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Ronald N. Harpelle. *The West Indians of Costa Rica: Race, Class, and the Integration of an Ethnic Minority*. McGill-Queen's Studies in Ethnic History. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. xx + 238 pp. Canadian \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2162-9.

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At Arm's Length on the Caribbean Rim

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Some years back the human geographer John Augelli postulated his Mainland-Rimland culture area scheme in order to delineate the differences between the cultures of Mexico and Central America on the one hand and those of the Caribbean on the other.[1] His boundary between these two large culture areas ran slightly inland along the Caribbean-facing coasts of Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Belize, a worthwhile cartographic attempt to demonstrate geographically where different cultural traditions meet and interact and collide. Among the principal settlements along this low-lying tropical coastal zone is Limon, the Costa Rican port town established by the United Fruit Company for banana export in the late 1800s, a place where thousands of Jamaicans and other Afro-Caribbean peoples landed, settled, and stayed. Canadian historian Ronald Harpelle's well-done book, *The West Indians of Costa Rica*, tells that this process, which has taken place at the interface between Mainland and Rimland, never has been easy for the settlers.

In the preface Harpelle points out that his book "tells the story of the transformation of the West Indian identity in Costa Rica during the first half of the twentieth century" (p. xiii). He further suggests that his book, in line with other recent studies, modifies the oversimplified "white settler" image that highland Costa Ricans often project about their country. The author also writes

that his book considers the importance and interactions among class, ethnicity, and adaptation over time in detailing how an Afro-Costa Rican community has been forged in eastern Costa Rica. At the end of his introduction Harpelle tells us that his study really is "a story about choices" (p. xx), thereby introducing the appealing notion that people create their own circumstances, although, from the perspective of black Costa Ricans, the story Harpelle subsequently tells probably is more about the constraints of discrimination and prejudice than it is of free will.

The West Indians of Costa Rica has a total of nine chronologically arranged chapters that are further divided up into Parts One, Two, and Three, providing a bit more compartmentalization than necessary for what is only one hundred ninety pages of text. Part One (chapters one through four) describes the establishment of the Limon banana enclave and events there into the mid-1930s when the region was beset by labor turmoil and the arrival of plant disease that soon led the United Fruit Company to move most of its operations to the Pacific side of the country. The earliest rail construction from San Jose down to Limon in the 1870s was bedeviled by financial shortfalls and geographical constraints. The sweltering and disease-ridden coastal zone repelled highland peasants as possible laborers. So, despite anti-black laws that denied the entry of "prohibited races" to Costa Rica, tens of thousands of black West Indians, mainly Jamaicans, were transported by United Fruit Company of-

ficials to help complete the railroad in 1890. In the subsequent years, North American demand for bananas transformed Limon into a “bustling enclave” (p. 20) with English the lingua franca mediating an interdependence between the fruit company, known locally as “el pulpo” (the octopus!), and its transplanted, mainly black workers. The black populace developed its own local culture, with ties to the Caribbean far more important than to the Central American mainland. For example, the Jamaican-born black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey worked in Limon in the second decade of the twentieth century, reinforcing black consciousness and identity; and the establishment of particularly active chapters of Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association in eastern Costa Rica (pp. 52-61) was partly a response to hostility from Hispanic Costa Ricans. As economic depression and dislocations weakened interdependencies between the fruit company and black workers, the latter group came in for increased criticism from locals because they were not “real” Costa Ricans. In the 1920s and 1930s, various anti-black local groups, such as the inappropriately named Amigos del Pais, convinced the fruit company to adopt discriminatory, anti-black hiring practices (pp. 70-71).

Parts Two and Three of Harpelle’s book describe the ways in which black Costa Ricans of the Limon district survived and persisted within the broader Costa Rican context until mid-century. The depression decade of the 1930s, when wage destinations throughout the circum-Caribbean were imposing tough, anti-immigration sanctions, were particularly difficult. Anti-black sentiments, which had been nurtured by Hispanic Costa Ricans all along, seemed to increase, now accented with occasional calls for deportations of “Jamaiquinos” (p. 101) for reasons of their supposed lunacy, dementia, and overall wickedness. Harpelle is particularly effective in showing how a handful of celebrated local cases involved the reported actions of eccentric spiritual leaders. In the 1930s several of these events were publicized widely, creating hysteria over black magic, obeah, and the presence of dangerous cults (“cultos”) within the black community (pp. 102-119.) Shortly thereafter in the early 1940s all Costa Ricans were obliged legally to apply for identification cards (“Cedulas de Identidad”), an obligation many blacks avoided even when deportation was threatened (pp. 140-141). The author sums up the overall black experience in Costa Rica in the 1930s by suggesting that the decade saw the group evolve “from an embattled group of immigrants to a national minority led by Afro-Costa Ricans” (p. 162). Yet blacks apparently continued to occupy the political sidelines, even into the 1940s when various

