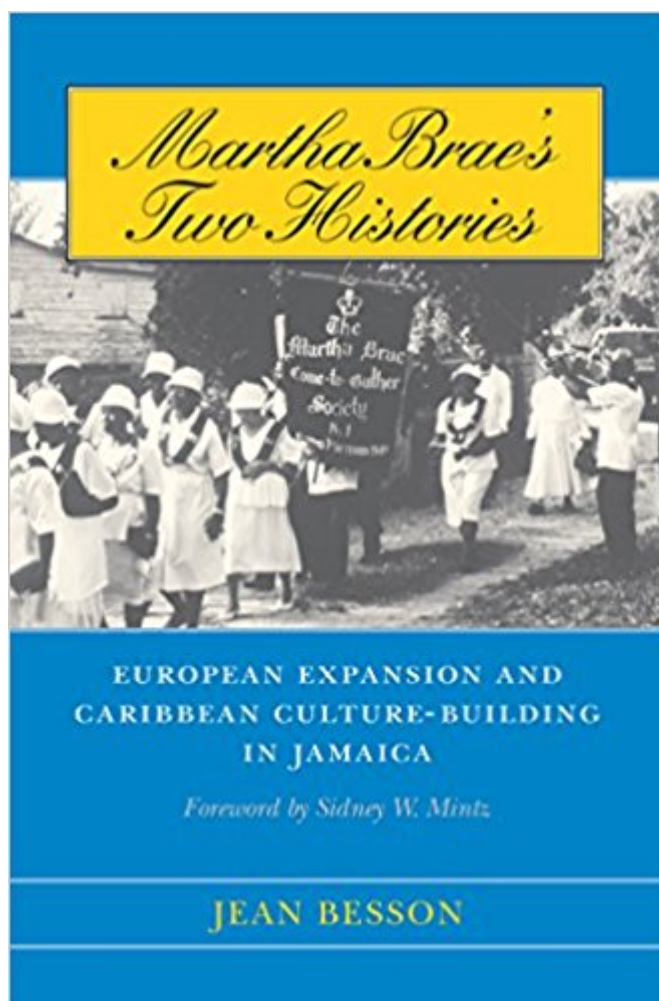


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Martha Brae's Two Histories: European Expansion And Caribbean Culture-Building In Jamaica



Synopsis

Based on historical research and more than thirty years of anthropological fieldwork, this wide-ranging study underlines the importance of Caribbean cultures for anthropology, which has generally marginalized Europe's oldest colonial sphere. Located at the gateway to the New World in the plantation heartlands of the Americas, the settlement of Martha Brae, Jamaica, has witnessed the unfolding of two distinct yet interrelated histories. Exploring the significance of Martha Brae as a European Caribbean slaving port in the eighteenth century, Jean Besson simultaneously uncovers the neglected tale of Martha Brae's gradual appropriation by ex-slaves and its transformation into an African Caribbean free village, bringing the story right up to the present day. Central to this transformation is the system of "family land," which interrelates with kinship, community, economy, cosmology, gender, oral tradition, state law, and migration. Besson shows that this customary land tenure is not a passive legacy from either Africa or Europe, as conventional theories contend, but a dynamic creole institution created by Caribbean people in response to European American land monopoly and cultural dominance. This perspective advances debates on African American cultural history and the anthropological study of culture.

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Customer Reviews

"This book about Martha Brae is also a book about a world that Europe and Africa had made together--and not always unwillingly. Here we are afforded, by this daughter of two worlds, an inspiring and genuinely original vision of how the Jamaican people came into being and built their own society. (Sidney W. Mintz, from the Foreword)"

A fine testimony to the ways in which good regional ethnography can offer an important contribution to central concerns within anthropology.--Journal of Anthropological Research

This book about Martha Brae is also a book about a world that Europe and Africa had made together--and not always unwillingly. Here we are afforded, by this daughter of two worlds, an inspiring and genuinely original vision of how the Jamaican people came into being and built their own society.--Sidney W. Mintz, from the Foreword

Jean Besson's efforts in this book warrant high praise. Words that might come to mind to describe her accomplishment and contribution to Caribbean studies are 'essential reading' and 'of central importance,' but 'fundamental to our understanding of Caribbean society' is more apt. The book is full of wonderful detail, hard-wrought from thirty years of sympathetic ethnographic and oral history research by this politically committed 'daughter of the soil' and erudite anthropologist.--Kevin A. Yelvington, University of South Florida

Besson's *Martha Brae's Two Histories* is an impressive work, bringing together various aspects of her scholarship, research and reflection upon her own biography. . . . The book is a welcome volume for all Caribbeanists as well as those who are interested in the contacts between Europe and Africa on the third site of contact and living-the Caribbean.--Ethnic & Racial Studies

This book contributes to kinship theory beyond the Caribbean and to explicating the relationships among culture, land, and kinship in peasant economies. Academic libraries supporting anthropology programs on every level will want to have it. . . . Highly recommended.--Choice

Who'd have thought it? For years Jean Besson produced accomplished but rather technical anthropological work on eastern Caribbean land tenure. Now, when she offers a major monograph, probably her landmark work, surprise! It's a thoroughly-researched but wonderfully accessible ethnohistory of a neighborhood in northern Jamaica close by the Martha Brae River; the two histories are of plantations and peasantries. Besson combines the scholar's use of evidence with the access and irreplaceable insights of a daughter of the area. Her father "Lawyer" McFarlane was a beloved local attorney who represented and aided many poor people; this helps not just to gain inside access to knowledgeable informants, but ensures trust as well. Land tenure receives due attention for its crucial economic function, also its role in maintaining community identities. But there's plenty here concerning the history of complex relations between European planters, African slaves, Maroons (runaway or "self-liberated" slaves) and post-emancipation peasantries. "MBTH" superficially resembles local history but is much more comprehensive. The writing is beautifully clear, the personal touches and reminiscences memorable and occasionally moving. Perhaps it's

too detailed for some visitors to a prime Jamaican tourist area, but who says beach reading must be mindless diversion? All travelers to the Caribbean who read this will get more out of their sojourns. For Caribbeanist scholars, of course, it is essential and will stand the test of time. A most fitting monument to Mr. McFarlane.

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