

Sugar Barons of Barbados

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Andrea Stuart,
Sugar in the Blood:
A Family's Story of Slavery and Empire
Knopf, 2013
384 pages

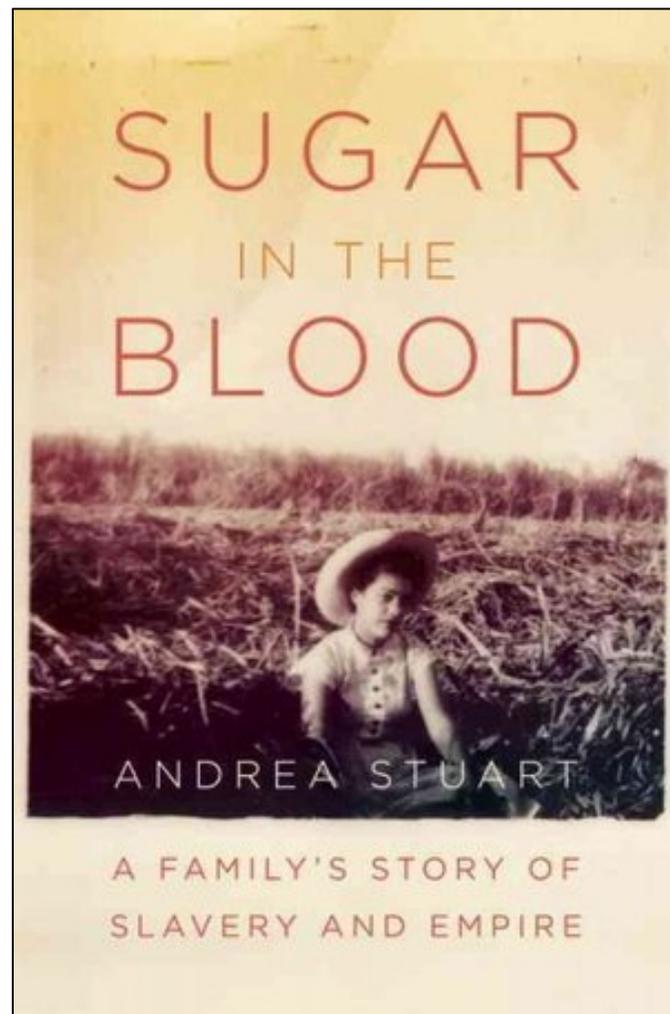
The narrative of the book is organized around a particular genealogy of the Ashby family, my maternal ancestors. It begins with my first identifiable ancestor and continues to the present day.

— Andrea Stuart

S*ugar in the Blood* grew out of Andrea Stuart's genealogical research. Her eighth great-grandfather, George Ashby (c. 1620-1676), emigrated from England to Barbados in the late 1630s. In England, he worked as a blacksmith. In Barbados, he bought nine acres in St. Philip Parish and became a plantation owner. From this small stake, which was not even large enough to allow George to vote, his descendant Robert Cooper Ashby (1776-1839) became one of the largest plantation owners on the island. It was from one of Robert's slave families that Andrea Stuart descended.

In her introduction, Stuart correctly identifies a problem with most genealogies, that "it yields the skeleton, not the body" (p. 3). While pursuing my own genealogical research, I have never understood how individuals could be content with a family tree that includes only the dates of births, marriages, and deaths, the type of list that Stuart rightly includes in the beginning of her book. I understand her "triumphant" feeling when she was able to have an unbroken family tree dating back to 1620. I also understand the "sense of anticlimax" that overwhelmed once she completed the skeleton, as well as her desire to put flesh on the bones of her Ahnentafel Report, the chart of her pedigree.

Although I have been writing biographical sketches of the Liberacki-Wilcox-Berg ancestors, I am not sure how I would summarize the story of my family. But Stuart had the exciting realization that a narrative of George Ashby and his descendants was "a story of migration, settlement, survival, slavery and the making of the Atlantic world" (p. 3). It had the potential to be an exciting story that would provide a unique glimpse into the settlement of Barbados, sugar, and slaves.



The Skeleton, Not the Body

Unfortunately, that promise of a living, breathing story was not realized. In the first section of *Sugar in the Blood*, Stuart labors under the not unexpected dearth of primary and secondary source materials about George Ashby. He simply was not prominent enough to have made much impact on the historical record. This is no more Stuart's fault than it is my fault that I can only trace one branch of my family back to my second great-grandfather, whom I know even less about than does Stuart about her eighth great-grandfather.

The problem is that Stuart spends too much time on international relations and other issues at the expense of her ancestors. For example, in a section on piracy, five times more text is devoted to an extensive biographical sketch of Sir Henry Morgan than is devoted to how piracy impacted the planter class of which George Ashby was a member.

