

**Philippe Girard.** *Toussaint Louverture: A Revolutionary Life*. New York: Basic Books, 2016. 352 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-09413-4.

**Reviewed by** Charlton Yingling

**Published on** H-Slavery (January, 2018)

**Commissioned by** David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

Philippe Girard has produced an approachable book that will engage students and a wider public on Toussaint Louverture, one of the most captivating and consequential figures in the history of the Americas. While elements of his life and legacy as the salient figure of the Haitian Revolution will be familiar to historians of slavery, this book is a thorough go-to resource that scholars have needed for many years. Girard deserves commendation for meticulously humanizing Toussaint's ruthless pragmatism against more palatable hagiographic portrayals that at times render him as an emblem of liberation beyond critique. Toussaint was, as the author explains in exacting detail, exceptional in both talent and complexity. In his steep ascent to governor of the colony in which he had once been an illiterate slave, he wielded a malleable idealism animated by his skill, ambition, and perhaps most important, grit. Toussaint's own guardedness, equivocation, lack of close confidantes, and image consciousness all perplex incisive analysis. To address these intricacies, the author has scrutinized secondary sources to synthesize multitudinous fragments into a biographical whole, while many of Girard's most novel analytical claims are grounded in rigorous primary research.

This book's twenty-one chapters may at first appear to fragment Toussaint's biographical arc.

To the contrary, this organization better magnifies Toussaint's position within major themes, such as the African diaspora, plantation economies, French rule, family life, and religiosity. Girard covers the majority of Toussaint's life in chapters 2 through 9, formative prerevolutionary years that typically never receive such detailed treatment. By beginning his study with a synopsis of the slave trade to Saint-Domingue, Girard offers an excellent context for understanding the possible aristocratic lifeways of Toussaint's father, Hippolyte, and the likely pathways of enslavement that he endured amid the mass exportation of Alada captives from West Africa during Dahomeian expansion. Likewise, his depictions of Toussaint's birth into a reconstituted Aja network in 1743 and youth as a Fon speaker present rich descriptions on the possible contours of his murky early years. He then follows Toussaint and his family into his better-documented plantation life under the prominent Bréda family. Girard presents Toussaint and his siblings—his father's second family after his first wife and children were sold away—as having chosen to adapt to slavery rather than riskily resisting or dying from despair. Though the author does not explore this possibility, perhaps the social prestige of Toussaint's father and his Aja affiliations deserve more credit for having mentally and materially bolstered this kin group

into resilience to survive the depredations of slavery. Girard convincingly portrays Toussaint as a sincere Catholic but also interprets him as having rejected Vodou and admired *grand blanc* French culture as a young adult.

Girard points to Toussaint's risk aversion as a reason why he apparently never participated in unsuccessful prerevolutionary revolts (a trait that may have factored into Toussaint's hesitation to immediately join the uprisings in August 1791), though he does speculate that Toussaint may have fled the plantation in protest in 1772. Girard makes the intriguing assertion that Toussaint's purported manumission in 1776 was perhaps never legalized, a secret that may have haunted him for many years. Nevertheless, Toussaint used his newfound mobility to buy and liberate some of his kin, and his job as a coachman allowed him to network across Nord, linking him to Georges Biasou, Henri Christophe, and other salient figures of the later revolution. Girard compellingly depicts Toussaint as a striver who attempted upward mobility through coffee planting only to embarrassingly fail. While overseeing slaves in coffee production, Toussaint met Jean-Jacques Dessalines, then under his management, who later became his indispensable collaborator and eventually founded independent Haiti.

At this juncture Girard clarifies that "anointing Louverture as an abolitionist saint is a mistake" (p. 74). Perhaps paradoxically, Toussaint participated in slavery. Beyond his coffee ventures, Toussaint once exchanged a twenty-two-year-old Aja slave to free his adoptive mother. Concurrently, Toussaint endured psychological duress under plantation hierarchies, including deaths of children, sexual predation against his daughter by a white man, and separation from his first wife due to her possible affair with an overseer. This well-developed background shows how by 1791 Toussaint had significant personal slights to redress yet no outlet for his abilities. Girard makes the provocative assertion that Saint-

Domingue, though a cosmopolitan colony with Atlantic cultural connectivity, was less of a sugar and coffee profit dynamo than scholars often present, and may have drained more French resources than it generated. Girard attributes worsening conditions as a factor for slave unrest but places more emphasis on royalist emancipation rumors, elite divisions over French politics, and possible French revolutionary ideals while downplaying the role of African culture.

