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Christopher M. Church, *Paradise Destroyed: Catastrophe and Citizenship in the French Caribbean*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 324 pp. Illustrations, maps, graphs, tables, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8032-9099-0.

Review by Jeffrey H. Jackson, Rhodes College.

Environmental history integrates non-human actors into our understanding of the past. Doing so often makes clear how very familiar stories are, in fact, deeply shaped by human interactions with their natural environments. Already well-known to scholars in other fields, historians are becoming interested in so-called natural disasters because they open new windows onto our understanding of the past as moments of dramatic change that expose the choices people have made in building their societies. The revelatory power of disasters highlights the ways in which we have added risk to our built environments, to our economic structures, or to our political systems, all of which come under stress at moments when humans find themselves in the way of natural processes.[1]

Christopher M. Church shows us that disasters do indeed reveal some significant facts about the risks and stresses of life in the French colonial Caribbean. In the last years of the nineteenth century, a series of traumatic episodes--hurricanes, fires, and volcanic eruptions--highlighted the fault lines within Antillean society and in the relationships between France and its colonies. In particular, Church argues, Republicanism itself was the primary victim of these shocking episodes because of the difficulties its advocates had in responding to the aftermath of disasters. Church's primary focus is the question of citizenship and who was included and excluded from that category in the colonial Caribbean. Republicans wanted to extend citizenship to those in Martinique and Guadeloupe, places where the civilizing mission was being carried out amidst a challenging island ecology. Indeed, the Antilles was seen as a raw environment perfect for the civilizing mission. But racial politics and economic concerns repeatedly got in the way. Who were the civilizers of this wilderness? Whites or blacks? Citizens or subjects?

A series of disasters--most "natural," but some also human-made--raised these fractious issues to the forefront of everyone's attention. Church tells the story of the collapsing view of Republican hopes of citizenship for the islands as calamity pushed everyone to the edge. He highlights the inequalities of race and class as well as labor strife and the ways in which disasters only reinforced and deepened the conflicts. Citizenship was rethought in the wake of calamity.

When disaster struck and hard choices had to be made, victims of these shocks to the system found out that there were limits to Republican ideology. The sugar trade was privileged in recovery efforts and so were white landowners. Racial relationships, always complicated in the Caribbean, were made even more so in the aftermath of disaster. Black and mixed-race islanders were often seen as those carrying out the “civilizing mission” in this harsh, tropical land. But disasters only served to emphasize how difficult it would actually be to achieve civilization when hurricanes repeatedly hammered the islands’ trade, and widespread fires fanned the flames of doubt about whether the islands could be integrated into the nation. Mount Pelée’s eruption in 1902 caused many to finally lose faith in the capacity to bring French order out of nature’s chaos.

French civilization was defined and negotiated, at least in the Caribbean, in conflict with these kinds of encounters with the powers of the natural world. Agriculture and land use as interactions with the biome were important, but unexpected disasters always made the islands seem to lie just beyond the civilizing mission itself. Church’s essential insight asks us to see the processes of colonialism in a slightly different light than we often do: as not only focused on political ideology or economic development but also as the product of a place-based ecosystem. Engagement with the work of Diana Davis or Caroline Ford might have further elucidated the ways in which the specific story of the Antilles fits into larger patterns across the French empire.[2]

Church primarily engages with the historiography on the French Caribbean, and his argument will be of most direct interest to scholars of colonialism. The literature on disasters informs the approach, although it is largely in the background of the account. Church does reference some of the important work on Caribbean disasters by Matthew Mulcahy and Stuart Schwartz.[3] But foregrounding some of the interdisciplinary scholarship from the field of disaster studies might have highlighted the dynamics Church describes. For example, disaster studies describes the common phenomenon of “elite panic”: the fear among political and economic leaders that disasters will lead to destabilizing or revolutionary situations.[4] Church describes precisely this process playing out on the ground, but using the larger conceptual literature might help readers understand what is particular to the Caribbean context. Likewise, research by scholars of other French disasters including Gregory Quénet’s work on earthquakes, Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud’s exploration of urban disasters, or Richard Keller’s book on the 2003 heat wave—the latter also deeply concerned with the fault lines within Republican ideology—might also help to highlight the uniqueness of the colonial context and how its ecology set the stage for political conflict.[5]

Church’s book is well-researched, highly detailed, and tightly argued using a wide range of primary sources, including some illuminating statistical data. It introduces important new insight into the story of the French Caribbean by shifting the focus towards the human/nature interaction while also showing how environmental concerns were deeply intertwined with political economy, race, and colonial/metropolitan relationships. As such, the book makes a significant historiographical intervention at the intersection of French colonial studies and environmental studies and should become a model for future work in this area.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, the special issue of *French Historical Studies* (volume 36, spring 2013) on the theme of Disaster in French History, which summarizes and cites much of the relevant literature.

[2] Diana Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 2007); Caroline Ford, *Natural Interests: The Contest over Environment in Modern France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[3] Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Stuart Schwartz, *Sea of Storms A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[4] See, for example, Lee Clarke, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[5] Gregory Quénet, *Les tremblements de terre aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: La naissance d'un risque* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2005); *Cities and Catastrophes: Coping with Emergency in European History* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002); Richard Keller, *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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