 Reilly narrows in on the case study of the former tenantry of Below Cliff, privileging its past and present community as his unit of analysis. He considers his study “an archaeology of a community” (p. 84), rather than community archaeology, and steers clear of postcolonial ventriloquism by emphasizing that, while the Below Cliff community played a fundamental role in his research process, he does not pretend to speak for them. Avoiding formal interviews and preferring casual conversations and walks with community members, the author gathered their recollections that proved indispensable to better understanding Below Cliff. Likewise informed by the community, he then proceeded to excavate in the ruins of three households within the former tenantry, recovering a small yet revealing number of artifacts dating from the late 18th to the late 20th century.

Reilly then goes on to detail how the Below Cliff community contested colonial designs and expectations in Chapter 4. Through an analysis of parish vestry minutes, he reveals that patronizing elite logics of labor and class did not comport neatly with the way the Redlegs were living their everyday lives. Rather than dismiss the plantocracy as merely aporophobic, the author mobilizes the archaeological evidence that demonstrates that poor whites were by no means idle. While some were in fact wage laborers involved directly in sugar production, many were busily engaged in an intimate and informal “semimoral economy” (p. 139), with unconventional occupational identities that flew beneath the radar of what elites categorized as acceptable, productive, and necessary forms of labor in a capitalist sugar society.

If any, my only critique here concerns the lack of a minimum number of vessels (MNV) count in the author’s analysis of the ceramic and glass recovered from Below Cliff (p. 105). Although it is common practice in historical archaeology, I consider it problematic to base interpretations of ceramic type/ware abundance on sherd counts alone, as this can result in

potentially serious misinterpretations. To be fair, Reilly does stress that his reading of these data is cautious due to the limited number of units excavated (p. 160) and the difficulty of determining earthenware vessel forms from a small number of diagnostic sherds (p. 159). Curiously, the author also mentions a number of unspecified faunal remains (p. 159), and I was left wondering what species these might represent, and how further analysis of these might shed more light on poor white foodways and subsistence strategies.

Digging deeper, in Chapter 5 the author then challenges the perception of the poor whites as isolated and confronts the rigidity of racial identities, especially the alleged distinctions between poor whites and Afro-Barbadians. His evidence includes excavated local coarse earthenwares that suggest poor whites were entangled in local commercial networks involving free and enslaved Afro-Barbadians. Reilly further proposes that similarities in Afro-Barbadian and poor white architectural techniques and household spatial organization (“chattel houses” and swept yards, for example) indicate cultural influence and exchange in both directions. Moreover, documentary evidence from parish records reveals that interracial unions in poor white communities were in fact not beyond the norm. The author therefore argues that communities such as Below Cliff were perplexing and misunderstood places for the plantocracy because they destabilized modern essentialist notions of race that were crucial to the maintenance and success of plantation society.

In the final chapter Reilly ties up the previous discussion through his critical retooling and application of the concept of “alternative modernities” (p. 174–180) which I find particularly useful, and one that many authors will surely find applicable to their research. To the author, the poor whites developed their own alternative to modernity, formulating a *sui generis* relationship with the island’s economic systems and diverse residents that suited their everyday needs.

Offering a multilayered and messy rendering of the economic lives of Redlegs, Reilly cuts through simple notions of domination by or resistance to capitalism.

With this book Reilly sets the bar high for Caribbean historical archaeology. He powerfully illuminates the overlooked lives of the Redlegs, eloquently disarms damaging stereotypes, and dignifies a people who have stood in the face of centuries of bad press. Senior and junior scholars, and graduate and undergraduate students alike should be challenged and inspired by Reilly's work. I myself, for one, will use this study as an obligatory standard with which to measure the anthropological sensitivity, political responsibility, and epistemic humility of my future work.

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