

Book Review: Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the Wake of British Liberalism by Christopher Taylor

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Recommended Citation

Ford, Amanda () "Book Review: Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the Wake of British Liberalism by Christopher Taylor," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 95 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss2/5>

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Taylor, Christopher, *Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the Wake of British Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. ix+320 pages. Paperback, 27.95.

In Jane Austen's novel, *Persuasion*, an admiral's wife describes her travels throughout the Atlantic with her husband, and laments that she has never been to the West Indies because, "We do not call Bermuda or Bahama, you know, the West Indies." In response her dinner companion confesses, internally at least, "she could not accuse herself of having ever called them any thing in the whole course of her life." This snippet of the novel captures one of the contradictions at the heart of British identity and history—empire is both the heart of Britain and easily erased or forgotten by the British themselves. Christopher Taylor's *Empire of Neglect* examines this story from a new angle, namely how does it feel to be forgotten? How did West Indians attempt to reinsert themselves in the narrative and force the British to consider their place in empire? Neglected by the British, Taylor argues that West Indian authors turned instead to a new empire—the United States. These writers could not imagine a world without imperialism, and so they sought any port in the storm while the British blithely turned away, seduced by the lure of free trade.

In theory Taylor's book is about the ways in which West Indian writers responded to British neglect and sought to return to the friendly folds of an earlier form of mercantilist empire, but at several critical junctures Taylor finds himself more interested in critiquing free trade liberalism and highlighting the ways in which it failed as an economic principle. The West Indies simply become a useful case study against capitalism, as opposed to complex societies dealing with massive changes in real time. The book is divided into five chapters and a coda. In each chapter Taylor provides a close reading of a series of texts, highlighting the ways in which authors responded to the feelings of neglect they felt from the metropole. These texts range from

letters sent between a widow who owns a plantation in Jamaica to Anthony Trollope's travelogue, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*. The book is generally chronologically divided and roughly covers the nineteenth century, but the chapters are not deeply connected, which means the reader can pick up and read almost any chapter independently. Although many of the texts he uses sound positively horrendous to read—there is a reason that *Marly: or, a Planter's Life in Jamaica* never became a classic—Taylor successfully ties them to feelings of abandonment and the desperate need that whites and creoles felt to return to the warm embrace of the British Empire.

Empire of Neglect is a fine work in regard to textual analysis; unfortunately, it falls flat as a work of history, primarily due to two factors: the first is Taylor's attempt to turn liberalism into a *deus ex machina* of sorts, with free trade becoming the sole factor in Britain's rejection of its West Indian colonies and the overarching foundation of the second British Empire. This ties into the second critique of *Empire of Neglect* as a work of history, the isolation of the West Indies from the rest of the empire, and indeed British foreign policy as a whole. Taylor's presentation of the political history of free trade is admirable; he dutifully notes the important acts of Parliament that pushed forward this free trade vision of empire and heartily discusses various authors and theorists regarding political economy, but it ignores the reality of nineteenth-century empire. As the British shifted from the first to the second British Empire the contradictions of imperial policies became even more pronounced, as the British pushed for free trade throughout the world, but also briefly allowed the East India Company to monopolize the opium trade in China. British leaders talked frequently of completely abandoning empire, while simultaneously conquering new colonies. For many imperialists free trade policies and philosophies were useful until they were not. Part of Taylor's difficulties come from the way he flattens liberalism into

capitalism, which then becomes further flattened into free trade. However, this overlooks the many facets of liberalism as they were practiced in the empire. While liberal free trade was certainly part of the reason that the British abandoned the West Indies, foreign policy played an equally large role. The losses of the French and Spanish empires, as well as the growing friendliness between the British and American empires, meant that they were free to turn east to India and China. Part of the problem is that although Taylor has read deeply in the fields of postcolonial studies, British domestic history, and West Indian historiography, he is not fully versed in imperial history. For instance, his claim that no imperial historian has ever claimed that the British abandoned the West Indies is perhaps a bit of academic overreach.

In the end, Taylor asks an important question, “What happens, I ask, not simply when subjects are neglected, but when they come to conceive of themselves as being neglected?” (p. 1) This monograph begins to answer that question in interesting ways, but unfortunately becomes too invested in critiquing capitalism to fully delve into the myriad of responses to that question.

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