

CHAPTER I

What Is a Caribbean Enlightenment?

This book asserts that there was a distinctive Caribbean Enlightenment and that recovering this Enlightenment matters for two reasons: it contributes significantly to our understanding of eighteenth-century French and British Caribbean societies and to our understanding of the Enlightenment as a cosmopolitan intellectual and cultural movement.

Yet recovering a “Caribbean Enlightenment” only became possible when scholars of eighteenth-century life and the Enlightenment began to offer different answers to Kant’s eternally vexing question, “What is Enlightenment?” It was unthinkable when the Enlightenment was still conceived as the work of prominent *philosophes* ensconced in cosmopolitan European capitals with Paris preeminent. The Caribbean lacked anyone who possessed the intellectual stature of a Benjamin Franklin or a Thomas Jefferson, much less a Jean-Jacques Rousseau or a David Hume.¹ But a Caribbean Enlightenment became discernible as scholarly approaches of the last few decades brought the social aspects of intellectual life to the fore and as scholars’ interests “switched from the Enlightenment as an idea to the Enlightenment as a practice.”² This entailed, according to Bettina Dietz, “turn[ing] away from a pure history of ideas in favor of a cultural history of publishing and reading, a social history of intellectual sociability, and the situating of ideas within historical-political constellations.” As Carla Hesse points out, this “sociocultural history of the Enlightenment” necessarily poses very different questions: “How did the Enlightenment emerge? How

¹ Two figures meriting systematic analysis as Enlightenment intellectuals: on the British side, Edward Long, author of *The History of Jamaica* (1774), often cited for his racist views; on the French side, Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, see *Moreau de Saint-Méry ou les ambiguïtés d'un créole des Lumières*, ed. Dominique Taffin (Martinique: Société des Amis des Archives et de la Recherche sur le Patrimoine Culturel des Antilles, 2006).

² L. W. B. Brockliss, *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

did it spread? And how was the Enlightenment transformed from a new way of thinking into a new way of life?”³

Nearly forty years ago, the essays in *The Enlightenment in National Context* reacted to an Enlightenment composed of “systems of socially disembodied ideas” whose geographic centers were either assumed or considered irrelevant.⁴ The pioneering work of Robert Darnton and other scholars compelled us to consider how print, the chief disseminator of Enlightenment ideas, actually worked (or did not work) as well as what people actually read and what they made of it. The role of the press in Enlightenment studies now embraces enterprising publishers and printers, from a bookseller in Berlin to a mestizo priest in Mexico City.⁵ Tracking the mobility of texts through translation, John Robertson and Sophus Reinert have illuminated how Scots, Neapolitans, and Germans all looked to the same political economy to develop solutions to the distinctive problems of their states.⁶ Historians of science, long attentive to the social contexts and meanings of the production of knowledge, have applied a transnational approach to create intellectually rich studies such as James Delbourgo’s *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (2006). The work of these scholars and others has given us a more richly detailed and nuanced picture of the Enlightenment as a simultaneously cosmopolitan and local phenomenon.

I have distilled the lessons of these new approaches into a trio of commonalities that undergirded Enlightenment intellectual culture wherever it appeared: attitude, approach, and activity (Figure 1.1). *Attitude* comprised both intellectual rights and responsibilities. The right to think

³ Bettina Dietz, “Making Natural History: Doing the Enlightenment,” *Central European History* 45, no. 1 (2010): 25; Carla Hesse, “Towards a New Topography of Enlightenment,” *European Review of History/Revue européenne d’histoire* 13, no. 3 (2006): 500.

⁴ *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), vii.

⁵ Pamela E. Selwyn, *Everyday Life in the German Book Trade: Friedrich Nicolai as Bookseller and Publisher in the Age of Enlightenment, 1750–1810* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Fiona Clark, “Read All About It: Science, Translation, Adaptation, and Confrontation in the *Gazeta de Literatura de México*,” in *Science in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires, 1500–1800*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar, Paul De Vos, Kristin Huffine, and Keven Sheehan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 147–77; Fiona Clark, “Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained: Lightning and Enlightenment in the *Gazeta de Literatura de México* (1788–1795),” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series 99, no. 5 (2009): 71–93.

⁶ John Robertson, *The Case for Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sophus A. Reinert, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Antonella Alimento, “Translation, Reception and Enlightened Reform: The Case of Forbonnais in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy,” a special issue of the *History of European Ideas* 40, no. 8 (2014).

