

[Allain on Roper, 'The Torrid Zone: Caribbean Colonization and Cultural Interaction in the Long Seventeenth Century'](#)

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L. H. Roper. *The Torrid Zone: Caribbean Colonization and Cultural Interaction in the Long Seventeenth Century*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018. 273 pp. \$49.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-890-6.

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In his introduction to *The Torrid Zone*, Lou H. Roper describes this edited volume as an invitation “to consider the ‘long’ seventeenth-century Caribbean in an organic, transnational, holistic way that incorporates the diverse array of actors involved” (p. 3). With a heavy emphasis on the Dutch, English, and French empires, the essays in *The Torrid Zone* show how European and indigenous trade, warfare, and empire-building in the seventeenth-century Caribbean—an understudied period—laid the groundwork for chattel slavery and the rise of plantation-based agriculture. Conceptualizing the Torrid Zone as a region whose reach extended beyond the Caribbean Sea to include Cayenne and Carolina, the book asks, “What made the Caribbean the Caribbean?” and contends that careful study of the long seventeenth century is crucial to answering this question (p. 3).

With a few notable exceptions, Roper is right to note that “very little scholarship has concentrated on seventeenth-century Native-European relations in the Caribbean, especially in Native terms” (p. 3). Essays by Tessa Murphy, Carolyn Arena, and Sarah Barber in part 1 of this volume offer important preliminary steps in filling this gap. Placing indigenous peoples on “equal analytical footing” with European powers, Murphy’s chapter highlights “decades of contestation and negotiation” between French and indigenous powers in the Lesser Antilles and attempts to explain why European domination in this region of the Caribbean took so long to achieve (pp. 18, 29). Arena, through her creative and attentive contextualization of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, sheds light on the understudied topic of indigenous enslavement at Dutch hands in seventeenth-century Suriname. Barber’s chapter investigates the entanglements of European-indigenous alliances in the Lesser Antilles through an examination of the career of Thomas Warner. These essays contribute to a growing body of scholarship that nuances commonplace understandings of indigenous Caribbean politics and society, indigenous-European conflict, and the trajectory of European conquest of the region.

Part 2 analyzes settlement and warfare among competing colonial powers, emphasizing that in the seventeenth century, lines of imperial rule in the Caribbean were anything but certain. Together, these chapters demonstrate the contingency and variability of imperial strategy during this period. Jessica Vance Roitman explains why Dutch imperial ambitions in the so-called Wild Coast—the region of the South American mainland that is made up today of Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana—were met with the limited success that they were. Drawing from private correspondence

among Surinamese colonists, Suze Zijlstra and Tom Weterings explore the tumultuous impacts of imperial warfare on the daily lives of colonists. Amanda Snyder examines the events leading up to England's defeat of Spanish forces in Jamaica and its 1655 conquest of the colony. Picking up where Snyder's analysis ends, after the conquest, Robertson shows how English colonists in Jamaica—a colony that would eventually become one of England's most prosperous and populous in the Caribbean—struggled to mold the colony as English in character in law. "Being 'English' in late seventeenth-century Jamaica," he tells readers, "was often as much a goal as an achievement" (p. 117). Erik Gøbel continues with the theme of imperial rivalry in his chapter on the settlement of the Danish West Indies, ending with a helpful note about the research potential of the West India and Guinea Company archives, housed today at the Danish National Archives. Giovanni Venegoni describes the settlement of Saint Domingue by buccaneers (hunters, traders of meat and leather, and pirates), habitants (colonists who engaged in agriculture), and filibusters ("freebooters" who based their trading operations at Caribbean ports), showing how by the end of the seventeenth century, the habitants had eclipsed the other two groups in political influence.

The three chapters that make up part 3 highlight inter-imperial networks of trade and political influence. Laurie Wood examines the emergence of a "global judicial elite" out of seventeenth-century Martinique, emphasizing that studies of this period of French Caribbean history are crucial to understanding the rise of the plantation complex (p. 150). Barry Stiefel's fascinating chapter on Jewish merchants in the Anglophone Caribbean shows how colonial authorities sometimes practiced a form of religious tolerance when they believed that Jews could be of economic and political benefit to the colonies. Often multilingual and enmeshed in wide co-ethnic business networks, Jewish merchants "had skills and abilities difficult to find within the nation-state," and so were met with reluctant acceptance in the Caribbean (p. 163). Finally, in his own contribution to the collection, Lou Roper discusses the seventeenth-century Caribbean in relation to Carolina.

The overwhelming majority of historical actors who make appearances in these pages are male. This is undoubtedly and understandably due in no small part to the book's focus on trade, treaty-making, warfare, and exploration. But in light of decades of insights by scholars of women's and gender history, is the justification that women simply did not leave a record good enough? And should not masculinity itself be historicized? As a whole, the essays in this collection neglect to engage these questions. Moreover, the overwhelming whiteness of the contributors gives this reader pause. As Roper rightly notes, the ramifications of the large-scale "shift to staple agricultural production and slave labor" in the early modern Caribbean "continue to ripple into the present day" (p. 13). I wonder if the racial inequalities that form the bulk of these ramifications are not exacerbated when all-white or majority-white teams of scholars are given a platform to represent the history of the Caribbean.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Torrid Zone* more than achieves its aim of illuminating an understudied epoch in early modern Caribbean history. A major strength of the collection lies in the sheer breadth of material covered. The skilled contributors to this volume draw collectively from source material in at least five languages, probing readers to consider the unpredictability and capriciousness of inter-European and European-indigenous relations during the Caribbean's long seventeenth century. Overall, the essays in this collection offer fresh insights that are sure to interest even seasoned scholars of Caribbean history.

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