



William S. Cormack. *Patriots, Royalists, and Terrorists in the West Indies: The French Revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1789-1802.* Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2019. 392 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4875-0395-6.

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Published on H-Atlantic (March, 2021)

Commissioned by Bryan Rindfleisch (Marquette University)

The French Revolutionary Script in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1789-1802

Those in the United States who are anxious about media misinformation, racial and class tensions, and insurrection might take some comfort in reading William S. Cormack's *Patriots, Royalists, and Terrorists in the West Indies: The French Revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1789-1802*. For however tumultuous and divided the United States is today, Cormack's book shows that late-eighteenth-century Guadeloupe and Martinique were even more so. *Patriots, Royalists, and Terrorists in the West Indies* offers a detailed study of these two French colonies, the so-called Windward Islands or Îles du Vent, during the chaos of the French Revolutionary and early Napoleonic periods. Whereas previous scholarship on French colonial experience has focused mostly on Saint-Domingue and the Haitian Revolution, Cormack illuminates Martinique and Guadeloupe's neglected histories, which Cormack posits "should be seen as part of the larger story of the French Revolution" (p. 263). And whereas recent studies have emphasized colonial agency and influences within the French Revolution and upon Enlightenment ideology, Cormack demonstrates that France still wielded tremendous influence on the colonial Windward Islands.

Specifically, Cormack argues that France's revolutionary ideas, language, political culture, and news provided "a script for revolutionary action in the Windward Islands" that "helped shape developments in the colonies" (pp. 3, 9). Examining newspapers, correspondence, travelers' accounts, official announcements, and metropolitan decrees through many years in French, Guadeloupean, and Martinican archives, Cormack argues that this "revolutionary script" did not translate perfectly and unadulterated across the Atlantic Ocean. Instead, various groups in these colonies revised, interpreted, and sought to monopolize the news, rumors, and ideas coming from France for their own benefit. At the same time, these metropolitan influences helped shatter the colonial status quo and explode existing tensions into outright violent rebellions on both islands. The revolutionary impulses from France undermined royal governors' authority while unleashing bitter conflict between white colonial factions (such as the *grands Blancs* who were mostly wealthy planters that tangled with the *petits Blancs* among whom were minor merchants, overseers, clerks, artisans, soldiers, and sailors). French revolutionary news also developed the aspirations of free people of color (the *gens de couleur*) to agitate for civic equality and

political rights within the colonies. Finally, the “revolutionary script” helped prompt many enslaved people of African descent to seize the revolutionary opportunity to liberate themselves, often by use of deadly force. These many threads of the French Revolution altogether illustrate the importance of the circulation, dissemination, and control of metropolitan news, rumors, and ideas in Martinique and Guadeloupe. These dynamics resulted in complex class and racial conflicts, the profound ambiguity of the French Revolution in these colonies, and the Windward Islands’ overall weakness in the face of invading British forces.

Cormack’s elaboration of all these points follows in chronological format. His work is mostly a narrative and social history that tracks change over time and offers readers an incredible amount of detail for a largely unfamiliar topic. Each chapter focuses on a distinct phase of the Windward Islands’ revolutionary experience. Cormack balances the revolutionary events in both Guadeloupe and Martinique jointly until chapter 7 (“Reign of Terror: Victor Hugues’s Regime in Guadeloupe, 1794-1798”) when Martinique succumbed to British occupation from 1794-1802 while Guadeloupe successfully resisted it. Naturally, the first chapter—“The Windward Islands on the Eve of Revolution”—sets the stage for the revolutionary changes of the 1790s and 1800s by providing the background to French colonization and society in the Windward Islands. One of the most important points that Cormack states early on is that while the Caribbean colonies produced copious amounts of wealth mainly in the form of lucrative sugar production, these overseas possessions were “neither secure nor stable” (p. 12). The stability of Martinique and Guadeloupe suffered throughout the eighteenth century under the constant threat of war, foreign invasion, planter resentment of colonial trading restrictions and lack of colonial autonomy, and contests between *grands Blancs* and *petits Blancs* over taxation and representation in colonial assemblies. On top of such tensions, the *gens de couleur* consistently

sought means to assert opportunities for civic equality with free whites, in addition to the furtive and overt resistance efforts by the enslaved (roughly 80 percent of the colonial population) and a small yet nonetheless vocal call by metropolitan liberals for the abolition of slavery. By 1789, then, Cormack argues, all of these tensions only needed “the communication of new political forms, radical concepts, and subversive language from France” to “set them ablaze” (p. 38).

