For “British Caribbean” in the title of Randy Browne’s book, read “Berbice.” Berbice was one of three Dutch colonies (along with Demerara and Essequibo) sandwiched between Suriname and French Guinea in the vast estuarine region between the Orinoco and Amazon rivers. British forces conquered them in 1796; in 1831, they were consolidated as British Guiana, which on decolonization in 1961 became Guyana. Berbice’s unique history tests supposed commonalities of plantation slavery in the greater Caribbean: Dutch, when the large majority of enslaved Africans labored in British and French colonies; continental, when most of those French and British colonies were on islands; densely riverine, when rainfall was critical for sugar crops on the islands; transportationally efficient, thanks to Dutch hydraulic engineering, while island colonies were bogged down in the rainy season. On the eve of the trans-Atlantic slave trade’s abolition in 1807 Berbice had the highest proportion of African-born slaves among British colonies. In the last decade before the legal abolition of British slavery in 1834, the new colonies of British Guiana and Trinidad produced as much sugar as did all the old British Caribbean colonies combined. This sugar frontier had opened while British abolitionists were coopting Parliament into a policy of amelioration that contradicted two centuries of British slavery. Enslaved people gained legal rights to property, marriage, and judicial recourse against cruel and unusual punishments; British officials, not planters, would enforce them.

British Berbice retained a type of Dutch judge, the fiscal, who had powers unlike those of any official in long-established British plantation colonies, where planters individually and collectively subjected the enslaved population to their will, both out of hand and through legislation. Fiscals regulated relations between enslavers and the enslaved and among the enslaved themselves. Their duty was to maintain the institution of slavery by restraining its inherent excesses. Enslaved people could present cases directly to the fiscal. Most of them (roughly 70 percent) failed to obtain justice and suffered punishment for supposedly frivolous cases, but airing their grievances put their enslavers under a watchful official eye. To deter atrocities, such as having a pregnant woman lashed one hundred fifty times for insulting a manager’s wife, the fiscal occasionally punished plantation authorities with fines and imprisonment (224n95). Since the fiscal’s powers depended on Roman rather than British law, as investigative judges they could call anyone—black or white, slave or free—as witnesses, record their testimony verbatim, and impose punishments ranging from admonitions of better behavior, to fines, tortures, executions, and ritual decapitation. Browne analyzes the fiscals’ records in conjunction with those of a new type of British official, protectors of slaves, appointed from 1817 onward to administer policies of amelioration by reporting infractions to the governor and the fiscal, and themselves forbidden from owning slaves. Though protectors lacked powers of enforcement, they could require plantation administrators to submit meticulous records of punishments, on standardized forms. In principle, a formerly extrajudicial realm had been bureaucratized.

Only a handful of historians have exploited these extraordinary records, “the single largest archive of first-person testimony from enslaved people in the Americas” (5). Browne uses them for chapters on enslaved people’s use of legal processes to contest the violence against them, on the crucial but conflicted role of drivers in the functioning of plantations, on the patriarchal compromises that enslavement posed for gender and family roles, on seditious and dangerous practices of magic and exorcism, and on the conflicts among the enslaved with plantation managers arising from their entitlements to property and contract. On each of these topics Browne brings individuals to life, dramatizes their situations, and evokes their existential problem—surviving slavery not by overturning it collectively but by effective individual strategies.
Berbice had the highest mortality rate among plantation colonies, largely because of unsanitary water supplies and dependence on plantation managers for subsistence. Violence and white supremacy upheld the regime, but on those counts Browne does not find Berbice to be exceptional. He distances himself from historiography based “on unspoken assumptions that continue to shape the study of slavery, including the notion that enslaved people’s primary goal was freedom and that their lives can best be understood by focusing on the hot and cold wars they waged against their enslavers” (4). His revisionism requires an evidentiary tautology: to gain a voice in the record, enslaved people tacitly had to accept slavery and then explain how they had suffered exceptionally while fulfilling their obligations.

In counterpoint to Browne’s revisionism, it bears remembering that the Dutch mainland colonies were synonymous with profound repudiations of European slave regimes. Upriver regions were heartlands of grand marronage. In 1763–64 enslaved people in Berbice waged the greatest slave rebellion before that on Saint-Domingue. During the 1790s there was a five-year civil war over slavery in Suriname. And in 1723 roughly thirteen thousand enslaved people in Demerara launched a short-lived, initially nonlethal, protest against the government’s supposed withholding of a parliamentary declaration of emancipation.

Browne’s book on Berbice gets us more deeply into the lives of enslaved people in the Caribbean than any other work of nonfiction that comes readily to mind. It bears favorable comparison with Emmanuel Le Roi Ladurie’s Montaillou (1975): a deep microhistory, based on fortuitously rich sources that a gifted historian uses to illuminate a previously obscure world with profound humanity. Accordingly, Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean won the biannual Elsa Goveia Book Prize for excellence from the Association of Caribbean Historians.

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Philip Caudrey, in his new assessment of three well-known Court of Chivalry cases, argues that their collective contribution offers a much broader historical batch of information, with “a host of themes central to gentry studies, whilst simultaneously touching upon unexplored aspects of the cases themselves” (180). To accomplish his goal, Caudrey has reevaluated three cases—Scrope v. Grosvenor (1385–1390), Lovel v. Morley (1386–1387), and Grey v. Hastings (1407–1410)—with an eye toward political and social affiliations and alignments. Previous scholarship has focused on the military and chivalric aspects of the court. Maurice Keen used Court of Chivalry information as a repository of content on military careers, chivalric culture, and identity as defined by heraldry. Keen’s successors, notably Andrew Ayton and Adrian Bell, saw comparable historical value, although they narrowed the focus to issues such as revenue and retinue.

In the first chapter, Caudrey looks at witness testimony from the Grosvenor and Hastings cases to identify familial traditions, generational changes, and attitudes about Edward III and Henry V, respectively. He draws upon similarities between Grosvenor and Hastings and their testators, identifying continuities in the careers and attitudes of all involved. Caudrey also emphasizes the importance of county in the shaping of “vertical and historical ties” in the relationships among men (62).