Planters, Merchants, and Slaves is an important addition to the study of British America as well as to that of Atlantic history, early American history, and slavery studies more broadly. Herein, Burnard deftly details the origins and emergence of the large integrated plantation in the British Caribbean and in the southern American colonies. This work will be particularly valuable to historians of the ante-bellum South because it spectacularly handles the genesis and ensconcement of violence within the large-scale integrated plantation world and highlights the long-established exploitation of slave labor on plantations throughout British America by the onset of the Revolution.

A central theme of this work is the crucial role of violence to the rise and profitability of the plantation complex. Burnard’s insights are far-reaching and help to ground our understanding of the almost innate disposition to brutality in the antebellum South, especially in the rich-soiled cotton districts and cane parishes. Burnard notes that having a group of people to mete out discipline was critical to the shift from small- to large-scale slave plantations. Terror was at the heart of this transition. A class of overseers emerged at the end of the 1600s because there was a marked decline in opportunities available to regular whites outside the plantation economy, an increased presence in the plantation regions of men accustomed to brutal treatment as soldiers, and an increased racialization of plantation labor as whites were brought out of indentured servitude and into managerial roles. Ordinary white men who had served in the British Army were desensitized toward brutal treatment, as were men who had been sailors on slave ships. He explains that white men who brutalized enslaved Africans were “prepared by their previous experiences” (54) and that whites had to learn a particular kind of violence to keep blacks in check. Learning to use this violence did not come naturally but “arouse out of the particular historical context of the Atlantic slave trade and large-scale European warfare” (54). It is here, in locating the origin and acceptance of race-based violence, that Burnard’s work transcends disciplinary boundaries.

It was important to have nonelite white men as overseers and in managerial roles, but it was essential to have them invested in and connected to the plantation system. Burnard shows that the non-plantation-holding white sector played an important role in the switch to large plantations. Ordinary whites quickly reconciled themselves to large-scale plantations because of the many advantages that being part of the plantation complex brought. Large-scale plantations lifted the economic status of most of the free population and employment opportunities abounded within the plantation.
complex. Burnard clearly explains, and brings numerous examples to show, how the role and critical positioning of ordinary whites changed within plantation society to become a vital element of the integrated plantation.

Beginning with an exploration of indentured servitude in the seventeenth century, the book then traces the entrenchment of a plantation world built on slave labor, driven by brutality, and focused on profits. Gang labor became the standard and this labor practice, and its management, was a critical aspect in the global shift in the eighteenth century that spawned merchant capitalism. Burnard demonstrates that planters in British America were market-focused businessmen who concentrated on economic gain and were always entrepreneurial. He also explores how planters used prosperity as a means to ensure political power and control back in England, and does an excellent job of examining the effect that this loss of political clout had on British Caribbean planters after the American Revolution.

Other highlights of this information-laden book include examining why booms happened in some locations faster than in others. Economic, social, political, and environmental reasons are incorporated throughout the work, in addition to compare-and-contrast studies and single-location analysis. Discussions of the indirect impact of the American Revolution on Britain and the British Empire are insightful and a reminder that the Revolution’s outcome was not preordained. The impacts in Britain and the colonies of the Somerset and Campbell v. Hall rulings are given substantial attention and are particularly impactful in discussions of notably altered relationships of formerly elite Caribbean planters within British social and political circles following the American Revolution.

The drawbacks of this work rest mainly with the layout. The pages are packed with so much rich information that the chapters could have been shorter. Although the chapters are logically laid out and crafted, a change in chapter length would better highlight the robust sources and important arguments, especially for undergraduate and graduate students.

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For many nineteenth-century Americans the fiery terrain of hell was frighteningly real. But as Kathryn Gin Lum documents in her remarkable history, ideas about hell in the early republic and antebellum period varied widely, running from those whose vivid imaginings of eternal damnation drove them to insanity to those who denied the reality of hell altogether. The idea of hell was also incredibly versatile. It was not only a religious doctrine, it was an idea through which Americans worked out their visions of society and each other. As Lum writes, for Americans of this era, “Hell was never distant. It underlay conceptions of justice and equality. It haunted dreams and waking visions” (4). At both ends of Lum’s chronology, experts and enlightened critics predicted the demise of hell as an idea, but, as Lum writes, “the concept of hell did not just survive in antebellum America: it thrived” (3).