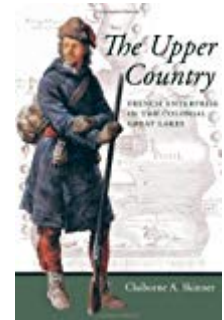


Claiborne A. Skinner. *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xiv + 202 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-8838-0.



Reviewed by Bryan Rindfleisch

Published on H-Canada (November, 2011)

Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth (King's University College, UWO)

Claiborne A. Skinner offers a concise synthesis for the history of the “French Middle West,” or New France, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Largely aimed at diffusing the “popular myths” surrounding French colonization in the Great Lakes region that revolves around the benevolent Jesuit missionary and heroic fur trade trapper carving out a French empire in North America while enjoying harmonious relations with indigenous peoples, Skinner instead posits the imperial designs of the French in Canada and the Illinois country as violent and factious, and a site of constant negotiation and conflict with other Europeans, native populaces, and even the varying factions of the French themselves. As Skinner states, “it was one thing to claim a continent and quite another to hold onto and exploit one” (p. 155). As a consequence, the French imperial venture in North America resembled the “rollercoaster rhythm” of history that James H. Merrell provided in his study of the Catawba Indians for this same period of time; the French colonizing experience comprised continual upturns

and downturns that rendered any imperial planning utterly useless and forced the French in North America to rely on the everyday interactions and relations forged with their Native American neighbors as a means for stability in the absence of support from the imperial metropolis.[1] In fact, Skinner suggests that this intimacy between the French and Great Lakes Indians (the Huron, Ojibwe, Illiniwek, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Fox, Sauk, Menominee, etc.) proved to be the only sustainable feature of the French North American empire, and that when this coalition disintegrated during the eighteenth century, so too did New France, largely as a product of intertribal Indian warfare (“Fox Wars” and “Chickasaw Wars”) and the European imperial wars.

In addition to his corrections of the pervasive mythology that so often becomes enshrined in popular history and memory, Skinner ably reconciles three contending histories despite unfolding on two different continents, bringing early modern European history into dialogue with early American (with an emphasis on New France) and

indigenous histories. By framing New France as a methodological tool that connects this French colony with the rest of Europe, France's imperial rivals in North America, and the indigenous populations of the continent, Skinner shows that this place and its peoples offers a window into how European geopolitics; the conflicts between New France and its rival English and Dutch colonies; and commercial exchanges, violent interactions, and sexual intimacies of the French with indigenous populaces all intersected and proved inter-related throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In short, Skinner pleads for American historians to look beyond the prototypical, Anglo-centric history of early America and to be more inclusive of New France, the Illinois country, and its native populaces, all of whom were every bit as important as the English to molding the history of the North American continent during this period.

As Skinner promises, his narrative of New France and early America is driven by conflict and violence. Beginning as early as 1608 with the arrival of Samuel de Champlain in the Saint Lawrence River Valley and his settlement of Quebec, Skinner stresses, violence defined the French imperial design in North America, particularly as Champlain courted Huron and Algonquian Indians, which in turn provoked a "century of warfare with the Iroquois" (p. 3). Subsequently, the French and their native allies in Canada and the Illinois country fought the Iroquois and their constituents throughout the seventeenth century until the "Great Peace of 1701," which coincided with and even exacerbated France's war efforts against other Europeans during the English Civil War, the Thirty Years' War, and Anglo-Dutch wars; its own internal insurrections; and the imperial warfare of the eighteenth century that started in 1689. Due to this legacy of violence that plagued France during the seventeenth century, Skinner asserts, New France often found itself isolated; forced to depend on itself and its indigenous allies for protection and subsistence; and

fundamentally unable to pursue the imperial design originally envisioned by French monarchs and imperial administrators, particularly because "France simply lacked the manpower to do anything else" (p. 7). Yet in relying on its native neighbors, New France even contributed to this cyclical violence by creating competing factions among the indigenous polities who vied for access to and control of French commerce, the fur trade, and French military support for use against traditional Indian enemies.

Internally, New France suffered from its own factionalism between the imperial governors who attempted to expand France's sovereignty over the North American continent (in contest with the English, Spanish, and Dutch) and French settlers, fur traders, merchants, and "coureur du bois" (frontiersmen and fur trappers who sometimes served as formal intermediaries for the French colony with indigenous peoples, but more often acted in their own interests) who sought their own livelihoods and self-interests divested of any sense of obligation to further the imperial design. Imperial administrators and Jesuit missionaries continually tried to impose political and moral control over these peoples, which in turn only provoked hostility and emigration farther westward and southward away from New France, often to the detriment of French royal authority and territorial integrity. Again, Skinner demonstrates that French history in North America paralleled what occurred among the English in early America as backcountry settlers composed of diverse ethnic origins, religious affiliations, and political loyalties increasingly moved farther west and south throughout North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which not only inhibited imperial control, but also precipitated violence between Europeans and their indigenous neighbors. This Euro-Indian violence fostered a growing racial animosity between these two peoples and undermined all of the intimate relations constructed throughout over a century of commercial, diplomatic, and sexual inter-

actions between the French and Indians, connections that New France and the French empire in North America utterly depended on for stability.

