

Agricultural History talks to Richard Follett

Q: Tell us a little about your background—did you grow up in a rural setting?

A: I grew up in Northwest Wales. Back in the 1970s, it really was quite a rural and isolated place. Rural life impinged at home, too. My father was a reproductive physiologist at the university in Bangor, and from the youngest age, I remember dinner conversations about seasonal breeding. All that training must have gone in; some of my best publications address the seasonality of childbirths among enslaved women. America was a big presence in our lives. We lived in Austin and Seattle for spells, and there were always American post-docs at home, many of whom came from Ann Arbor. Oddly for a child in rural North Wales, I spent my childhood wearing University of Michigan shirts, and Coach Bo Schembechler was revered in our household!

When I was eleven we moved to Bristol, a port city famous for its connection with the slave trade. The street names—White Ladies Road, Black Boy Hill—spoke to the city’s slave past and racial present; like many other British cities, a series of race riots convulsed Bristol in the 1980s. Those experiences must have influenced me, albeit subliminally. I have spent the past decade studying slavery, and currently, I’m writing about the history of racial violence.

I read American Studies and History at the University of Wales–Swansea, although I spent my third/junior year at the University of Illinois and that’s where my interest in becoming a professional historian started. It was an eye-opening year. Having just delivered the Fleming Lectures at Louisiana State University, Robert Johannsen suggested that I should go to LSU for my PhD. It proved very wise counsel.

With a master’s from the University of London in hand, I arrived at LSU in 1991. David Duke was running for the governorship; it was an inauspicious start! Armed with a Fulbright scholarship, I settled

down to the long haul of American graduate education. I loved it in Baton Rouge (I still consider it home) and was fortunate to study with two mentors and later friends: William J. Cooper and Paul Paskoff. LSU's Hill Memorial Library provided rich pickings on the history of Louisiana sugar. My first faculty position was at the National University of Ireland–Galway. Nicholas Canny was department chair and his constant attention to Atlantic history shaped my academic development. I co-founded the Routledge quarterly *Atlantic Studies* in 2003 and have edited it for the past ten years. Today, it's a leading journal in the field.

I joined the faculty at the University of Sussex in Brighton, England, in 2000 and have been there ever since. Blessed with many excellent colleagues, it remains a wonderfully creative place in which to work. Colleagues sometimes ask whether it's different being an American historian overseas, whether somehow the ocean opens up new vistas or isolates one from the American academy. My own sense is not—my academic world is geared toward the United States, and my background is all about being an Americanist, albeit with an Atlantic flavor.

Q: You have written and published extensively on slavery and the American sugar industry. Please tell us about your research and what it has revealed?

A: My research engages with central issues in American history: what was the nature of slavery, why was plantation agriculture so profitable, and what was the legacy of slavery after the Civil War? To answer those questions, I focused on sugar, the definitive plantation crop of the Americas, and concentrated on Louisiana, the last of the New World sugar colonies, where nineteenth-century slavery reached its most modern, advanced form.

My first book, *The Sugar Masters*, explored how sugar slavery combined capitalist and pre-capitalist elements in a novel manner and how the structure of the master-slave relationship underpinned the economic success and modernity of American sugar. My research into slavery on Louisiana's sugar plantations suggested that slaveholders adhered to a language of paternalism even while they raced headlong in the search of lucre. Louisiana sugar thus served as a place to complete the (then) incomplete historiographical circle. Here was an industry where

Figure 1. Richard Follett.



Cape Coast Castle, Ghana—a famous slave-trading fort.
Photograph by Fiona Rumboll.

slaveholders modernized quickly, introduced relatively complex technology, and still spoke about paternalistic social relations. *Sugar Masters* argued that it was the day-to-day compromises, worked out under the veneer of slaveholding paternalism, which accounted for the success of the antebellum sugar industry. Enslaved people did not, ordinarily, break the machines or stand in the way of technical progress. Far from it, as *Sugar Masters* makes clear, enslaved people stood at the axis of modernization. In return for cash payments and pecuniary benefits, when backed up with the whip, slaves toiled the incessant hours and manned the steam-powered mills that ultimately enriched the master class.

My subsequent work focused on the legacies of plantation slavery and examined how the peculiarity of the master-slave relationship influenced former slaves and slaveholders following emancipation. *Slavery's Ghost: The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation*, co-authored with Eric Foner and Walter Johnson, considered the residual effects of slavery. It stressed just how narrow the passageways from slavery to freedom were for African Americans in the 1870s and 1880s, and it suggested that the legacies of the master-slave relationship continued to haunt sugar workers late into the nineteenth century. Sugar slavery stamped its footprint on demography, too. Much of my work over the past decade, albeit in journal form, has demonstrated how the particular demands of sugar production influenced birth rates, natural increase, and public health on American and Caribbean plantations. Through this work, we better understand the operation of a major plantation system, and the place of sugar as a fundamental determinant in the economic and social relations of production.

Q: Who/what would you consider the main influences on your work and thinking?

