

Philip P. Boucher, *France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xii + 372pp.

Reviewed by: Peter Hulme, University of Essex

History is inevitably approached in retrospect: we know that early French colonisation in the Caribbean led to the massive plantation complex of Sainte-Domingue, which collapsed in such spectacular fashion at the end of the eighteenth century. Knowing that, we tend to read France's seventeenth-century Caribbean experiences as leading inexorably to the sugar machines that followed. Philip Boucher's new book aims to persuade us to approach the seventeenth century on its own terms, seeing the complexities and uncertainties which did lead—but far from inevitably—to plantation and then to revolution.

France and the American Tropics to 1700 has several distinctive features. It deploys the increasingly familiar term "American Tropics" in order to deal with France's short-lived colonial adventures in Florida and Brazil, which are sensibly considered alongside those on the Caribbean islands and on the northern coast of South America. It makes good use of Boucher's intimate knowledge of French history, which enables him to understand the European context of Caribbean matters. It draws on his knowledge of the larger American picture to make appropriate comparisons with events in the English Caribbean. And it offers a nice balance between fact and analysis, generalisation and detail.

The book's ten chapters proceed more or less chronologically after Chapter 1's introduction to the geography, topography, flora, and fauna of the Caribbean, as well as an account of the indigenous inhabitants, the Island Caribs, about whom Boucher wrote more extensively in his 1992 book, *Cannibal Encounters: Europeans and Island Caribs, 1492-1763*. Chapter 2

looks at early French involvement in America prior to the establishment of colonies in the Lesser Antilles in the 1620s. The remaining eight chapters divide the rest of the seventeenth century into two periods, the 1620s to the 1660s and the 1670s to 1700. In each case two chapters provide a narrative of events for the period and two chapters look at the structure and character of seventeenth-century French colonial society in the Caribbean. This organisation sensibly allows the book both to chart changes and to give a sense of how this intriguing example of an early-modern colonial society actually functioned, paying attention to all the main population groups.

The preface makes reference to the author's website <http://www.philipboucher.com/>, which includes a chapter omitted from the book, "Early French Impressions, Images and Stereotypes of the Caribbean", and

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a partially annotated list of References. Both of these are useful resources for anyone working on Caribbean colonial history in general, and early French colonial history in particular.

Two elements might be highlighted to give a flavour of the book's achievement. Most Caribbeanists have probably struggled at some point to understand the bewildering array of French colonial and commercial companies active in the Caribbean during the seventeenth century: Compagnie rouennaise du Cap du Nord, Compagnie des Isles de l'Amérique, Compagnie des Indes occidentales françaises, etc. Boucher skilfully untangles the operations of these companies, bringing to life the machinations of French political figures such as Richelieu, Colbert, and Fouquet, as well as the Caribbean protagonists like Poincy, du Parquet, and Blénac. And while carefully noting the origins of French colonists to Saint-Christophe and the other islands—predominantly Norman, a larger percentage of Huguenots than in the general French population—he is also alert to the extent to which seventeenth-

century Caribbean society was more mixed than its eighteenthcentury equivalent:

Circulating in the dirt streets of the tiny colonial towns, however, were also Catholic Irish, Dutch Calvinists from Europe or those fleeing Brazil, Portuguese Jews from the same area, a growing minority of Africans, and, in peacetime, Caribs on holiday. (p. 132)

France and the American Tropics to 1700 draws on its author's lifelong study of France in America. It offers an authoritative and readable account of the period which is sure to become recognised as the standard work on the subject in English. It is a very valuable contribution to the historiography of the Caribbean.