Aside from the violence that drives Skinner's narrative, the other pertinent theme to his work is the intimacy that existed between French and native peoples in New France and the Illinois country, encapsulated best by his chapter on the creation of frontier communities (more akin to fortified villages than actual communities) during the early to mid-eighteenth century by both the French and Indians. Utilizing the forts of Detroit, Michilimackinac, Miami, Niagara, and others throughout Canada and the Illinois lands, French men and women (far fewer in number than their male counterparts) lived alongside or even with Huron, Illiniwek, Ojibwe, and other Great Lakes native peoples, creating hybrid communities that balanced their diverse ways of life. For instance, at Fort Detroit, French and Indian individuals engaged in subsistence and commercial agricultural together; competed with one another in lacrosse matches and footraces; intermarried and raised Metis children; joined in one another's religious observations or secular celebrations; participated in joint leisure activities, such as drinking, dancing, or gambling; fought alongside one another in defense of their families and community; engaged in illicit trafficking of fur pelts to their European rivals or native enemies; and enslaved both African and native peoples. Further, these French-Indian forts and villages maintained communications, kin connections, and other associations (military, recreational, commercial) with all the other frontier communities of New France that created a mass network of French-Indian intimacy throughout the French empire in North America. Yet as Skinner so eloquently relates and ultimately concludes, violence undermined these seemingly peaceful and amicable relationships, not just because of the conflict and bloodshed of the imperial wars of the eighteenth century, but also because of the incessant intra-Indian warfare that plagued New France and the Illinois country

at this same juncture, both of which chipped away at the intimate relations forged by French and indigenous peoples in the preceding century.

Overall, Skinner's work is a superb, even masterful, synthesis that testifies to the importance of New France and the history of French colonization to the overarching narrative of early America, yet in terms of his engagement with the historiography he is less than impressive. While solidly relying on the work of Denys Delage, William Eccles, Richard White, and Gilles Havard, he is less attuned to the most recent historiographical trends and monographs on the French colonization experience in North America. For example, his analysis of Champlain and his diplomatic and military interactions with the Huron and Algonquian Indians lacks the rich scholarly analysis that Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton provide in *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (2005), which set the new standard for interpreting how Champlain's actions were understood and exploited by indigenous peoples for their own military and political purposes. Similarly, Skinner's comprehension of indigenous peoples' social organizations and community exchanges requires consideration of Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (2003), a study that is utterly fundamental to understanding how native populaces and polities throughout North America relied on kinship and tenants of reciprocity to define their lives in the colonial era. Also absent from Skinner's monograph, despite his lamentations of little scholarly attention to New France and French colonization in early America, are works by Emma Anderson on Indian converts to French Catholicism in New France (*The Betrayal of Faith: The Tragic Journey of a Colonial Native Convert* [2007]); Arthur J. Ray on Indians and the fur trade in colonial America (*Indians in the Fur Trade, 1660-1870* [2nd. ed., 2008]); Allan Greer on interactions of indigenous peoples with the French and Jesuits in New France, particularly focused on Catherine Tekak-

witha (*Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* [2006]); Sylvia Van Kirk on French and Indian women of the fur trade (*Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* [1996]); Carl J. Ekburg on relations of the French and Indians in the Illinois country (*French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* [2000]); and Alan Taylor's transnational narrative of early America inclusive of French, Dutch, English, Spanish, and Indian peoples and histories (*American Colonies: The Settling of North America* [2002]). All of these monographs seemingly fit the purview of Skinner's historiographical scope, yet fail to make appearance. Additionally, since the publication of this book, Susan Sleeper-Smith has situated the fur trade and European-Indian interactions in an Atlantic context (*Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in an Atlantic World* [2009]); M. J. Morgan has examined the relations between French and indigenous peoples in the Illinois country in the eighteenth century (*Land of Big Rivers: French and Indian Illinois, 1699-1778* [2010]); and Richter has offered a transatlantic narrative of early America, stretching from medieval Europe to indigenous North America (*Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* [2011]). These authors have contributed even further to scholarly understandings of New France and its interconnected role with the other European powers and native polities in creating early America.

Yet despite this historiographical detraction, Skinner's work provides a foundational synthesis for the history of New France, French colonization in North America, and French-Indian relations that is easily accessible and uninhibited by popular misconceptions. Through his themes of violence and intimacy, Skinner offers novel insights into how French and native peoples produced intercultural communities unprecedented in the Anglo- or Spanish worlds. In the end, violence blunted French imperial designs and destroyed whatever intimacy the French inculcated with their indigenous neighbors, a potent re-

minder of the brutalities and conflict that proliferated throughout early America and even continue to this day.

Note

[1]. James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: The Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), x.

-
-
,
more
at
that
more up
comprising largely
-
-
of the eighteenth-century
with one another
,
,
as well as the
-
-
ce
the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries
-
up
W
,
,
-
-

Throughout the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, i

-

-

that

not only

, but

up

this

-

men

Skinner sketches how

,

,

,

,

,

,

,

. And

-

inclusive of

Samuel de

d

s

(

)

,

(

,

(

,

(

,

(

,

(a

(

ing

,

(

-

,

Daniel K.

(

-A

[2]

-

-

, yet as a consequence of violence these hybrid societies ultimately deteriorated

s

[2]. Emma Anderson, *The Betrayal of Faith: The Tragic Journey of a Colonial Native Convert* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade, 1660-1870*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Allan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Chicago: Watson Dwyer Press, 1996); Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2002); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in an Atlantic World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); M.J. Morgan, *Land of Big Rivers: French and Indian Illinois, 1699-1778* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Uni-

versity Press, 2010); Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Bryan Rindfleisch. Review of Skinner, Claiborne A. *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34552>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.