ideological factions competed for political power. When the post-election rivalries early in 1948 resulted in violence in most of Costa Rica, for example, the sentiment held by the majority of coastal blacks was indifference: “The political struggles that concerned Hispanics were of little interest to West Indians” (p. 169). Blacks seemed finally to be accepted by mainstream politicians in the country by the early 1950s, not least because of the opportunistic efforts by a handful of Afro-Costa Rican leaders. Despite these efforts, the Afro-Costa Rican group “has remained a footnote in Costa Rican history and a forgotten part of the national heritage” (p. 183).

Harpelle’s study apparently is based on his Ph.D. thesis, a conclusion drawn from his brief acknowledgements which could have been more detailed in order to aid other researchers. He derives his information from an impressive array of secondary sources in both Spanish and English. Much of his primary material comes from several Costa Rican archives listed at the back. And while he cites a number of “FO” (presumably British Foreign Office) documents in the end notes, he does not mention archival work in the United Kingdom. He makes good use of information and trends reported in early newspapers from the Limon area, several of which had “Atlantic” in the title, thereby providing literal daily reminders to readers that eastern Costa Rica was tied more closely to overseas destinations than it was to the central part of the country. Moreover, Harpelle points out that (especially the black-oriented) newspapers, “passed from hand to hand, farm to farm, and town to town” (p. 107), thereby buttressing black identity and society in the years they were establishing a foothold in the country. Harpelle cites valuable information from “interviewees” at a number of points in his study, but, again, the locations, extent, and nature of his interviewing older people is not pointed out beyond an end note (p. 204) that he interviewed “several elderly” Costa Ricans in 1984 and 1990.

The author’s prose is clear, engaging, and straightforward, and he knits chapters together well by providing hints about what will come next at the end of each one. The absence of any kind of graphic material in Harpelle’s book, not even a single small-scale map, is disappointing, especially because the spatial isolation of the Afro-Costa Rican group is such an important part of the story he tells. And whereas the conclusion of the book is the middle of the twentieth century, non-specialists of eastern Costa Rica are left hanging as to the progress of the black community there and the local roles they now play. Is their integration into the national economy stronger or weaker in an age of globalization? What were their

sentiments toward their neighbor to the north during the 1980s when the eastern zone of Nicaragua was the locus of anti-Sandinista activities? Certainly the author is entitled to delimit his study's time period, yet a brief epilogue bringing readers up to date on the region and its people would have been very helpful. Interested readers will find some of that material in Trevor Purcell's *Banana Fallout*, published in 1993, although the latter is more an ethnography than it is a social history.[2]

The book with which Harpelle's inevitably will be compared is Aviva Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940* (1996).[3] As is obvious from Chomsky's title, the two studies overlap a good deal in their subject matter. Both authors have consulted much of the same archival material, although Chomsky's work in British and United States archives seems to make her research more complete. She also has provided a more tactile, grassroots picture of the transplanted West Indian community in Costa Rica from the admittedly difficult and fragmentary population data that exist for the period. For example, she provides valu-

able tables of mortality and morbidity at the village level. Both authors are struck by black solidarity (regardless of islands of origin) in the region and how these feelings have been reinforced by local religious activities. Finally, both Harpelle and Chomsky successfully argue that an enduring and prophecy-fulfilling "white settler" historiography for Costa Rica fails to deal with the country's ethnic reality and that the incomplete portrayal of a harmonious, egalitarian, small settler society at the national level has the effect of telling a story that never was.

Notes

[1]. John P. Augelli, "The Rimland-Mainland Concept of Culture Area in Middle America," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 52:2 (1962), pp. 119-129.

[2]. Trevor W. Purcell, *Class, Color, and Culture among West Indians in Costa Rica* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Afro-American Studies, 1993).

[3]. Aviva Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

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