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History of the non-Spanish Antilles

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Book Reviews

General and Sources

Historia de las Antillas no hispanas. Edited by ANA CRESPO SOLANA and MARÍA DOLORES GONZÁLEZ-RIPOLL. Historia de las Antillas. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas / Ediciones Doce Calles, 2012. Photographs. Plates. Illustrations. Maps. Figures. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 638 pp. Paper, €33.65.

This volume should interest many Latin Americanists not only because it provides a detailed overview of the history of a large part of the Caribbean from late precolonial through postcolonial times, but also because it does so from an unusual perspective. The extensive Spanish-language literature on the Caribbean more typically treats Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. And, in fact, the three other volumes of this series synthesize the scholarship for each of those former colonies: the first, on Cuba, appeared in 2009 and was edited by Consuelo Naranjo Orovio, who is also the general editor of the series; the second, on the Hispanic portion of Hispaniola, was edited by Frank Moya Pons and came out in 2010; and the fourth, on Puerto Rico, should be available soon. In contrast, the cosmopolitan group of historians who authored the 20 chapters of this third volume in the series mainly draws on the literatures in English, French, and Dutch that address the non-Hispanic Antilles colonized by the northern European metropolises. Such a diversity of secondary sources brought together in a single volume conceived by historians at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Spain's national research council, provides a distinctive interpretation and unique resource.

In the introduction, Ana Crespo Solana and María Dolores González-Ripoll provide a brief editorial synopsis of the volume's expansive and complex topic. It spans the late fifteenth century through the late twentieth century, and it concerns the colonial projects of the British, French, Dutch, German, Swedish, and Danish metropolises. Each of them exhibited a great deal of dynamism, both internally and in relation to one another and to the Spanish Caribbean. Together they dominated that region from the arc of the Lesser Antilles in the east to Jamaica and the Cayman Islands in the west, Haiti in the north, and the *Benedenwindse* (Leeward) Netherlands Antilles in the south. They included diverse environments, from places with fertile soils and humid climates to those with infertile soils and little rainfall. And those differing colonial projects, locations, and

environments resulted in economies, societies, and cultures as distinct as Haiti, Barbados, and Aruba.

The volume covers that diversity with a series of 20 chapters divided into 4 parts. The parts on the French, British, and Dutch colonies follow the same general sequence of topics, with five or six chapters respectively addressing population, social structure, economy, politics, and culture, although, at times, the authors combine some of these themes into a single chapter or spread certain aspects, such as literary culture and cultural identity, across two chapters. In contrast, the part on Swedish, Danish, and Germanic colonization contains only a single chapter on each, probably appropriate given their limited involvement in the Caribbean relative to the other three countries. Each of the four parts includes informative tables and graphs as well as high-quality reproductions of historic maps, paintings, photographs, and other illustrations, many in full color, which nicely complement the text. Not a single original map, however, helps readers to locate and understand the spatial arrangements and relationships of the places discussed.

Environmental history does not receive the same degree of attention as demographic, political, social, economic, and cultural history. Authors do touch on such matters as deforestation when discussing economic processes and cite some of the principal contributions to the region's environmental history. But such brief treatment cannot provide an understanding of the region's environmental diversity and dynamism in relation to other aspects of its history.

The limited engagement with environmental history aside, the organizational framework of the volume has inherent advantages and disadvantages. Most basically, it makes information on particular topics for each colonial realm easy to locate despite the poor index but, by the same token, results in repetition because each chapter author provides similar general context for processes specific to particular colonies. More problematically, the organizational framework obscures the relationships among the various colonial projects and prevents authors from fully developing topics of regional scope, such as the creative tension between creole social relations and transatlantic ones central to the emergence of novel societies across the Caribbean. To be fair, however, this volume is but one in a series conceived as a whole, and the projected fifth and final volume, entitled *Historia comparada de las Antillas* and scheduled for publication in 2013, will doubtlessly provide more comparative and relational interpretations on such topics as creolization and emancipation.

Overall, the editors and authors have delivered an extremely useful resource. Despite nearly 550 pages of text, the subject is so large and complex that many readers will doubtlessly desire more attention to particular topics or places of personal interest. And a bibliography of even some 50 pages cannot include all relevant publications. Nonetheless, the volume synthesizes and interprets much of the pertinent literature for students and scholars working in Spanish and makes a key contribution to integrating Atlantic historiographies.

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