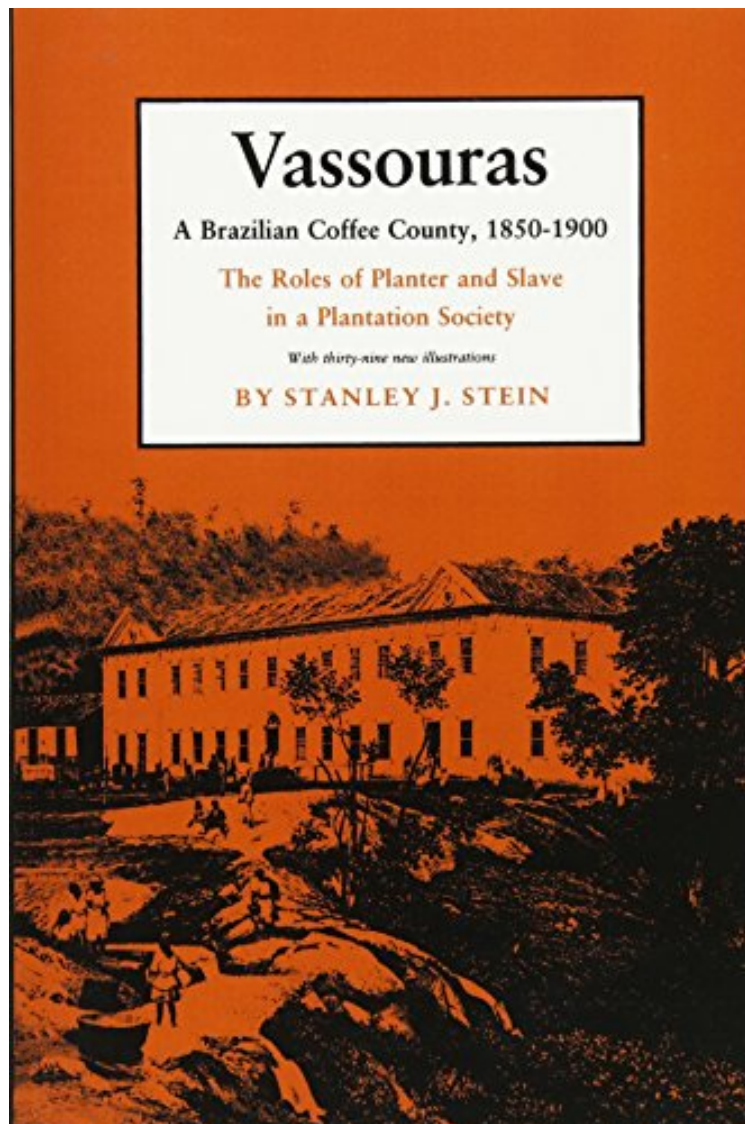


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Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee County, 1850-1900: The Roles of Planter and Slave in a Plantation Society

Stanley J. Stein

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#1290438 in Books Princeton University Press 1986-01-01 1986-01-21 Original language: English PDF # 1
9.00 x .90 x 6.00, 1.13 #File Name: 0691022364336 pages | File size: 53.Mb

Stanley J. Stein : Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee County, 1850-1900: The Roles of Planter and Slave in a Plantation Society before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee County, 1850-1900: The Roles of Planter and Slave in a Plantation Society:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. UsefulBy Richard RThis is the updated and reissued 1985 edition of

Stein's seminal 1957 book, "Vassouras", an academic study of a 19th century coffee plantation in Brazil. It is interesting for the Brazil scholar, accessible, and thoroughly-researched. This edition has photos that give readers a bit more sense of time and place than the original book. Vassouras is a town in the interior of Rio de Janeiro state. From about 1820 to 1900, it arced from backwater to a cradle of fabulous nouveau wealth based on monoculture coffee production, and back again. Its rise and fall were based on two elements: access to virgin forest land which could be cleared to plant coffee bushes and access to slave labor to work the enormous plantations. Both land and laborer were brutally abused, and by 1888, when Brazil became the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery, Vassouras's farmland was nearly sterile for lack proper farming techniques. In the years to come, neighboring Sao Paulo state became the next (and still) coffee king of Brazil, as it adapted modern agriculture and wage labor. Stein's classic work remains fresh today, a fascinating look at slavery-era plantations and shortsighted farm management. Explanations of an ossified and polarized society that reproduced patterns of colonial plantations --a farm model that continues to skew Brazilian land patterns today-- are insightful. As Vassouras planters saw their assets evaporate as their labor force and acreage plummeted in value, the foundation for an entire economy collapsed. Their choices brought about this collapse, and Stein is able to chronicle them in detail. The work is strong, but suffers from a grating failure common to academic works that are converted into mass publications: maps. The book has no good maps. The sole map is a near-useless rendering of the hills around Vassouras. But the book deals at length with roads and railways and the annual odyssey of transporting crops to Rio, with immigration from Minas and Sao Paulo states. A dozen clear maps would have made this book much better.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Review Of Vassouras By Lorraine Sobers

