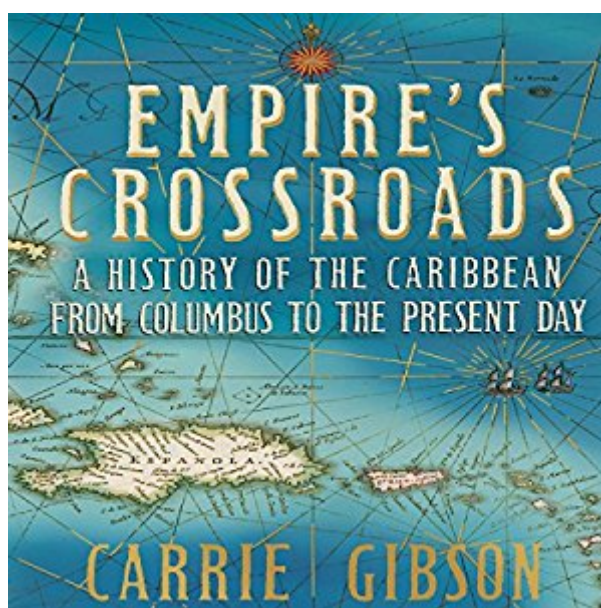


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# Empire's Crossroads: A History Of The Caribbean From Columbus To The Present Day



## Synopsis

Ever since Christopher Columbus stepped off the Santa Maria onto what is today San Salvador, in the Bahamas, and announced that he had arrived in the Orient, the Caribbean has been a stage for projected fantasies and competition between world powers. In *Empire's Crossroads*, British American historian Carrie Gibson traces the story of this coveted area from the northern rim of South America up to Cuba, and from discovery through colonialism to today, offering a vivid, panoramic view of this complex region and its rich, important history. After that fateful landing in 1492, the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, and even the Swedes, Scots, and Germans sought their fortunes in the islands for the next two centuries. Some failed spectacularly: A poorly executed settlement in Panama led the Scots to lose their own independence to England. The Spaniards were the first to find prosperity, in Mexico but also along the islands. In Hispaniola, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, they built grandiose cathedrals and extracted shipfuls of gold and silver, which English, French, and Dutch pirates were happy to seize. But precious metals weren't a sustainable export - the colonizers needed something that was, and they would need hordes of slaves to cultivate it. The Caribbean's first cash crop, one indigenous to the New World, was tobacco, and it, along with sugar, spurred expensive new addictions back in Europe. Gibson argues that immaterial exports were just as important. No other region of the world has experienced such a vibrant mixing of cultures, religions, and peoples - Africans, Europeans, Asians, and Amerindians created amazingly dynamic Creole societies that complicated traditional ideas about class and race. By the end of the 18th century, 70,000 free blacks and mulattos lived in the British islands alone, and it was in the Caribbean that the world's only successful slave revolt took place - sparking the meteoric rise of Napoleon's black counterpart, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and the Haitian Revolution. The Caribbean island of St. Eustatius had been the first to recognize the United States as a nation, but the Americans were soon vying for their own imperial stronghold in the West Indies, attempting to control Cuba and backing influential corporations, most notably United Fruit. In the 20th century, most of the islands broke from the imperial traditions that had lorded over them for four centuries: this would be the explosive age of decolonization and "banana republics," of racial riots and ngritude, of Cold War politics and tourist crowds. At every step of her expansive story, Gibson wields fascinating detail to combat the myths that have romanticized this region as one of uniform white sand beaches where the palm trees always sway. Evocatively written and featuring a whole cast of cosmopolitan characters, *Empire's Crossroads* reinterprets five centuries of history that have been underappreciated for far too long.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As Carrie Gibson notes in the conclusion to her superb history of the Caribbean, "it is much easier to imagine a West Indies without history." The prevailing view of Americans and Europeans of the Caribbean is one seen through the eyes of tourism - a paradise of exquisite beaches and rum drinks with little umbrellas. But as Ms. Gibson so aptly demonstrates, the Caribbean is not a mere footnote of history: it has been a geographic vortex of superpower entanglement and a crossroad of globalism for over half a millennium. Ms. Gibson creates a lively narrative supercharged with facts, but none offered gratuitously. I knew I was in for a treat as the introduction began with an anecdote about a decapitated statute still standing in a park in Fort-de-France, Martinique. We learn that the statute was of Napoleon Buonaparte's first wife, who was born on the island. Many islanders believed that it was she who convinced Napoleon to reinstate slavery on this island eight years after its abolition. The book is replete with such wonderful stories of human interest and intrigue. Ms. Gibson's history is not one written in a vacuum, but is a comprehensive worldview of nations that meddled in and forged the complex fabric of the West Indies. After covering what little is known about the native inhabitants, who were all but obliterated by Europeans, her narrative takes full swing with the struggles of the European powers. The relative might of these powers ebbed and flowed like the tides, with the flux of fortunes reflected in the changing control of various islands and coastal regions in the West Indies. A generation of explorers beginning in the late fifteenth century, aided by new sailing technologies, advances in astronomy, and, imperatively, royal and private investment, set forth on a westward quest for gold, exotic spices, and other riches that eventually led them to the

