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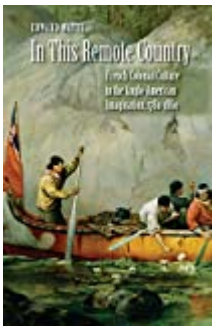

Edward Watts. *In This Remote Country: French Colonial Culture in the Anglo-American Imagination, 1780-1860.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. ix + 273 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5762-5.

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Somehow Less Than White

Edward Watts has written an important study of how late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American writers used the memory of the new country's shadowy French past to make sense of the evolving economic and social world of the United States in the first three decades of the 1800s. America's colonial French past is a somewhat esoteric topic, subordinated as it is to the grand narratives of eighteenth-century America: the Great Awakenings, the Revolution, and the slave trade. Sometime in that long century, the French fact receded northward and allowed the great, white, westward expansion of America to proceed. Watts's book stops the clock and allows readers to peruse a fascinating part of America's past and, more important, how that past was later called into service by two distinct schools of writers. This is not a work of history, and Watts is quick to point out that others, notably Roger Kennedy (*Orders from France: The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World, 1780-1820* [1989]) and Gordon Sayre (*Les Sauvages Americains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* [1997]), have admirably outlined the factual details of the period from a historical perspective.

Beginning in the last years of the eighteenth century, some American writers began imagining a borderland French American past with characteristics that changed according to the needs of the text under construction. As with most "others," the culture of these inland French could be, and was, sliced and diced according to the perspective of a given author. Watts identifies two distinct strains of writing that sought to use this imagined French colonial world for the authors' own competing ends. One group saw the United States as an Anglo-Saxon Israel where white, Protestant industriousness would resume its forward march. In contrast to this view were those who saw the new country as a collection of diverse and functionally disparate communities held together by "ideals of liberty" (p. 16). The author labels the two sets of writing as the imperial and the dissident schools. The imperial group was highly sensitive to religion and race, or, rather, racial mixing. With a highly developed sense of hierarchies and the associated moral baggage, they appropriated America's unfortunate French past to justify the strength and wonder of an America that saw its rightful fruition in the era of Jacksonian democracy, a precept that can be said to have had its last Anglo-Saxon gasp

on July 3, 1863, with George Edward Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. The imperial, nationalist writers treated the pre-republican French as "somehow less than white" and used them as a foil to set up the eventual arrival of the virtuous, powerful Anglos (p. 9).

Watts's book is a philosophical companion work to Richard White's groundbreaking study of Indian-white relations, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (1991). If White expertly sketched the way in which Indians and Europeans actively manufactured a common world in the Great Lakes area during the fur trade era, Watts shows how a similar hybrid world, the world of the colonial French in roughly the same part of "the West," was later used by American writers to push their own competing imperial and communitarian agendas. But, whereas White's middle ground was a place of exchange, Watts's remote country is a fluid Gallic state of mind, a usable past in the service of the nineteenth-century cultural construction of competing visions of the United States. This French world was Catholic, it lacked a healthy sense of industry, and it was inclined toward indiscriminate metissage with Indians.

Chapter 1 discusses a selection of local, state history books wherein "the French are unflaggingly depicted as representing episodes in failure" (p. 18). Here, the imperial and nationalist perspective saw its greatest florescence. Places like Illinois and Michigan, whose borders had been arbitrarily sketched on maps, needed foundation myths to compensate for their otherwise illusory sense of historical wholeness. In constructing the accepted narrative, nineteenth-century romantic state historians tended to portray the French and Indians as similarly degenerate, equally "lesser peoples" (p. 27). This was an old Anglo-Saxon strategy that was retooled to fit the American frontier. In the context of England's first colonial adventure, earlier Anglos had made similar condemnations of the Irish, a point highlighted recently to great effect by philosopher Richard Kearney. Kearney sees the English and Irish as having been "joined at the hip of Ulster," and the same might be said for the Anglos and the French in the Great Lakes region.[1] Just as the English had to find ways to hate the degenerate, immoral Irish to whom they were so similar, the nationalist Anglo state historians needed to re-imagine the French as uncivilized and disorganized, essentially a form of white Indian. The French had been debased by the frontier; or, rather, their natural immorality was allowed to flourish. Anglos, however, imposed their democracy and economy on the middle ground. While some local historians sought to distinguish these new western polities from their privileged New England predecessors by emphasizing a long French and Indian past, however chaotic, others, such as Samuel Hildreth in his history of the Ohio Valley, simply ignored the French past and commenced their narratives with the arrival of the British after 1750. The French could not win. They were either portrayed as creepy or written out of the story altogether. In opposition to this nationalist approach, a small number of dissident historians saw the French as an important distinguishing feature in the western story and played up the plural nature of earlier settlements.

