



Toussaint Louverture: A Revolutionary Life

Philippe Girard

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Toussaint Louverture's life was one of hardship, triumph, and contradiction. Born into bondage in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), the richest colony in the Western Hemisphere, he witnessed first-hand the torture of the enslaved population. Yet he managed to secure his freedom and establish himself as a small-scale planter. He even purchased slaves of his own.

In *Toussaint Louverture*, Philippe Girard reveals the dramatic story of how Louverture transformed himself from lowly freedman to revolutionary hero. In 1791, the unassuming Louverture masterminded the only successful slave revolt in history. By 1801, he was general and governor of Saint-Domingue, and an international statesman who forged treaties with Britain, France, Spain, and the United States-empires that feared the effect his example would have on their slave regimes. Louverture's ascendancy was short-lived, however. In 1802, he was exiled to France, dying soon after as one of the most famous men in the world, variously feared and celebrated as the "Black Napoleon."

As Girard shows, in life Louverture was not an idealist, but an ambitious pragmatist. He strove not only for abolition and independence, but to build Saint-Domingue's economic might and elevate his own social standing. He helped free Saint-Domingue's slaves yet immediately restricted their rights in the interests of protecting the island's sugar production. He warded off French invasions but embraced the cultural model of the French gentility.

In death, Louverture quickly passed into legend, his memory inspiring abolitionist, black nationalist, and anti-colonialist movements well into the 20th century. Deeply researched and bracingly original, *Toussaint Louverture* is the definitive biography of one of the most influential people of his era, or any other.

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