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Review Of "The Sun King's Atlantic: Drugs, Demons And Dyestuffs In The Atlantic World, 1640–1730" by J. Wimmmler

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Recommended Citation

Robert S. DuPlessis. (2018). "Review Of "The Sun King's Atlantic: Drugs, Demons And Dyestuffs In The Atlantic World, 1640–1730" by J. Wimmmler". *New West Indian Guide*. Volume 92, Issue 3-4. 293-295. DOI: 10.1163/22134360-09203022

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Book Reviews



Jutta Wimpler, *The Sun King's Atlantic: Drugs, Demons and Dyestuffs in the Atlantic World, 1640–1730*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017. xiii + 229 pp. (Cloth US\$93.00)

Scholars have long debated the significance of Atlantic slave trades and plantation crops for European economic development, most notably the English Industrial Revolution. Cultural, social, and intellectual effects of Atlantic goods, practices, and concepts on Europeans have been much less canvassed, despite pioneering works such as Marcy Norton's *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (2008). Jutta Wimpler's well-researched intervention in this emergent field sheds welcome light on the French experience, which remains largely unexplored. After an overview of the development of French Atlantic trade and an introduction to her sources, five thematically organized chapters examine materials, procedures, and knowledge once important though subsequently supplanted.

The French were already familiar with Atlantic goods well before staples such as sugar, coffee, and chocolate became popular in the eighteenth century. Yet if the Atlantic mattered to metropolitan France in the age of Louis XIV, Wimpler proposes, it was conceptually and discursively marginalized. For one thing, Asia beguiled the French public, even if West Africa, the Caribbean, and New France supplied more cheaply or more readily the materials that enabled consumers to buy affordable versions of Asian goods or new products marketed as Asian. Atlantic products mediated French fascination with the Far East, but their identity vanished in the process. This paradox is explored in two impressive chapters dealing respectively with imports employed in fashion products (dyes and gum arabic, furniture raw materials, hides, skins, and furs) and those concerned with corporeal matters (foodstuffs, cosmetics, and medicinals). Using admittedly incomplete and problematic overseas trade documents for Bordeaux, La Rochelle, and Marseille between 1715 and 1734, Wimpler attends, if briefly, to production and marketing. But the chapters are partic-

ularly concerned with the uses to which these items were put within France, and the ways in which they were absorbed into a cultural narrative that largely erased their origins.

The remaining three substantive chapters investigate ways that the French understood, learned from, and distorted Africans and Amerindians and their (usually unattributed) techniques and expertise. The contrast between enchantment with Asia and disinterest in the Atlantic largely disappears, however; indeed, no general thesis is offered. As Galenist medicine proved unable to offer remedies for new or newly virulent diseases encountered in Atlantic locations, institutions in or in contact with the Atlantic—notably botanical gardens, the Paris Académie des Sciences, and colonial hospitals—provided key empirical knowledge and methods that led to Galenism's subsequent downfall. Before early eighteenth-century commerce, colonization, and missionary activity brought France degrees of success that eluded them in Asia, Atlantic topics were of marginal interest in courtly theater and the *Mercuré Galant*, and representations of its indigenous inhabitants stereotypical. Similarly, constructions of Atlantic religions depended more on French preoccupations and projections—martyrdom, Satan, witches—than on the beliefs and rituals of those targeted for conversion.

In the course of her analysis, Wimpler presents intriguing information and smart observations about a variety of subjects from gum arabic to ostrich feathers, *nouvelle cuisine* (early modern iteration) to syphilis, the “iatrochemical Atlantic” and a ballet. Commendably, *The Sun King's Atlantic* seeks to recover contributions of indigenous and enslaved populations to European cultural and material life, particularly those of West Africans, though limits inherent in Wimpler's sources often oblige her to put forward possible scenarios rather than demonstrated findings. Economic historians will find the data too fragmentary to permit drawing any but tentative conclusions about trading patterns and trends. Historians of consumption will wish that Wimpler had moved her discussion of why and how Atlantic imports were adopted and incorporated beyond assertions of elite-centered emulation and social distinction to consider newer theorizations like the material lives of things or the polycentric origins of fashion. The decision to forego a conclusion in favor of self-contained chapters meant as well that there is no overarching interpretation that not only might have tied together the rather disparate chapters but also could have probed more deeply into the early modern dimensions of the important issue Wimpler has identified: the difficulties of intercultural transmission of knowledge and acknowledgement.

Besides expertly illuminating products, mentalities, and exchanges that are still understudied, this very useful book provokes fresh questions—and, one

hopes, fresh research—about the impact of novel goods on habits, expectations, and perceptions not only in the French Atlantic—or even in the Atlantic *tout court*—but across the globalizing world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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