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Reseña de "Igniting the Caribbean's Past: Fire in British West Indian History" de Bonham C. Richardson
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En conclusión, *Pensar el Caribe* es una obra comprensiva y completa. Los cinco colaboradores se complementan de manera intelectual y cada uno trae su conocimiento profesional a una apreciación de lo que es el Caribe y por qué no es posible homogenizar la región entera como lo hace Washington. La lección principal que emerge del libro es la siguiente: la historia variada del Caribe implica que la región no tiene un solo futuro o un solo destino. Los distintos patrones de las diversas potencias coloniales, las diferentes procedencias geográficas y culturales de su gente, los recursos naturales de cada país, y el grado de desarrollo socio-cultural y político de cada uno, condicionarán sus presentes y determinarán sus futuros. Si bien es cierto que hay semejanzas, no es sabio hacer declaraciones generales mal informadas de la región, ni presumir que todos los países caribeños siempre bailarán uniformes al ritmo imperialista.

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In this informative and enlightening book, geographer Bonham C. Richardson explores the role that fire has played in British Caribbean history. Although the title suggests a broader coverage of the topic, the study focuses on a more circumscribed time and place: the British Lesser Antilles between roughly 1885 and 1910. Given the challenges of teasing this topic out of the historical record—“as scholars of fire know,” Richardson reminds us, “their subject is everywhere and nowhere”—he is wise to approach...
it on a more manageable (and, given his prior publication record on the eastern Caribbean, familiar) scale. Through a series of “relevant digressions” he uses the medium of fire to cast light on the social, political, and economic conditions prevailing in the British Lesser Antilles at the turn of the twentieth century. Richardson stresses that fire, unlike the hurricanes and earthquakes that so frequently impact the region, has almost always been initiated by human actors, and thus is particularly conducive to examining the role of agency in Caribbean history.

Richardson’s work is a welcome addition to the literature on the environmental history of the Americas. Ecological approaches to Caribbean history have been uncommon, he suggests, because rural cultivators in the region allegedly lack the ties with the earth associated with, often in essentialist terms, the indigenous peoples of mainland Latin America. This disconnect between the people and the land, he adds, has been reflected in the high rates of migration that characterize Caribbean populations, another subject that he has studied previously. Although not concerned with broad comparative analysis here, Richardson suggests that fire has had a particular meaning in the history of the Caribbean. It has not threatened the destruction of pristine wilderness, as in the forests of Eurasia or North America, nor has it been as closely linked to the long-term evolution of local flora and fauna, as in Australia. Instead, given the overwhelming impact of European conquest, colonialism, and slavery, the uses of fire reflect and reinforce the region’s social relationships. For Richardson, fire itself is less an agent of historical change than a lens through which to view the fin-de-siècle Caribbean.

In a wide-ranging second chapter after the introduction, Richardson comments on the role of fire during different periods in Caribbean history. He begins with a major fire in Port of Spain in 1895 (as well as the 1907 Kingston earthquake), when U.S. naval forces contributed to relief efforts, to illustrate the shift from British to U.S. hegemony in the region around the turn of the century. He then considers archeological evidence of fire use by
aboriginal West Indians, European destruction of native vegetation as lands were cleared and burned for export agriculture, and the use of fire in popular uprisings by slaves and their descendants, including during the pre-Lenten torchlight parades of the cannes brulées in Trinidad and elsewhere. Fire in Caribbean history, Richardson tells us, has been “omnipresent” as well as “symbolic.” In the final section of this chapter, he sets aside his coverage of fire to highlight the main themes—including the growing distinction between rural and urban life, migration, race relations, popular protest, local and colonial politics, and identity—that appear in the remainder of the book.