The landscape, and relative Anglo and French uses of the land, forms the foundation of chapter 2. Nationalist writers saw the American era as being a corrective to the wasteful and disorganized "system" of French land cultivation. The French habitants had lived in sociable clusters and had walked to their fields every day, while the later Anglo-Saxon settlers lived in solitary farmhouses, surrounded on all sides by carefully tended fields. To the northward, the old French seigneurial model of laying out farms, with a long strip of land placed at an angle to some river or lake, was viewed as hopelessly European in comparison with the American way. For the Yankees, the proper use of the land was "a means to wealth" and this led to inevitable conflicts with Indians (p. 57). Looking back on earlier decades of settlement, nineteenth-century nationalist writers contrasted Anglo industry with French peasantry as a way to make sense of the increasingly industrialized America in which they were living. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a government explorer, portrayed the French as debased and outlandish. Again, philosopher Kearney's musings on English treatment of the stereotypically lazy, Catholic native Irish against the industrious Protestant English remind us that this American tendency to portray the "other" as less than white has deep roots in the British Isles.[2] Still, there were some pro-French writers who portrayed the French in a positive light, not the least of which was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow whose kind treatment of the French in the Acadian epic poem *Evangeline* (1847) rotates on a spindle of tragedy and exile.

As America industrialized, American men got soft (or this was the fear of some nineteenth-century writers). Thus, the image of the voyageur was contrasted with that of the western American pioneer as a way of assuaging a growing sense in the male American psyche that it was losing its important connection to the land and thus a corresponding sense of independence and rural agricultural progress. In chapter 3, Watts uses class and gen-

der as channels to explore the ways in which the differing French and Anglo approaches to frontier life served as lessons for the urban American worker desperately in need of a sense of triumphant American self. Watts skillfully weaves questions of ethnicity and class together to show how nineteenth-century writers, such as Francis Parkman, the stereotype of the sickly, soft Bostonian, used voyageurs and *coureurs de bois* "both to affirm and to critique the systematization of masculine identity intrinsic to industrial-era capitalism" (p. 97). In *The Oregon Trail* (1849), Parkman saw his French guide as "illiterate but compassionate" (p. 98). Since his masculinity, unlike Parkman's, was not in question, the guide could show a soft side that Parkman himself struggled unsuccessfully to keep at bay. Manhood seemed much less rigid and situational in the forest. Perhaps workers in eastern mills and factories could repair their masculinity on the frontier. Ironically, early white settlers in the middle ground of the Great Lakes region felt alienated and ignored by eastern bureaucrats and were treated by writers as inhabiting yet another cultural middle ground, somewhere between savage and civilized.[3]

The issue of frontier people, both French and Indian, as being simultaneously compassionate yet strong is wonderfully illustrated on the cover art of the paperback edition of *In This Remote Country*. It shows a detail from Frances Anne Hopkins's 1869 oil painting "Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall." In the detail shown, an Indian (or Metis), dressed in a clean striped shirt, pauses in his paddling and leans out of the canoe to pick a water lily from the river. He is at once powerful and sensitive. It is a shame the entire painting was not shown, as in the front of the same canoe sit a white Hudson's Bay Company official and his wife (the painter), neither of them holding paddles and both covered with a blanket. The feminized white administrator is contrasted with the hardy, flower-loving, and racially ambiguous French/Indian voyageur. The canoe, complete with Union Jack and loaded high with trade goods, is an obvious metaphor for empire: the canoe of state.[4]

