Galloway, J.H.
Reseña de "From Rainforest to Canefield in Cuba: An Environmental History Since 1492" de Reinaldo Funes Monzote
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sumptuous memoir, *From Harvey River: A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island*, demonstrates some of the possibilities I am imagining: offering an account that is at once a celebration of family and a loving and matter-of-fact exposure of some of that family’s peculiar and buried silences (Goodison 2007). In the process of shifting ethnographic focus “from the homelands represented in public manifestations of cultural politics to the places of belonging that emerge in the private, intersubjective context of migrants and their descendants’ lives” (p. 16), Olwig overlooks that there is a cultural politics too in the arena of kinship, a cultural politics that runs at the very core of Caribbean social discontents. A regional ethnographic focus is as important as it ever was, and must be maintained alongside the equally vital analytical emphasis on global belonging.

References


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This book is both an explanation of how Cuba became a major producer of sugar cane—for some years indeed the leading producer—and an assessment of the damage to the island’s environment this achievement involved. The author has based his arguments on research in archives in Spain and Cuba, on biological evidence of vegetation change and on the observations made over the centuries by government officials, travellers and scientists: Cuban, Spanish and
foreign. He presents the results of this research in terms of the interests of three groups each of which had very definite ideas about the correct, or most appropriate, form of land use for the island: the Spanish Royal Navy which wished to preserve the island's forest cover so as to provide a continuing source of timber for export to Spain and for building naval ships in Cuba; agricultural interests seeking an extension of private land-ownership with the aim of clearing the forest to make way for sugar plantations; and a third group, growing more vocal with the passage of time, concerned about the environmental change caused by deforestation and the expanding sugar industry, and with whom the author sympathizes. The book is organized chronologically from the beginnings of the sugar industry in Cuba to the investment of American capital on a large scale in the early twentieth century. This translation from Spanish is clearly written, jargon free, as I assume is the original. There are Appendices with information on scientific names, climatic data, and units of measure. Rather than footnotes there are end notes organized by chapter, a Glossary, Bibliographical Essay, an Index and a good choice of maps and illustrations. Without doubt this book is a major contribution to the environmental history of Cuba and the Caribbean.

The first 250 years or so of Cuban history since the Spanish arrival are covered rather quickly in the first chapter on the grounds that sugar industry was then comparatively underdeveloped, not yet the major force of landscape change that it was to become. The brief discussion of what the vegetation cover of the island might have been like in 1492 leads to the conclusion, even allowing for the activities of the indigenous population, that it was then well-forested. The Spanish farmers at first changed little, making use of woodlands for the grazing of hogs and cattle but the beginning of the sugar industry did start the process of deforestation to make way for fields and to supply timber for buildings, mills, carts and fuel. The dispute between the sugar industry and the navy developed particularly strongly during the late seventeenth century and on into the eighteenth in the most densely settled area of the island around Havana, reaching a climax in the years around 1800. By that time Havana had indeed become an important shipbuilding centre for the navy while the sugar industry had been given a major boost by the recent revolution in Haiti which destroyed the industry there, removing a competitor. The author devotes two chapters to this dispute which the navy was to lose. In 1815, after much debate, “the king put his seal on the royal edict giving private property owners the perpetual right to fell their own trees with complete freedom” (p. 124) ending the navy’s claims to manage forests. The prospect of the tax revenues from a developing sugar industry was a deciding factor (p. 125). In the following three chapters the author examines the relationship between the sugar industry and the environ-
ment. In the first he discusses the immediate consequences of the edict: the expansion of cultivated land at the expense of the forests. The main theme of the second is the impact on the forests of the introduction of new technology such as the large central factories and railroads with their demand for fuel and railroad ties. In the third he discusses the American-financed clearances to make way for the expansion of the sugar industry into the east of the island. The study ends in 1926 the date of a final decree in a series issued by the government that, taken together, amounted to the virtual undoing of the 1815 edict. The brief Conclusion is an excellent summing up.

