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Wealth and Disaster

Pierre Force

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In 1729, Marc-Antoine Lamerenx, a minor French nobleman, set sail for Saint-Domingue. Twenty years later, peasant Jean Mouscardy also made the long and difficult journey to Saint-Domingue. Although the men were not related and had little in common, they hailed from the same Pyrenean town, La Bastide Clairence. In the New World, they both settled in Saint-Martin-du-Dondon, where they made their fortunes growing coffee. After the Haitian slave revolt uprooted them, some of their descendants stayed in Haiti and took part in building the new nation. Others took refuge in France, started businesses in New Orleans, or transferred their slaves and their Haitian experience to new coffee plantations in Cuba.

Wealth and Disaster follows the emigrant Lamerenx and Mouscardy families over three generations and various locations across the Caribbean. Pierre Force traces their white and mixed-race descendants from the early-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries and over decades of comings and goings between their French ancestral town and Saint-Domingue, Cuba, and New Orleans. A chance encounter in a French archive led Force to uncover an epic saga, a fascinating and character-driven story of pirates, revolution, staggering riches, financial ruination, natural disaster, harsh imprisonment, and the rise of the plantation economy.

By observing the circulation of a few individuals between the Pyrenees and the Caribbean, Force is able to show how these two worlds became interconnected. Arguing that who emigrated and how depended on one’s position in the Pyrenean house-based system, Force also reveals how capital accumulation in Saint-Domingue relied on Pyrenean networks and how, in turn, wealth acquired in America changed the rules of the game back home. An exciting and accessible history, *Wealth and Disaster* offers riveting insight into the matrimonial strategies and inheritance customs of French rural society and the resulting choices to emigrate or to stay.

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