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Philip P. Boucher, *France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xiii + 372 pp. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8018-8725-3; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8018-8726-0.

Review by Laurent Dubois, Duke University.

“Bad news from the Indies,” Philip Boucher notes in this study, “has more likely survived in the archives than good” (p. 40). There was, to be sure, plenty of bad news coming from the French tropical colonies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: ravaging disease, including dysentery and malaria and then (as if that wasn’t enough) yellow fever; rolling periods of imperial warfare; poisonous snakes and poisonous trees; the devastation of local ecosystems through over-fishing of the delicious manatees and sea-turtles that sustained early colonists; the devastation of local ecosystems through the introduction of European mammals, who at first provided a fine diet for the *boucaniers* who hunted them before they too, remarkably, were hounded nearly to extinction; incompetence, ego-trips, mismanagement, and glaring stupidity among colonial leaders; poorly thought-out and executed economic and legal policies, transmitted within a state structure tied together by creaky ships that had to cross the vast Atlantic, not to mention battling currents, wind, and cannon-fire as they navigated within the Caribbean sea itself. There were also constant conflicts with indigenous Caribs seeking to preserve their land and autonomy, for whom the bad news never stopped. For, as Boucher notes laconically, once the French were “on the move . . . [g]rave consequences ensued,” particularly for the Carib population (p. 87). Boucher remains remarkably upbeat as he chronicles all of this and more, never ignoring the disasters but also showing how all of this laid the foundation for what became remarkably successful—if always brutal—plantation colonies in the eighteenth century.

The period of his study was the foundational one in the history of French colonialism in the Atlantic, but, as Boucher notes, it has received surprisingly little attention from historians. Studies on the French Atlantic in general are not legion, and studies of the French Caribbean comparatively rarer than those on French Canada. Work on the Caribbean has tended to focus for the most part on the height of the French plantation system and on its fiery and fascinating demise in Saint-Domingue during the 1790s and early 1800s. Even as scholarship on the French Caribbean has expanded in recent years, few have ventured into this earlier period, though there are important exceptions, notably Doris Garraway’s fine book *The Libertine Colony*.^[1] Before the publication of this new book, Philip Boucher’s first book, *Cannibal Encounters*—a wide-ranging and fascinating study of European-Carib interactions from 1492 to the end of the eighteenth century—was one of the main touchstones for those seeking to gain an understanding on the early colonial history of the French islands.^[2] Thankfully, Boucher built on this earlier work during the past decades in order to present here a rigorous, expansive, and erudite investigation of a period that defies easy analysis or straightforward narrative.

Boucher focuses on what he calls the “American Tropics,” incorporating analysis of French attempts to settle Brazil, as well as the long and often disastrous series of settlement projects in French Guiana. But much of his study focuses on the Caribbean, and particularly the eastern Caribbean, where French colonists first settled in St. Christopher and then expanded to Martinique and Guadeloupe. Saint-Domingue, whose settlement really only got off the ground in the 1660s and 1670s, is less of a focus,

but is also included especially in later chapters, which emphasize how its development was directly tied to the piracy and looting of nearby Spanish and English possessions that supplied money and often slaves for this late-blooming colony.

What propelled this seemingly unstoppable expansion? First, one drug--tobacco, which was "introduced from Spain into France in the 1550s by Jean Nicot (hence the genus *Nicotiana* and our word 'nicotine')" starting a "smoking addiction" that "gathered pace slowly but steadily" (p. 55). Then, once competition from other tobacco-growing regions (including North America) coupled with ill-considered French economic policies reduced the viability of that crop, another drug: sugar. Boucher is cautious in his exposition of the rise of sugar, highlighting the many slow steps along the way (notably the importance of indigo production in some contexts) and arguing that its rise never constituted a "sugar revolution," as some scholars have claimed. Still, the world he leaves us in by the end of his book is one in which sugar is well on its way to becoming the dominant plantation crop in the French Antilles.

Boucher takes care to outline the political and institutional history of colonization, detailing the role of various companies and of a range of fascinating individuals who oversaw, for better or worse, colonization efforts. In contrast to his first book, which carefully examined Carib responses to European invasion, this book is for the most part centered on the experiences and actions of the French colonists. Nor is there extensive attention to the social or cultural history of enslaved Africans in these new societies, though Boucher does carefully examine their health and demography in different colonies and at different times. While emanating a healthy dose of skepticism about the viability of official population records--"Who counted the people, and whom did they want to fool?"--he provides a valuable and detailed breakdown of population changes in the various islands over time.

Boucher is interested in a question that has attracted much ink and controversy over the years: why the use of European indentured labor ceded, relatively quickly, to the racialized system of slavery that came to dominate the societies of the French Caribbean. In answering the question, he emphasizes French demographic and political factors, arguing for instance that the "push" factors present in the English islands, such as the land enclosures, were not present in France. He also focuses on the details of the situation on the ground in the colonies, rather than on ideological or cultural issues. He does not hazard a grand theory about the transformation--that is not his intellectual style--but the careful information he provides about the transition, as well as the conditions under which European indentured laborers were recruited and toiled, will help readers gain a much richer and more complex understanding of the interaction of various forms of coerced labor during this period.

Boucher also lays out the legal and social differences between *metropole* and colony--colonists had much greater latitude when it came to debts in the colonies, for instance, and social hierarchies among the colonists were more fluid than those back home. Women, he argues, "in general had greater opportunities to achieve a decent existence in the islands than they did in France," inheriting their husband's properties and often running them (p. 264). They were also spared the attention of "busybody clerics and lawyers so involved with the blight of European witch hunts" (p. 267).

Boucher concludes his book with a chapter on "Coerced Labor," describing the emergence of the Code Noir as both a product of and an attempt to control plantation life in the Caribbean. He tells the remarkably story of an early maroon, Francisque Fabulé, "a black Spartacus of Herculean proportions," according to Boucher, who in 1665 negotiated a "surrender" with the island's Sovereign Council that guaranteed him a tribute of tobacco and protected he and his followers from punishment. Fabulé, like many other enslaved men, was mobilized by the French to fight England. Indeed, Boucher's work shows how prevalent the use of enslaved soldiers--some of whom won their freedom--was in French wars especially during the seventeenth century. The enslaved, who became the pillar of the labor force of the French colonies, therefore also played a crucial role in the violent processes that created them.

Boucher's book is dense, thick with names and numbers, and structured less by narrative than by analysis and historiographical debate. At the same time, it is pleasingly conversational, and Boucher's sense of humor enlivens the text. It would be most appropriate in the classroom for graduate students and some advanced undergraduates. For them, as well as for scholars and researchers seeking to understand the foundations of the French Atlantic empire and all those broadly interested in the history of European expansion into the Americas, this book is a rich--indeed invaluable--resource, one which will hopefully spur on a new generation of historians to wander back into this fascinating and startling period of encounter, devastation, change, and creation.

NOTES

[1] Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

[2] Philip Boucher, *Cannibal Encounters: Europeans and Island Caribs, 1492-1797* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

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