Even when Stuart has primary sources at her disposal, she relies more on speculation than research. For example, based on the tone of the introductory paragraph in George Ashby's will, she concludes that he "had always been or had become a religious man." She further speculates that "there

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Barbados *continued from page 23*

are tantalizing indications that he had become a Quaker”, in part because he referred to two individuals as “friends” which is “the term used by the Quakers to describe themselves and their brethren” (p. 116).

What Stuart does not realize is that the opening paragraph of English wills of that time typically bequeathed the testator’s soul to God. Larry Gragg, in his *The Quaker Community on Barbados*, reports (p. 34) that of the 516 wills written by Barbados settlers through 1660, about 90% have a devotional clause. Furthermore, as Gragg explains, Quaker wills typically avoided “‘pagan’ dates” (Gragg, p. 60). As such, a Quaker would have dated his will as the third day of the eighth month instead of George’s date of “this third day of October.” Faithful Quakers “refused to be buried in the consecrated ground of the state [Anglican] church” and frequently made provisions in their wills to be buried on their plantations or in Quaker cemeteries (Gragg, p. 98), a request not made by Ashby. Although she cites a book and an article written by Gragg, Stuart does not consult his study of Quakers while speculating on George’s will and other potential Quaker connections of her ancestors.

I have a special appreciation for the devotional clauses in Anglican wills because my 12th great-grandfather, William Tracy (1460-1531), decided to make a theological and ultimately political point in the devotional portion of his will when he affirmed his reformed faith. When his will was probated, he was declared a heretic, his body was ordered dug up and removed from consecrated ground, and—in a fit of enthusiasm— was then burned at the stake.

However, it was not due to my genealogical research that I was bothered by Stuart’s speculation throughout *Sugar in the Blood*. It is due to my work as an interdisciplinary trained historian that I am bothered by individuals who are content to speculate without then taking the time to investigate. Hunches and feelings do not make good history. In terms of George Ashby, they do not even make for a good story.

An Empire of Privilege

Had I not made a commitment to a colleague to review *Sugar in the Blood*, I would have stopped reading before I had finished the first section. This would have been a mistake because, when writing about her ancestor Robert Cooper Ashby, Stuart is at her best. Born in 1776, Robert Ashby was the third great-grandson of George Ashby. He was “the member of the Ashby clan who would really transform the family’s fortunes” (p. 131).

While setting the scene for the second part of her book on “The Plantocrat”, Stuart does a better job of establishing the world in which Robert lived than she did in writing about George’s world. Robert Cooper Ashby married into the socially more prominent Burke family, and he would eventually run the family plantation known as the Burkes. *Plantocracy* is the term for a ruling order composed primarily of plantation owners, and this certainly applies to Robert Ashby and his peers. As a result of his social promi-

nence, Stuart had a richer historical record than she had when writing about her earlier ancestor and, overall, she uses those records well. Instead of focusing on the world stage, she is able to set the socio-cultural context of Barbados during the late 18th and early 19th Centuries while keeping the focus on the Ashby family.

Robert Cooper Ashby was a prominent slave owner whom Stuart acknowledges must have treated his slaves in the same barbaric fashion as did other Barbadian slave owners. Many who have studied the horrors of American slavery might not realize that the treatment of slaves in Barbados was even much worse than in the American South. Stuart provides the evidence in excruciating detail.

Robert, like other Barbadian plantocrats, practiced a learned helplessness. “It was a point of honour in plantation society that no menial activity was undertaken by anyone but a slave, so Robert Cooper and his contemporaries would do as little for themselves as was humanly possible” (p. 161), such as swatting flies, picking up bits of wool that had fallen on the floor, or fetching a glass of tamarind water that was on the other side of the room.

Robert was also an adulterer who raised four separate families— one with his wife, and three with slave mistresses— and had additional children with other slave women. Like other plantocrats, he realized that his wife could not leave him, that his neighbors would not condemn him because they were having affairs of their own, and that there were not legal repercussions for his activities because “in Barbados a man could not be accused of ‘raping’ his slave because the slave was property and therefore had no legal rights” (p. 188). Sukey Ann, one of his mistresses, was approximately 14 years old when he began a family with her— the same age as one of his sons by his wife.

What might surprise most readers is that, at the time of his death, Robert bequeathed most of his estate to his slave mistress Mary Ann and her children. He also left a home and six apprentice laborers to his baby son Samuel. His wife and the son he had with her had died years earlier.

The narrative of Robert’s life is a narrative of a changing Barbados, and Stuart tells the story well. She gives insight into a plantation system that too many people know only through cultural mythology and dry history texts. By using the life of her ancestor, Stuart puts flesh on the skeleton of the historical record.

The Past is Never Dead

In the final section of *Sugar in the Blood*, Stuart considers “The Legacy”, an issue which I have often contemplated in my own genealogical work. What have my ancestors handed down from generation to generation, and how has that legacy shaped my life? It has been fascinating to uncover evidence of how things I value were valued by my ancestors, especially in terms of education and community service.

