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Pierre Force, *Wealth and Disaster: Atlantic Migrations from a Pyrenean Town in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. xviii + 230 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4214-2128-5.

Review by Sandra Ott, University of Nevada, Reno.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a popular definition of what it meant to be “an authentic Basque” had three main requirements: to have a Basque surname, to speak the Basque language, and to have an uncle in America.[1] Pierre Force’s fascinating study of trans-Atlantic French Basque migrations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries begins with a passage from a musical comedy entitled *L’oncle d’Amérique*, performed in Paris in 1826. In the play, a coachman poses as a young lady’s “American uncle,” a plantation owner from the Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue. The “uncle” boasts ownership of “two millions” worth in land, houses, and “negroes.” French audiences of that time equated America with Saint-Domingue, once France’s most lucrative colony owing to sugar and coffee production and to slave labor. Yet the figure of the “American uncle” conveyed a dual, ambivalent image of both wealth and disaster. Pierre Force seeks to understand the roots of such ambivalence by reconstructing a multi-generational network of emigrants in two families from the town of La Bastide Clairence in Lower Navarre: the Lamerenxs and the Mouscardys.

Marc-Antoine Lamerenx emigrated to Saint-Domingue in 1729 and settled in the town of Saint-Martin-du-Dondon. In 1750, his fellow citizen, Jean Mouscardy, followed suit. Lamerenx claimed noble status through his family’s house, Uhart-Juzon. By contrast, Jean Mouscardy was a peasant. Both men made fortunes in the Caribbean as the owners of coffee plantations. Force follows them and their white and mixed-race descendants across three generations as family members variously made, lost, and sometimes remade their fortunes in the islands, often returning to their natal communities in Lower Navarre to control, augment, and to contest family assets. The author thus shows how life in the western Pyrenees and in the plantation societies of Saint-Domingue and Cuba—very disparate socio-economic, racial, and cultural worlds—became interconnected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The family narratives that emerge from Force’s extensive archival research focus closely upon the intertwining roles of kinship, inheritance practices, matrimonial strategies, and economic opportunism in trans-Atlantic migrations and colonization. In chapter one, Force traces the origins of a transnational migration network that linked those Pyrenean and Caribbean worlds. He argues that a person’s position in the Pyrenean house-based system of impartible inheritance determined who emigrated and how. In the Basque region of southwestern France, the eldest child, whether male or female, normally inherited a house and associated property and became its master or mistress. (Anthropologists refer to the practice as “cognatic primogeniture.”) Ideally, the house passed intact to a single inheritor from one generation to the next. The system distinguished “entailed property” (*biens propres*) from assets acquired by the master or mistress of the house through their labor (*biens acquêts*). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, non-heirs like Marc-Antoine Lamerenx and Jean Mouscardy had a limited range of

options. Younger male siblings typically chose to emigrate. Other possibilities included joining the priesthood, marrying an heiress, embarking on a military career, or remaining in the natal household as bachelors.

In chapter two, Force explores the origins of coffee growing in Saint-Domingue and the paths to capital accumulation forged by Marc-Antoine Lamerenx and other family members. Marc-Antoine's father financed his trip to the islands. From the father's perspective, funding trans-Atlantic crossings to the Caribbean was less expensive than providing a dowry for a noble heiress in Lower Navarre—a marriage strategy that his parents would have expected him to pursue had he remained in the homeland (p. 28). Marc-Antoine's father also covered the cost of his son's second trans-Atlantic journey in 1741, with the dowry received on the marriage of his eldest son and heir, Mathieu Lamerenx, to Anne de Marmont. A younger, non-inheriting son thus came closer to becoming established in the islands, thanks to a dowry negotiated in the French Basque Country and to a lucrative marriage. Soon after his second return to Saint-Domingue, Marc-Antoine married the daughter of colonial settlers in the parish of Dondon just at the start of the coffee boom there. He soon amassed a fortune (pp. 31-32).