The next five chapters detail the complex and rapid progression of such tensions between 1789 and 1794, which produced varied forms of violence, rebellion, and political change. Overall, Cormack does an excellent job supporting his argument about the importance of the “revolutionary script” being used to precipitate and direct various actions by multiple groups in Guadeloupe and Martinique. For instance, in 1789, enslaved people in Martinique launched a large-scale revolt because they believed, incorrectly, that King Louis XVI had granted them their freedom yet their masters had refused to enforce this decree (chapter 2, p. 40). Meanwhile, the *petits Blancs* (who eventually styled themselves as “patriots”) wore the revolutionary tricolor cockade and challenged the authority of colonial governors by demanding the convocation of general assemblies in both Martinique and Guadeloupe (chapter 2, p. 47). In response, the *grands Blancs* asserted they rather than the *petits Blancs* spoke for the nation and were the source of legitimate authority, which Cormack asserts “was an essential characteristic of the revolutionary script from France” (chapter 3, p. 94). Such developments culminated in Martinique’s civil war between these two white factions. And when French troops arrived to restore order and metropolitan control, they instead introduced a more moderate revolutionary script from France that emphasized political liberty and civic equality, especially for the *gens de couleur* (chapter 4, p. 96). Such actions incensed both the *petits Blancs* and *grands Blancs* in Martinique and Guadeloupe who felt threatened by racial equality,

worrying that such developments might soon lead to the abolition of slavery. As a consequence, these *grands Blancs* launched a royalist counterrevolution against French metropolitan authority (chapter 5, p. 123). Soon after, metropolitan officials launched propaganda campaigns to discredit such royalists' claims to legitimacy, in effect controlling and disseminating news from Europe to discredit rumors of counterrevolution, while patriots continued to rely on the rhetoric of popular sovereignty to attack executive authority (chapter 6, p. 155). While all these events between 1789 and 1794 are too numerous and complex to enumerate in this review, Cormack argues that they all shared a common thread related to the introduction and reinterpretation of metropolitan influences, ideas, and news that helped inspire and shape these colonial revolutionary proceedings.

The diverging point in the narrative comes in the year 1794. While the British captured both Martinique and Guadeloupe, in this year Victor Hugues (one of the civil commissioners from France) quickly retook Guadeloupe. Hughes brought with him the radical revolution from France, including the dreaded guillotine, revolutionary Terror, and a reliance on (in this case black) *sans-culottes* to maintain power. Most radically, Hughes enacted the 1794 decree of universal liberation, thereby temporarily ending slavery in Guadeloupe. His regime in Guadeloupe thus "represented the extension of the Jacobin Terror in the Windward Islands" before news of the Thermidorian Reaction enabled his white enemies to denounce him as a tyrant (p. 188). Meanwhile, as described in chapter 8, planters in Martinique supported the British occupiers who reestablished Old Regime law, maintained slavery, and blocked news from Guadeloupe and France that might threaten the planter-dominated colonial status quo.

Cormack wraps up his narrative with the 1802 Peace of Amiens between Britain and France, which handed Martinique back to the French.

France's new leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, quickly reversed the radical revolution in Guadeloupe and reestablished slavery in the Windward Islands. Napoleon was successful here, unlike his failed campaign to roll back emancipation in Saint-Domingue, since he was supported by the several classes of planters as well as many French officials who had previously subscribed to more radical notions of emancipation and equality.

Throughout his work, Cormack deftly charts the many class and racial conflicts in the Windward Islands and how they evolved over the course of the French Revolution, which rival in complexity those of Saint-Domingue. But while the book is impressive in detail, there are several points of clarification needed. Given that “terrorist” appears in Cormack’s title, it would have been helpful had the author defined what he means exactly by this term early on in his work. It is only immediately obvious that he is referring to the Jacobin Terror in chapter 7. “Terrorist” holds specific meanings in particular places and times, and Cormack could have avoided some confusion or misinterpretation by being more straightforward about his use of the label. Additionally, while Cormack does mention several times that news from Saint-Domingue affected dynamics in the Windward Islands and vice versa, he absolutely prioritizes connections between Guadeloupe and Martinique and metropolitan France. While perhaps too much for Cormack to have taken on, *Patriots, Royalists, and Terrorists in the West Indies* thus at least opens a potential avenue of future research to examine links between Saint-Domingue and the Windward Islands. For instance, did Martinique planters take inspiration from *grand Blancs* in Saint-Domingue who allied with invading British forces at roughly the same time (see pp. 164-173)? Was communication from the metropole more common and more influential than intracolony conversations, especially given the fact that France had such a hard time sending information across the Atlantic for much of the colonial period?[1] Future investigation will be useful to address such lingering questions.

While the relative importance of intracolony versus transatlantic communications might be examined further by future historians, Cormack has forcefully and unequivocally demonstrated that metropolitan France’s revolutionary script had a tremendous impact on the turbulent history of Martinique and Guadeloupe from 1789 to 1802. As he suggests, Cormack’s method will prove useful

to examine to what degree modern colonial insurgents (including ones fighting in twentieth-century wars of decolonization) built off or adapted the “revolutionary script” of the metropole (p. 262). He provides clarity to an understudied and complex topic, mixing his argument with clear enumeration of what happened and by whom, similar to what Laurent Dubois’ *Avengers of the New World* accomplished for the Haitian Revolution.[2] Indispensable for historians of Martinique and Guadeloupe, this work will also serve as important reading for scholars of the French Caribbean, French Revolution, and so-called French “First Empire.”

Notes

[1]. For difficulty in French transatlantic communications, see Kenneth Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

[2]. Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

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Citation: Grant Kleiser. Review of Cormack, William S. *Patriots, Royalists, and Terrorists in the West Indies: The French Revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1789-1802*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2021.

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