Caribbean. The fascinating twists and turns of geography, climate, and history, including the influx of many peoples, all so well documented by Ms. Gibson, set off a chain of events that Henry the Navigator could never have imagined. The history of the Caribbean is marred by violence and shameful disregard for human dignity. Ms. Gibson spares us no detail. But the details force the reader to acknowledge the horrific reality that marked the struggles of slaves, indentured servants, and others who have been exploited by those in search of fortune. Perhaps the greatest irony of Caribbean history is that the quixotic search for riches eventually gave way to the harvesting of sugar cane. This "useless by-product of a breed of grass," as Ms Gibson calls it, became the virtual gold of the Caribbean. It is fascinating to discover the roster of notables throughout history who left their fingerprints on the Caribbean. From Queen Elizabeth to Oliver Cromwell; Louis XIV to Napoleon, and the latter's nemesis in the fight for Haitian independence, Toussaint Louverture, their stories are varied and fascinating. Virtually every US president left his mark on the region, starting with George Washington who fought for the British in Barbados. As Ms. Gibson sardonically remarks, British generals probably wished the future first US President would have died of the smallpox he contracted in Barbados instead of developing immunity to the disease that may have spared his life during the fight for American independence. Perhaps missing from Ms. Gibson's discussion of great historic individuals with connections to the islands is Alexander Hamilton. Born in Nevis and raised in the Caribbean, he would go on to become the primary architect of the American financial system. He was indisputably one of the most influential world figures ever born in the West Indies, and therefore, I believe would have been worthy of mention. We learn about the intertwined relations of the Caribbean, the American British colonies, and England, and how clandestine commerce with the islands weighed heavily in the outcome of events leading to American independence. The relationship between the Caribbean and the fledgling Republic altered drastically over time as US influence in the region and the world grew exponentially. Armed with the Monroe Doctrine, the pretext of defending American national interests, and supposedly, the islanders right to freedom from foreign interference, was a thin disguise for what the US wanted: geographic positioning, the exploitation of natural and human resources, and trade policies that favored American interests. In other words, the prize of dominance in the region had changed little from the days of European hegemony. Imperialism in the West Indies takes an interesting twist in the twenty-first century. Trade wars that once centered around mercantilism and piracy primarily involving the age-old commodities of sugar and rum more recently have triggered WTO actions, as private and public entities fight in international courts for lucrative shares of these and other commodity markets, particularly bananas. Of even more recent interest, Ms. Gibson discusses the

