

France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent? PHILIP P. BOUCHER.
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In comparison to the British Caribbean, French colonization of the Antilles has received relatively little attention by North American scholars, particularly for the period prior to the Haitian Revolution. While historians such as David Geggus, John Garrigus, Carolyn Fick, Stewart King, and Laurent Dubois have illuminated the later decades of the eighteenth century, and Doris Garraway has given us a literary critique of French colonial narratives on solid historical footing, Philip Boucher fills an important gap with his new book, France and the American Tropics. Synthesizing the latest Anglophone and Francophone scholarship, Boucher provides useful and engaging *point d'embarcation* for teachers and students seeking to understand the development and character of seventeenth-century French colonization of the Antilles. Studded with interesting anecdotes and insights, this book will be cribbed by many a lecturer seeking to survey French arrival in the southern climes of the northern hemisphere.

Boucher is well known for his award-winning 1992 transnational study of Carib Indians, Cannibal Encounters. Like its predecessor, France and the American Tropics is a lively and meticulous chronicle of the period leading up to 1700, when the maturation of plantation society profoundly and irrevocably transformed the economies, societies and cultures of France's Caribbean colonies. Boucher asks us to suspend our knowledge of that seemingly inevitable development to encounter the original institutions and characters that first peopled the French colonies of the Circum-Caribbean, including: Saint Christophe (St. Kitt's), Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guiane (Guiana), Sainte-Lucie, Saint-Martin, Saint-Barthélemy, as well as the impermanent sixteenth-century settlements of Florida and Brazil.

The book's narrative chapters proceed chronologically, interspersed with thematic excursions into colonial society. Chapter 1 lays out the region's geography, topography, climate, flora and fauna, Carib culture and the disease vector that decimated the indigenous population, facilitating both European conquest and the African slave labor regime. Chapter 2 describes 16th-century French colonial experiments in Florida and Brazil, prior to the permanent colonization of the Lesser Antilles in the 1620s. Chapter 3-6 chronicle the "frontier" period, from the 1620s to the 1660s, including imperial policy toward colonization, chartered commercial companies and private proprietorship, Carib resistance, the exploration and failed settlement of Guiana, patterns of colonization and economic development, missions, indentured servitude and slavery. Chapters 7-10 analyze the changes ca. 1665, following Carib defeat and isolation, transfer from private to royal administration of the colonies, wars against Dutch and English rivals in Europe and the Caribbean, and the development of creole society for whites, blacks and their descendants.

One of the book's key arguments, hinted in interrogative subtitle (*Tropics of Discontent?*), is that conditions for white French colonists were significantly better in the Antilles than for their contemporaries in seventeenth-century metropolitan France (see, e.g., pp. 118-119, 137-138) and that seventeenth-century slaves may have experienced a higher quality of life than their counterparts in the British West Indies or their eighteenth-century descendants (292-293, 300). The islands' natural bounty, climate and relative social mobility created – if not a paradise – certainly opportunities to thrive that were unavailable in war-torn and famine-ridden Europe.

A number of strengths are evident in this book. Boucher is at his best narrating the Caribs in their glory and gradual demise and the political history of French colonization. The first chapter and subsequent analysis of Carib resistance and defeat are especially rich. Boucher's lively account of the high politics of colonization is punctuated by colorful portraits of French officials and their intrigues, including: Du Parquet, Poincy, Fouquet, Colbert, Tracy, De Baas, and Du Casse. The endless disasters befalling French explorers in their successive attempts to colonize Guiane make for gripping, if grim, reading. Boucher also has a good eye for the role of gender in the early years of colonization (though not all of his passages on this subject make it into the index) – a subject that begs a monograph in its own right. Finally, Boucher's gentle sense of ironic humor permeates the pages; no detached, anonymous observer here!

Unfortunately, readers of *Slavery & Abolition* may be disappointed with Boucher's account of the introduction and development of slavery in the seventeenth-century French Caribbean. The most important French historians of this subject – Gabriel Debien, Lucien Abenon, Jacques Petit-Jean Roget, Anne Perotin-Dumon, and Leo Elisabeth – are all duly cited, but a great deal of Boucher's discussion of slavery is sustained upon the observations of two contemporaries: the missionaries Father Dutertre and Father Labat. This occasionally leads to superficial analysis, for example, regarding the transition from indentured labor to slavery. Boucher argues that around 1666 European wars slowed the flow French indentured migration to the islands even as slavery began to supply the majority of unskilled colonial labor (269). But surely the decline in French indentured service was facilitated by transitions in land-holding patterns as arable land in the Lesser Antillean colonies of Saint-Christophe, Martinique and Guadeloupe, came to be monopolized by a relatively small white elite. Elsewhere, Boucher accepts uncritically Labat's claim that Louis XIII authorized slavery (77). But as Christopher Miller argues, this canard originated with Labat and has been endlessly repeated by historians without corroboration right down to the present.

Still, for those who will seek to expand our knowledge of seventeenth-century slavery in the French Atlantic, Boucher's book forms a fundamental and reliable entry to the political establishment of French colonization in the Antilles and Guiana. For this essential framework and for engaging prose that enlivens it, readers will be grateful.

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