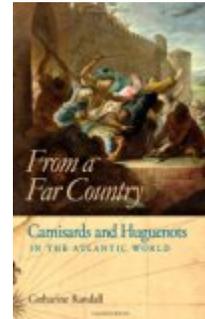


Catharine Randall. *From a Far Country: Camisards and Huguenots in the Atlantic World*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. 176 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3390-8.

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French Protestants in the Old World and the New

Historians have long recognized the important roles played by Huguenots who left France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in locales where they settled as emigrés. The premise of Catharine Randall's new book, *From a Far Country*, is that a key element of the Huguenot diaspora—the example and influence of the Camisards of southern France—has been insufficiently recognized in the historical literature. Randall argues that the experience of the Camisards, perhaps the most brutally persecuted Protestants of the early modern era, was essential in shaping not only forms of piety but also secular ideology and social practice among their coreligionists throughout Europe and in the New World.

This short work is divided into seven chapters. The first three are devoted to the experience of the Camisards in Europe, both in France during the era of the persecution and in England where the “French Prophets” sought refuge shortly after 1700. The last four chapters examine the experience of French Protestants, Camisards as well as Huguenots in general, in colonial America. The book is based on secondary sources in French and English and a variety of primary sources, including contemporary histories, tracts, testimonials, poetry, and correspondence written by direct participants in the events chronicled or by their sympathizers, most notably, the American divine Cotton Mather. Randall's central argument is that, contrary to the views of some historians, French Protestants did not quickly assimilate to the religious and political culture of colonial America but, rather, maintained a distinct religious identity. This identity, she argues, was

an adaptation of the “strategy” used by the Camisards to survive what she calls the campaign of “genocide” (elsewhere, “ethnic cleansing”) pursued by administrative authorities and military forces of the French Crown (p. 117, 8). The essentials of this strategy, Randall writes, were “covert worship and personal, ecstatic piety ... rather distrusted by the more rule-bound continental Calvinists such as those in Geneva and London” (p. 115). Randall also maintains that key features of the French Protestant experience—their embrace of an “enthusiastic and ecstatic” form of piety, their belief in continuing revelation through prophecy, and their courageous defense of individual freedom of conscience—exerted a powerful and lasting influence on “the culture, religiosity, and the polity of Europe and the New World” (pp. 12, 111).

Randall begins her exploration of the French Protestant experience with what she calls the “crisis in the Cévennes” —the armed assault on the Camisards of Languedoc, Haute-Guyenne, and Dauphiné from the 1680s to the early 1700s (p. 11). To supply a portrait of Camisard resistance, she examines the activities of two individuals, Jacques Bonbonnoux and Pierre Carrière (known as Corteiz). The first she characterizes as a “village lad, autodidactic, soldier ‘in the Army of God,’ Camisard pastor, and reformed minister” (p. 23). His autobiography describes the fervent faith of the resisters, and the activities—praying, psalm singing, reading the Bible, and attending to the words of a boy of seventeen who “spoke to us every day with prophecies or sermons”—that sustained them through days of

flight, hunger, and fear. Bonbonnoux was one of many Camisards who recounted “‘miraculous’ happenings,” perceived as direct divine aid, which made possible the survival of these impoverished, mostly illiterate peasants amid attacks by the strongest army in Europe (p. 24). While Bonbonnoux represents the heroic phase of armed struggle, Corteiz exemplifies the work of those ministers who, once guerrilla resistance was defeated, worked to harness and institutionalize Camisard religiosity by establishing regular synods and endorsing the Confession of Faith of the French Reformed Church.

In chapters 2 and 3, Randall interrupts her chronicle of events to explore the phenomenon of prophecy, critical, as she sees it, both to Camisard resistance and to the distinctive form of piety that was central to their legacy. Stories of the prophets—males and females of all ages, including a thirteen-month-old baby boy who prophesied in the king’s French—formed the most striking element of testimonials to Camisard experience collected and published by the Huguenot pastor Pierre Juriu. These *inspirés* enjoyed visions; spoke in tongues; and, on occasion, wept tears of blood. Three intrepid Camisards made their way to England, where, known as the “French Prophets,” they were met with hostility not only by Anglicans but also by local Huguenots. Brought to trial for blasphemy and sedition, the French Prophets nonetheless inspired some English believers to prophesy in their own right, speaking in Greek and predicting the end-times.