Chapter 4 gets to the heart of the issue of race and racial mixing that so intrigued the writers under study. After the Revolution, the American family began its slow evolution from, roughly, an extended cluster of relations and associated laborers to the nuclear model with a strong patriarch at its head. On the French frontier there had been a dearth of women, so the Frenchmen took Indian wives. Watts discusses the ways in which the resulting half-blood (according to the Anglo taxonomy of the day) or Metis (the French word) children were used by authors struggling to define race in the Republic. Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (1980) famously showed how fur trade society depended on women and families and how the eventual appearance of white women at the frontier heralded the arrival of racist ideas and practices. While Watts does not go so far as to propose that white women were agents of racism, he does demonstrate that early Republican writers looked down on earlier French-Indian racial mixing and contrasted it with the better American model of ethnically homogeneous and hierarchically parsed families (and thus, society) where one's place was known and assigned at birth. Indians, Frenchmen, Canadians, Blacks, and the many newly arriving ethnic Europeans represented "disruptions of paternal order" and thus confounded the emerging bourgeois and paternalistic American economic effort (p. 132). James Fenimore Cooper, for example, was alarmed by the seeming lack of a paternal structure in French/Metis families and thus ignored the French while portraying the installation of Anglo, white, father-led families in the years after the Revolution as a metaphor for the spread of law and order in the new Republic.

Chapter 5 addresses, finally, the fascinating question of religion. In the first chapters of the book, Watts does not make enough of the issue of the Catholicism of the French and how this was a definite point of profound discomfort for the nationalists among the writers under study. If the easy Gallic sexuality and seeming lack of concern over racial mixing simultaneously intrigued and repelled Anglo-American observers, so did the Catholic faith of the borderland French. By the 1840s, enough Catholic immigration from Europe had occurred to alarm East Coast Americans. The two streams of writers, Anglo-imperial and dissident, dealt with the tensions thus presented by looking westward to the French and Catholic society that had existed within America's early borders. To some degree, American nativists of the period would have felt surrounded and permeated by "papists." In addition to the obvious dangers of Catholic Mexico to the south and Quebec to the north, thousands of Irish and German Catholics were peopling both the eastern cities and western borderlands. They were feared because the suspicion was that their loyalties were to Rome rather than to Washington, D.C. Lyman Beecher, for example, was a nativist bigot who perceived a considerable threat to the young Republic from "Catholics and infidels" (p. 183). His sermon, "A Plea for the West," provoked acts of violence against Catholics, which he quickly disavowed. James Hall took up Beecher's chal-

lenge and sought to discredit it. Hall, an anti-nativist writer, did not need to appeal to a historical European Catholicism to criticize what he saw as an irrational fear of the large numbers of Irish and other Catholics who were making their way to the United States. America had its own French and Catholic past, and a robust one at that. Hall used this past "to defend and define a more inclusive American identity" and to expose the otherwise shallow roots of American Protestantism, in its myriad forms, by comparison (p. 182).

Watts could, and should, have made more of the issues of gender, sexuality, and racial mixing in this excellent book. A theme that fascinated many nineteenth-century writers is that of metissage, that alarming French tendency to "breed" with Indian women and thus move comfortably through the landscape and society of the middle ground. Early Quebecois used the term "country wives" to describe the women (and ultimately, whole families) that many of the voyageurs and coureurs de bois kept in the fur trade regions. This activity both attracted and repulsed American writers. As the new Republic industrialized, its shop-bound eastern men lost the traditional markers of masculinity: physical strength, comfort in the wilderness, and virility. Some literary, nationalist Americans, by way of defense, sought to portray those very qualities as "alien."[5] America, like Britain in the preceding centuries, was a "narrated community which invented itself in dialectical opposition to its others."[6] And, just as earlier French officials had been alarmed that the civilized men they were sending into the *pays d'en haut* were "metamorphosing into sauvages," so did the Anglo-Saxon American writer view the Frenchman as somehow uncivilized and less than white.[7] Kearney reminds us that this Anglo tactic had its origins in Ireland centuries earlier. A large part of the American discomfort with, or envy of, the feckless borderland French resided in the seeming bucolic freedom with which some of them created families in this Arcadian middle ground.

Notes

[1]. Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 93.

[2]. Ibid., 94-95.

[3]. The topic of white settlers on the early Republican frontier is dealt with by Edward Watts in " 'If Indians Can Have Treaties, Why Cannot We Have One Too?': The Whiskey Rebellion and the Colonization of the West," in *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*, ed. Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 81-102.

[4]. The entire painting can be seen online at www.collectionscanada.gc.ca.

[5]. This is similar to the earlier Anglos who saw the Irish as monsters. See Kearney, *On Stories*, 99.

[6]. Ibid., 98-99.

[7]. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 58.

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