

Book Review

- Sharika D. Crawford, *The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean: Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 204. Bibliography, Figures, Maps, Table, and Index. \$27.95 (paper).

Far from the periphery of world history, the circum-Caribbean has always been at its center core. The region was the first meeting place of world cultures, a crucible of migrations from all continents, the driver of trans-Atlantic slavery and capitalism, and a key playing piece on the strategic chessboard of nationalist and imperial desire. While sugar shaped the lives of Caribbean people on land, other factors (salt, fish, turtles, and trade itself) provided reasons for a maritime mobility that transcended landlocked thinking. From the transgressions of piracy to the movement of people and fluidity of its cultural formations (including technology, cuisines, religions, songs, costumes, dance and rituals), the Caribbean encounters ushered in moments of modernity that historians now identify as the earliest forces of globalization.

Sharika Crawford's new book, *The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean: Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making*, provides a valuable maritime perspective of the Caribbean past by examining the dimensions of a unique circuit of resource extraction and the mobility of both hunter and prey. Unlike many world histories of commodities, Crawford's scholarship casts a wider lens that includes biology, geography, diplomatic history, labor history, and family sagas, arguing for and revealing a single narrative that revolves around two sea turtle species: the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), favored for its flavorful meat, and the Hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), whose colorful scutes from the carapace's bony upper plate were prized for tortoiseshell artistry that adorned combs, snuffboxes, mirrors, furniture, jewelry, and other objects. The craftsmanship of Jamaican and other artisans and the nineteenth-century culinary destiny of the wildly popular turtle soup consumed by European, Australian, and North and South American elites led to overharvesting of the sea turtle. Both species are now threatened and/or endangered around the world.

Five chapters are organized in a mostly chronological narrative. Chapter One explores the "Sages of the Sea," a reference to both the biology of the amazing sea turtles, residents of the planet for 250 million years, and their ecology in relation to the earliest turtle hunters. This is Big History brought to the level of a very small place. Following the indigenous

turtlemen, enslaved Africans took advantage of both industries as hunters, carvers, and culinary markets in the wider Atlantic world took shape. The turtlemen of the Cayman Islands provide an example of interisland economy and migrations that included enslaved and free Jamaicans and others, from Nicaragua to Cuba.

Chapter Two examines the experiences of local labor in a global market between the 1880s and 1950s, when hunting skills and techniques were passed from father to son. Chapter Three explores the themes of migration and movement in the post-Emancipation Caribbean, 1850s-1940s. The lyrics of the local Caymanian folk song, "Rice and Beans," suggest that the fishermen who provided the elite palates with turtle soup and inspired mock turtle soup recipes for the masses, wound up with considerably less as sojourners far from home. Chapter Four shows the competing interests of states and the role turtlemen played in maritime disputes between the 1880s and 1950s, when greater territorial controls by governments eventually led to licensed harvesting. Chapter Five and the Conclusion that follows bring the story of the turtles and turtlemen up to the present day, focusing on how international conservationism addressed environmental issues, especially from post-war years until the adoption of protections by the United States in 1973. The turtle's story reveals the interplay between global waters and attempts to nationalize the seascape. Stories, songs, oral history interviews, scientific and government reports all provide a maritime perspective that is richly documented and often surprising in its transnational reach.

Despite the hypermasculine environment of the turtlemen, the author surprisingly does not engage with the gendered subjects of the book, as if taking for granted that their sea lives were inevitably and exclusively male domains. Comparative perspectives gleaned from world history suggest otherwise. For centuries, women divers known internationally as *haenyeo* on the volcanic island of Jeju (in the Korea Strait) used their harvesting of abalone and other aquatic treasures to construct a powerful matrilineal society. Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women* (Scribner, 2019) uses the research and scholarship (again, both scientific and oral historical) from the other side of the world to tell their story in novel form. Indeed, even the seafaring men of the Caribbean sometimes moved as families and couples, who served as integrating factors in the watery Atlantic world. Much like the mariner's view of Michael J. Jarvis's *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680–1783* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), the profile of an industry at sea alters the twinned perspectives of sugar and tropical slavery that have long characterized the historical Caribbean and Atlantic Commons.

Finally, *The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean* reminds its readers of the role that consumer choices made in shaping the fate of the turtles and their astonishing ecology that stretches from the warm Caribbean waters across the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. Not only humans were global in their movements and impact. This slender book is particularly appropriate as a supplemental text for world history and environmental history classrooms, spaces that

increasingly will need to find ways to help students think about policy decisions and personal lifestyle changes in response to the environmental crisis our shared planet urgently faces.

Candice Goucher is Professor Emerita of History at Washington State University. She is the author of the award winning *Congotay! Congotay! A Global History of Caribbean Food* (Routledge, 2014) and several world history textbooks. She recently edited the multi-volume reference work *Women Who Changed the World: Their Lives, Challenges, and Accomplishments Through History* (ABC-CLIO, 2021). She can be reached at cgoucher@wsu.edu.