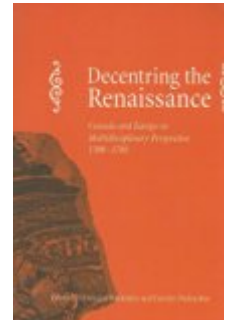


Germaine Warkentin, Carolyn Podruchny, ed.. *Decentring the Renaissance: Canada and Europe in Multidisciplinary Perspective, 1500-1700*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. xii + 387 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8020-8149-0.



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Canada in the Renaissance

Canadian historiography takes a postcolonial turn in Warkentin's and Podruchny's *Decentring the Renaissance*. By problematizing the categories upon which the writing of colonial Canadian history has rested, the editors seek to accomplish two things. First, they hope to add voices from the "northern latitudes" to the ongoing work that Stephen Greenblatt, Anthony Pagden, James Brad- ing, and Robert Blair St. George have undertaken in their studies of colonial cultures in the New World.[1] Second, they seek to understand not just how contact between first peoples and Europeans created Canada, but how contact reverberated back into Europe and onto the Renaissance. On balance, they succeed admirably. Many of the essays bring to the writing of Canadian history a postcolonial sensibility that could have a profound affect on the profession's approach to the era. Indeed, the collection has important things to say about the writing of the history of the Americas beyond what the contributors have to say about the Avalon Peninsula, Trois Rivières, Lorette, and Kodlunarn Island.

What ideas do the editors hope to decenter? They take on the idea of the Other that looms large in colonial histories of contact and seek to humanize both sides of the experience. At the same time, they scrutinize the discipline of history and trace its origins in the colonial and Other- ing enterprises that constituted Europeans' attempts to make sense of the New World. By drawing upon historians, geographers, anthropologists, literary critics, and students of Italian humanism, Iroquoian languages, and Jesuit theology, the editors ably upset historical conventions and harness the insights of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Natalie Zemon Davis' "Polarities, Hybridities: What Strategies for Decentring?" opens the collection with a consideration of the broad and complicated methodological terrain that must be crossed in order to undertake the decentring that the editors call for. Davis draws amply from recent work in postcolonial theory to explicate how a reconsideration of perspectives, methods, and sources can shift the center of New World historiography from a relatively simple story of contact to one in which mutual influences, exchanges, and oppres-

sions leave all parties changed in some way. Following from arguments made by Caribbean writers and scholars like E. Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, and Jean Bernabé, a decentered history of the colonization of Canada might move from considering peoples like the French or the Wendat as discrete groups to considering each as constitutive of the other, and, more broadly, of the Canadian nation.[2] By removing the "us against them" undercurrent that runs through much of colonial historiography, Davis hints at the creation of a scholarship premised on "métissage" instead of the conflict between civilizations, racial groups or any other social classifications that are current in today's scholarship.

The strategies that Davis outlines, however, can potentially run aground in any number of places. Deborah Doxtator seeks to articulate indigenous ways of seeing the past in order to counter a sort of European intellectual hegemony that has structured the writing of Canadian history. The notions of time that she argues frame native and European culture may be quite different but she holds out the promise that they can be, as Davis put it, braided into a history that is meaningful to both sides. Toby Morantz is less optimistic. Where Doxtator sees the possibility of writing a meaningful history of métissage, Morantz deprecates historians' abilities to get inside of other cultures and mindsets. Neither Cree oral traditions nor Western history comport with one another, she argues, and any attempt to fuse the two into a more ethnohistorical analysis of Canada's early history is doomed to failure. "Historians," Morantz concludes, "have to abandon all notions of writing a truly multicultural history that includes Indian or Native history, and be content to ransack the oral tradition for what suits their conceptual needs" (p. 65). Morantz's cautionary essay stands as a useful balance to Davis and Doxtator, but it embraces the kinds of cultural essentialism and bifurcation that they write against. As Gilles Thérien remarks in his essay on renaissance rhetoric and the construction of history, stu-

dents of Canada's past should not limit themselves to binary ways of thinking about contact that understate the myriad connections between natives and Europeans, and the impact of these connections today. Denis Delâge and Jean-Phillipe Warren's conclusion likewise warns scholars to discard the traps of their own ethnicities and to "refuse the paradigms stemming from the colonial heritage" (p. 312).

The remainder of the essays put the methodological and theoretical outlines advanced by Davis, Doxtator, Morantz, and Thérien into practice. The results are less satisfying for a number of reasons. First, the essays are short, typically between ten and twenty pages, so the contributors make assertions moreso than they make arguments. For example, Lynn Berry's interesting interpretation of Pierre Boucher's *Histoire* (1663), a natural history of New France, posits that the author's writings mark him as a hybrid figure caught between the cultures of the Old and New Worlds without every really getting into the origins and nature of Boucher's hybridity. Selma Huxley Barkham's interpretation of the motivations that drove sixteenth-century Basque merchants includes interesting points about their notions of making money while serving God and Crown. But the interpretation comes up short when she explains that their trade relationship with the Innu owed more to their adherence to the "golden rule" than to the complicated cultural, political, and economic exigencies that informed the St. Lawrence River trade. Réal Oullet and Mylene Tremblay posit a reading of travel narratives that identifies a third "Indian" that Europeans constructed through their discursive practices. In addition to the "peaceful Indian" and the "savage Indian" that Christopher Columbus left to future generations of explorers, colonizers, and settlers, Oullet and Tremblay found the "reasonable Indian" whose voices European writers like Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz used to criticize the decadence of their home societies. The argument presupposes that people like the leaders of the

Natchez, about whom Le Page du Pratz wrote, could not make such observations on their own and raises interesting questions about literary criticism of historic documents. All in all, these essays and others on early missionaries, colonial literature, and imperialism provide a number of interesting glimpses into the possibilities of the editor's historiographic mission and, in a sort of composite fashion, provide the reader with a portrait of the métissage that Davis called for in her opening essay.

One curious omission merits some comment. For all of the discussion about resituating the premises of Canadian history and embracing new views of an old story, neither Georges Sioui's important methodological work *For an Amerindian Autohistory* nor his autohistorical text, *Huron-Wendat: The Heritage of the Circle* are discussed or referenced.[3] This is odd given that for a decade Sioui has been writing exactly the kind of history that the editors seek to advocate. Critics might call Sioui to task for his essentialism and for his misconstruction of a general Amerindian ethic, but the intent of his enterprise, to truly de-center the way we think about the peoples of the Americas, needs to be read alongside this collection. Why his work failed to merit any mention is difficult to say, but it is problematic given his pioneering revisionism.

The intellectual vision of the editors and the contributors marks *Decentring the Renaissance* as an important collection of essays on the rewriting of Canadian and New World history. The volume makes an important contribution to broader debates about colonization and will have much to say to students of American, Latin American, and Caribbean history. Re-orienting a nation's history is a long and slow process, but as this collection makes its way through graduate seminars and undergraduate courses, and then into the hands of the general public, perhaps the multiculturalism that constitutes present social policy will be brought to bear on our understanding of the past.

Notes

[1]. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonders of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); David A. Brading, *First America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and, Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000)

[2]. E. Kamau Brathwaite, *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Edouard Glissant, *Introduction a une Poetique du divers* (Montreal, 1994); Jean Bernabe, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant, *Edloge de la Creolite* (Paris, 1993)

[3]. Georges E. Sioui, *For an Amerindian Autohistory*, translated by Sheila Fischman (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) and *Huron-Wendat: The Heritage of the Circle*, translated by Jane Brierley (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press and East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999).

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