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Philip P. Boucher. France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?

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la qualité d'une édition dont l'appareil péritextuel, par sa richesse et sa rigueur, rend justice au texte édité.

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Philip P. Boucher.

France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. Pp. xiii, 372.

Often overshadowed in the New World by the presence of Spain and England, France nevertheless struggled to create a vibrant, economically viable colonial role for itself in the Caribbean. Philip P. Boucher contends that academic work on French settlement activities has largely focused on the eighteenth-century plantation system and the Haitian Revolution, leaving unanalyzed archival material and historical data on earlier conditions. Despite several hurdles — a long-term economic lack and limited academic resources in the Caribbean; relatively few colonial family lines continuing to live in the colonized areas, thus less local European interest in ancestral activities; the destruction of regional records following any number of meteorological, geological, and social crises; and what Boucher views as a current dearth of historical accounts examining French-Caribbean life prior to the eighteenth century — Boucher gives a detailed survey of the French struggle to settle land in the Caribbean, and he sheds light on the diverse social groups operating, and sometimes barely surviving, in the area.

Life in the Caribbean was admittedly a struggle. Unaware of the plant's tendency to erode an already delicate soil system, many farmers relied on tobacco crops, limiting the land's future productivity with each planting cycle, and even by the 1660s Saint-Christophe (now St. Kitts) was showing the devastating environmental effects of the burgeoning colonial presence: the French appetite for sea turtles and wild boars led to a discernible drop in numbers for both species, while valuable sources of lumber like the mahogany tree were being cut at a rate that could not guarantee sustainability. Seventeenth-century settlements at times operated without authority directly from France, for officials at home were sometimes without real power or were

completely uninterested in the development of overseas holdings. This reading of administrative relations challenges established understandings of French settlement and in particular older arguments that French colonization was closely monitored and regulated by the state rather than following the kind of *laissez-faire* system adopted by the English. In fact, Boucher contends that the French government only seriously began to attempt to instil legal codes and to regulate behaviour in the 1680s. Along with political instability, settlers faced any number of deadly illnesses like malaria and yellow fever, while indigenous groups also lost huge numbers to European diseases like smallpox. Ongoing skirmishes between French magistrates and Island Caribs led to further loss of life.

Despite this grim outline, Boucher proposes that prior to the development of the more well-known, lucrative plantation complex, life for all except the native Carib in French-controlled portions of the Caribbean was perhaps healthier and safer than the standard of living that developed later. While there *was* unrest among slaves, established Creole slaves sometimes had a degree of financial agency and were even able to purchase their freedom in certain instances. “In short,” Boucher suggests, “not all islanders were equally unhappy all the time, given a realistic spectrum of what then constituted ‘happiness.’” Boucher characterizes the seventeenth-century French settlements as successful overall, and he reiterates that while labour conditions and quality of life were far from ideal for most working in the frontier and pre-plantation French-Caribbean, hardships faced in France — food shortages, epidemics, war, and economic concerns — made “home” a daunting site for survival as well.

Boucher’s research shows a surprisingly diverse population on the islands by the mid-seventeenth century: in Guadeloupe, French colonialists made their way from both rural and urban settings, and they were joined on the island by contingents of Catholic Irish, Dutch Calvinist exiles, and Portuguese Jews, along with increasing numbers of Africans. While the vast majority of Guadeloupe’s inhabitants were men, small numbers of French women also began to migrate to the island by the mid-seventeenth century, and Boucher carefully describes a portion of the population that might otherwise be ignored in accounts of pre-plantation life. Boucher’s work also does much to reveal the important work of indentured servants from France, as well as the more traditionally recognized and researched African slaves. While a lucky few indentured labourers were highly skilled artisans, and thus able to negotiate better living and working

conditions with a contract of association, most *engagés* had few specific, in-demand skills to offer (or rights to claim as a result). Arduous labour conditions and persistent local problems with malaria, other illnesses, and poisonous snakes created a situation in which fewer than half such workers are likely to have lived to see the end of their three-year terms.

Boucher describes his text as the culmination of forty years working in the field, and notes that it is “a general history ... more indebted to scholars past and present than is the typical academic monograph.” In it, he attempts to address many kinds of readers — academics working specifically in the field of French-Caribbean history or more generally in that of the New World, graduate and undergraduate students, and general readers. So on the one hand it is richly and even overwhelmingly detailed; on the other, it lacks a bibliography, although Boucher includes endnote references and an expansive bibliographic document can be found on his personal website. It does sometimes feel as if Boucher is trying to describe too many things to too broad an audience. But at its best, the book offers vivid accounts of lives which will previously have been hidden from many of its readers.

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