The theme of deforestation permeates the book. It is of course a very visible aspect of environmental change: Cuba once forested is now mostly deforested. Another theme is soil exhaustion, a consequence of deforestation abetted by poor agricultural practices. The risk of changes in river flow and rainfall regimes also receive attention. These are familiar and necessary topics in environmental history and are the main content of the book but the author goes further to discuss some consequences of environmental change that are often overlooked: the loss of plant, animal and bird species. The author notes apologetically in his Conclusion he has not been able to go into this subject in depth leaving it for “future studies” (p. 274). What he has given is a tantalizing introduction, an indication of what might be done. He does report briefly on the discussions in nineteenth century Cuba about the “useful” trees that might be planted with the aim of improving climate (p. 215), providing a list that inevitably includes eucalyptus which came to be widely introduced in Latin America during the nineteenth century not so much in the expectation that it might increase rainfall but because of its quick growing characteristics and abundant yield of timber. Bird life he notes has suffered from loss of habitat with at least one extinction, the Cuban macaw, with possibly more to come (pp. 214, 259-260, 273-274). An important source here is an Ornitologia cubana published in 1893 by Johannes Gundlach, a German long resident in Cuba (p. 214). A concern which the author does not raise are the possible consequences the deforestation of Cuba, and indeed of other Caribbean islands, may have had on the fall and spring migrations of birds travelling between North and South America.

Could the environmental history of Cuba from the European arrival down to the 1920s have been any different? The Spanish government’s quick understanding of the ocean currents and wind systems of the Atlantic made navigation between Cuba and Spain relatively safe, except in times of hurricanes and war. The island was in fact easily accessible. Although it did not provide a quick supply of extraordinary wealth as that which flowed to Spain after the conquest of Mexico and Peru, its
forests were an important resource for a country short of timber at home that needed to maintain a powerful navy. Sooner or later these forests would be exploited. Sugar was a luxury in Europe at the time of the discovery of the Americas, enjoyed by only a very small minority but cheaper supplies would, and indeed did, expand consumption. The Portuguese and Spanish quickly turned newly-discovered Madeira, the Canaries and São Tomé into sugar islands. Once introduced to the Caribbean—by Columbus on his second voyage—it became the main cash crop of the region, later in this instance rather than sooner, from the early 1600s on. Other crops such as tobacco and coffee were never its equal. Even cattle were auxiliary to sugar, providing the power to turn mills and pull carts. There were similarities in the industry from island to island, in agricultural techniques, technology of processing cane, and use of slave labor, abolished at different times in the different colonies, but the record of the longevity of the industry has varied enormously.

On Barbados, despite early deforestation, it has been cultivated now for nearly 400 years, yielding recently some acreage to golf courses. In Haiti the sugar industry collapsed two hundred years ago in revolution and environmental disaster. These are perhaps extreme examples.

Cuba’s size permitted a very large scale industry. Landowners wished to participate in the money-making that sugar cultivation made possible. Could participation have been limited? Could intensive forms of land use have been introduced, even a rotation between cane field and forest? Such measures would have required determined, persistent, long-term planning. Another consequence of Cuba’s size was the importance of railroads which, because of the lack of coal, depended on the forests for fuel. Bagasse, or cane pulp, to quote the term the translator has used, was not a good fuel for steam locomotives.

The author has not ventured into speculation about what could have happened if. Instead he records what indeed did happen in a book which will probably serve as a guide to writers on the environmental history of other islands in the Caribbean and around the tropical world.
Reinaldo Funes Monzote, is an associate professor of history at the University of Havana. He holds a Ph.D. from Universitat Jaume I, Spain. He has been a visiting instructor and research guest in universities from Spain and Brazil and has been a guest lecturer in numerous countries around the globe. Event is free and open to the public. A reception sponsored by DOHGSA (the history department graduate student association) will be held following the event in the History department conference room, DM370. For additional information and to RSVP call LACC at (305)348-2894. Co-sponsored by the Depar By Reinaldo Funes Monzote. Translated by Alex Martin. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008. By Reinaldo Funes Monzote. Translated by Alex Martin. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008.