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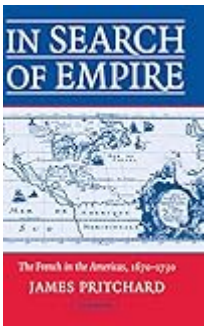

James Pritchard. *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 484 S. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82742-3.

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A Needed Synthesis, with an Edge

Most broad synthetic works attempt to unite disparate strains of scholarship in some broad field, in this case, the French involvement in the Americas. Usually, the reader comes away from the synthesis with a clear sense of the common bonds that tie together the heretofore scattered subjects. In a twist on the typical pattern, James Pritchardâs *In Search of Empire* unifies our understanding of the French colonies by emphasizing that their common characteristic was a link to perpetually ineffective French imperial policies in Europe. The many communities in the French Caribbean and New France all shared the reality of being on their own economically, socially, and even, at times, militarily. The latter arena–warfare–often appeared to bring the colonies together in that they were all involved in some conflict that spilled over from Europe. Yet, even in this realm, Francophones in the Americas were often left to their own defenses.

The book is organized into two distinct parts. The first, âColonies Formed,â describes the different groups of people who lived in the French colonial world. Pritchard consciously discusses the African and Amerindian populations, provides clear definitions of the different social classes that made up white society in the colonies, and examines their interactions with each other, as well as their social institutions and economic lives. It is appropriate that the chapter on âgovernment and politics,â comes last in part 1. Pritchard largely argues that during this era the French government developed a faÃ§ade of a colonial administration in France that looked absolutist, single-minded, and potentially effective. In reality, the unique features of each colony made administration from a central authority impossible. One of the many gifts in this work is his constant reminder to the colonial historian: simply because Jean-Baptise Colbert or Louis XIV voiced a vision about the colonies does not mean that that unified vision ever came close to fruition.

The second part, âColonies Defended,â discusses the major colonial military engagements between 1670 and 1730: the Franco-Dutch War (1672-78), the Nine Yearsâ War (1688-97), and the War of Spanish Succession (1702-13). In this portion of his work, Pritchard provides

a detailed summary of major theaters in each conflict, characteristically emphasizing the local events that led to French victory or defeat. His overall conclusion is that by the end of this series of events, in the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), France gave up many individual colonies that might have been seen as material liabilities: Hudson Bay, Acadia, and Newfoundland. However, in losing this territory and making some other concessions to Great Britain, France lost the battle for âla gloire,â which lay behind so much of the motivation for creating an overseas empire in the first place.

Though not a narrow social history, *In Search of Empire* has a populist tone, as Pritchard tends to emphasize the actions of the colonists themselves and saves a good bit of venom for Colbert and other French officialsâ mismanagement of their imperial enterprise. Ultimately, Pritchard has produced a much-needed synthesis of the histories of all French colonies. He does fall slightly short of constructing a synthesis of the wide array of the most influential literature. Though no broad work can be comprehensive in its coverage of each subfield, this work has some curious omissions and relies on some older works while failing to acknowledge some important more recent studies. For instance, in his discussions of the Iroquois-French interaction, he frequently relies on the work of Francis Jennings but does not consult Daniel Richterâs *Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (1992), which speaks specifically about the role of the Francophile factions within the Iroquois League. He is directly dismissive of Richard Whiteâs argument that a âMiddle Groundâ emerged in the Great Lakes region among French, English, and Amerindian forces in the seventeenth century. Pritchard brushes away Whiteâs paradigm (which he describes as âunconvincingâ) in a few quick strokes. Between the French and Amerindians in the *pays dâen haut*, âno middle ground was ever established between the two peoplesâ (pp. 103, 103n148). This is the extent of his engagement with the middle ground paradigm. Debunking such a dominant interpretation on Upper Canada demands a more extensive critique than Pritchard offers.

Likewise, though he brings in environmental histories and ethnohistorical works from the 1980s and early 1990s, he is bluntly dismissive of some other works. In a slightly mocking tone, perhaps intended to echo the title of Jared Diamondâs work *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Society* (1996), he bluntly notes, âThe currently fashionable âgenes, germs, and geographyâ school that denies the influence of human exceptionalism is a fad. History continues to be about people rather than thingsâ (p. 74). Nonetheless, Pritchard is very conscious of the role that environmental realities played in agricultural development and in the spread of disease. Yet he seems to overstate the arguments of some more recent environmental syntheses in order to highlight the agency of the people who populated and created institutions in the diverse French colonial world.

Pritchard deserves our gratitude for bringing together massive bodies of primary materials produced during the height of Franceâs âElusive Empire.â The remnants of the distant colonies created diverse secondary literatures on each of the colonies: ethnohistorians working in every corner of the Americas, scholars of Africa and African slavery in the New World, European historians, and students of the Caribbean world. In the final analysis, we cannot fault him too much for missing individual works. Yet the gargantuan task he undertakes means that he had to make many omissions in constructing this single volume. As a result, the reader–whether a specialist in one of the above fields or a general reader–must appreciate that Pritchardâs work is not one that fairly includes all of the dissenting voices and interpretations that differ from his own. Nonetheless, the work is an essential interpretation of the French colonies and an important resource on many of the details of colonial administration and warfare.

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