A: There is a full-length portrait of J. Carlyle Sitterson in the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. Whenever I pass it, I always pay my respects. Sitterson was the first modern historian of American sugar, and in many ways *Sugar Country* (1953) remains the benchmark study of the industry. In that book and the articles he published, Sitterson demonstrated his monumental command of the primary sources and his unquestionable knowledge of Louisiana sugar. My work, albeit fifty years later, addresses many of the issues

Sitterson raised. I sorely wish I could have met him. Today, there is a small cottage industry on the history of American sugar and particularly its labor force. Books and articles abound, but Sitterson's influence endures.¹

I have a small shelf of books that profoundly shaped my writing. It includes works by Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, Eugene Genovese, James Oakes, Catherine Clinton, and Peter Coclanis. Two former Sussex colleagues, Peter Way and Trevor Burnard, encouraged me to think about human agency, and its limits, in creative ways. Our stimulating discussions were the essence of what academic life is all about.²

Q: What do you consider your greatest achievement?

A: In terms of prizes, sales, and impact (within academia and public engagement), *Sugar Masters* is my most visible publication. Chapters were adapted for popular magazines, and films about the book were commissioned by teachinghistory.org for US high school educators. My articles on demography contributed to the evolving body of work on the medical humanities, but I think my biggest achievement was the completion of a major digital research project on American sugar in 2008. Funded by the AHRC in the UK and SSHRC in Canada, "Race and Labor in the Cane Fields" was a four-year research project based at the universities of Sussex and Toronto. The project centered on the production of a web-based research tool that interrogates a unique, unbroken time series of economic and production data on nineteenth-century American sugar. No other crop in US agricultural history was so meticulously recorded as cane sugar. The annual data (250,000 entries) and census records alone merited digitization (and record-linkage), but we additionally produced a novel, analytically rigorous tool to consider the interplay of core factors within plantation societies: economic performance, technology, environment, race, labor, and modernization. Two fully searchable data and documentary resources (based on ninety separate interpretive fields) enable users to conduct micro and macro queries over time. Few historians had previously attempted such ambitious resource-creation/enhancement projects, and no other publicly accessible data resource of comparable size or detail exists in US agricultural and social history. It is freely available at www.sussex.ac.uk/louisianasugar. The project furthered my reputation as one of the leading modern scholars of American

sugar, and on this basis I was invited to serve on the editorial board of *Agricultural History*.

Q: Tell us about your upcoming projects.

A: I'm currently working on two projects. "A Global History of Southern Commodities" is a co-authored book project based on lectures delivered at the Marcus Cunliffe Center for the American South at Sussex. Examining the histories of cotton, rice, sugar, and tobacco, the volume places US staple crop production within a global context and considers the history of these crops (including their production and consumption) over the long nineteenth century.

My second project, "White Fright: Slave Revolts in American Memory," assesses one of the most enduring issues in American history, the criminalization of young, black men. As this book project makes clear, that process began in the eighteenth century and derived from the fears of white Americans who responded to the threat of slave revolt with alarm and anxiety. The book brings together (for the first time) the cultural memory of all slave revolts within American history, and it considers the ways these memories shaped racial thought from the 1730s to the 1920s. "White Fright" asks important and unsettling questions: why did Americans harbor troubling fears of black male insurgency? How did they rationalize and exaggerate such fears? And to what extent did these anxieties shape the history of slavery and segregation in the South? Understanding the place and role of slave revolts within the cultural memory of the United States helps answer those questions, and it explains the evolution and enduring power of some of the most troubling stereotypes in US race relations. Thanks to a British Academy Senior Research Fellowship and a Gilder Lehrman grant, I have completed all research for this book. Almost thirty archives and tens of thousands of air and road miles later, I expect to complete this project by December 2014.

Q: What do you think will have the most influence on agriculture in the twenty-first century?

A: Historians have never been great soothsayers, but without rehashing familiar discussions of global warming and the requirement to feed a vastly expanding (and aging) population, I think one of the biggest

challenges for twenty-first-century agriculture lies in biofuels. It is obvious that fossil fuels, particularly oil, require careful and sustained management. Improved extraction rates increase the range, depth, and utility of fossil fuels, but there is nothing quite like the renewable energy that comes from harvesting a field of sugar beets in Iowa or a stand of sugar cane in the tropics. Sugar-based ethanol might fuel the cars of twenty-first-century Brazil, but the expanding market for biofuels reminds us that history is not easily erased. Cane still grows in the soil made rich by the labor of African slaves, and the expansion of the global ethanol industry provides welcome opportunity for those who wish to clear forests in the name of sugar, just as they had done centuries before. Far from representing a new chapter, cane and beet-based products (ethanol included) remind us of the embattled, competitive history of sugar and its enduring relevance to international trade.

NOTES

1. See, for example, J. Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South 1753–1950* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953); Sitterson, “Financing and Marketing the Sugar Crop of the Old South,” *Journal of Southern History* 10 (May 1944): 188–99; Sitterson, “The Transition from Slave to Free Economy on the William J. Minor Plantations,” *Agricultural History* 17 (Oct. 1943): 216–24.

2. See, for example, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1974); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); James Oakes, *Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Peter Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country, 1670–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).