

The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870–1960. By *Laura Putnam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 303 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables, illustrations. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82732-0; paper 0-807-85406-9.

Reviewed by Ron Harpelle

A century ago, passengers on the train that connected the city of San José in the country's heartland with Limón on its Caribbean coast were taken on a journey to the geographic, historical, and social fringes of the modern state. Much to the chagrin of the Costa Rican elite, the Caribbean lowlands developed in a direction that contrasted starkly with the course followed by the rest of the country, which drew its identity from coffee and from the Catholic church. In the late nineteenth century, the Caribbean coast became a crossroads for Hispanics, British West Indians, and Americans, among others. At the time, the province of Limón and its capital city, which bears the same name, constituted the center of the greatest foreign investment the country had ever seen. Beginning in 1870, when construction of the railway began, Limón became a magnet for men and women in search of work. The railway triggered the growth of a banana industry, and the plantations in Limón were a key element in the formation of the United Fruit Company in 1899. By 1913, Costa Rica became the world's leading exporter of bananas. The result was the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people wishing to take part in the banana boom.

One person who visited the Caribbean and wrote about what he observed was Pío Viquez, one of the country's most exemplary liberal ideologues. In *Miscelánea: prosa y verso* (1903), Viquez described Costa Rica in terms of its "feminine" qualities. For example, using stereotypes of women as a metaphor for society in various regions, he described Cartago, Costa Rica's colonial capital, as "pure" and "civilized." In contrast, the author depicted Limón as reflecting the equatorial passion and feverish temperaments of the "mulata" who lived there. For Viquez and other framers of Costa Rican identity, the temptations of the Atlantic coast might be seductive, but the nation's purity and values could only be found in the highlands. The idea of Costa Rica that Viquez

popularized remained the foundation of mainstream history throughout much of the twentieth century. Fortunately, recent literature, like Laura Putnam's *The Company They Kept*, creates a more complex, and accurate, picture of Costa Rican society and history.

The Company They Kept is a welcome addition to the literature because it offers new insights into the lives of the people, especially women, who made their homes in Limón. The book, which is well written, is divided into six thematic chapters that present the multifarious roles played by women in the banana region. Putnam focuses on issues of gender, work, and community in the context of a frontier region, where violence and notions of honor shaped everyday lives. The first chapters establish the social context of Costa Rica's Caribbean coast by looking at immigration and settlement in the area. Although West Indian immigrants were most prominent, Putnam is careful to ensure that her canvas reveals the complexities of an enclave society that attracted people from a variety of ethnic, social, and linguistic backgrounds, who competed to build a future for themselves and their families. She demonstrates that although women were essential participants in the economy, their contributions remained informal and often hidden. Chapter Three, for example, examines the functional nature of prostitution in the context of an industry that relied on the labor of thousands of men. Having established the rough-and-tumble nature of frontier life, she devotes the second half of the book to women's roles as mothers, wives, and members of a broader community.

Throughout *The Company They Kept*, Putnam demonstrates how factors like ethnicity and class served as benchmarks for the development of community in Limón. She shows how women created and defended space for their families within a fluid, enclosed society. Drawing from oral accounts, United Fruit Company records, police reports, and a range of other sources, she brings women out of the shadows of Costa Rican history, overturning many entrenched mainstream beliefs in the process. Limón is thus revealed as having had a far more complex and multicultural orientation than has been presented in most other studies. *The Company They Kept* offers new insights into women's position and their participation in export-oriented enclave societies like the banana regions of Central America. Readers interested in Costa Rica and Central America will appreciate *The Company They Kept* and will look forward to more books by Laura Putnam.

Ronald N. Harpelle is associate professor and chair of the Department of History at Lakehead University. He is the author of The West Indians of Costa Rica (2001) and of several articles on the West Indian diaspora to Central America. Most recently, he codirected and produced "Banana Split," a one-hour documentary film about the most popular fruit in the world.