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**David Geggus**, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xii + 348 pp. Maps, appendices, notes, index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-253-34104-3.

Review by Laurent Dubois, Michigan State University.

“The Haitian Revolution,” writes David Geggus in the preface to *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, “produced the world’s first examples of wholesale emancipation in a major slave-owning society, colonial representation in a metropolitan assembly, and full racial equality in a European colony.” It did so, he continues, “when the Atlantic slave trade was at its peak and when slavery was an accepted institution from Canada to Chile.” A precocious experiment in democracy and freedom, it both triggered a backlash on the part of those who were threatened by its example and provided inspiration for the ongoing battles against slavery. At the time—and since—it “seized international attention with images of apocalyptic destruction and a new world in the making,” as Geggus writes (p. vii).

The event stands at the crossroads of the histories of despotism and democracy, slavery and emancipation, colonialism and independence. It was, on one level, a grand historical epic, a story of masses of African and creole slaves who transformed themselves into an army; of white Republicans on both sides of the Atlantic who embraced the cause of equality and celebrated the liberation of slaves as the climax of their democratic revolution; of one-time slaves who became generals, governors, emperors, and kings. It was also, of course, an event of enormous complexity and contradiction, one that ultimately cannot be explained simply as a struggle between different racial groups or even different social groups. The political and philosophical terrain of the Revolution shifted constantly, as did the alliances formed upon and through it. And the greatest heroes of the Revolution—Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe—can also be seen as its greatest villains.

Although there has been a fair amount of historical writing about the Revolution, it varies widely in its quality and depth and remains remarkably dispersed. The major works available in English are C.L.R. James’ 1930s classic *The Black Jacobins*, Thomas Ott’s 1973 *The Haitian Revolution*, and the more recent contribution by Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti*. Major nineteenth-century works by Thomas Madiou and Beaubrun Ardouin, which have been foundational sources for later historians, remain available only in French and are difficult to find in the U.S. twentieth-century writings by historians such as Gabriel Debien, also invaluable, are in many cases out of print or else dispersed in a variety of journals and collections. [1] Until now this also has been the case for the writings of David Geggus, who, since the publication of his 1982 *Slavery, War and Revolution*, has written a series of ground-breaking and, as the French say, *incontournable* articles on different aspects of the Haitian Revolution. The publication of *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, which collects the most important of these articles in one volume, is therefore an extremely welcome addition to the expanding literature in the field. Furthermore, many of these essays have been significantly updated and transformed thanks to Geggus’ continuing research, and two articles—in many ways the high-points of the collection—are completely new.

The collection begins with a general account of the Revolution—the best short summary of the event now available—which allows readers to situate the more specific pieces that follow in a broader context. This is followed in Part II by two historiographical articles. The first article, an overview of approaches to the Revolution, begins by recalling the towering achievement of James' work, which Geggus compliments for its "brilliant prose" and its "virtuoso analysis" and notes is "a very hard act to follow." It then discusses newer work that has extended "our knowledge of the Haitian Revolution" beyond what was known "at the time C.L.R. James was writing" (p. 33). Geggus usefully outlines the contributions made by Fick and Debien and by the work of John Garrigus and Stewart King on free people of color in Saint-Domingue. He examines Pierre Pluchon's work on Toussaint Louverture, lauding its qualities while appropriately criticizing the author for his "systematically cynical interpretation of all the key events in Toussaint's career" (p. 39). And he also directs readers to a recent work published in Haiti by Gaetan Mentor, which draws on little-used private collections in the country. The next article offers a useful catalogue of some central, though "underexploited" sources available to historians of the Revolution in French, British, Caribbean, and U.S. archives. Geggus has contributed to making a number of these sources more accessible through his participation in the invaluable French Revolution Research Collection, which thanks to him has an excellent section on the colonies.

The third part of the book presents a series of essays about the revolt that exploded in 1791 in Saint-Domingue, which was the central and defining event of the Revolution. Here Geggus presents some of his more controversial theses, taking on arguments made by a number of historians about the links between marronage, religious practices, and the insurrection itself. In an essay on "Marronage, Vodou and the Slave Revolt of 1791," Geggus vigorously disputes the idea, presented most strongly in the work of the historian Jean Fouchard, that there was an important link between the activities of maroons and the beginning of the Revolution. He concludes that while a few insurgent leaders may have had some experience as maroons, "it seems very likely that the insurrection was organized from within the system more than from outside it" (p. 73). He argues further (in a vein similar to the approach used by David Barry Gaspar in *Bondsmen and Rebels*, a study of a slave conspiracy in Antigua) that it was in fact the limits placed on the "safety valve" of marronage by the expansion of coffee cultivation in the mountains during the second half of the eighteenth-century that may have paved the way for open revolt (p. 74). Similarly, he opposes the idea that many insurgent leaders were religious leaders and argues that "the role of vodou in the Haitian Revolution" was "ancillary rather than central" (p. 80).

At the end of this article, Geggus notes that the piece has been "deliberately negative in tone." "Too much in the historiography of the Haitian Revolution has gone without critical appraisal," he declares. The goal of his "notes toward an evaluation of the Saint-Domingue slave revolt," he continues, is to begin the process of constructing an "interpretation of this greatest of all slave revolts" (p. 80). But, at least in this essay, Geggus does not take on this difficult task, which some readers may find frustrating.

