

Book review from French History journal by Ben Marsh, University of Stirling

Review of:

France and the American tropics to 1700 : tropics of discontent? By Philip P. Boucher. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xiii, 372 pp.

In *France and the American Tropics to 1700*, Philip Boucher pleasingly restores a healthy measure of historical contingency and national diversity to a region (the Greater Caribbean) that has sometimes suffered from a kind of semi-justifiable historiographical myopia. In the early modern period, the Caribbean became, among many other things, the conduit of the “Columbian” exchange, the archetype of the slave plantation regime, and the stepping stone leading first the Spanish and then the English empire to riches in the New World. These historical developments, with their global impacts on trade, disease, race, and international relations, have naturally assumed a central position in narratives of the region, along with the distinctive and influential Haitian Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. But Boucher reminds us of the need to probe beyond and around these waypoints to better understand the region, its connections, and evolution. Meticulously drawing on a range of printed primary sources, and building on earlier archival findings (both his own and others’), he makes a potent and convincing case.

Boucher’s narrative of the development of French societies in the circum-Caribbean (including engagement with activities in Brazil and “La Floride”) is structured around a series of overlapping chapters that move from the dawn of French colonisation to its adolescence in the 1690s. Some of the chapters focus on particular social groupings, and there is full, careful attention throughout to the experiences of coerced bodies – including Caribs, indentured whites, *gens de couleur*, and African slaves. Boucher argues that for most groups, colonial society was “relatively healthier and less brutal” (p.11) than it would subsequently become.

Boucher emphasises that the development of the sugar complex in the French Caribbean occurred only in the first three decades of the eighteenth century. The rise to prominence of a *habitant* elite and their codification of labour coercion on islands such as Martinique, Saint-Domingue, and Guadeloupe may have laid the vital foundations for such a system (and here one detects echoes of Richard Dunn’s English Barbados), but Boucher’s approach deliberately eschews the teleological rise of sugar, and he stresses the diverse and improvisational dynamics of a seventeenth-century Caribbean whose only constant was its high death rate, driven by epidemics of disease and warfare. The topographical and environmental constraints of their island worlds deflected French settlers from their largely economic ambitions, warping them into new hybrids; the survey does a good job, especially in chapters 5 and 6, of contextualising their vacillating societies and economies (based on tobacco and indigo, as well as the emerging sugar).

This broad work of synthesis, which Boucher himself describes as a “composite product” (p.x) is no mean feat, and deserves to succeed in its key aims: “to stimulate interest [and new scholarship] in French colonial and commercial projects in the regions outside continental North America.” In line with Boucher’s refreshing emphasis on “a whole variety of possible outcomes,” it is hoped that the publishers will be willing to append a bibliography (currently only accessible online) to the prospective second volume, devoted to the eighteenth century.