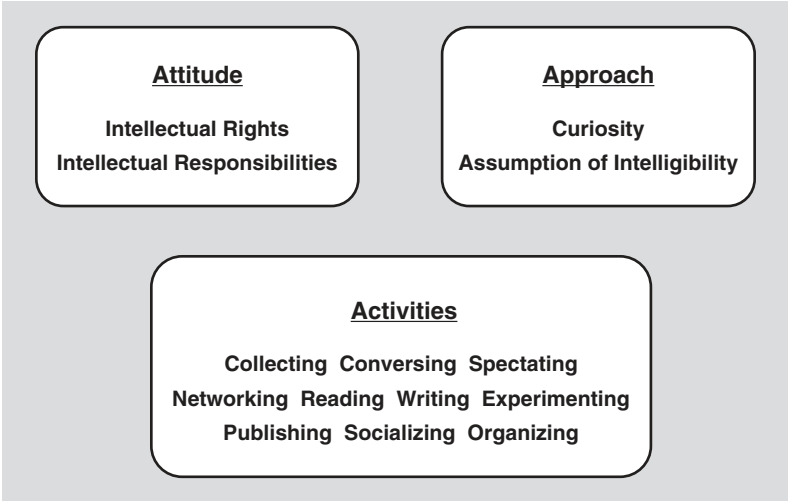


Figure 1.1 Commonalities of Enlightenment intellectual culture

for one’s self was the most democratic and potentially transformative. In the apt phrase of a disapproving Englishman, it was the liberty of “every man in this Enlightened age . . . of making a philosophy (and . . . a religion) for himself.”⁷ Indeed, Rousseau’s Savoyard Vicar claimed that liberty without apology: “The God whom I adore, is not a God of darkness; he hath not given me an understanding to forbid me the use of it. To bid me give up my reason, is to insult the author of it. The minister of truth doth not tyrannize over my understanding, he enlightens it.”⁸ Certainly not everyone enjoyed and exercised Shaftesbury’s “Intire Philosophicall Liberty.”⁹ In reality, rights were abridged by factors such as censorship and religious belief; they were denied partly or wholly because of status, gender, and race.

Chief among intellectual responsibilities was the imperative for improvement, personal and social, moral and physical. This logically followed from the belief that knowledge must be useful, not idle. An emphasis on improvement retains an urgent sense of human agency at the heart of the Enlightenment while bypassing the misleading popular characterization of it as optimistic. Eighteenth-century people were not

⁷ Alexander Catcott quoted by Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: Norton and Company, 2000), 79.

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emilius* (Edinburgh, 1768), 2:169.

⁹ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, 3.

fools. D'Alembert warned in the *Preliminary Discourse* to the *Encyclopédie* that “everything has regular revolutions,” and he even worried that “barbarism” was humanity’s “natural element.”¹⁰ With respect to *approach*, people were supposed to be curious about the diverse phenomena of the human and natural worlds, which were assumed to be intelligible.¹¹ “Intelligible” is preferable to “rational” – and expansive enough to include what recent scholarship on sensibility has abundantly proved: eighteenth-century people believed they understood the world, especially the other people in it, not just through their rational capacities, but through sentiment. Indeed, the capacity to imagine internal emotional states like one’s own was key to developing compassion and opened a pathway to virtue.¹²

My list of *activities* suggests just some of the ways people could participate in Enlightenment intellectual culture. Clearly everyone did not have access to all of them, much less engaged in them. But anyone who was literate and possessed some disposable income and time would have had access to some, and there were social imperatives beyond the intellectual to pursue them.

Conceptualized as approach-attitude-activities, the Enlightenment is not just a “most reified bundle of axioms.”¹³ Instead, it seamlessly joins the high and the low, the learned and the popular, the intellectual and the social. As such, it offered eighteenth-century participants neither consensus nor a “coherent doctrine,” but ways for people to ask questions about things that mattered to them and to argue about the answers.¹⁴ Paris and other European cities remain central,¹⁵ yet their intellectuals could not control how people appropriated and applied what they made available in the intellectual marketplace. As Sebastian Conrad writes, “The

¹⁰ Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, “Discours préliminaire,” ARTFL.