Marc-Antoine's return to Lower Navarre for his elder brother's (Mathieu Lamerenx) wedding in 1741 apparently inspired a significant number of citizens from La Bastide Clairence to emigrate to Saint-Domingue. Jean Mouscardy was the first to do so (p. 43). As a younger sibling and non-heir, Mouscardy established a coffee plantation in Saint-Domingue in 1750. He married a free woman of color who was also his household manager. Mouscardy fathered at least six illegitimate children with her (p. 48). Since they had no claim to family property in La Bastide Clairence, Mouscardy deeded land to them in Saint-Domingue to establish them as coffee planters (p. 49).

The unhappy but fascinating saga of Mathieu Lamerenx and Anne de Marmont deserves mention for several reasons. Both had inherited their natal houses as the eldest offspring, an unusual and problematic marriage strategy that presented deep conflicts of interest. Mathieu Lamerenx was master of the house Uhart-Juzon in the French Basque village of Aïcirits. Anne de Marmont was mistress of the house Berrio in La Bastide Clairence, where the couple lived for twenty years and had seven children. Around 1760, the couple moved into Uhart-Juzon, but a nasty dispute over debts ensued. Both houses faced accumulated debts from previous generations and acquired new ones. Each spouse fought to preserve his or her natal house at the expense of the other. Mathieu Lamerenx remained in Uhart-Juzon, where he fathered several illegitimate children, while his wife returned to Berrio. The couple urgently needed to sell land to settle their debts. Lamerenx wanted to sell his wife's land because her house had "commoner" status, while Uhart-Juzon had "noble" status. Most seriously, Anne de Marmont accused him of having taken money and livestock from her as if he were master of Berrio. He countered that she had misused his property as though she were mistress of Uhart-Juzon. A tribunal ruled that Berrio should be sold to finance their elder son's trans-Atlantic journey to Saint-Domingue, to settle Berrio's debts, and to apply any remaining funds to debts owed by Uhart-Juzon. In recommending the sale of Berrio, the ruling violated the Pyrenean principle of impartible inheritance while simultaneously preserving the house Uhart-Juzon. Anne de Marmont, however, refused to abide by the ruling, but she did consent to sell a meadow in order to finance her eldest child's journey to the Caribbean. She remained in Berrio until her death in 1781 (pp. 66-69).

Cognatic primogeniture is often cited as the "single most important factor stimulating emigration" from the Basque Country to the New World.<sup>[2]</sup> Not all emigrants were, however, younger siblings of the firstborn child. In chapter three, Force provides an intriguing exception to the rule in the story of Jean-Pierre Lamerenx, eldest child of Mathieu Lamerenx and Anne de Marmont. Although he was the presumptive heir to both Berrio and Uhart-Juzon (not a particularly advantageous position, given the parental discord), Jean-Pierre's uncle, Marc-Antoine Lamerenx, urged him to emigrate to Saint-Domingue. Jean-Pierre Lamerenx did so in 1764, with little economic capital but with a gentleman's status. His marriage to the daughter of well-to-do coffee planters and the dowry they provided allowed

the young couple to start their own plantation without having to wait—as would have happened in Lower Navarre—to inherit their parents' properties (p. 78).

In 1785, Jean-Pierre Lamerenx returned to the Basque Country to manage his parents' succession. Although Navarrese customary law forbade the sale of *biens propres* (entailed property), he sold his mother's holdings in La Bastide Clairence in order to pay his father's debts and to repurchase property his father had previously owned. In doing so, the eldest son did what his mother had so resolutely refused to do: he ensured the survival of the house Uhart-Juzon, at the expense of Berrio. (Interestingly, Jean-Pierre did not use money acquired in Saint-Domingue, where returns on investments were much higher than in Lower Navarre.) A younger brother, also newly returned from Saint-Domingue, received Berrio as his share of the parental estate, then sailed back to the islands and leased the house. When the younger brother died without issue, Berrio reverted to Jean-Pierre as the eldest offspring. With France's Civil Code of 1804, Berrio became the joint property of Jean-Pierre Lamerenx's widow and their children, who lived in Cuba and who appointed the eldest son, Charles Lamerenx, administrator of the family properties in France. He pursued the same strategy that his father had used thirty years earlier by selling land owned by his maternal grandmother (Anne de Marmont) to pay off debts contracted by his paternal grandfather (Mathieu Lamerenx). Charles likewise sold Berrio, which marked its demise as a Navarrese "house" (p. 82-83). The complicated experiences of the Lamerenx family offer an intriguing lens through which to understand the relationship between Basque customary laws regarding inheritance, the Civil Code, and patterns of trans-Atlantic emigration.

