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Alan Forrest, *The Death of the French Atlantic: Trade, War, and Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. xix + 352 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780199568956.

Review by Paul Cheney, University of Chicago.

Over his five-decade career, Alan Forrest has jauntily outpaced even the Stakhanovite standards that the Thatcherite educational bureaucracy, starting in 1986, began to impose on British universities. By my count, Forrest has published ten single-authored monographs, several textbooks, nine edited volumes, and (at the very beginning of his career) a novelized account of a nineteenth-century shipboard diary. Some of the subjects to which Forrest has periodically returned include conscription, Napoleonic warfare, the Revolution in the provincial and especially the port cities of France, as well as warfare and revolution in historical memory. Forrest brings to bear all but the first of these elements, adding some others, to conduct an inquest into the death of the French Atlantic. The result is an informative discussion—partway between a scholarly synthesis and a research monograph—of the way that “War, revolution and the moral uncertainty over the slave trade...destroy[ed] France’s Atlantic empire” (p. xvi).

In what did France’s Atlantic empire consist? By the mid-eighteenth century, if not well before, principally the Antillean colonies that produced so much sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton; in metropolitan France, the wealth siphoned from these colonies was most visible in the port cities on France’s western façade, notably Bordeaux, Nantes, Le Havre, and to a far lesser extent La Rochelle. Accordingly, the first part of *The Death of the French Atlantic*—one third of the book—gives an overview of the co-development of France’s port cities and its Antillean colonies, with considerable attention to the slave trade that fed the seemingly insatiable need for plantation labor. Not all of France’s ports participated equally either in the “triangular” trade, involving an initial stop on the slave coast of Africa before proceeding to the Americas; or in the “direct” trade, which involved ships shuttling between France and the islands to exchange largely French goods against colonial produce. Indeed, the take off of the colonial trade, beginning in the late seventeenth century, accelerated a consolidation and reordering of France’s port hierarchy. Smaller port cities were relegated to the status of “feeders” to the larger ports, otherwise subsisting on fishing and the coasting trade. Bayonne, hitherto a large port and a presumptive candidate for eighteenth-century glory, lost out in the grand reshuffling because of a particularly large sandbank that blocked deep-water ships from entering its port; La Rochelle had a narrow port susceptible to silting up and had, at any rate, suffered from the exodus of much of its merchant elite and skilled labor after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Le Havre was cursed as well by a silt-prone harbor uninviting to deep-water ships, but then again, the Seine was a

boulevard connecting Paris to the Atlantic. Le Havre thus ended up vying with Nantes and Bordeaux for primacy. Although much of the material in the first part of *The Death of the French Atlantic* feels familiar, discussions such as these show the revealing emphases a historian of France's western port cities brings to this topic.

Although Nantes was unquestionably prosperous, it nevertheless declined relative to Bordeaux, the unquestioned heavyweight of the Ponant, which went from strength to strength throughout the eighteenth century. Nantes had a shallow hinterland in comparison to Bordeaux, which made it less responsive to growing demand in the Antilles for wine, grain, textiles, and a host of other goods. Moreover, Bordeaux—a regional capital—was able to provide an array of services beyond the capacities of Nantes's comparatively homogenous merchant elite. Bordeaux hardly neglected this sector, but Nantes made up for its structural disadvantage by increasing specialization in the slave trade over the eighteenth century. Although quite profitable, this trade enriched few people beyond the merchants who plied it; not only did it not contribute particularly to the development of Nantes's hinterland, it was a highly risky trade that was particularly susceptible to the disruptions of war and diplomacy. Once the slave trade was finally abolished, Nantes could not as easily pivot, as did Bordeaux and its hinterland to a certain degree, to other activities (pp. 257-258).

Forrest returns frequently to the situation of Nantes. With its fulgent but ultimately superficial growth, this port city was representative in some way of the French Atlantic as a whole. The lure of colonial wealth drew a disproportionate share of fortune-hunting immigrants and investment capital to the sugar islands and, in the wake of the Seven Years' War, these colonies, and in particular Saint-Domingue, became the undisputed priority of imperial policy making. The one-sided growth of the slave-tropical commodity nexus served as a weak foundation for more broadly-based developmental paths; in any event, growth in this sector was highly volatile: its vulnerabilities became the vulnerabilities of the French Atlantic tout court. The disruptions of war weighed particularly on an imperial economy reliant upon the reexport of sugar and coffee to the Baltic once—and if—these commodities reached France. The same may be said of the heavy reliance of the entire economic circuit on slave labor: war and, a fortiori, abolition of the slave trade were existential threats to the lopsided economy of the French Atlantic. One is reminded here of McCusker and Menard's classic *Economy of British America, 1607-1789*, in which the authors demonstrate how the prosperity of different regions of the British Atlantic was generally a function of early moves to economic diversification, including the spread of purchasing power and skill enhancement throughout the population.[1] In this comparison, the mid-Atlantic colonies had long-term advantages over the seemingly sure bets in the agroindustrial slave economies of the British West Indies. More recently, Robin Blackburn has argued that absent linkages in the French imperial economy—most notably, between its sugar colonies and the largely peasant economy of the metropole—meant that the eighteenth-century slave economy did not contribute materially, as it did in the British metropole, to the triumph of industrial capitalism.[2] The French Atlantic economy, in this view, was less a prelude than a parenthesis, one that began to close starting with the slave uprisings in Saint Domingue in August 1791. Once French industrialization did begin in earnest, it centered on the north and east of the country, and from this basis was oriented toward the rest of continental Europe; even such renewed prosperity as Nantes found in the later nineteenth century was inward-looking and not much connected with Atlantic markets (pp. 286-287).

