

H-Net Reviews

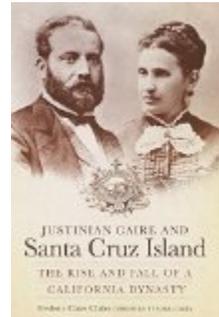
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederic Caire Chiles. *Justinian Caire and Santa Cruz Island: The Rise and Fall of a California Dynasty*. Norman: Arthur H. Clark, 2011. 240 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87062-400-1.

Reviewed by Philip Dreyfus

Published on H-Environment (November, 2011)

Commissioned by David T. Benac



At a glance, two things stand out on the dust jacket of this book. The first is the fine photographic portrait of an elegant and quite evidently bourgeois fin de siècle couple, while the second is the boldface phrase *Santa Cruz Island* that occupies the dominant visual position in the title. An environmental historian would no doubt be drawn to the latter, given the intense contest in the last two decades over the island's ecological future. No less a literary luminary than T. C. Boyle has brought fame (or infamy) to the island in his recent novel *When the Killing's Done* (2011), which builds a fictional tale around the National Park Service's recent efforts to eradicate the feral descendants of domesticated livestock in order to restore a semblance of pre-Columbian nature. However, while Santa Cruz Island is the principal setting of Frederic Caire Chiles's narrative, the remainder of the title is far more instructive of the purpose of the book, which is to describe the life, business accomplishments, and travails of Justinian Caire and the rise and fall of a California dynasty.

Santa Cruz Island, off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, is now part of the Channel Islands National Park and is under the protection of The Nature Conservancy, which owns and manages the western 76 percent of the island, and the National Park Service, which owns and manages the eastern 24 percent. At almost one hundred square miles in size, it is California's largest island and is rich in topographical variety, sustaining as well a significant range of plant and animal species, some of which are entirely distinctive to the island's habitats. While Santa Cruz Island's ecology is in part a characteristic microcosm of California's and in part unique, its cultural history is entirely consistent with that of the rest of the state—thousands of years of native habitation, in this case

by the Chumash; followed by Spanish and then Mexican control with the establishment of land grant ranching; and then finally, commercial development under American sovereignty, which typically included multiple market-oriented uses of what was essentially agricultural land. A major portion of that latter stage of history on the island was occupied by the Caire family, who owned Santa Cruz Island in its entirety from 1880 to 1925, and held 90 percent ownership for twelve years thereafter.

Within that story of transition after transition for Santa Cruz Island as well as for the rest of the state, the potential exists for exploring the engagements of various peoples with their external world, and the ways that their respective material and ideological cultures shaped and were shaped by their transformations of the nonhuman nature around them. However, that is clearly not the purpose of Chiles's book, and the reader should consequently be advised not to expect a work of environmental history. Chiles was educated as a historian and is one of the many descendants of his book's leading subjects, Justinian and Albina Caire. Justinian was a Gold Rush migrant to California from Briançon in the French Alps near the Italian border and Albina Molino was his Genoese bride. Though we non-Caires are offered a window to the author's family history through this book, the story does not feel as if it were written primarily for us, as Chiles notes when he declares that he and his siblings "came to realize that we were the last members of the family to have really known the generation who had delighted in this island world and had suffered terribly from its loss. I began to feel that it was imperative to conjure up the past and create a coherent and accurate narrative for our descendants" (p. 14).

We may take the author at his word, and note that *Justinian Caire and Santa Cruz Island* is a labor of love. One can readily understand the motives of a writer with a rich family history—wealthy or not—in wishing to transmit that history as a legacy to his descendants. And in this case, Chiles had at his disposal an abundant archive of family papers, including those of its enterprises, the Justinian Caire Company and the Santa Cruz Island Company. Chiles makes good use of these but only very rarely contextualizes the narrative he builds from family sources in such a way as to pose provocative questions about the larger significance of his family's history. Consequently, much of the book has an antiquarian bent. The reader will learn a great deal, in great detail, of the daily operations of the Caire San Francisco hardware and vintners' supply business, and especially of the family's ranching and vineyard operations on Santa Cruz Island. There is exhaustive discussion of various island building projects, water works construction, introduction of livestock, sheep shearing methods, and planting of numerous varieties of grapes, along with employment practices, expenses, earnings, and debts. We discover much about the personal lives of the many members of the cosmopolitan Franco-Italian Caire family, including their travels to Europe; their personal attachments and antipathies; the tragic loss of children; and ultimately, the soap opera marriages that led to the division of family fortunes, and the collapse of Justinian's vision.

Much of the blame for the dynasty's collapse and the Caires' loss of Santa Cruz Island is placed on two of Justinian and Albina's sons-in-law, Pietro Carlo Rossi of the Italian Swiss Colony vintners (married to Amelie Caire) and his ward Goffredo Capuccio (married to Algaë Caire). These men sought liquidity from their wives' shares in Caire business assets and were represented in the lawsuits that they eventually filed to this effect by the attorney Ambrose Gherini, who had become Rossi's own son-in-law by marrying Justinian Claire's granddaughter Maria. It is perhaps noteworthy that Chiles's book was

preceded by the publication of *Santa Cruz Island: A History of Conflict and Diversity* (2005), written by Santa Barbara attorney John Gherini, a direct descendant of Ambrose Gherini and Maria Rossi. Since the Rossi-Capuccio-Gherini triumvirate is not represented in Chiles's book as a particularly holy alliance, and since the author—without acrimony—makes several references to the need to bring out the truth, one may suspect that the residue of an old family rift may have played some role in producing this book.

Though the Caire family saga is a remarkable story, there is little for environmental historians to glean from *Justinian Caire and Santa Cruz Island*. For those interested in the environmental relations of Native Americans, the Chumash occupy two pages near the beginning of the book. For those interested in environmental politics, there are roughly twenty relevant pages toward the end. Neither of these subjects is central to the author's mission nor deeply researched. It is possible that a future historian may derive some utility from the detailed descriptions of how commercial activities were conducted on the island during the Caire years and beyond, since these had an environmental impact that persists today, and if so, Chiles's extraction of data from company records will have proved significant beyond his effort to reclaim his family's history for the benefit of his descendants. In summary, one may search this book in vain for a thesis, or an environmental history perspective, or even a larger context within which to grasp the significance of California families like the Caires, but it was not the author's goal to provide these. *Justinian Caire and Santa Cruz Island* is exactly what its author promised—a fairly comprehensive history of his family's halcyon years based on its own letters, diaries, and business records. Chiles's book may interest readers concerned with the small stories that collectively constitute the history of California, or those fascinated by the family intrigues that all of us share, but that are particularly costly in the high stakes world of wealth and privilege.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Philip Dreyfus. Review of Chiles, Frederic Caire, *Justinian Caire and Santa Cruz Island: The Rise and Fall of a California Dynasty*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34093>



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