



States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940

Stuart George McCook

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The process of nation-building in Latin America transformed the relations between the state, the economy, and nature. Between 1760 and 1940, the economies of most countries in the Spanish Caribbean came to depend heavily on the export of plant products, such as coffee, tobacco, and sugar. After the mid-nineteenth century, this model of export-led economic growth also became a central tenet of liberal projects of nation-building. As international competition grew and commodity prices fell over this period, Latin American growers strove to remain competitive by increasing agricultural production. By the turn of the twentieth century, their pursuit of export-led growth had generated severe environmental problems, including soil exhaustion, erosion, and epidemic outbreaks of crop diseases and pests.

This book traces the history of the intersections between nature, economy, and nation in the Spanish Caribbean through a history of the agricultural and botanical sciences. Growers and governments in Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Colombia, and Costa Rica turned to scientists to help them establish practical and ideological control over nature. They hoped to use science to alleviate the pressing environmental and economic stresses, without having to give up their commitment to export-led growth. Starting from an overview of the relationship among science, nature, and development throughout the export boom of 1760 to 1930, Stuart McCook examines such topics as the relationship between scientific plant surveys and nation-building, the development of a "creole science" to address the problems of tropical agriculture, the ecological rationalization of the sugar industry, and the growth of technocratic ideologies of science and progress. He concludes with a look at how the Great Depression of the 1930s changed the paradigms of economic and political development and the role of science and nature in these paradigms.

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