¹¹ On the rehabilitation of curiosity after denigration in the Christian tradition, Neil Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1998); Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), chap. 8.

¹² Chief theme of Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Brychan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

¹³ Simon Schama, “The Enlightenment in the Netherlands,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, 54.

¹⁴ Paraphrase of Antoine Lilti, *L'héritage des Lumières: Ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris: Gallimard & Seuil, 2019), 19.

¹⁵ Reconfirming French centrality, Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Enlightenment was not a thing; rather, we should ask what historical actors did with it.”¹⁶

In fact, many colonists were doing many things with the Enlightenment in the Caribbean. Yet the notion that they were “enlightened” would have struck many contemporaries in Europe as oxymoronic. Caribbean philistinism had already become cliché by the middle of the eighteenth century. Historian François Regourd nicely sums up French metropolitan disdain, which applies equally well to the British: colonists were perceived as “materialist and debauched, indifferent to the life of the mind, unfit for the slightest intellectual activity that did not promise immediate profit.”¹⁷ No surprise, then, that Charles Leslie declared of Jamaica in 1740 that “learning is here at the lowest Ebb.”¹⁸ Derogatory views of Caribbean philistinism became even more powerful in combination with arguments that Europeans and their offspring inevitably degenerated morally, physically, and intellectually in the tropics.¹⁹

As Natalie Zacek observes, historians have generally echoed rather than interrogated the harsh judgments of eighteenth-century critics. Richard Dunn asserts that “ever since the eighteenth century the sugar planters have *deservedly* received bad press” – and not, of course, just for boorishness. Others assert that, at the time of the American Revolution, the Leeward Islands were noteworthy only for their “grotesque character of life” and that Nevis at mid-century was nothing but a “tropical hellhole of dissipated whites.”²⁰ Regourd notes similar characterizations by historians of the French Caribbean: these scholars relate that colonists favored “useful preoccupations, dancing, crude jokes, gossip, and sexual gluttony” over “disinterested learning, reflection and conversation” and “notoriety conferred by wealth” rather than time-consuming literature.²¹

Yet Zacek notes that this view is changing, that historians have begun to “explore English West Indian society in a more nuanced way.”²² Indeed, Trevor Burnard was the first historian to engage seriously with the intellectual life of Thomas Thistlewood, a notorious slaveholder important in

¹⁶ Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 1015.

¹⁷ François Regourd, “Lumières coloniales. Les Antilles françaises dans la République des Lettres,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 33 (2001): 182.

¹⁸ Charles Leslie, *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1740), 36.

¹⁹ More on this topic, Chapter 2.

²⁰ Natalie A. Zacek, *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4–6.

²¹ Quoting Pierre Pluchon and Jack Corzani, Regourd, “Lumières coloniales,” 183.

²² Zacek, *Settler Society*, 6.

this account, too.²³ Regourd was urging colleagues working on the French Caribbean to do the same, and studies by Jennifer Palmer and Paul Cheney have acknowledged a place for Enlightenment in their studies of Saint-Domingue, chiefly in connection with rationalizing plantation management.²⁴ Yet only two historians have placed eighteenth-century Caribbean intellectual activity at the center of book-length treatments: James E. McClellan III in his pioneering study of Saint-Domingue's scientific society, published nearly three decades ago, and B. W. Higman in an astute portrayal of the intellectual life of a Jamaican clergyman, John Lindsay.²⁵

In this book, the colonists doing Enlightenment in the French and British Caribbean take center stage. They include planters, of course, but many others as well: physicians, merchants, overseers, military men, publishing entrepreneurs, colonial officials, and the rare minister or priest. They were just as inspired as their metropolitan counterparts by ideologies of utility and improvement, and they engaged in intellectual practices common in the metropole. They collected specimens of fauna and flora, sharing them with a local naturalist or posting them to a metropolitan intellectual society; they contributed a poem or a report on an agricultural innovation to their local periodicals; they checked out a book from a circulating library or read the news to each other in a café; they recorded observations from their barometers and thermometers and peered through telescopes and microscopes; they challenged metropolitan economic and political constraints by arguing in meetings and in letters to the editor. In the process, they made the Caribbean an object of knowledge, generating new knowledge about it. They brought ideas to life through diverse practices, from a White slaveholding parent of a mixed-race child transcribing passages of John Locke's treatise on education to an experienced

²³ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-American World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), chap. 4.