In chapter four, Force explores the Haitian Revolution's impact on property rights. Plantation owners left in droves for Cuba and Louisiana. Jean Mouscardy escaped when his plantation burned down. With the help of his agent and guardian of his mulatto children, Mouscardy returned to Bayonne on the Basque coast where he owned a house. He died there in 1797. His eldest child, Jean-Théodat, became a general in the Haitian army and an aide to King Henri Christophe, who ruled the northern part of Haiti from 1811 until 1820.

Having decreed that absent owners forfeited their property rights, the French authorities sequestered the Mouscardy properties in Saint-Domingue in 1795, and leased them to former slaves (p. 100). The sequestration was lifted in 1801 by Toussaint Louverture (p. 108). Following the indemnity ruling of 1825, in which France coerced Haiti to pay reparations for seized property in exchange for resuming diplomatic and trade relations, the legal heirs of Jean Mouscardy in Bayonne received a cash compensation for his island properties.

During the Haitian Revolution, Jean-Pierre Lamerenx ended up fighting first for a slave army and then for the French Republic under the command of Louverture (p. 112). He then moved to Cuba with his wife and children where he reinvented himself politically and culturally and amassed a second fortune as a coffee planter under the authority of the king of Spain.

Operating transnationally across three generations, Lamerenx family members acquired, managed, and sometimes contested assets from afar, across several national boundaries, in different languages and legal systems. As "Atlantic creoles," men like Marc-Antoine and Jean-Pierre Lamerenx became experienced intercultural negotiators in different national contexts. By 1860, the Lamerenxs had become Cuban, but they nevertheless maintained a French identity through a series of first-cousin marriages (p. 154).

In his conclusion, Force argues that the dystopian image of the "American uncle" derived not only from the loss of property after the Haitian Revolution, but also to the colonial experience itself and its reliance upon slave labor (p. 156). Yet, as he rightly observes, when Jean-Pierre Lamerenx returned to the Basque Country in 1786, his arrival made "a big splash" among local citizens eager to see the rich "American."

*Wealth and Disaster* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the complex trans-Atlantic world in which the members of two French Basque families operated. The chief strengths of this book derive from the painstaking archival research that Force undertook in a wide range of Cuban, French, and Spanish archives and printed primary sources. The stories that emerge are full of human folly, opportunism, kin-based loyalties, collaborations, and disputes. Although the author often repeats facts and observations made about the main characters (either in different chapters or sometimes within the same two pages), such repetition is at times helpful to the reader in sorting out chronologies, complex financial deals, trans-Atlantic migrations, and complicated intra-familial interactions. The genealogical tables in the appendices are particularly useful as guides. The book also adds substantially to the existing literature on return migration, especially to the French Basque Country and the Caribbean. As an original contribution to transnational studies, *Wealth and Disaster* will attract a readership across several disciplines and will be of special interest to cultural anthropologists, as well as to historians.

## NOTES

[1] Pierre Lhande, S.J., *L'Émigration basque* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1910), p. xvii.

[2] William A. Douglass & Jon Bilbao, *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1975), p. 131. See Marie-Pierre Arrizabalaga, "Basque Migration and Inheritance in the Nineteenth Century," in Annemarie Steidl, Josef Ehmer, Stan Nadel, and Herman Zeitlhofer eds., *European Mobility: Internal, International, and Transatlantic Moves in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2009), pp. 135-150.

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