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### Book Review: A Voyage across the Americas: The Journey of Henri de Buren, 1852-1854

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**Jean-François de Buren, adapted *A Voyage across the Americas: The Journey of Henri de Buren, 1852-1854*, ed. August Cosentino (Geneva: Editions de Penthes, 2013), 320pp. \$21.99.**

The author of these letters and journal was Henri de Buren (1825-1909), a Swiss aristocrat, botanist, agriculturalist, explorer and painter. The book's present form resulted from editing, though the editor is a mystery. The title page lists August Cosentino as the editor, though in the text great great grandson Jean-Francois de Buren wrote that he had edited the volume. He claims to have edited only style and punctuation, a proposition that rings true when one immerses oneself in the content. Henri de Buren wrote the letters to his sisters, mother, father, aunt, and uncle, though he did not always make clear the recipient. The letters focused on the United States, Canada, Cuba, Mexico, Panama, and Peru. The journal discussed Cuba, Peru, and Brazil.

De Buren's interest in the Americas appears to have stemmed from German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt's works on the plants and animals of Latin America. In addition, de Buren was fascinated by his readings about the natives of the Americas. Arriving in Boston in 1852, de Buren lodged with Louis Agassiz, Swiss American ichthyologist, naturalist, and racist who may have been most responsible for launching what might be called "scientific racism," however unscientific it was. One has the sense that de Buren had known Agassiz when the two had lived in Switzerland. He also visited Asa Gray, America's foremost botanist and confidant of British naturalist Charles Darwin. Unlike Darwin, who would published a record of his travels, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, de Buren never did.

In leaving New England, de Buren ventured south to observe and gain an understanding of tobacco and rice planters at a time when slavery and plantation life was inextricably intertwined. Visiting these plantations, he judged the slaves as happy, well fed, strong, lazy, unintelligent, and incapable of self-governance. According to de Buren, whites did not force blacks to work to exhaustion. He described blacks in the context of slavery and servitude and had little to say about free blacks. Modern scholarship has overturned almost everything de Buren wrote about blacks. They were not lazy, stupid, well nourished, and incapable of regulating their own affairs. Whites often forced them to the point of exhaustion. De Buren did not understand blacks, he merely caricatured

them. In effect, he was parroting the common ideas put forth by the slave owners themselves.

As with blacks, de Buren was not kind to the Amerindians and termed mulattoes as a “mean and cruel race” (page 62). He characterized the women of Latin America as lazy and insinuated that they were illiterate.

Throughout the Americas, de Buren noted that the flora was more diverse than in Europe. He perceived the United States as a land of rationality rather than faith, a curiosity given the importance of Christianity. De Buren faulted the greed of plutocrats for undermining the spirit of inquisitiveness. He appreciated the scope and diversity of U.S. agriculture. De Buren noted the dearth of wheat farms in New York without apparently realizing that wheat had migrated with the pioneers farther west. He imagined the United States as a land of upward mobility. Because three of his nine children were deaf and mute, de Buren toured U.S. institutions for the disabled, lauding their work.

In Mexico de Buren observed the cultivation of potatoes near sugarcane, a curiosity given that potatoes are a temperate crop whereas sugarcane can be grown only in the tropics and subtropics. De Buren provided an outsider’s insights about the Americas, but these too often dwell on the putative inferiority of non-Europeans, particularly blacks and Amerindians. In this context de Buren provided a kind of travelogue of imperialism and racism. He was conscious throughout of being a European aristocrat and deprecated everything that departed from social graces, refinement, and scientific inquiry. His work is full of information and opinions, if not always edifying. In his prejudices, de Buren was a creature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although not as strident in his views as Agassiz, de Buren was scarcely more tolerant of minorities.

*Christopher Cumo*