Five years after Robert Ashby’s death, in accordance with the terms of his will, the Burkes plantation was sold and the proceeds were divided among his heirs. But his great-grandson,

the descendant of his union with an unknown slave, returns to plantation life with the purchase of Plumgrove. Stuart writes, “It is interesting to speculate on why both my great-grandfathers would want, so to speak, to return to the scene of the crime by purchasing sugar plantations” (p. 279).

Fortunately, as she did when considering the life of Robert Ashby, Stuart does not take a simplistic approach to her speculations before concluding that “The intensity of the relationship that its inhabitants had with this land [Plumgrove] is proof that we are made by the places we love, just as we make them” (p. 280). Maybe he did not clear Plumgrove, but George Ashby’s legacy in clearing the land for his nine-acre plantation turned into the legacy of giving his descendants a sense of place. While he could not have imagined that his African descendants would become plantation owners themselves or that when he purchased his first slave he might have African descendants, his legacy was passed from generation to generation as an eventual gift to his eighth great-granddaughter, Andrea Stuart.

My own pedigree does not support Stuart’s conclusion that family legacy is an intense sense of place, that we are made by the places we love. However, not all families share the same legacy, and Stuart’s contribution to an understanding of the history of Barbados is her genealogy and her family’s legacy.

Stuart’s book is one of those publications that would be twice as good were it half as long. Were I her editor, I would have encouraged her to write a book about Robert Cooper Ashby in which she incorporated his ancestors and descendants. Although I was disappointed with much of Stuart’s book because it did not live up to its promise of tracing her genealogy from George Ashby to the present, I have a better understanding of Barbadian history because I read *Sugar in the Blood*. •

April MIIE Conference in Columbus



The Schoolcraft College International Institute cordially invites you to join us at the upcoming 21st Annual Conference of the Midwest Institute for International/ Intercultural Education (MIIE). The conference will be held at Columbus State Community College in Columbus, OH. This gathering will draw faculty participants from throughout the Midwest and beyond.

For more information, contact Helen Ditouras, our MIIE representative, at 734-462-4400 extn. 5647, or hditoura@schoolcraft.edu. You’ll also be able to download the registration forms and other information at <http://www.miiie.org>.

Kudos

Schoolcraft student **Ryan Bardusch**, who is contemplating majoring in East Asian Studies, won the “Best Paper” award for 2013 from the Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA) in the Two-Year College category. His research paper, “A Wounded Karabakh”, investigated the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and its role in the growing instability of the Caucasus region. The paper was a course project in Political Science 209 (International Relations) taught in Winter 2013 by Prof. **Marjorie Nanian**, who nominated the paper for the award. In conjunction with the “Focus: Russia and Its Environs” project at Schoolcraft, Prof. Nanian had assigned the students to research problems of human rights and political conflict in the region. Another of Ryan’s papers in that course, “Moldova Struggles with Human Trafficking”, was published in the Fall 2013 issue of *International Agenda*.

Congratulations also to the **Asian Student Cultural Association**, its faculty advisor **Anna Maheshwari** (English), and **Todd Stowell** (Student Activities Office), who led in organizing Schoolcraft’s seventh annual Navratri Garba/Bhangra celebration. Over 500 people purchased tickets to enjoy the event on Saturday, Oct. 19 from 7 pm – 12 midnight in the VisTaTech Center. There was a catered dinner by **Taste of India Suvai Restaurant** (Ann Arbor), authentic music, costume, and dance, and a marketplace. The featured performers were the members of **Sammvad**, an orchestra that plays music for such Indian dances as *garba*, *bhangra*, *dandia*, and *raas*. The Hindu Navratri festival is traditionally a nine-day event celebrating the goddess Durga at the beginning of Autumn.

Last year, the **Coins to Change** service-learning project at Schoolcraft College further advanced its fundraising work to help build a middle school for AIDS orphans in the village of Nyaka, Uganda. On Nov. 20, activist and author **Twesigye Jackson Kaguri**, who heads the Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project, spoke again to students on campus here and shared his vision of freeing these orphans from a cycle of poverty. Prof. **Anna Maheshwari** (English), founder and director of Coins to Change, reports that approximately \$18,000 has been raised by the Schoolcraft community so far in the two-year effort to change coins into real change in Africa. She hopes to have the full \$25,000 goal met by this April. To learn more or to help out, e-mail amaheshw@schoolcraft.edu or call 734-462-4400 ext. 5296, or visit <http://www.nyakaschool.org/>.

Kudos to the **Native American Cultural Club**, which on Oct. 30 sponsored another successful annual celebration of the Mexican *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) festival. Packing a classroom in the Liberal Arts Bldg., the event included a potluck supper, a traditional *ofrenda*, and a screening of the PBS-TV documentary “Food for the Ancestors”, which explores aspects of the day through its food customs. Instructors **Sumita Chaudhery** (English), **Helen Ditouras** (English), and **Marjorie Nanian** (Political Science) brought students from their classes to the event. Faculty advisors for the club are Profs. **Karen Schaumann-Beltrán** (Sociology and Anthropology) and **Mark Harris** (English).