



BOOK REVIEW

Jacob Selwood. *At Kingdom's Edge: The Suriname Struggles of Jeronimy Clifford, English Subject*

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European colonization of the Americas in the seventeenth century was a chaotic and uncertain endeavor. The English and other northwestern Europeans planted colonies across the Americas on the edges of older Iberian footholds. They struggled to populate and defend their colonies from Indigenous powers, from European rivals, and from internal rebellions. The small colony of Surinam[e], founded in the Guianas in the middle of the seventeenth century, serves as a prominent example of a failed seventeenth-century English settlement. Historians have recently started to show greater interest in Surinam[e], a place that had once seemed promising enough that some colonial architects hoped it would rival Portuguese Brazil. After twenty years of settlement, the English were forced to cede Surinam to the Dutch in the Second Anglo-Dutch War. Yet, many English settlers continued living in Dutch Suriname.

English settlers in a Dutch colony raised important questions about subjecthood. To whom did they owe allegiance? What rights and protections of subjecthood could the English claim? Issues regarding property rights became particularly acute because of high death rates for Europeans in the Guianas. Would English legal customs pertaining to property continue to apply to marriage or inheritance in Dutch Suriname? These are the sorts of issues that Jacob Selwood tackles in *At Kingdom's Edge: The Suriname Struggles of Jeronimy Clifford*. His book is a short but thorough analysis of the ongoing efforts of Clifford, an Englishman, to assert what he believed to be his rights of English subjecthood, particularly his property rights in a lucrative sugar plantation called Corcabo in Dutch Suriname. Corcabo was home to nearly 100 enslaved people. It was one of the “finest” estates in Surinam[e] (148). Clifford believed he had gained ownership rights to Corcabo through marriage to Dorothy Matson, a woman of “ambiguous nationality” (43). Matson had, in turn, acquired Corcabo through a previous marriage. Because of the lethal disease environment in Suriname, Matson had already been married and widowed three or four times before marrying Clifford.

The dispute over Clifford's right to Corcabo hinged on two points. First, the Dutch had agreed in 1667 to allow the English to leave and to transfer property out of Dutch Suriname. Clifford had left for Jamaica and then returned to Suriname before trying to leave again. Did he maintain his rights as an Englishman when he returned to the colony? Second, what rights had Clifford gained to Corcabo through his marriage to Matson? Clifford believed that “English norms of coverture” supported his full control of Corcabo, but did such norms still apply in a new Dutch colony (68)? A prenuptial contract, however, shows that Matson and Clifford signed an agreement that “suggests common ownership” (69). The two “competed for control” of the estate until a court in Suriname froze the estate's

assets to stop Clifford from moving plantation equipment and Carcabo's enslaved labor force to Jamaica (68). The sequestered plantation fell into a slow and steady decline.

The problem with this study of Clifford's legal disputes is that the sources for understanding the case are so scarce and many of them were supplied and curated by Clifford himself in his efforts to regain the plantation. Selwood is often left speculating at what the truth might be. The book is filled with questions that Selwood is forced to leave unanswered, more questions than one would find in most historical monographs. It is fitting that "Perhaps" is the first word of the last paragraph in his book (167). Nevertheless Selwood—who admirably learned how to read early modern Dutch to pursue this project—scoured archives in Suriname, England, and the Netherlands, seemingly turning over every rock he could find to better explore all possible angles of the case. Despite the paucity of source material and its biases, Selwood's thorough interrogation of his source base is masterful. He never takes his sources at face value. His works against their biases to reveal which of the many competing narratives seems most plausible.

Selwood tracks Clifford's case across a vast stretch of time, following Clifford from Suriname to Jamaica, back to Suriname and then to London where Clifford fell into poverty—and quite likely madness—before dying. Rather than simply stopping with Clifford's death, Selwood explores the meaning of the case and the ways in which it resurfaced after Clifford's death, despite any clear legal resolution. Clifford's case was used as a prominent example of Dutch atrocity, sometimes listed alongside the more well-known 1623 Amboyna massacre in which the Dutch had killed English merchants in Indonesia. Selwood shows us that contemporary interpretations of Clifford's case were pivotal for understanding the meaning of subjecthood in an evolving empire.

There has been growing historiographical interest in the nature and role of subjecthood across the expanding British Empire, connected to a resurgence in imperial history. Scholars of slavery and indentured servitude have become particularly sensitive to the role of subjecthood and its denial in shaping these labor institutions. Selwood's work intersects with this burgeoning literature on slavery, servitude, empire, and subjecthood. Selwood is sensitive to the contradictions apparent in an Englishman asserting his rights of subjecthood to exercise property rights over the lives of enslaved blacks who were being denied the rights of subjecthood even when they were born in an English colony. Selwood's conclusion focuses on the ways in which race became determinative in the definition of subjecthood. As Selwood argues, "not all people born in British colonies benefited from the protections of subjecthood" (162). Enslaved Africans, even those born in British colonies, were never "accorded the blessings of birthright subjecthood" (163).

Clifford's legal battle is a fascinating case study for exploring contested definitions of subjecthood. By committing to deep archival work, remaining critical of his sources, and taking on the challenge of learning Dutch, Selwood has produced a fine study that traverses imperial boundaries and makes an important, original, and sophisticated contribution to the growing literature on subjecthood in the British Empire.