

Jacob Selwood, *At Kingdom's Edge: The Suriname Struggles of Jeronimy Clifford, English Subject* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022, 252 pp., ISBN 9781501764219).

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot remarked, 'history is messy for the people who must live in it.' Take Jeronimy Clifford for example. Around 1663 the young Jeronimy sailed with his parents from Surrey, England, to the English colony of Suriname in South America. As Jeronimy later emphasized, the monarchist Clifford tried to build a new life and fortune after being ruined during the civil war. However, in 1667 Suriname became Dutch, soon after England conquered New Netherland in North America. Jeronimy was ten years old at the time. Jacob Selwood explores what it meant to be an English subject (see the two crucial last words in the title) in a now Dutch colony where soon the majority of English colonists sold their properties and left for Barbados and Jamaica. The question was how to stay English in a foreign environment. The few English settlers remaining often tried to live and operate as discreetly as possible, but not so the wealthy planter Jeronimy Clifford, who repeatedly clashed with the authorities. According to Selwood, 'Jeronimy Clifford's position was not unique, even if his story is idiosyncratic. Around the world, the flotsam and jetsam of the seventeenth century's imperial wars had to decide not just where to live but also how to belong' (44).

In this sophisticated book, Selwood not only addresses the challenges English subjects faced on the imperial peripheries during changes of sovereignty, and Clifford's subjecthood in particular, but also the changing Anglo-Dutch relations. The story actually starts at the end of Clifford's life when he was reduced to great poverty. In 1728 Clifford, by that time 71 years of age, wrote to a high official in London enquiring about the fate of a petition relating to the damages done to him by the 'Dutch of Suriname'. Clifford was a tenacious man. Petitioning from debtors' prison he had positioned himself as an English victim of Dutch plundering and plotting. In his final years he firmly believed that vast riches awaited him and he thus could reclaim his place as a wealthy man.

So what to make of Jeronimy Clifford as a person and a witness? *At Kingdom's Edge* is based on solid archival research in Suriname, England, and the Netherlands. It is centered on a two-volume manuscript, held in the British Library, that is 'written in Clifford's own hand', to claim for compensation. The volumes not only include petitions but also copies of 'correspondence, accounts, plantation records, legal documents, estate inventories, and sources from colonial Suriname' (12). Despite the fact that Clifford was an unreliable, self-serving, and inconsistent narrator, Selwood

considers him a reliable source. Many relevant documents have been lost, but what the author was able to check shows ‘the accuracy of Clifford’s transcriptions and translations’ (12).

Selwood reconstructs and describes Jeronimy Clifford’s disputes in detail, but, probably inevitable given the sources, the landowner, the slave-owner, and the husband do not really come to life. What it does bring to light are, for example, accounts of scheming to acquire or sell property and Clifford’s sense of privilege and entitlement. There is the widow-and-wealth story of Dorothy Matson of ‘ambiguous nationality’ (43) and her central role in the transmission of property within a patriarchal system. Clifford was Matson’s fourth or fifth husband and theirs is a complex story of control of their marital property and how both parties appealed to law, national status, and gender roles in different ways. Matson brought one of the colony’s largest plantations, Corcabo, into the marriage. Following English law, Clifford asserted control over this land. His efforts clashed with Dutch law that stipulated joint ownership of marital property. Selwood deftly charts the strategies Clifford used to gain control over the plantation in order to liquidate it and Matson’s defense to protect her property and herself against her domineering husband. Suriname’s highest authorities had to walk a fine line between backing a patriarch and protecting a large estate that an English subject was trying to liquidate. According to Matson, Clifford considered himself immune from Suriname’s law because he was English and backed by the Crown. The dispute ended with Clifford in charge of Corcabo, yet the authorities placed limits on how he could dispose of it. Despite legal challenges, he was unable to liquidate the plantation and move its enslaved workers.

The Glorious Revolution, when the Dutch stadholder William III would become Clifford’s king, made matters even more contentious. This second shift in sovereignty turned out to be both a peril and a blessing. Clifford’s disloyalty and scheming led to an unfulfilled death sentence and a four-year prison sentence. After his release in 1695 he left Suriname. The release is telling: Clifford petitioned the king as an English subject and William as stadholder intervened with the States General which sent instructions to the governor in Suriname to free him.

After 1695 Clifford traveled to The Hague and London to plead his case for compensation and control of plantation Corcabo. Clifford evoked his birth within England and cited seventeenth-century Anglo-Dutch treaties to make his case. ‘While none of his efforts succeeded, his sense of the value of his claim took an inverse trajectory to that of his own condition. The poorer he became, the wealthier he thought he was’ (129).

Clifford’s death in 1737 was not the end of this story however. His case was used to flare up anti-Dutch sentiments in England. For example, in 1766 a book entitled *The Dutch displayed; or, a Succint Account of the Barbarities, Rapines and Injustices committed by the subjects of Holland upon those of England* concerning

Clifford's legal case was published in London. The publication linked the unfair treatment of Clifford to the other incidents of Dutch betrayal, cruelty, and violence, of which the Amboyna massacre in 1623 was the starting point (on the Amboyna massacre and this event's relationship with stereotypes of Dutch brutality, see Alison Games, *Inventing the English Massacre*, 2020). Jeronimy Clifford thus became a representative for all English subjects tricked by the Dutch.

*At Kingdom's Edge* is a welcome contribution to Atlantic and imperial history as it reveals how European wars and the resulting changes in sovereignty not only impacted the state and expanse of colonial empires, but also created complex personal identities and competing definitions of belonging between and across empires. Jeronimy Clifford's life highlights these ambiguities and the messiness of living at the kingdom's edge.

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