Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. vii + 264 pp. (Cloth US\$ 40.00)

Paul Cheney has written an important book for historians of the Caribbean plantation era and the French Atlantic. A microhistory based on letters from the managers of a Saint-Domingue sugar plantation to a French nobleman, it describes the economic and social relationships that defined the estate from 1773 to the Haitian Revolution. It then traces how heirs tried to collect the indemnity that France forced the Haitian state to pay colonial proprietors.

The extraordinary correspondence that Cheney found in a French family archive illustrates how eighteenth-century French sugar plantations often ran on razor-thin margins, teetering between bankruptcy and profit. Cheney uses the managers' 200 letters to argue that Saint-Domingue had reached an economic dead-end—the "Cul de Sac" of his title, which is also the name of the region where the estate was located. As Jean-Baptiste Corbier wrote to the Marquis de Ferronnays in 1779, "The Cul-de-Sac plain is the deadest dead-end in the world." In fact, this was one of Saint-Domingue's most productive sugar districts, which makes Corbier's frustration all the more interesting.

In seven chapters Cheney sketches the tensions behind that frustration, using letters written by Corbier and his son to illustrate how Saint-Domingue was whipsawed between old regime institutions and mentalities on the one hand and the pressures of tropical commodity production and slave society on the other. The title of each chapter expresses these conflicting pressures. Chapter 1, "Province and Colony," introduces the aristocratic Ferronnays and the bourgeois Corbiers, from Brittany and Anjou, respectively. Their lives show how ties among families connected Saint-Domingue and France so tightly that elite colonial society experienced many of the social conflicts of a French province. Chapter 2, "Production and Investment," emphasizes the tension between the estate's protomodern market orientation and its expensive problems: soil exhaustion, slave and livestock mortality, and Ferronnays's deep indebtedness. The massive irrigation projects that made Cul-de-Sac so productive were built on a similar opposition; although planters owned these systems cooperatively, they fought each other for water, even sending their slaves out at night to sabotage a neighbor's aqueducts.

In Chapter 3, "Humanity and Interest," Cheney does fine work contextualizing the Corbiers' management of the Ferronnays' slaves. His sources do not shine as much light on the lives of enslaved people as the diary of the Jamaican plantation manager Thomas Thistlewood. But he provides a fascinating anal-

ysis of how the Corbiers wrote to the Marquis in the fashionable language of sensibility and virtue while exploiting slaves in the crudest ways. For example, Corbier described how purchasing a young girl as a sexual partner for his son healed his relationship with the teenage boy. In Chapter 4, "War and Profit," Cheney describes how wartime blockades devastated the plantation's profits and food supply. The estate suffered so much that "Saint-Dominguan society behaved less like a healthy organism with its capacity for adaptation and recovery than [like] a great and complex machine operating on dangerously narrow tolerances" (p. 124).

Chapter 5, "Husband and Wife," is the book's highlight. In 1772 Ferronnays, then a high-ranking colonial administrator in his 40s, married Marie-Elisabeth Binau, an island-born 21-year-old plantation heiress. Ferronnays viewed the marriage as little more than a financial transaction, but after months of neglect from her husband, Binau began to create a family on her own terms. After years of legal struggle she successfully separated her property from her husband's. Cheney narrates and contextualizes these events masterfully, offering an unprecedented portrait of subverted gender roles among Saint-Domingue's elite.

The book's final two chapters, "Revolution and Cultivation" and "Evacuation and Indemnity," trace what happened in Cul de Sac during the Haitian Revolution and how those events affected the Corbier and Ferronnays heirs. The epilogue describes Cheney's 2010 encounter with concerned local people while touring the ruins of the Ferronnays sugar refinery. Continuing the contrasts that define this book, he reflects on how Haitians live with the consequences and artifacts of their ancestors' enslavement, while for the Ferronnays' twenty-first-century heirs the Cul de Sac plantation records are merely an historical curiosity.

Though well supported by the Corbiers' letters, Cheney's larger thesis that Saint-Domingue's economy was nearing a dead end does not fit the history of plantation slavery, which remained profitable for nearly a century after the Haitian Revolution. Political changes and not economic fragility destroyed Saint-Domingue's plantations and their successors in Louisiana, Cuba, and elsewhere. For its penetrating examination of the economic and social forces tearing at the fabric of colonial society, Cheney's well written and deeply researched microhistory joins the growing list of essential books about pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue.

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