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Book Reviews

Imperial Panama: Commerce and Conflict in Isthmian America, 1550-1800. By Christopher Ward. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. xii + 272 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, tables, appendix, notes, glossary, index. \$45.00 cloth.)

Despite continuous international interest in Panama, there are few major works on its history, and fewer still on the colonial period, a time when the isthmian province constituted a vital link in the Spanish Empire's commercial lifeline. According to Christopher Ward, a major purpose of *Imperial Panama: Commerce and Conflict in Isthmian America, 1550-1800*, is to fill the need for a well-documented general work in English on colonial Panama. In many ways, this welcome contribution transcends the author's modest statement of intent. Ward makes extensive use of manuscript materials from archives in Spain, and to a lesser extent, from archival materials in Panama and Colombia, to describe the early development of the isthmus under Spanish rule. Colonial economic history specialists will appreciate the careful, year-by-year reconstruction of the Indies fleets and Portobelo fairs, in which Ward employs data not only from familiar published studies, but also from original archival research. Other useful features include a chapter on fortifications, which significantly diminishes the once lofty reputation of military engineer Juan Bautista Antonelli, and an extensive bibliographic essay, which surveys and evaluates the existing literature on the Spanish period.

Imperial Panama has a refreshingly personal tone. On more than one occasion, Ward's passion for his topic shows through, making it clear that he hopes not only to inform his audience, but also to inspire other scholars to follow in his footsteps. There are delightfully human glimpses of the researcher at work, for example, when Ward recalls being hospitalized after spending only two days in notoriously pestilential Portobelo, or when he recounts his experiences roaming Panamanian back roads in an effort to understand the routes employed in the *trajín*, the system of inland waterways and overland mule trails that connected Spain's Atlantic shippers to markets in Peru.

As a nation, Panama fully belongs neither to Central America nor to South America. In the outside world, it is thought of more as an externally-oriented point of transit than as an autonomous society. Such ambiguities are reflected in *Imperial Panama*, in which Ward does not resolve the tension between synthesis and monograph, or between imperial and provincial history. Area specialists and general readers alike would benefit from a clearer focus, and, in particular, from a more detailed explanation of how the various eco-

conomic cycles identified in the extended discussion of fleet and fair data found concrete expression in isthmian society. Some weaknesses are to be expected in a ground-breaking study, however, and, in general, they do not detract from Ward's achievement. *Imperial Panama* is a useful introduction to a neglected topic and it is certain to be an indispensable reference for years to come.

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