

Book Reviews

Nessler, Graham T. (2016) *An Islandwide Struggle for Freedom: Revolution, Emancipation, and Reenslavement in Hispaniola, 1789–1809*, The University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill, NC), xiii + 312 pp. \$29.95 pbk.

On the eve of the 1790s, the West Indian island of Hispaniola, the oldest European settlement in the New World, became the epicentre of two decades of geopolitical turmoil. The island would be profoundly changed, as it experienced revolution, the overthrow of slavery, international conflict, civil war and eventually independence. This history has traditionally been divided roughly along the border between the French colony of Saint Domingue in the West, and the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo in the East prior to the revolution. Both territories have been studied in separation, if not in isolation, as if the contemporary countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic had issued whole from their colonial incarnations. In *An Islandwide Struggle for Freedom* Nessler argues that the stakes and events of the Haitian Revolution are better understood at the scale of the

whole island, in the light of its ‘forgotten Dominican chapters’ (p. 4). The profound differences between the two colonies’ approaches to slavery, government and economics, and the ways these approaches intersected, form an essential dynamic of the Haitian Revolution.

Nessler reads important episodes of the Haitian Revolution chronologically – from Ogé’s rebellion to the final surrender of the French troops remaining in Santo Domingo in 1809 – in the light of little-known related events and documents. Santo Domingo was not just close geographically to Saint-Domingue: the two colonies shared histories of oppression and resistance. For years before and during the revolution, slaves from both sides joined maroon communities, as French and Spanish authorities collaborated to subdue them; during the Revolution, the model of small peasantry set by former slaves of Santo Domingo inspired the newly freed people of Saint-Domingue – much to the dismay of successive rulers keen on putting labourers back to work on sugar plantations. Nessler’s archival research allows him to explore in compelling depth what practices national policy decided in Europe, and even decisions taken by local government, translated for groups and individuals living on the island. Records of a slave revolt in Santo Domingo whose suppression was defended by French revolutionary authorities illustrate that the abolition of slavery remained a complex process throughout the revolution. The very people who had promoted it in Saint-Domingue sometimes supported delaying its implementation in Santo Domingo as part of the complex economic, political and military calculations involved in concurrently running a revolution, fighting civil and international wars, and engaging in transnational and transcontinental diplomacy. Administrators of Saint-Domingue from Sonthonax to Louverture thus struggled with reconciling freedom with the labour demands of the sugar economy they wished to maintain on the French side, or reboot on the Spanish side.

The victory of Dessalines over the French and the independence of Haiti exacerbated matters of freedom and slavery in Santo Domingo, where French General Ferrand settled between 1804 and 1809. The military regime he installed re-established slavery, threatening the freedom of many inhabitants hailing from across the border. Nessler is at his most compelling when he details the legal tactics employed by the formerly enslaved to avail the temporary government of their claims to freedom. The information gleaned in notary records offers vivid glimpses into the ways in which law and everyday life intersected in an otherwise seldom discussed era of the island’s history.

There are a few minor issues in the book. Nessler notably misidentifies the black officer in the illustration that graces the cover of his book and is also reproduced inside, drawn from the Mexican translation of Louis Dubroca’s biography of Dessalines, *Vida de J. J. Dessalines* (1806). The back cover has him as ‘possibly Toussaint Louverture’. It is in fact the Martinique-born General Etienne Mentor, engaged in what could only be a fictional conversation, as Louverture had already expelled Mentor from the island along with Commissioner Sonthonax by the time Hédouville arrived. One slight disappointment also lies in the fact that Nessler does not appear to know that Commissioner Roume, for a time the French representative in Santo Domingo, was not chosen randomly: Roume was notably the principal force behind the settlement of the island of Trinidad, and negotiated with Spanish authorities the *cédula* of population for the island of Trinidad in 1783. Considering Roume’s interactions with Spanish colonial authorities in Santo Domingo in the light of his own history would certainly have coloured Nessler’s analysis.

*Book Reviews*

However significant, these are ultimately minor issues in an otherwise compelling and informative book that succeeds in demonstrating that the Haitian Revolution cannot be understood without Santo Domingo.

Grégory Pierrot

*University of Connecticut at Stamford*