Philippe Girard

Toussaint Louverture: A Revolutionary Life. New York: Basic Books, 2016. 340 pp.
(Cloth US\$ 29.99)

Co-author of an article on Toussaint Louverture's early life and author of two books on his final years, Philippe Girard here joins up these two extremes with a full-length biography of the Haitian Revolution's main protagonist. Straddling the divide between popular history and a scholarly study, the book astutely exploits much of the wealth of recent Haitian Revolution research and weaves it into a tightly written, highly accessible narrative. The work's most original feature is the attention given to Toussaint's life before the Revolution, which historians long thought irrecoverable but in the last forty years has been pieced together by various scholars. Also unusual is an interesting final chapter devoted to Louverture's descendants and his evolving postmortem reputation. The space Girard devotes to these topics—some two-fifths of the text—reduces the room available for exploring the revolutionary process, so that this study is somewhat less of a history of the Haitian Revolution than many similar biographies.

Whereas most Louverture biographers have adopted extreme interpretations that depict the black leader as either an idealist or an opportunist, Girard provides a balanced portrait, sympathetic but unsentimental. Since the discovery in the 1970s that Toussaint was a propertied freedman before the Revolution, some writers have taken off on a tangent, turning him into a wealthy planter. Girard, however, portrays a black freedman of very modest wealth, who continued to work on the estate where he was born and many of whose relatives remained slaves. Arranged chronologically, the book's 21 overlapping chapters emphasize different facets of Toussaint's developing career. From "Aristocrat" to "Icon," they pass via "Family Man" and "Freedman" to "Rebel," "Monarchist," "Governor-General," and so on. Two chapter headings strike false notes: "Muleteer" and "Slave Driver," for Toussaint was neither in the accepted sense (but rather a stockman and steward). Along with "county" for parish (p. 72) and "carriages" for carts (p. 77), such mistranslations are rare in a generally stylish text. On the most vexed issues in Louverture's career—at what age he was freed and what role he played in the 1791 uprising—there is no new information but throughout the narrative, Girard makes interesting connections and hypotheses. Readers may not always grasp how much is conjecture rather than fact, and certain suggestions are surely wrong. Whether or not an act of marronage precipitated Toussaint's manumission, he was certainly not the fugitive "Toussaint" (p. 54) listed in the newspaper in September

1772 (who was owned by a free black). The idea that he liberated his wife and children during the slave revolt by attacking their plantation is similarly fanciful.

Having written an excellent book on the period 1801–4, Girard knows the second half of the Revolution better than its earliest phase. Minor inaccuracies dot the narrative concerning Saint Domingue's colonial assemblies and the slave uprising. Gabriel Bellair was not Biassou's "second" (p. 292), Jean-François's wife is misidentified, Hyacinthe's death is misdated, and Toussaint's enslaved companion Sans-Souci was not the famous leader of the same name (who lived on a different plantation). To claim that "most" North province revolutionary leaders were "related by blood or marriage to Toussaint" (p. 52) is a great exaggeration. The handling of the prerevolutionary period also reveals problems. Affiba was the first wife, not the father-in-law, of Toussaint's father. It is far from true that two-thirds of the Africans sold by French slavers were adult men, or that the French often made nonaggression pacts with maroons, or that Saint Domingue's baptismal and notarial records "only go back to 1776" (p. 277). One may also doubt that Saint-Domingue experienced an "agro-industrial revolution" (p. 78) in the 1780s or that, at the same time, "the sustainability of the entire plantation economy" (p. 86) was threatened. Allusions to "delving deep into plantation records" (p. 34) are somewhat misleading, as only those of the Bréda estate where Toussaint worked are cited, and it was a rather atypical plantation.

Although the work concludes with a short bibliographic essay, the endnotes mainly list only primary sources and engage very little with the secondary literature. This departure from scholarly norms makes it difficult for nonspecialist readers to distinguish between long accepted fact, the insights and discoveries of others, and those of the author. Such quibbles aside, there is much to admire in this biography that brings together far more information on its central character than any previous work.

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