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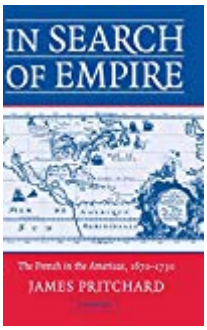
James Pritchard. *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 484 S. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-82742-3.



Reviewed by Gayle K. Brunelle

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James Pritchard's central argument in this study of the relationship between France and its colonies in the Americas is that, contrary to what many historians have asserted, France never actually achieved an empire in the New World. Moreover, according to Pritchard, the economies and societies of the French colonies developed as they did primarily in reaction to local incentives and constraints--geographical, climactic, economic, and geopolitical--rather than as a result of policies or plans the central government in France instituted. Not that the French royal government did not formulate policies to try to direct the growth and development of its American colonies. Pritchard argues that various ministers, such as Colbert and Pontchartrain, did create and attempt to realize policies governing the colonies. But they did so only in a desultory, inconsistent, and frequently incoherent manner, and their efforts bore little fruit. When the French government did move beyond outright neglect, benign or otherwise, to active involvement in colonial affairs, its efforts to intervene were, almost without fail, ineffective, at best, frequently harmful to the interests of the colonists and at odds with the crown's expressed desire to build an empire in the New World.

Pervasive ignorance in metropolitan France regarding the real conditions in and needs of the colonies was part of the problem. So was the conflict between the economic and social interests of merchants and financiers in metropolitan France, on the one hand, and their often under-served and over-charged clients in the colonies, on the other. The greatest factor in the mismanagement of the colonies, however, was the constantly precarious state of the royal treasury in France that resulted in fiscal policies that stunted or stifled entirely more than one colonial venture, such as tobacco growing. As a result, the economic successes the French colonies did achieve, and, in particular, the remarkable expansion of sugar production in the West Indies, resulted from the unique conditions in each colony, the enterprise and hard work of the colonists themselves, and Europe-wide market forces outside the control of either the colonists or the French crown. Hence, in the main, the French government's intervention in colonial affairs usually bore negative con-

sequences for the colonies. When its efforts had positive results, they were still underfunded and insufficient.

Similarly, in Pritchard's view, the societies and cultures that developed in the French colonies also were unique. Indeed, they were as different from each other as they were from those of metropolitan France which exerted very little effective control and not that much influence over the colonies. Once again, it was the ways in which the colonists, free and unfree alike, interacted with conditions in the New World that determined the direction in which France's colonial societies developed. Thus, in French Canada, an agrarian society, in Pritchard's estimation largely pre-capitalist and based on peasant labor, evolved. In the West Indies, on the other hand, a plantation economy and society that was very much capitalist--in some ways, almost industrially organized--and dependent on coerced African labor, sprang up to exploit the rising European demand for sugar. The colonies differed sharply in their geopolitical orientations as well. French Canadians were often at odds with their English neighbors in the colonies to the south, while Acadians maintained generally peaceful relationships with both the English and the Native Americans. Colonists in the West Indies fought with the English, Dutch, and Spanish with whom they shared the Caribbean, usually at times when France was at war in Europe. But they were more eager to trade with other colonies than to fight with them and to sell their sugar and indigo to merchants from France's enemies in Europe, activities that were in direct contravention to the policies of the crown. Fortunately for the French colonists, the French crown usually possessed neither the resources nor the inclination to put a stop to such contraband trade.

The main cause of this apparent incapacity was, according to Pritchard, French absolutism. The need of Louis XIV and his successors to enhance their personal stature, their *gloire*, in the eyes of both their subjects and their European rivals, led to a series of ever more costly and debilitating wars. These conflicts drained the treasury and obliged ministers such as Colbert to devote most of their time and energy to financing them. Few resources were left over for the colonies. On the contrary, the colonies, far from being a drain on the royal treasury, were important contributors to it, especially during the Nine Years' War (1688-1697). Colonial "policy," such as it was, tended to be subordinated to the needs of the metropolis, meaning that even when the crown was able to formulate and enact a policy or program that might be beneficial to the colonies, it usually fell into abeyance as soon as the next fiscal crisis in France diverted resources and ministerial attention. Quite often, French colonial policies, designed as they usually were to make the colonies pay for European wars, actually hindered France's imperial ambitions.

In Pritchard's view, colonial economies did best when left alone to forge commercial ties with other colonies or countries in Europe and become integrated into the wider Atlantic economy. In contrast, absolutism seems to have been the nemesis of capitalism as well as of French imperialism. One problem with this argument, however, is that, although Pritchard discusses the various theories and debates surrounding absolutism, he does not clearly define absolutism in this context. Nor does he explain why French absolutism should have had such deleterious effects on the development of a French colonial empire or how France differed in this respect from Spain or England, whose rulers also sought to centralize their power and rule in the face of similar obstacles. Moreover, the Dutch, who were the least absolutist and the most "capitalistic" of European societies, seem to have been less successful as colonizers than the French, Pritchard's archetypal "pre-capitalist," absolutist society.