²⁴ Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 34; Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), chap. 3, at 78, 91–92. Discussed further in Part IV.

²⁵ James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); B. W. Higman, *Proslavery Priest: The Atlantic World of John Lindsay, 1729–1788* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2011); also see James Robertson, "Eighteenth-Century Jamaica's Ambivalent Cosmopolitanism," *History* 99, no. 337 (2014): 607–31; Dennis Bann, *The Caribbean: An Intellectual History, 1774–2003* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2004). Special case discussed in Part IV, Justin Roberts's *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750–1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

French sugar refiner perusing chemical works to understand the process bubbling in his boiler house.

These examples underscore the fact that my primary focus will be a Caribbean Enlightenment as experienced and made by White, male British and French colonists. This is not to dismiss the aspirations of the enslaved or free people of color or to occlude their participation in and contributions to knowledge production.²⁶ Rather, it reflects an essential feature and function of Enlightenment as these men practiced it. Exclusion, based in race and gender, was very much the point. They enacted what David Hume so brutally asserted in his essay “On National Characters”: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.”²⁷ Thus, a White author masqueraded as an enslaved “Toussaint” in a Saint-Domingue newspaper, deriding the possibility of a colonial learned academy by savagely satirizing his persona’s intellectual pretensions. Similarly, Edward Long in 1774 viciously dismissed the intellectual capacities of Francis Williams, a free Black man who had acquired a reputation for learning both in Jamaica and in Britain.²⁸ White women were also largely

²⁶ Laurent Dubois, “An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic,” *Social History* 31, no. 1 (2006): 2–14, and in *The Atlantic World*, ed. D’Maris Coffman, Adrian Leonard, and William O’Reilly (New York: Routledge, 2015), 227–41; Karol K. Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Londa Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

²⁷ Hume added this footnote to the essay five years after its original publication in 1753: David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London, 1758), 125. Even more unequivocal was a final revision of 1777: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites.” Richard H. Popkin, “The Philosophical Basis of Eighteenth-Century Racism,” in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture: Racism in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Cleveland and London: Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 24–62; Richard H. Popkin, “Hume’s Racism,” in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 251–66; John Immerwahr, “Hume’s Revised Racism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 3 (1992): 481–86; Robert Palter, “Hume and Prejudice,” *Hume Studies* 21, no. 1 (1995): 3–23; Emmanuel C. Eze, “Hume, Race, and Human Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 4 (2000): 691–98; Aaron Garrett, “Hume’s Revised Racism Revisited,” *Hume Studies* 26, no. 1 (2002): 171–77; Aaron Garrett, “Human Nature,” *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1:160–233, esp. 195–97; Silvia Sebastiani, “National Characters and Race: A Scottish Enlightenment Debate,” in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 187–206.

²⁸ See Parts II and III, respectively.

excluded. Certainly they could discuss a book over tea and experiment with the medicinal qualities of a local plant. But in Jamaica we will see them excluded from intellectual friendships forged by men and how in Saint-Domingue they were assigned a complementary role to an emphatically male ideal of enlightened citizenship.

Certainly not every White male in Cap Français or Kingston engaged deeply in Enlightenment intellectual culture – but neither did all the men in Bordeaux, Bristol, or Boston. The Enlightenment’s impact does not depend on inevitably elusive numbers, but in how individuals used its tools to make sense of their worlds, determine the meanings of their lives, and act. This is a book, then, about how a small but not insignificant set of people practiced and experienced the Enlightenment – its wonders and challenges, discipline and diversions, camaraderie and competition. It thus recovers an important facet of what Burnard has termed the “rich, vibrant, and distinctive” cultures of the eighteenth-century Caribbean²⁹ and a significant aspect of the “beyond” that the Caribbean historian Douglas Hall implicitly challenged us to find when he wrote many years ago: “Life in our slave society of the eighteenth century went beyond master-driver-slave-and-whip, and sugar-rum-and-molasses.”³⁰ This is not directly a book about slavery, either. Yet slavery inevitably conditioned many appropriations of Enlightenment intellectual culture as all of the actors in this book benefited from the brutal system of racial bondage that inextricably linked astounding wealth and enormous human suffering. Indeed, becoming “enlightened” made a new, distinctive colonial identity available to them, one that rejected metropolitan notions of Caribbean degeneracy, redrew the line between free and unfree smudged by proximity and intimacy, and validated on a cultural basis the power to enslave.