The core of Igniting the Caribbean’s Past consists of a series of chapters that examine fire in specific contexts. In the third chapter, Richardson covers urban fires, whether caused by accident or arson, in either case fuelled by the continued widespread use of kerosene and the proliferation of wooden matches in the region at the turn of the century. In the next chapter he considers colonial tropical forestry and rural bushfires, paying particular attention to efforts by colonial officials like Daniel Morris, director of public gardens in Jamaica in the late nineteenth century, to condemn small-scale cultivators and charcoal producers for intentionally setting fires that caused extensive environmental destruction in the countryside and mountainous interiors of the islands. In the fifth chapter, Richardson examines the sugarcane industries of the eastern Caribbean, stressing that differences along the lines of climate, technology, land, and labor distinguished the islands from each other. Leaving aside accidental blazes, the vast majority of sugar cane fires were the result of illegal incendiarism, whether as acts of vengeance or, more commonly, started by workers to force immediate employment cutting burnt cane before it quickly lost its sucrose content. The intentional burning of cane fields prior to harvesting did not begin to emerge as common practice in the British Caribbean until the 1920s.

The final two chapters deal with efforts to minimize the destruction wrought by fire and the use of fire in public protest,
respectively, and thus juxtapose elite attitudes and actions towards fire with popular ones. The formation of fire brigades, the use of steam engines and chemical fire extinguishers, and the increasing availability of fire insurance all characterized this time period. The provisioning of water to urban areas was also critical, and by the beginning of the twentieth century all of the British Lesser Antilles had centralized, state-run water systems. Richardson observes that the public standpipe served as a social focal point for city dwellers during this time, yet also represented heightened dependency on the government for basic necessities. When tensions boiled over colonial officials drew the ire of enraged residents, who often employed fire in their uprisings. To illustrate this, Richardson examines the significant cases of “fires of protest” in St. Kitts in 1896, Trinidad in 1903, and St. Lucia in 1907.

Richardson paints a picture of the Caribbean that will be familiar to scholars of the region. While his approach to studying this period may be original, his findings reinforce what we know about the marked social divisions, racial inequality and tensions, economic dislocation, and growing anti-colonial sentiment of the time. Yet even as he highlights certain key characteristics shared by the colonies of the eastern Caribbean, he also acknowledges the diversity within the region. Fire might be universal, but its impact varied within islands (especially between rural and urban locations) as well as between them (depending in particular on both size and climate).

Although Richardson critiques certain (unspecified) studies for being “based exclusively” on government records, and thus offering limited insight into the lives of the common people of the Caribbean, his own study is not entirely devoid of elite bias. He relies primarily on newspaper articles and editorials, supplemented with some archival sources, particularly Colonial Office correspondence. One wonders to what degree the newspapers that form the core of this monograph provide a new perspective on the past. Despite Richardson’s aim of presenting the viewpoint of the lower classes, his book often gives greater voice to the islands’
planters, businessmen, and newspaper publishers. To be fair, a history of fire “from below” would not be easy. Perhaps extensive research in local archives would allow increased access to the actions, attitudes, and motivations of the lower classes, particularly the workers who so frequently set fire to cane fields.

The text is complemented by ten illustrations and a map. The latter—reproduced from the 1897 *Report of the West India Royal Commission*—is helpful, although perhaps not as clear and detailed as students with little prior knowledge of Caribbean geography would require. Similarly, the rich narrative might be appealing to a student audience, but the narrow focus of the book might make it more difficult to incorporate into a survey course on the Caribbean. Given the obvious challenges of documenting the impact and meaning of fire in the time and place chosen by the author, it would be too much to expect this study to cover a broader span, yet clearly the significance of fire could be considered for all of the Caribbean and at other moments in time. Future researchers can now take up the torch, following Richardson’s lead, with *Igniting the Caribbean’s Past* lighting the way.

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Geographer Bonham C. Richardson explores the effects of fire in the social and ecological history of the British Les. Unlike the earthquakes and hurricanes that have influenced Caribbean history, the region's fires have almost always been caused by humans. Geographer Bonham C. Richardson explores the effects of fire in the social and ecological history of the British Les.