Pritchard's argument that the goal of building an empire in the Americas proved elusive for the

French would also be aided if he laid out in the introduction precisely how he is defining "empire." The Dutch colonial "empire" in Asia and the New World, for example, was in many ways less of an empire in terms of controlling and settling territory than the French colonies were. The Dutch colonies were lucrative, but they were chiefly cogs in a "trading-post" empire. The most extensive Dutch efforts at direct land settlement and a plantation-type economy, in the East Indies, ultimately achieved, at best, mixed results once they lost their monopoly control of nutmeg which, ironically, was successfully cultivated in the West Indies. The English, by contrast, were more successful colonizers than the Dutch, but they possessed a larger population of potential colonists. Most historians have also argued that they benefited less from active colonial programs on the part of the English government than from that government's benign neglect, the result of, among other things, its pursuit of a veneer of absolutism at home. It is true that the Dutch and English navies were better funded than that of the French and consequently did a better job of protecting the colonies most of the time, but on the other hand the French colonists themselves, with some help from the French crown, were able to beat the Dutch and the English pretty soundly in the New World. Nor, by the same token, is it clear that the English possessions in the New World were more connected to each other, or integrated more coherently into the English government and economy than were those of the French. Those of Spain were, at least initially, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but by the end of the seventeenth century, the Spanish possessions were also developing along different tracks and their economies deeply enmeshed in contraband trade as the Spanish navy proved unable effectively to prevent contraband or, as the Nine Years' War demonstrated, protect the colonies.

These varied experiences suggest that the failure of the French to build an empire in the Americas as successfully as the English or the Spanish, if partly a result of absolutism's political manifestations and the fiscal chaos war created in France, also had to do with other factors. Chief among these was demographics. A major reason why the French colonies in the New World, and especially in North America, remained weaker than those of the English or the Spanish was their lower population densities. The Spanish built an empire upon the backs of a native population that, despite its precipitous decline in the sixteenth century, was always much denser than that of the native populations of North America, even before the disease-driven mortality crisis struck there. Moreover, the Spanish and even more the English, possessed larger populations of dispossessed peasants and under-employed artisans willing to travel to the New World than did France, whose different land-tenure laws gave peasants securer holds on their land than peasants elsewhere in Europe enjoyed. The French domestic economy, built on a strong agrarian base, "pre-capitalist" and often war-ravaged though it may have been, did not produce a large surplus of laborers willing to emigrate to the Americas. It is true that the crown did little to increase emigration, but it is questionable how much effect greater government efforts in that direction would have had.

And, if the French people were reluctant to go abroad, French capital also preferred to remain in France. Here again, absolutism, though in its cultural rather than its political guise, was a major factor. Quite simply, honor and access to political power, not to mention lucrative financial rewards and a stable income, could flow from investments in upward social mobility through the acquisition of land, annuities and royal offices. Commerce, while not conveying the opprobrium that it seemed to hold for the Spanish, was not particularly honorable and, by itself, could not bring upward social mobility in France. Indeed, one could only attain social advancement through commerce by draining its profits into honorable professions such as office-holding. In this way French society, in a curious similarity with Confucian Chi-

na, generated a set of cultural values that affected patterns of economic investment. Such values and investment patterns may not have been "capitalist," but in the context of French society, they were quite rational, as tangible economic, as well as intangible social rewards, such as nobility and its privileges, flowed directly from them. Nor could the crown have promoted investment in New World commerce sufficiently to persuade newly-minted nobles to invest in it even when, in part due to the fiscal needs of the monarchy, they found their titles and noble status repeatedly investigated, withdrawn and ransomed back to them by the very crown officials from whom they had first purchased them. Commerce was always a risky business, overseas commerce more so, and colonies were expensive to fund and protect. Colonial investments were also not perceived as producing quick returns that could be used to advance the social standing of one's heirs. In the face of attitudes such as these, which metropolitan French merchants and aristocrats shared with the ministers who governed them and the colonies, it is not surprising that the American colonies tended to constitute, at best, an afterthought for the French crown.

Despite these problems in Pritchard's argument, however, ***In Search of Empire*** is an interesting and useful contribution to the study of French colonial policies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Its focus is primarily on those policies, the politics and diplomacy in Europe that drove them and their consequences for the development of the colonies in the New World. Much of the book focuses on military history, the struggles of the under-funded official French navy and the ad hoc colonial navy and merchant marine to supply and protect the colonies in the face of official neglect. Scholars of the French Atlantic world will find this book invaluable for understanding the precarious situation of the French colonies in the Americas and the failure of the French to realize their imperial ambitions there.

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