
Book Review: *The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean: Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making*

The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean: Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making, by Sharika D. Crawford. University of North Carolina Press, 2020, + 204 pages.

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How does one map small places onto the canvas of world history? How, more so, when the region is mostly constituted of islands of “miniscule size,” often (because of this size and distance from the coast) viewed as “peripheral” to the respective mainland nations that claim sovereignty over them today? Turning to maritime labor, and the lives, journeys, knowledge regimes, and cultures of seagoing communities, offers one way in for Sharika Crawford to pull out stories from the Cayman Islands, the Miskito Cays (modern-day Nicaragua), or San Andrés and Providencia (claimed presently by Colombia), for instance.

Turning to turtlemen—that is, the communities that hunted green and hawksbill turtles (who once numbered in the millions in the Caribbean region) across this water-space—allows Crawford to reorient Caribbean historiography toward the ocean. In a region where historians have emphasized the terrestrial economic form of the sugar and/or banana plantation, Crawford turns instead to the sea and its creatures. Crawford focuses on the human communities that hunted turtles to argue that these actors were fundamental to processes of boundary-making and sovereignty as they emerged in the modern period. Although the first chapter takes a long view to Caribbean history, the bulk of the text is focused on the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Crawford’s main thesis and evidence force us to ask how small places matter. Each of the five chapters strives for a different argument, dipping into and out of different

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historiographic fields and time periods, each of which I would have liked to know about in greater detail. These include the rise of conservation science, maritime labor, contact-zones in the Caribbean, and the emergence of international maritime law. The book's somewhat distinct strands each begin an interesting argument although these do not, finally, dovetail. How does the rise of conservation science in the Caribbean, with US Navy backing, for instance, radically reshape notions of state boundaries? The unifying thread is the argument that "turtlemen helped to redraw the maritime boundaries of the modern Caribbean" (p. 7).

Crawford approaches Caymanian turtle hunters using oral histories or (more often) North American scientists and travel writers' reports about them. These seafaring individuals paid little heed to nascent nations emerging on the mainland, following their prey from beach to creek, across different nooks and bays spread out across the islands. Historians of maritime labor will be drawn to this book for the (perhaps predictable) similarities between turtlemen and other maritime workers such as sailors, whalers, lobster fishers, or pearl divers. Chapter 2, which is the most labor-focused of the book, will be of special interest for those who work on maritime occupations. Turtlemen were "mobile and transnational"; they, too, had little regard for land-based notions of where one state's sovereignty ended and another began. They devised creative ways to move between space. We find that because turtle hunting requires following turtles who moved and thus prompted a kind of human itinerancy that "exposed the limits of these states' sovereignty over both their borders and their resources" (p. 11).

It is perhaps worth pointing out, for the purposes of a review in this journal, that the text is not an animal history. Green and hawksbill turtles were clearly a valuable commodity: their flesh was eaten locally but also in foreign markets, and their shell carapaces became ornaments or other shell-based commodities in Europe and North America. One of the real joys of this book is how foodways run through this study, from baked turtle in Puerto Limon marinated in wine and cooked with tomato and Spanish onion to fried flippers to tender meat stewed in coconut milk. Animal history, however, is not merely "about animal products," in which case, much economic history on ivory, peacock feathers, guano, pearls, or silk, would also count as animal history. Instead, animal history asks how turtles themselves may have experienced history. Turtles remain, in this story, "raw materials" that drive human migration and movement.

Where the turtle does matter, then, is in relation to the question of law and state sovereignty. For as the creatures moved, so too, the humans who hunted them, between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and Colombia. While the actors Crawford is interested in were certainly mobile, chapter 4 on the law of the sea, which should have contained the main argument, still left me with questions about causality: Could one really insist based on the movements of turtlemen that these were the *causal* patterns that shaped maritime sovereignty? Although turtlemen certainly contravened settled livelihoods, I was not fully convinced. ■

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