As it happened, the death of the French Atlantic was protracted, stretching all the way to the second and final abolition of slavery in 1848. Although Forrest locates abolitionist sentiment among some Enlightenment *philosophes*, the Girondin party during the French Revolution, and even among some merchants hitherto involved in the slave trade, he is rightly unimpressed by the overall depth and force of abolitionist sentiment in France, notably in comparison with Britain, concluding, “This lack of moral concern is not easy to explain” (p. 108). The first abolition of 1794 flattered Jacobin self-understanding, but it was always more of a ratification of facts on the ground in Saint Domingue than the universal proclamation of principle it was pretended to be: it was never applied at all in the East Indies for fear of scandalizing the planter elite, and it remained a dead letter in Martinique, which lay under British occupation. It was therefore only actively applied, with certain limitations, in Guadeloupe and Guyane. Napoleon’s infamous reimposition of slavery in 1802 did not, therefore, change the status quo in the French Empire as much as is commonly supposed—except, of course, to set off a chain reaction leading to the War of Haitian Independence and the final expulsion of the French from the island of Hispaniola. The British decree of 1807 abolishing the slave trade proved difficult to impose with any consistency on other nations during the Napoleonic Wars; and despite their evident upper hand at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, British enthusiasm for abolition was blunted by French opposition into “relatively modest results” (p. 242). Louis XVIII eventually became a moral convert to the cause of abolition; but even after his decree had been made law in 1818, implementation remained the subject of ongoing negotiations with, and prevarication by, resistant planters and slaving merchants. For quite some time interdiction of illegal slaving voyages remained the exception rather than the rule. The slave trade only ended as a matter of fact when a kind of moral consensus emerged over the evils of slavery; only slowly were the rogue merchants who plied the illegal trade convinced that the increasing probability of capture, and the mounting costs of evasion, had ground away their expectations of profit. Abolition won out at the point when black turned to red on merchant ledgers. Reading Forrest’s account, I was reminded of Max Weber’s oft-cited dictum that politics is the “strong and slow boring of hard boards.”^[3] How one views the French in all of this will depend upon whether one chooses to focus on the bore or on the boards.

Although the ostensible object of his study is the French Atlantic, one observation from the preface signals the veritable center of Forrest’s interest: “the history of France’s Atlantic ports can no longer be told in isolation from the rest of the Atlantic world” (p. xv). Forrest’s insistent focus on the merchants of Bordeaux, Nantes, and Le Havre sheds light on the politics that drove war and commercial policy during the Age of Revolution; and as I have suggested, treating Nantes as a microcosm provides real insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the French Atlantic economy.

But occasionally the author is drawn out of his area of expertise as a historian of French port cities. In the chapter entitled “War and Revolution in the Caribbean,” he observes that “the decree of 15 May [1791] granting full civil rights to free men of color including the right to stand for election to the colonial assemblies...resulted in something of a social revolution in the Antilles, with mulattoes rushing to take advantage of their new freedoms, buying property, investing in plantations, and becoming slave owners in their turn” (p. 156). Here the expression “full civil rights” is not terribly helpful; later, Forrest refers to “active” citizenship, or the enjoyment of political rights (p. 158), but this clarification does not fully repair the confusion. In old regime Saint-Domingue, and despite several often-discussed discriminatory edicts passed against them after the Seven Years’ War, *gens de couleur* (people of color) continued effectively to enjoy the

most important civil rights: the rights of *conubium* and *commercium*, of due process, and, hence, to the protection of their property. As Dominique Rogers points out, “for the majority of the *libres de couleur* [free people of color], as for white people, citizenship was only realized in the civil domain.”^[4] Thanks to these civil rights this population had been investing in plantations and becoming slaveholders for generations; these were hardly “new freedoms.” By the time of the 1789 revolution, a silent but ineluctable social revolution had put 40 percent of the land and 25 percent of the slaves of Saint Domingue in the hands of *gens de couleur*; indeed, it was this preceding social revolution, and the resulting conflict within a multiracial slave-holding elite, that kept the political revolution that began in 1791 in Saint-Domingue at a steady boil until 1804—and in reality well beyond.

If Forrest’s longstanding interest in the port cities of France does not always make him the most reliable guide to the social history of Saint-Domingue, his repeated *séjours* in western France furnish readers an invaluable perspective on the slave trade in collective memory, the subject of the final chapter of *The Death of the French Atlantic*. Often drawing on his own experience at academic conferences, from museum visits, and simply observing the evolution of the public urban spaces of France’s port cities over the last several decades, Forrest chronicles the sometimes-fitful awakening of French historians and of the French public at large to the centrality of slavery in its colonial past. As Forrest observes, it was often political activists and not academics who led the campaigns for recognition of the slave trade. The death of the French Atlantic in the age of revolution meant that, in the collective memory shared in France’s port cities, the eighteenth century was often viewed nostalgically as a golden age of prosperity, without much explicit recognition of its basis, or it was simply consigned to oblivion once the closing parenthesis was put on the Atlantic phase of French history.

NOTES

[1] John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

[2] Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997).

[3] Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 128.

[4] Dominique Rogers, “On the Road to Citizenship: The Complex Paths of the Integration of Free People of Colour in the Two Capitals of Saint-Domingue,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Norman Fiering and David Geggus (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2009), p. 66. For a fuller treatment, see Rogers, “Les Libres de couleur dans les capitales de Saint-Domingue: fortune, mentalités et intégration à la fin de l’Ancien Régime (1776-1789)” (PhD diss., Université de Bordeaux III, 1999).

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