This collection of essays is drawn from papers delivered at a conference held in Jamaica in January, 2010. It focuses on the multi-faceted world of Caribbean Jews in the early modern era, a milieu that has recently attracted the attention of scholars. Driven from the Iberian Peninsula by expulsions, forced conversions, and an intolerant “Inquisition,” Portuguese New Christians sought refuge in the west, particularly in Brazil, where, during twenty-four years of Dutch rule they were able to openly practice as Jews. After the Portuguese re-took Brazil the Caribbean became another refuge. Gerber explains that the importance of this new focus in scholarship is an expanded understanding of Sephardi life and economic activity during this period. She notes

“traditional depictions of Sephardi cosmopolitanism have not usually included the rich local textures of the Caribbean diasporas. Similarly, Sephardi Jewish economic life acquires new dimensions when viewed from the colonial periphery. . . . Considered through a Caribbean, as opposed to a continental European lens, Jewish life in the early modern period assumes new contours.” (p. 2)

The collection is divided into seven sections dealing with a variety of topics, from the economic and political to the personal narratives of “ordinary” individuals. The first section presents three perspectives on trading between Jews in the Caribbean and the Portuguese Jews who had remained in Europe (especially Amsterdam). It was this trade that stimulated the development of the Jewish communities in the Caribbean. Noah Gelfand notes that “Sephardi Jewish merchants were able to negotiate a space for themselves to live, work and worship in the Caribbean” (p. 64). In her introduction Gerber explains that although the focus of the book is on the Dutch and English islands, Portuguese Jews maintained trading and family networks across the lines of European empires. In addition, though living and trading under the authority of different colonial powers, the Portuguese Jewish diaspora maintained its language, most especially in religious contexts. As Gelfand concludes, “Sephardim exhibited a
common purpose and fostered a sense of shared identity that transcended the bounds of Empire” (p. 64).

Discussion then focuses on the issue of authority, analyzing the impact of religious and secular leadership. Various expressions of power—that exerted by the Dutch West India Company and by Jewish religious leaders—as well as the modes of conflict resolution are described. The importance of Amsterdam as source of religious authority is emphasized but it is also noted that local religious autonomy was occasionally sought and sometimes even granted. The consequences of the West India Company’s “hands off” approach to resolving disputes among its constituents is illustrated in an examination of communal conflict in Curacao.

Part III focuses on the material and visual culture. That culture is explored through synagogues and cemeteries and through the work of Isaac Mendes Belisario, the first professional artist born in Jamaica. Some of his watercolors are featured in the book.

Five papers are devoted to an exploration of the relationship between Jews and slaves. One paper examines the phenomenon of Eurafrican Jewish identity among slaves and freepersons in Suriname. Another considers the question of concubinage within the Sephardi community and the extent of communal or familial absorption of mulatto children. The final contribution within this section analyzes the political alliances that formed following the abolition of slavery in Jamaica.

The personal narratives include the experiences of Benjamin Franks, an Ashkenazi pioneer who followed closely in the footsteps of the Western Sephardim who first settled the region. Josette Goldish focuses on the life of one Grace Cardoze Delvalle, a woman beset with an absent husband (who lost the household’s entire savings when he went gallivanting off on a venture in Panama) and the six growing children she was left to raise (one of whom was mentally disturbed). Ronnie Perelis examines a poem by Daniel Israel López Laguna which is seen by some as describing the “psychic and intellectual processes” involved in the transformation of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews, once driven to convert to Catholicism, re-emerging as Jews once more (p. 319).

The final essays in the book consider the contemporary Jewish community in the Caribbean. In reviewing the current state, Judah Cohen takes the discussion one step further to show how the largely liberal Jewish community of St. Thomas “... had to co-ordinate their standard complement of communal activities with efforts to present their island’s historical Jewish presence—even when they have little in common with their religious forbears” (p. 361).

This outstanding collection of papers opens a window into the world of the Portuguese Jewish diaspora in the Caribbean. Accompanied by illustrations, notes, and bibliographies, this work is essential for those seeking to understand the circumstances which led to the specific patterns of development, communal organization, and personal life of the Sephardim in this region.
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