Christopher M. Church, *Paradise Destroyed: Catastrophe and Citizenship in the French Caribbean*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xii + 308 pp. (Cloth US\$ 65.00)

Paradise Destroyed examines how disaster, natural and manmade, helped define the political status of inhabitants of the French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe (hereafter “M and G”) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Informed by the field of disaster studies and the tools of digital humanities, Christopher Church deftly weaves together a series of events—hurricanes, fires, economic crises, worker strikes, and the eruption of Mont Pelée—that devastated M and G in the early years of the Third Republic. Through careful analysis of official and popular reactions, he demonstrates how each incident generated new discussions about the status of Martinicans and Guadeloupeans within the imperial nation-state that revealed key tensions in the model of French assimilation. In particular, the disasters laid bare the fact that, though often portrayed as quasi-departments, M and G remained colonies prized for economic productivity. Disaster fatigue, economic calculus, and concerns about long-term viability, Church argues, ultimately limited state relief efforts as well as full integration of the French Antilles into the French state and emerging social welfare system.

Paradise Destroyed begins with a nuanced analysis of the ambivalences that marked the relationship between the French Antilles and metropolitan France in the early Third Republic (1871–1918). At the time M and G were colonies of citizens touted as successful models of assimilation, though they had not been integrated into the French Republic as full departments and thus occupied a liminal status. Early officials frequently portrayed them as “settler colonies” imbued with Frenchness, thereby downplaying the tangible ways that life remained structured by social and racial hierarchies forged under slavery as well as an extractive economy dependent on sugar. Instead, officials emphasized a notion of “tropical Frenchness,” which portrayed the islands as a source of fecundity and regeneration. This perspective, however, was revised with series of disasters that recast the Caribbean environment as disaster-prone and a threat to French civilization.

The book’s core chapters examine the events that conditioned this shift. Church begins with the 1890 fires that tore through Fort-de-France, Martinique and Port-Louis, Guadeloupe. Despite the citizenship status of inhabitants, the Republic offered M and G limited financial support, a decision that reinforced their colonial status. Significant disaster relief, in contrast, came from popular fundraising efforts that, Church argues, fostered compatriotism between

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Antillean and metropolitan citizens, especially those living in metropolitan peripheries. Recovery was scarcely underway when a hurricane decimated parts of Martinique in 1891. This new catastrophe, coupled with the ongoing sugar crisis, he shows, promoted a sense of “disaster fatigue.” Overwhelmed by damage and worried about finances, colonial officials began downplaying narratives of cultural affinity, emphasizing instead economic concerns and the colonies’ long-term viability. Economic issues remained central as officials and metropolitan investors reacted to worker mobilization in Martinique and arson in the Guadeloupean sugar industry at the turn of the century. While the incidents resonated with metropolitan events, they also exacerbated tensions between officials, elites, metropolitan investors, and workers. The book’s final chapter focuses on the deadly eruption of Mont Pelée in 1902, which destroyed the Martiniquan capital, Saint-Pierre. The devastation solidified the association between disaster and the Caribbean, thereby reinforcing differences that marked the two colonies as distinct from France and justified arguments for delaying integration. Church concludes with a short analysis of a different kind of disaster: the violence of World War I. Antillean participation in the bloodshed, he argues, reinforced perceptions of commonality, cultural affinity, and compatriotism that helped to set the stage for eventual departmentalization in 1946.

Paradise Destroyed offers a significant addition to the history of the French Antilles, providing important insights into an understudied period that is nevertheless essential for understanding the contemporary, and often fraught, relationship of metropolitan France to its Caribbean *départements d’outre-mer*. Church’s work also makes a thoughtful contribution to the field of Caribbean history. In particular, his approach provides a useful, albeit sobering, perspective on the historical precedents that shape the way that “natural” disasters in the Caribbean are discussed, especially in the popular press. These accounts generally downplay deep structural problems shaped by slavery, imperialism, and extractive economies while emphasizing the culpability of disenfranchised populations and the inevitability of nature’s wrath. For anyone who has followed the U.S. coverage of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, this is indeed a timely reminder of how natural events such as hurricanes only become disasters when they intersect with the societies and environments built by humans.

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