Encomium for April Shelford's *A Caribbean Enlightenment*

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It is all there in the title: this is a book about the eighteenth-century Caribbean and it is about the Enlightenment. To my mind, the greatness of this book lies in the way in which it sheds new light on both topics. It also shows that Caribbean history and the history of the Enlightenment can *illuminate* one another.

To begin with the Enlightenment: the book starts off by proposing a new way of thinking about what 'the Enlightenment' was. And it insists that the Enlightenment was real, and was a lived experience of eighteenth-century people, contra J.C.D. Clark, who has recently argued that the Enlightenment didn't exist in the 18th century and had to wait another century for historians to give it a name.[1] Just as Samuel Johnson refuted George Berkeley's immaterialism by kicking a large stone and saying 'I refute it *thus*!', Shelford refutes historiographic nominalists like Clark by writing a book all about the 'enlightened' activities of 18th-century people and refutes him *thus*.

She sees the Enlightenment as characterised by three things, all of them starting with an 'A'. Shelford's three As are: attitude, approach, and activities. **Attitudes** included a sense of intellectual rights and responsibilities – an assertion of the right to think for oneself (and to improve oneself through knowledge and the quest for new understandings) as well as the responsibility to strive for improvement 'personal and social, moral and physical' (3). **Approaches** included curiosity above all (perhaps thus an offshoot of an earlier renaissance valorization and appreciation for curiosity) and an assumption that the world around us is 'intelligible' (i.e., understandable) – not necessarily rational, but intelligible either through reason or through empathy (feeling; sensibility). And **activities** included all of the things that Shelford's subjects did: collecting, networking, reading, writing, experimenting, conversing, observing, publishing, socializing, and organizing. All told, we are left with a perspective on the Enlightenment as a lived experience. Enlightenment wasn't a set of prescribed beliefs or an ideological program: it was a way of life.

And it was a way of life that people in the colonial Caribbean experienced. This is important because the Caribbean had been considered for quite some time to be on the margins of the European eighteenth century and especially marginal to the Enlightenment. Who was the Caribbean Voltaire, Hume or Rousseau? One might ask. But a reader of Shelford's book will quickly realize that this is *une question mal posée*. We should not seek Enlightenment in the works of great men, or great intellectuals, but rather in the actions of otherwise ordinary individuals. There may not have been a 'Caribbean Voltaire', but there was, she informs us, an enslaved person named 'Voltaire' in eighteenth-century Jamaica.

Of course, the eighteenth-century Caribbean was far from an ordinary environment, as eighteenth-century scholars have increasingly recognized in the twenty-first century. The Caribbean was, above all, a slave society. By this, historians mean that the entire social order of the Caribbean was dominated by the fact that the vast majority of the people who lived there were enslaved. The wealth generated by enslaved labour was substantial, and it is increasingly recognized that the grandeur of the age of Enlightenment depended upon the work of people who were forced to do it, and who gained little credit for their efforts. Arguments that were once seen

[1] J.C.D. Clark, *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2024).

as radical and perhaps overstated, such as Eric Williams' claim that modern capitalism relied upon slavery have gained newfound acceptance in the light of more recent scholarship.[2] Historians of the French Revolution used to be able to focus almost entirely on the experiences of 'hexagonal' France without mention of the coterminous revolution that took place in France's richest colony, St. Domingue (or modern day Haiti). This is no longer acceptable: the Caribbean now plays a central role in the master narratives that structure our understanding of the eighteenth century: the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and now the Enlightenment as well.

Shelford's book adds to this 'Caribbean revolution' in eighteenth-century history by showing just how important the Caribbean (and by implication, the slave societies created by European colonists in the eighteenth century) was to the Enlightenment. Enlightenment **attitudes** about intellectual and moral improvement made the social fact of slavery all the more difficult to explain, let alone to justify. Enlightenment **approaches** to the world as an intelligible and 'sensible' place relied on the work of enslaved peoples, and the rise of sensibility complicated (and indeed sometimes contradicted) racial hierarchies that depended upon understanding enslaved peoples as necessarily inferior to their enslavers. One of the most vibrant and ongoing debates in eighteenth-century studies today revolves around the question of whether the Enlightenment enabled slavery or laid the foundations for its ultimate abolition. Finally, Enlightenment **activities** in the Caribbean could not have taken place without the work of the people enslaved by the 'Enlightened' colonists discussed in Shelford's book.

I will conclude by remarking that Shelford's book is a model of historical scholarship. It is clearly based on many years of careful research in archives and libraries around the world. Her research took her to France, the UK, the USA, and of course the Caribbean and the work on display in her notes and bibliography will surely inspire many future eighteenth-century scholars. It is also a remarkable book due to its range. It is rare to find a historian willing to tackle the history of both Jamaica and St. Domingue in one study. Comparative history is difficult: it requires familiarity with very different archives as well as different national (or in this case, colonial) traditions and historiographies. *A Caribbean Enlightenment* succeeds in showing that there was 'an' Enlightenment in both British Jamaica and in French St. Domingue. The experience of Enlightenment may not have been exactly the same in the two colonies, but Shelford's careful research convinces us that both places had an Enlightenment.

This is a book that will transform several different fields. It will be required reading for students of the Enlightenment and the eighteenth-century Caribbean, to be sure. It will also inform work on colonialism, knowledge formation (especially the history of science and reading), and of course the practice of slavery in a world that thought of itself as 'enlightened'.

[2] Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution*, (Polity, 2023).