The Europeans who went to the islands were not culturally autochthonous. They brought with them a common intellectual heritage, one continuously refreshed by the circulation of metropolitan publications and the development of domestic cultural institutions, such as theatre and coffeehouses. As in the metropole, being “enlightened” in the colonies signaled more than the pursuit and possession of useful knowledge; it bolstered claims to gentility or *civilité*, serving as a means to acquire social and cultural capital. If anything, these larger stakes were felt by Caribbean

²⁹ Burnard, *Mastery, Desire, and Desire*, 245.

³⁰ Douglas Hall, “Planters, Farmers and Gardeners in Eighteenth Century Jamaica,” Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture (Department of History, The University of the West Indies, 1987), 17.

colonists more keenly because of the in-between state they occupied. Edward Brathwaite captured this in-betweenness when he defined “creole society” as the “result of a complex situation where a colonial polity reacts, as a whole to external metropolitan pressures, and at the same time to internal adjustments made necessary by the juxtaposition of master and slave, elite and labourer, in a culturally heterogeneous relationship.”³¹ This uncomfortable, sometimes perilous situation transformed the Enlightenment in the Caribbean into a distinctive “politics of culture.”³²

Philip Wickstead’s portrait of the planter Benjamin Pusey and his wife Elizabeth illustrates how colonists could appropriate metropolitan ideas and forms to serve a colonial agenda and their stakes in doing so (Figure 1.2). Nothing in the painting, not even the Black servant, would necessarily suggest that the scene is set in Jamaica rather than England.³³ Yet Wickstead probably painted it on the Cherry Hill and Cherry Garden Estate that Pusey owned in St. Dorothy’s parish. Hardly the grandest planter, he was prosperous enough,³⁴ and he served multiple terms in the Assembly of Jamaica.³⁵ He had a taste for improvement, as his name appeared on a list of Assembly members selected to oversee the creation and management of a free school for the poor in Spanish Town, the colonial capital.³⁶ He appreciated poetry, too, which he sought to promote locally by subscribing for six copies of the domestically printed *Persian Love Elegies* by John Wolcot (who later enjoyed much success as the satiric poet Peter Pindar back in Britain).

As a member of the White planter elite, it is not surprising that the portly and neatly attired Pusey occupies the center of the painting.

³¹ Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), xvi.

³² Phrase from David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 152.

³³ On Black enslaved servants as status symbols, Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), chap. 1; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 124–27; David Dabydeen, *Hogarth’s Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 21–28. I have learned much about Wickstead from Kate Crawford’s dissertation, “Transient Painters, Traveling Canvases: Portraiture and Mobility in the British Atlantic, 1750–1780” (PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2017), which she very generously shared with me.

³⁴ Benjamin Pusey, UCL; additional property acquired by his death, “Gymballs and Cherry Garden Estates,” *Caribbeana*, volume 2, JFSGR.

³⁵ Benjamin Pusey, Feurtado, “Official and Other Personages of Jamaica from 1655–1790,” JFSGR.

³⁶ School funded with a legacy from a member of the island’s most important planter dynasty, the Beckfords, *The Laws of Jamaica, 1681–1759*, 1:306–08.



Figure 1.2 Philip Wickstead (active 1763–86), Portrait of Benjamin and Mary Pusey (c. 1775). Oil on canvas. 99 × 124.6 cm. Collection: The National Gallery of Jamaica.
 Photo credit: Franz Marzouca

Gesturing toward a painting on a chair by the piazza's entry, he commands everyone's attention: the enslaved Black man who props up the painting; his wife in her pink satin dress, edged generously with lace; even the whippet at lower right. A landscape on the wall, an oriental carpet bunched up against a globe, books scattered on the floor as if they had just been consulted – all attest to the Puseys' affluence, refinement, and intellectual interests. It is a rather charming depiction, but it communicates power as well. However affectionate, even bemused, his wife's gaze acknowledges his authority. Fully illumined, husband and wife assert "enlightened" command over the human being and the humble beast consigned to the shadows and the margins.

Wickstead was working in the popular metropolitan genre of the "conversation piece," deploying its conventions to depict a colonial parlor. Like metropolitan painters, he showed his subjects "in a comparatively relaxed guise, demonstrating a 'natural', easy gentility through everyday