Vassouras is a Brazilian province reputed to be one of the richest coffee producing areas between 1850-1890. In his book of the same name, Stein uses this province as a model through which the rise and fall of coffee plantations during that era may be observed. The main themes of the book were the plantation lifestyle, the shortcomings of plantations owners as managers, the difficulties faced with coffee production and trade, and the rise and fall of the coffee industry in Vassouras. I believe that the writer's intention was to reveal how the resources and the opportunities afforded to plantation owners were ill managed and misused during the brief period of prosperity. In financial transactions, land use and coffee production, the blunders of the fazendieros and the coffee society at large were exposed. The author summarized his sentiments by stating, 'The prosperous edifice erected by coffee planters in the years immediately preceding and following 1850 held within it elements of destruction.' (page 213) Stein effectively brings the view that coffee production in Vassouras was fraught with lack of forethought as evidenced by the rapid and irreconcilable decline of the economy. Attached to the main themes were reports that gave a glimpse into the daily lifestyle and the routine of plantations. The details supplied were very successful in giving a clear, visually dynamic illustration of the town of Vassouras, the plantation house and the coffee fields in terms of physical appearance, daily activities and even special occasions. There was a reasonable degree of balance of the themes discussed as far as it concerned the relations between masters and slave and, barring to the shortcomings of the fazendieros, the insurmountable obstacles that were faced such as transportation of goods to Rio de Janeiro and climatic conditions. It is an excellent source for almost any information concerning coffee plantation life during that period. There was some bias against the fazendieros however, I believe that the account given was reasonably fair and, with the evidence given, that bias seems totally justifiable. I was greatly impressed by the author use of sources mainly because there was quite a large amount of primary sources used. Primary sources included newspapers, oral interrogations, proceedings from Agricultural Congresses, documents stored in archives of Vassouras and national archives and information stored at notarial offices such as police reports, wills, advertisements, sales of goods, posters and pamphlets. This enabled the author the report specific details of the fazenda architecture, purchases daily routines and interactions between members of the province. There was very limited use of secondary sources. For descriptions of the fazendas, mostly documents obtained in the archives were used and fortunately plantation owners were very thorough with their records. These details served to enhance the images construed by the reader. For example the inventory of the fazenda belonging to Antonio Vieira Muchacho in 1825 (page 23) details furniture, tools and household items. Inventories compiled later in the century were used to show the increase in prosperity in the Province by 1850, as in the case of the inventory of the household of Polucena d'Oliveira Serra (page 44). In reading the book I sometimes found it difficult to put things in perspective as it related to time. Whether it was master-slave relation, purchase of new machinery, methods of recapturing slaves or the departure of townsmen there was insufficient mention of how it related to aforementioned themes such as transportation. It was not easy to use the development of a particular chain of events as a timeline for another, for hardly was any mention of other aspects of the society alluded to when any one theme was being discussed. If a topical search for information in the book implemented, it would be useful in its present format. However the format falls short if it is used for a clear, chronological picture of events unless the reader is familiar with events which took place in Brazil in the latter half of the 19th century.

This book is a now classic social and economic study of the origins, apogee, and decline of coffee in the Parahyba Valley of South Central Brazil. Local society, the free-planters, professionals, tradesmen, and lower class citizens--and the slaves, are viewed through the routine of plantation life. The author shows how abolition, erosion, and bankruptcy

transformed virgin forest into a wasteland of eroded hillsides and abandoned towns, of disillusioned planters and poverty-stricken black freedmen.

"The key theme is actually . . . not coffee, or even Vassouras, but the use and abuse of soil and labor under slavery and its unhappy impact upon society."--Virginia Quarterly"By narrowing his canvas to one municipio, the author successfully combines sound historical perspective with the microcosmic insights characteristic of contemporary community studies."--Marvin Harris, American Historical From the Back Cover"Vassouras remains the single best regional study of Brazil, and a classic analysis of Brazilian slavery and of the society and economies it engendered. It is written with conviction, accuracy, and a control of detail which is always used to address central historical problems. It is among the best works of scholarship on Latin America of the last half century, and it has the great quality of being written in a style that captures the interest of general readers or undergraduates as well as scholars."--Stuart Schwartz, University of MinnesotaAbout the AuthorStanley J. Stein is Walter Samuel Carpenter III Professor in Spanish Civilization and Culture at Princeton University, and coauthor, with Barbara Hadley Stein, of *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America: Essays on Economic Dependence in Perspective* (Oxford).