posturing of the United States and China in the West Indies. On this development she notes, "As the axis of global power begins to tilt to the east, The Caribbean islands still find themselves in a strategic position." The islands share common themes, such as slavery, disease, corruption and natural disasters, but Ms. Gibson describes meticulously the individual trajectories that the islands and Caribbean coastal regions followed, giving each a distinctive history. Not surprisingly, the circumstances and prosperity of islands vary significantly today. From what Ms. Gibson calls the relative egalitarianism, albeit impoverished circumstances, of Cuba, to the extreme poverty of Haiti with its man-made buffer zone for cruise ships, she covers the uniqueness of history and culture that lead to the present day individuality of the territories and countries of the West Indies. Ms. Gibson deals extensively with the histories of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica. But many other islands, even the small and seemingly insignificant, warrant her mention, rendering her perspective particularly comprehensive. Thus we learn of the heyday of gangsters and nightclubs in Havana, and of the slave uprisings and brutal reprisals in Hispaniola, but we also discover the story of the violent volcanic eruptions that rocked the tiny island of Saint Vincent in the Lesser Antilles. The scope of this book is breathtaking: Ms. Gibson does not seem to miss a single beat. From the voyages of Christopher Columbus to the modern sounds of reggae, she covers the array of culture, peoples, and events, both natural and man-made, that have molded the texture of this region. She captures admirably how the tides of fortune vacillated as wars, disease, natural calamities, and money continually changed the balance of power in the region and on individual islands. Most who visit the West Indies may have little interest in knowing anything about the region other than where to find the most exquisite beaches and best hotels. But I believe everyone who enjoys the natural beauty and man-made comforts of this region would be well served to learn more about the complex culture, people, geography, and history of the region. Perhaps Caribbean cruise ships should consider leaving a copy of Ms. Gibson's masterful history in every cabin. Even a mere perusal of this book could be a significant eye-opener for the less informed into the broader vistas of the West Indies.

I have mixed feelings about the book. I bought this book to read about Caribbean history before visiting some of the islands. I was hoping for a sense of what brought the islands to where they are today and what underlies their culture. Unfortunately, the book was not well-suited for that purpose. The Good: On the one hand, I absolutely commend the author for her knowledge of the topic and her research. The book is amazingly well researched and the author's knowledge of the topic is impressive. If you are looking for a vast collection of facts about the different islands, then

this book will serve you well. The Bad: On the other hand, the book lacks a usable narrative format to make the information presented useful. It comes across a bit like someone listing everything they know rather than someone telling the story of the islands -- it is very linear. For example, the book outlines the names of leaders and how the demographics of the islands changed (skipping from island to island), but it presents little in the way of what life was like, how the islands functioned politically or culturally, or any of the usual colorful events that make history so interesting. There are also fascinating tantalizing moments, but the book doesn't exploit them. For example, it mentions the Founding Fathers of America visiting the islands and getting their gunpowder through the islands, but the book doesn't address this on a personal level nor does it explain how this might have affected the history of the two regions. This is too bad because I suspect this author has the knowledge to tell a much deeper, richer story than that normally presented in history courses. Again this is not a bad book. It is very informative and quite an impressive feat. But it is a difficult read which may not provide what you are looking for if you are hoping for insight rather than facts.

There is a need for this informative book as the history of the Caribbean is so interrelated with the history of the American South. This book explains how all of the islands are connected to so many different countries. I enjoyed reading this book. Dr. Jack Kushner

Fascinating subject matter but the book attempts to cover too broad a scope, both in terms of time and diverse cultures. Would have appreciated a greater focus on intersections of the various European efforts to explore the region or some kind of narrative thru-line. If you thought Anderson's "Lawrence in Arabia" was well-done for that region, don't get your hopes up about this book -- it's more of a reference piece.

This book provides a brief history of most of the area in the Carib. Which is what I was looking for. Towards the end, history gives way to facts and figures and some opinion - not as interesting, but still worth the read. Overall, I learned a few things about the area I hadn't known before.

This is a good history of the Caribbean but it is incomplete. There is very little about the Amerindians, not even names of tribes. Also little space is given to the long period when Spain was about the only colonial empire in the area. This book is very heavy on slavery and sugar. Of course these were of utmost importance but there is a lot more to the story. Finally, I have never read a book so full of typos. I think it was written properly but typed poorly. All in all it's good points far

exceed it's minor bad.

Such an amazing, entertaining and in depth read on everything that has happened in this important part of our history's world. Gibson does such an amazing job in this book... I could read it again- and I did not want it to end. I hope she writes more books like this.

Well researched book. Brings into focus the constant flux, struggle, and changing times of these important islands, run by so many European countries from such a long distance over a 300 year period.

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