The same can be said of the important essay which follows it, a detailed examination of the sources surrounding the Bois-Caïman ceremony. According to most histories of the Revolution, this was a religious ceremony during which slaves gathered together and took an oath, sealed by the drinking of blood from a sacrificed black pig, to rise up against the whites. The exact content and very existence of this event has long been the subject of fascination and, in the past decades, the center of a lively debate about the relationship between myth and history in Haiti. Geggus provides what is probably the most detailed examination of the ceremony available, painstakingly discussing the fragmentary evidence surrounding the event and critiquing various interpretations that have been provided by historians. He presents a compelling story of his own about the ceremony, but he does so tentatively and presents his interpretation within the interstices of his broader critique of the sources and the historiography. Geggus is clearly uncomfortable with the broad, often mythologizing histories that have been written and is wary of coming to conclusions when there are still many unknowns and often further research to be done. Still, given his extensive knowledge of the sources, a clearer attempt to reconstruct and interpret the events he discusses would be welcome.

In Part IV of the book, Geggus turns to subjects of central importance in understanding what happened after 1791 and how revolt led to emancipation. In one of the two new pieces in the book, he presents an analysis of a famous corps of slave soldiers, called the “Swiss,” who served with free coloreds in the Western province of Saint-Domingue in late 1791. This is a fabulous piece of research that lays bare the details of this complicated and controversial story, and readers interested in the problem of relations between free people of color and slaves will be grateful for the careful way Geggus has laid out the material. In the chapter that follows, Geggus presents a substantially updated version of a well-known article on the “volte-face” of Toussaint Louverture (originally published in the *Revue d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer* in 1978), who in 1794 switched from the side of the Spanish, who were using him to fight against the French, to the side of the beleaguered Republic. It was, according to many historians, the “turning point” of the Haitian Revolution, as Louverture and his troops shored up French power in the colony and turned the tide against the Spanish and British invaders. Still, the reasons for, and timing of, Louverture’s choice remain remarkably obscure. As in his essay on Bois-Caïman, Geggus pores through all the available evidence, providing some tentative interpretations of why the man made the choices he did. Readers of the earlier version of the article will note some important changes in both facts and interpretation in this new version.

The chapter that follows provides some of the best reading in the volume. It is an examination of a slave named Jean Kina who fought with whites against both free people of color and slave insurgents (ultimately joining the British side), and it provides a window into the complicated political landscape of the Revolution. Geggus writes here with eloquence, leaving his readers with a tantalizing and poetic picture of Kina and his family disappearing “from the historical record in a carriage on the Alpine high road, winding its way through the mountains towards the Côte d’Azur” (p. 151).

The same combination of painstaking research and good story-telling infuses one of the essays in Part V that explores the fates of a series of insurgents who sided with the Spanish and, unlike Louverture, never changed sides. Building on the pioneering work of Jane Landers, Geggus has tracked down material in archives throughout Spain and the Spanish Americas to tell the stories of where these leaders were settled by the Spanish authorities.<sup>[2]</sup> His work sheds light on the ways the Haitian Revolution contributed to the formation of new communities not only in Cuba and Florida, but also in Honduras, Yucatán and Panama.

The other essays of this final portion of the book explore the broader political context that shaped the Haitian Revolution, examining the colonial debates that took place in Paris during the early years of the French Revolution (in an article that was published in the *American Historical Review* in 1989) and the policies of Spain, Britain, and the U.S. with regards to revolutionary Saint-Domingue. The closing piece in the book is an exploration of why those who founded a new nation in the colony in 1804 chose the Amerindian name Haïti. It provides a glimpse of the complicated politics of nationalism and identity that would continue to shape post-independence Haiti.

These pieces showcase what is best about Geggus’ work: an unparalleled knowledge of the sources, an ability to make connections and analyze the inter-linked causes and ramifications of events, and a commitment to taking on difficult historical questions and providing as exhaustive an account as possible. There are times when we might wish Geggus to be less tentative about his own interpretations of the historical facts and to give us more of the excellent narration he provides in some of his essays. But his caution is understandable in a context in which many of the most basic questions of the Revolution have not yet been the subject of detailed research. Some central questions about the functioning and impact of Louverture’s regime, for instance, demand much deeper exploration. And there is much we still need to explore about the actions of those slave insurgents who rose up in 1791 and who continued to shape the course of the Revolution, the majority of whom were African-born. As Geggus writes eloquently: “Avoiding the twin perils of exoticizing or occidentalizing the slaves, how are we to imagine the attitudes and beliefs of those Africans and children of Africans of two centuries

ago: those who called their white enemies 'the monkeys' or 'the citizens,' those who in their native languages had no word for 'liberty' even though thousands of them died in its pursuit?" (p. 42).

Ultimately, of course, the answers will only come through cumulative and collaborative work. Indeed, in addition to his own writing, Geggus has made major contributions to this broader process by editing two volumes about the Haitian Revolution and its impact—*A Turbulent Time* (with David Barry Gaspar) and *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*—which came out of conferences that set in motion a series of valuable conversations and collaborations. Whatever we are to learn in the future about the Haitian Revolution, it will undoubtedly be profoundly shaped by the contributions David Geggus has made.

## NOTES

[1] C.L.R James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963; originally published in 1938); Thomas Ott, *The Haitian Revolution* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973); Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Beaubrun Ardouin, *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti* (Port-au-Prince: Dalencourt, 1958 [1853-1865]); Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haïti* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1989 [1847-48]); Gabriel Debien, *Les Colons de Saint-Domingue et la Révolution: Essai sur le Club Massiac (Août 1789-Août 1792)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1951).

[2] Jane Landers, "Rebellion and Royalism in Spanish Florida," in David Barry Gaspar and David Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 156-171.

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