The second half of Randall’s work focuses on the experience of Huguenots in America. She examines the career of three individuals in particular: Gabriel Bernon, Elie Neau, and Ezéchiel Carré. Bernon, who arrived in Québec in 1682, became a naturalized British citizen in Boston and a successful merchant. Although in time he joined an Anglican congregation, “he may never officially have converted” and he worked tirelessly to build and extend the influence of Huguenots in New York City and Boston (p. 78). Carré was a pastor first in Rhode Island and later in Boston; his many tracts supplied early accounts of Huguenot opposition to the power of Louis XIV. Here is where Randall’s story comes to focus intensively on Cotton Mather. Randall sees Mather’s intense piety as similar to that of the Camisards: his belief in direct spiritual messages was “akin to the reverence of the Camisards for the prophetic word” and his diary entries “sound like descriptions of the ecstasies” experienced by Camisard visionaries (pp. 83, 84). A gifted linguist, Mather strove mightily with his prefaces to and translations of Huguenot writings to overcome the hos-

tility and suspicion evinced by local Protestants, especially his fellow Puritans, toward French Protestants, often assumed—thanks to their Frenchness—to be Catholics or Catholic sympathizers. Denying that Mather was a Puritan “bigot,” Randall argues that he was instead an apologist for “a new sort of Puritan ecumenism” (pp. 80, 99). The last biography offered is that of Neau, an exile born in Saintonge who became a naturalized British citizen after going into exile. Traveling from London to the colonies, Neau was taken prisoner by a French privateer, confined in the fearsome Chateau d’Yf off the coast of Marseilles, and subjected to frightful treatment in the course of years of solitary confinement. Neau’s steadfastness through torture, attempts to starve him, and near blindness from years in darkness made him a model for all Protestants everywhere, not just those of an enthusiastic bent.

Randall offers a stirring and often beautifully told story. It unearths a little-known tale of courage, perseverance, and steadfast faith in reaction to brutal assault and lonely exile. A literary scholar, Randall is especially sensitive to the language and rhetoric of Camisard and Huguenot piety. Personally, I regretted that this sensitivity to language did not prevent her from using the modern terms “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” to describe the French Crown’s depredations against the Camisards. Neither “genocide” nor “ethnic cleansing” suit a context in which conversion to the dominant faith brought safety from physical harm and rejoicing at the rescue of a lost soul. Nor are Randall’s larger claims about the nature and significance of the French Protestant experience in the New World always convincing. It is noteworthy that her argument about French Protestants in the colonies shifts away from Camisards—whose form of piety she sees as exemplary of the spiritual interiority Huguenots in America had to embrace—to three figures who were not themselves Camisards (thus conflating phenomena she is elsewhere careful to hold distinct) and two of whom embraced Anglicanism. Randall argues that these were surface conversions, undertaken only to abet public goals, an argument that works well for Neau but seems ill suited to the career of Bernon, who, as she herself makes clear, was not averse to siding on at least one crucial occasion with the English governor against his fellow Huguenots. More significantly, Randall’s argument makes a claim for the long-term persistence of the form of piety originally inspired by the Camisards, but her narrative ends in the early eighteenth century and thus supplies no evidence for the distinctiveness of French Protestantism in the colonies in later years. And while her study is valu-

able for indicating Camisard and Huguenot piety as one source of the principle of freedom of conscience, how important it was in comparison to other influences remains an open question. More satisfying, to my mind, is her final conclusion that the experience of French Protestants in the New World helped to encourage religious pluralism in America, where “there would be a religion for every person and a person for every religion” (p. 116).

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