

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Geggus, ed. and trans. *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014. 262 pp. \$13.50 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-62466-177-8; \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87220-865-0; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87220-866-7.

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Over the past decade, US scholars' burgeoning interest in the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) has led to a flurry of publications in English as well as both undergraduate and graduate class offerings at US universities. (Widespread scholarly interest in France began a decade earlier during the bicentennial of the French Revolution; Haitian scholars' interest goes back two centuries.) The best-known scholarly works in English by Laurent Dubois, Ada Ferrer, John Garrigus, David Geggus, Jane Landers, and Jeremy Popkin, among others, have headed in various directions but all underscored the complexity of a revolution that did not always fit the Manichaean model of black slaves battling white planters. The challenge for educators is to convey to their students the scholarship's sophistication without hopelessly losing or confusing them. Adding to this problem is the fact that archival resources are rich but are spread far and wide and are often written in French or Spanish. Geggus's collection is the answer to these concerns. At once clear, concise, affordable, and comprehensive, it will likely become the standard reader at US universities for years to come, serving at the same time as a useful reference source for many scholars wishing to enter the field.

The readers available until now are few and not always adequate. The oldest, Charles Arthur and Michael Dash's *LibÃ¨te: A Haiti Anthology* (1999), includes an interesting medley of primary and secondary sources covering the whole scope of Haiti's history; it remains the best comprehensive one-volume reader on Haiti but it offers comparatively little on the era of the Haitian Revolution itself. Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon's *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected*

Essays and Historical Documents (2010) is marred by its narrow scope and the poor quality of its scholarship. Popkin's *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Revolution* (2007) is of higher caliber but is weighed down by the editor's unfortunate decision to focus on white accounts of the Haitian Revolution, a surprising choice when so many sources by former slaves and free people of color are available. In this context, the best reader until now is Dubois and Garrigus's *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (2006). Geggus's own effort supersedes this volume by offering a wider array of rare primary sources and more up-to-date scholarship.

Like the Dubois-Garrigus reader, Geggus's work starts with a general introduction that manages to summarize the complex narrative of the Haitian Revolution in thirty-four pages. It is followed by ten sections organized in chronological order, starting with some background information on the society of French Saint-Domingue (Haiti) before 1791 and ending with the worldwide reaction to Haiti's 1804 independence. Each section has its own mini-introduction (which occasionally duplicates the general introduction) followed by what constitutes the heart of the book: about ten excerpts of primary documents per section (ninety-nine in all), each of them situated in their historical context by brief introductory remarks.

The strengths of *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History* are twofold. The first is the author's unrivaled command of the history of the era. Geggus is best known for his definitive monograph on the British inva-

sion of Saint-Domingue in 1793-98, some landmark articles on the life of the revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture, and two edited collections on the impact of the Haitian Revolution. This familiarity with the historical record is evident as he provides some enlightening background information on heavily mythologized events, like the Bois-Caïman ceremony that preceded the Haitian slave revolt (docs. 34 and 35).[1] Even experts will likely find this reader useful as a handy reference guide informing them, for example, that the full name of the author of the oft-cited *Historick Recital* was Gabriel Le Gros (doc. 38).

Equally impressive as Geggus's introductions and annotations is the sheer range and diversity of the primary sources reproduced in the text. Some were originally written in Spanish, French, or English; some were authored by white planters, free people of color, slave rebels, or French administrators; some are private letters, newspaper ads, interrogations of slaves, parliamentary debates, or printed pamphlets. Geggus has culled the

documents from a wide variety of archives, some of them standard (the French Archives Nationales), some of them used more rarely by Haitian scholars (the Archivo General de Indias in Seville), and some of them downright obscure or unexpected (the Bibliothèque Mazarine and the Hagley Library). Considering that some of the academics who publish works on Haiti do not appear (judging by their footnotes) to be fully proficient in French, the publication of this reader, even though it is ostensibly intended for the undergraduate market, is likely to become an important milestone in the English-language historiography of the Haitian Revolution.

Note

[1]. Geggus and Léon-François Hoffmann deconstructed the event in two now-classic articles: David Geggus, "The Bois-Caïman Ceremony," *Journal of Caribbean History* 25 (1991): 41-57; and Léon-François Hoffmann, "Mythe et Idéologie: La Cérémonie du Bois-Caïman," *Études créoles* 13, no. 1 (1990): 9-34.

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