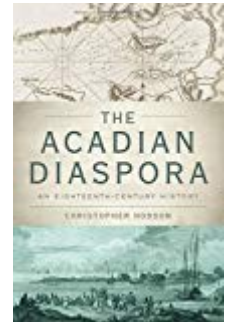


**Christopher Hodson.** *The Acadian Diaspora: An Eighteenth-Century History*. Oxford Studies in International History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-973977-6.



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In *The Acadian Diaspora*, Christopher Hodson traces the lives of Acadian individuals and groups as they sought security and prosperity across the globe following their expulsion from British Canada in the mid-eighteenth century. To reach these goals, Acadians often took part in various European imperial schemes as laborers and settlers. Hodson skillfully synthesizes the imperial and personal experience of the Acadian diaspora through an emphasis on two lines of analysis: the grand designs of imperial visionaries that would be made possible by Acadian labor and the personal experience of imperialism through the lives of individual Acadians involved in such imperial designs on the ground. In doing so, *The Acadian Diaspora* contributes to our historical understanding of the nature of imperialism as well as the role of the individual in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

Throughout, Hodson frames the Acadian diaspora as a result of and response to the vulnerability of European empires. Doing so roots the book in the contingencies of imperialism, arguing that

the eighteenth century was a “moment of creativity in which the fashioning of more just, efficient, and muscular empires seemed not just possible but inevitable” (p. 9). Everywhere the Acadians went, Hodson argues, they were seen as the hands by which these “muscular empires” would be built and sustained. He is careful, though, to demonstrate the limited range of opportunities available to Acadian exiles rather than portraying them as imperial pawns. This imperial recontextualization begins with Hodson’s interpretation of the 1713 expulsion, which he argues was the result of French and British attempts to be the only beneficiaries of Acadian agriculture and was “one of the smoothest, most successful applications of power in the history of the British empire” (p. 45).

Hodson follows specific Acadians across time and space with common themes of suffering and local contingencies. In each place, Acadians fought to integrate themselves into existing systems of trade and labor, though they were often unsuccessful. Hodson analyzes the diaspora through various “ill-fated colonial experiments

that promised to remap the Atlantic basin” (p. 83). For example, French colonization in Cayenne is reframed here as not just an attempt to grab land and money but also an attempt to build an anti-slavery empire because of emphasis on Acadians as free laborers. Hodson also uses Europeans’ interpretations of Acadians to explore various eighteenth-century intellectual developments. For example, French intellectuals concerned about low birth rates and degeneration (and the implications that would have on the trajectory of the French empire) cast the Acadians as “models for the seemingly impotent inhabitants of the French countryside” (p. 153). In doing so, Hodson argues, they solidified the Acadian corporate identity that would be used as leverage in later imperial experiments. Hodson concludes with a discussion of assimilation, arguing that, while the Acadians did not assimilate into any other ethnicity or nation-state (something praised by previous historians who emphasized cultural persistence), they were one of many groups that “ben[t] to the demands ... of the imperial world around them” through the commodification of laborers (p. 199).

To balance these imperial perspectives on Acadians, Hodson roots his study in the personal history of his subjects through a biographical approach. This organization allows him to reorient Acadian historiography from a focus on cultural persistence to one on a global diaspora framed by imperial designs and failures but experienced by individuals with diverse subjectivities. He follows specific Acadians to far-flung places around the globe, including the British American colonies, the Falkland Islands, France, Canada, and Spanish Louisiana. In each place the Acadians found much to be desired. Constantly trying to maintain political neutrality made Acadians particularly vulnerable to the whims of imperial designers in desperate need of labor to sustain European colonial projects. Hodson claims that, though migration (forced and otherwise) was a central part of the eighteenth century colonial experience, the Acadians endured a unique additional “psychological

suffering” because of their marginalization and alienation from their community (p. 4). While Hodson certainly proves that the Acadians doubly experienced suffering, he has missed some opportunities for comparison here by overstating its uniqueness. Surely other people who were marginalized and forced to migrate by imperialists also suffered psychologically from a loss of communal ties. Engaging with scholarship on this kind of experience for, say, enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples around the globe might have allowed Hodson to draw profound conclusions on the nature of suffering, labor, and community beyond the Acadian experience.

An insightful and personal analysis of migration, *The Acadian Diaspora* deepens our understanding of global history by portraying the eighteenth century as an imperial world in flux that created opportunities for some while closing the door to prosperity for many. In presenting the Acadian diaspora as a collective biography of global movement, Hodson links events and people in imperial peripheries to their counterparts in the core within one seamless narrative, which results in a rich imperial history rooted in contingency. Given the recent biographical turn in Atlantic history, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hodson has crafted his narrative in such a personal way. His decision to organize *The Acadian Diaspora* as a collective biography of a group through smaller biographical anecdotes of individuals makes this book especially effective in personalizing history “from the bottom up” while crafting an engrossing narrative with wide implications for scholars of global, French, American, and imperial histories.

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