

# H-Net Reviews

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**James Pritchard.** *Anatomy of a Naval Disaster: The 1746 French Expedition to North America.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. xxvi + 322 pp. \$39.95 US (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-1325-9.

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In the early summer of 1746 the largest French overseas expeditionary force yet assembled—including ten ships of the line, forty-five troop transports, and nearly 11,000 soldiers and sailors—sailed to defend French possessions in North America. In the autumn the shattered remnants of the fleet straggled back to France, fortunate to have escaped capture or destruction, and yet the naval forces of the expedition never met the enemy in battle. The primary goal of James Pritchard, professor of history at Queen's University in Canada, is to tell the story of this disastrous failure, and he has well succeeded.

Given Pritchard's description of the preparations for the expedition, misfortune was perhaps inevitable. Besides the ever-present problems of insufficient funding, lack of ships, and administrative incompetence, the expedition had to contend with the inadequacies of its commander, Jean-Baptiste-Louis-Frederic de la Rochefoucauld de Roye, duc d'Enville, a thirty-five-year-old scion of an illustrious family, who had evidently never commanded a sailing vessel. At the age of eleven d'Enville had inherited the post of *lieutenant-general des galeres* from his father. His appointment to lead the North American expedition resulted not from experience or merit, but from the family-promoting strategies of his first cousin, the comte de Maurepas, secretary of state and minister of the navy.

Though the goal of the expedition was to defend French Canada, Pritchard argues that it "did not represent the implementation of a grand scheme of empire," but was "guided by Maurepas's quest for family advancement" (p. 227). Pritchard's account of d'Enville's octogenarian rivals is fascinating, and demonstrates how marginal and ossified the navy had become by mid-century, as a result of lack of significant military action over the preceding decades. The first hundred pages of Pritchard's account meticulously detail the fitting out of the ships, the assembling of supplies and weaponry, and the specifications of a variety of representative vessels. Indeed, details are sometimes provided without adequate

explanation as to their importance, so that one is simply confronted with lists of provisions, for example, or a table that is of unknown significance. On the other hand, Pritchard provides an informative comparison of British and French naval weapons procurement and production.

Set to depart on 10 May, the expedition actually sailed on 22 June, a delay that weakened the health of the crews and soldiers, who were forced to live on board in increasingly poor conditions. The delay also led the ships into a series of storms that scattered and damaged the fleet. Pritchard nicely illuminates the vicissitudes of sea voyages for all aboard, and takes great care in describing the conditions and accommodations of sailors, soldiers, and officers. In one of the finest sections of the book, Pritchard establishes that on some ships mortality rates were as high as 20 percent because of inadequate provisions and the spread of diseases evidently contracted while awaiting departure.

In late September, after three months at sea, some elements of the dispersed fleet reached Nova Scotia, but nine of the ten ships-of-the-line were still absent and thousands of soldiers and sailors were dead or dying from causes that appear to have included scurvy, typhus, and typhoid. The dismal state of his expedition may have been too much for d'Enville, who had suffered several seizures over the previous six months, and he died from a stroke just days after making harbor at Chibouctou (Halifax, Nova Scotia). Ironically, within hours most of the missing vessels sailed into the bay. Adding to the confusion, a week later the new commander resigned his post and apparently attempted suicide when senior officers refused his advice to return to France (after a long discussion of the evidence Pritchard unhelpfully declares the reader must decide what happened [p. 143]).

An attack planned on Annapolis Royal (Nova Scotia) was broken up by yet another gale. Then, with senior officers convinced that further offensive action was impossible, the fleet, once again scattered to the winds,

limped back to France having spent just three weeks in Canada. Besides the thousands of men who died of disease, storms and accidents caused the loss of three capital ships. Worse still, perhaps one-third to one-half of the Micmac Indians of Nova Scotia perished from diseases brought by the French. Nothing was learned from the disaster, since official inquiries under Maurepas predictably found no fault with the planning or execution of the expedition. Pritchard hints that officials may have destroyed documents to cover up the dimensions of the catastrophe and to avoid responsibility.

Pritchard argues that “nature, in its climactic and pathogenic guises, destroyed the French expeditionary force,” but that “human weakness, personal ambition, and personal competence” were also contributing factors to the debacle (p. 12). Unfortunately, the author does not sort out whether greater competence and determination might have overcome the misfortunes of nature. As promised in the introduction, there is no attempt to create a systematic explanatory framework, and so the key thesis paragraph ends with the conclusion that “forces remained over which men continued to exercise little or

no control” (p. 12). We are briefly told, however, of an expedition of 1745 that appears remarkably similar in outcome to the d’Enville expedition the following year; where such a pattern exists, perhaps more systematic attention to larger, structural causes and factors might have been in order.

*Anatomy of a Naval Disaster* is a thoroughly researched and amply documented study, with twenty-three tables of information, six maps and charts, an appendix, extensive bibliography, and over a dozen engravings and photographs. The book will be of interest primarily to specialists in eighteenth-century French naval and colonial affairs, and secondarily to scholars of royal administration and court politics. As Pritchard intended, his account does indeed reveal much about “the ambitions and frailty of men, the arbitrariness of success, and the limits of power in the eighteenth century” (p. 12).

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