The remainder of the book (chapters 10-21) assesses Toussaint's complicated motivations along his circuitous path from being an insurgent affiliated with Spain, then an avowed French *citoyen*, and finally a separatist who controverted French rule in Saint-Domingue. We know Toussaint did not join the rebels for several weeks after the initial revolts of August 1791. Girard presents a tantalizing idea that Toussaint seeded plans for revolt among the conspirators who initiated the uprisings while concealing his own role for personal safety. Though intriguing, Toussaint's own claims to early involvement came years afterward when initial leaders were dead or exiled, and most evidence still suggests that Dutty Boukman directed the uprising. Girard interprets that French revolutionary ideals were more influential to the Haitian Revolution, diverging from work that highlights the earliest insurgents' organizing around African cultures and personal grievances. Though Girard does explain the royalist influences within insurgent ranks, he consistently downplays African influences. While accurately depicting the tensions among the "Black Auxiliaries" aligned with Spain, Girard goes on to question the prowess of Jean-François Papillon and Biassou who, despite their well-known foibles and flaws, were nevertheless pioneering, skillful leaders of self-liberated slaves. They panicked French officials into progressively inclusive abolition decrees to attract black supporters to the French Republic, and only in their ranks did Toussaint become a bona fide commander. Only after Tous-

saint left Jean-François and Biassou in 1794 did he become peerless in military and political acumen.

Once Toussaint defected to the French Republic in 1794, having taken the name “Louverture” roughly a year before, he rapidly retook lands from Spain and the British, turning the tide of the war. In the years from 1794 to 1798, not only did ex-slaves comprise the best French fighting forces, but they also represented the majority of French citizens on the island, and began adopting and adapting French revolutionary ideals, albeit with frequent skepticism of white French motives. Girard appropriately notes that Toussaint likewise was a “political shape-shifter” who, when it suited his ends, used African languages to rally troops or the republic’s rhetoric to flatter paternalistic French *égalité* (p. 155). Girard repeatedly underscores that Toussaint was a tactician and tacit deceiver yet asserts that he truly admired French culture and craved French approval. Was Toussaint both a skilled manipulator and sincere Francophile?

Toussaint, with his superb strategic mind, deracinated rivals to become the island’s preeminent political figure. Girard poignantly describes Toussaint’s precarious attempts to guarantee freedoms amid his morally ambiguous efforts to secure self-sufficiency. While centralizing Saint-Domingue’s governance and stability around himself, he built autonomous diplomatic relations with British Jamaica and the United States. By 1799 he forged steady external commerce in exchange for agreeing to impede the export of slave rebellions, a *realpolitik* that undercut emancipatory ambitions elsewhere. Not only did Toussaint acquire substantial landholdings, but his labor policies also attempted to return ex-slaves to plantation labor to supply his state with cash flow after production in Saint-Domingue had plummeted by 98 percent from 1789 to 1796. His efforts to revitalize the flagging economy drew resistance from ex-slaves who were required to work lengthy, regimented hours often on plantations

they had fled. Toussaint oversaw the violent suppression and executions of thousands of resisters to his policies, including Moïse, his beloved nephew and reliable officer. He even sought the purchase of new black laborers from Jamaica, and he dithered with the opportunity to definitively obliterate slavery in neighboring Santo Domingo.

This policy was not only disastrous but also poorly timed, as in 1801 Toussaint’s unilateral declarations of a highly autonomous colonial constitution and assumption of gubernatorial power antagonized Napoléon Bonaparte. When the French sent a massive expeditionary force to restore their rule, few in Saint-Domingue rallied to Toussaint’s side, and his fall was precipitous and rapid. While Toussaint froze to death in 1803 under French custody in an Alpine prison, Dessalines adopted his strategy of waiting for diseases to decimate the French army, launching a final anti-colonial war to the death, and declaring the independence of Haiti. Toussaint’s biographical complexity, including his ties to slavery, state repression, and accommodation of French interests, sidelined Toussaint in Haitian memory on the revolution in favor of Dessalines. In this robust book, Girard has tackled the man and myths of Toussaint with commendable rigor, leaving us with a clarifying contribution to scholarship.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

**Citation:** Charlton Yingling. Review of Girard, Philippe. *Toussaint Louverture: A Revolutionary Life*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. January, 2018.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47638>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.