States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940 (review)

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States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940. By Stuart McCook. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. Pp. 201. Images. Map. Bibliography. Notes. Index. $50.00 cloth; $22.95 paper.

This is an admirable and ambitious comparative study of the development of natural history, botany and agronomy in the Spanish Caribbean basin, touching on developments in five different countries—Puerto Rico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia. McCook's history of the agricultural and botanical sciences focuses on the conjuncture of nature, economy, and nation in a part of the world in which "the most important export commodities were plants" (p. 1). Displaying a solid grounding in the history of science, and a familiarity with the historiography of the different countries involved, McCook ranges fairly comfortably across the changing landscapes of the Caribbean.

The study begins by looking at the way that the early republican governments in Latin America followed the path established by the late imperial Bourbon state in encouraging practitioners of natural history to provide an inventory of the botanical potential of their territories, strengthening their sovereignty over these areas in the process. The practical orientation of scientific endeavour in nineteenth-century Latin America was worn on the sleeve, something revealed in the title of Ramón de la Sagra's 1845 publication, *Historia física, política, y natural de la isla de Cuba*. A turn to more directed agricultural science was retarded by the fact that growers could prosper during the early phase of the development of export agriculture by bringing vast, fertile areas of land under cultivation with little attention to method or variation. In the late nineteenth century the downside of mono-crop, agro-export economies became apparent: In particular, crop diseases and the inevitability of busts in the economic cycle. Only then did planters embrace a more concentrated use of agricultural science in the hopes that they might be spared such agonies, and the era saw the development of a number of experimental agricultural stations.

A new generation of botanists, backed rather haphazardly by the liberal states of the period, began the nationalist project of repatriating botanical knowledge from the metropolitan collections that had been assembled by foreign experts and expeditions. This allowed for the compilation of national floras. McCook makes the fascinating point that, aside from repatriating foreign research on a country's plants, these floras nationalized nature by taking the nation-state as the unit of analysis (rather than, say, a regional geography), and by standardizing in scientific terms the heterogeneous vernacular and foreign terms for indigenous plant names. This was what the botanist Henri Pittier called giving plants a "civil status" (p. 28). The Swiss-born Pittier looms large in McCook's study, not only because he spent his mature life as a scientist working for state institutions in Costa Rica and Venezuela, but also because his projects illustrate how scientists in Latin America began to develop institutional models that were distinct from those in Europe and North America. Essentially McCook argues that, for reasons of expedience, scientists pursued a nationalist agenda by appropriating the help of foreign scientists, playing on the hunger for data among the better-financed institutes of Europe and North Amer-

ica. In the process they received basic legwork done for under-funded and understaffed scientific projects whose end goal, however, was to erect an edifice of national science in the interest of agro-export development.

Of course, this fit rather nicely into the larger, general objectives of the imperial project, particularly that of the United States. Such was the rocky road to building "creole science," one that would eventually lead to the development of hybrids and techniques capable of warding off crop diseases and increasing production, particularly in the sugar industries of Cuba and Puerto Rico. A pioneering work in the best sense of the term, *States of Nature* is an important contribution to the new Latin American environmental history whose great promise lies precisely in its attentiveness to issues of political economy and state formation.

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The French in Early Florida: In the Eye of the Hurricane. By John T. McGrath. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. Pp. 239. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $50.00 cloth.

French Admiral Gaspard de Coligny made two attempts between 1555 and 1565 to plant defensible outposts in the New World and contest the claims of Portugal and Spain: Nicolas de Villegagnon's France Antarctique in Guanabara Bay, Brazil, and Jean Ribault's Charlesfort and Fort Caroline on the east coast of Florida. Historians have portrayed these ventures as parallel Huguenot refuges. Reexamining the sources and the European milieu in his dissertation, a broadly Atlantic study of France in America, McGrath concluded that the main motives of Coligny and his royal sponsors were not religious but strategic and commercial, that both times the French came close to succeeding, and that their defeats not only affected European events and developments directly, but contributed to the outpouring of anti-Catholic literature after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres of 1572, and the increasingly anti-Spanish output of Protestant publishers in the Netherlands and England in the 1580s.

In this book, McGrath concentrates on the second of Coligny's attempts. The story opens with Jean Ribault, a Norman mariner who had resided in England and studied under Sebastian Cabot, making a reconnaissance voyage to Florida in 1562. News that a follow-up expedition commanded by René de Laudonnière had fortified a spot near the mouth of the St. Johns River prompted Philip II to engage Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, a tough Asturian corsair-fighter, to destroy the French outpost. When Menéndez learned that Ribault was sailing to relieve Laudonnière, he rushed across the Atlantic to preempt him. After a formal challenge and a brief chase, the Spaniards landed and made camp at St. Augustine, from which they marched forty miles north in a hurricane to surprise and capture Fort Caroline. Ribault's ships ran aground near Cape Canaveral in the same storm; many of the French drowned, and the survivors in two parties headed north up the coast. At the inlet of Matanzas, below St. Augustine, Menéndez met the castaways and by his own count executed 330 of them, including their leader, Ribault.