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True-Born Maroons (review)

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Caribbean Studies, Volume 36, Number 1, January-June 2008, pp.
172-174 (Review)

Published by Institute of Caribbean Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crb.0.0023>



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as a very well-read Caribbean scholar: not only does she replace the novels she studies within a greater Caribbean literature context (and by this I mean its Francophone, Anglophone and Hispanophone context), but she also sometimes contrasts and links her thoughts to the African or African-American literature tradition.

Overall, *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean* offers excellent close-text studies of contemporary novels, the strength of the study being reinforced by a thoroughly researched context. However, while certain novels were judiciously chosen and fit the overall argument well (Joseph Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* and Gisèle Pineau's *L'Espérance-macadam* come to mind), other studies of more recent novels would have benefited from Larrier's enlightened analysis (*La Femme cannibale* by Maryse Condé instead of *La Traversée de la Mangrove* for example). Nevertheless, it is clear that every good library should have this study in its collection, and it should also be on every serious Caribbean scholar's shelves.

Kenneth M. Bilby. 2005. *True-Born Maroons*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 515 pp. ISBN: 0-8130-2873-6.

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In *True-Born Maroons*, Kenneth M. Bilby sets out to produce a study of cultural memory. More specifically, Bilby is interested in how the Jamaican Maroons have produced, preserved and used knowledge of their past. This is more complicated than it sounds. Since the Maroons inhabit a largely secret world, gaining access to them and to their stories is difficult: the Maroons look like other Jamaicans, and it is easy for them to remain anonymous and to hide their Maroon identity and their narratives to outsiders.

Bilby's approach has been to use the Maroons' narratives to tell their history. As an anthropologist who has been doing research on the Maroons for thirty years, Bilby has enormous admiration for their oral traditions; moreover, he argues that it is as vital to respect their oral statements as it is to accept written evidence from the archives. For Bilby, Maroon oral narratives can be used "not only to provide independent

verification of certain colonial documents, but also to contest colonial biases and fill the gaps in some of these documents, and perhaps to recover portions of the Maroon past previously considered unrecoverable” (p. 58). In fact, Bilby suggests that the Maroon narratives are often richer than standard historical sources.

Most of *True-Born Maroons* is therefore devoted to discussing these narratives. Many of them are about the differences, as the Maroons see it, between themselves and the Jamaican slaves who did not resist slavery. Rather than accept slavery, the Maroons fought against the British. Their narratives also suggest how they refused to work as slaves; in addition, they had better spiritual training than other Jamaicans and preserved their spiritual power through eating only wild plants and animals rather than the food provided by the whites. Though the Maroons shared the same origins as other Jamaicans, their narratives emphasize their differences with the rest of the population.

One of the Maroon leaders, Nanny, who is now a Jamaican National Hero, has a central place in the Maroon narratives. Stories abound about her ability to catch bullets and return them against the enemy or to lure British soldiers to peer into her cooking pot and then to fall in and die. Bilby argues that African cultural ideas and practices help to explain Nanny’s powers in these narratives, narratives which also have echoes in other Maroon groups in the Americas.

One of the most interesting aspects of Bilby’s book is his discussion of the 1739 peace treaty with the British. This guaranteed the freedom of the Maroons, and according to the Maroon narratives, was consecrated with blood oaths. It is particularly interesting to note not just the centrality of the peace treaties in the Maroon narratives but also the relative silence in the written evidence on certain aspects of the treaties. For example, the narratives make clear where the negotiations between the British and the Maroons took place, areas that are still critically important to the Maroons. Moreover, as Bilby suggests, for the Maroons the treaties are not mere pieces of paper; they are “a living reality and not the dead documents of a bygone era” (p. 275) It is also significant that the Maroons see themselves as the victors in the wars against the British: it was the British who had to sue for peace rather than the Maroons.

The treaties meant that the Maroons became agents of the State; they returned runaway slaves and helped to put down slave and post-emancipation rebellions. This has complicated their history and the perception of the Maroons in Jamaica, since they are regarded as having betrayed the enslaved population. But Bilby seeks to put this role in context. He points out that Maroons were not always successful in returning runaway slaves; for example, the obeah of the runaways was sometimes stronger than that of the Maroons. The Maroon narratives also suggest

that it was important for the Maroons to prove their spiritual superiority over the runaway slaves. The role of the Maroons in helping to suppress the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865 is equally problematical, although the narratives blame the leader of the rebellion, Paul Bogle, for not having given the Maroons sufficient warning of his plans.

These are serious problems for the Maroons. Whatever the stories in the narratives, the Maroons backed the wrong side in helping to suppress the Morant Bay Rebellion. Their relationship with the enslaved population was sometimes also problematical; they raided the plantations and often stole women as well as goods from the estates. Unfortunately, the Maroon narratives do not always clarify the basis for some of these actions. There are also more contemporary problems for the Maroons; as Bilby suggests, they face attempts to assimilate them into Jamaican society and to end their special status in the island.

This is an excellent study of the Maroons. Using their own voices and their own narratives, Bilby successfully reconstructs the Maroon view of their past. He ably deals with issues of memory and history, as he weaves together oral and written evidence. All students of Maroon societies and of slavery in the Americas will find this an invaluable book.