H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Claiborne A. Skinner. *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xiv + 202 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8837-3; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-8838-0.

Reviewed by Gregory Kennedy (University of Moncton)

Published on H-French-Colonial (May, 2011)

Commissioned by Jyoti Mohan (Morgan State University)

Claiborne Skinner is very clear in his preface about the scope and purpose of his book. Inspired by recent scholarship that underlines the importance of the French and Indian War as a trigger for the American Revolution, he wants to explore what, in turn, triggered the French and Indian War, remarking that this is an area little known to the typical American student. He aims to produce an undergraduate survey that synthesizes the existing scholarship rather than a new interpretation of the past based on original research. Dr. Skinner defines his contribution as "a relatively concise record of *what* happened, *where*, and my best understanding of *why*, linking the traditional story of colonial America east of the Appalachians with the Middle West" (p. xi). The result is a historical narrative that is very readable, engaging, and coherent, but also seems archaic in its seeming "heroic age" interpretation of this period of French imperialism in the North American interior, emphasizing the exploits of individual great men and oversimplifying aboriginal cultures and strategies.

Skinner sees the Great Peace of 1701 as a turning point in the history of the Upper Country, and divides his book accordingly into two parts. His prologue provides a reasonable summary of the founding of New France up to the reign of Louis XIV, the importance of the fur trade, and of relationships with the various aboriginal nations in the Great Lakes region. His detailed narrative begins with Frontenac and La Salle in the 1670s, both of whom are described, probably quite accurately, as arrogant and corrupt self-promoters who caused conflict and tension within the colony and with their neighbors. Skinner has more praise for some of their subordinates, men like Nicolas Perrot and Henri Tonti. The latter "held New France's western flank secure for nearly a generation while La Salle chased his chimeras to Texas and disaster" (p. 31). Skinner also distinguishes between French claims to the continent by means of trade and alliances and English objectives to actually people it, foreshadowing an eventual confrontation (p. 45). Skinner proceeds in chapter 2 to detail the failure of La Barre, Frontenac's replacement: a small man" whose botched diplomacy and over-cautious approach to war with the Iroquois seemed to threaten New France's very existence (p. 63). Chapter 3 examines the military campaigns against the Iroquois and Hudson's Bay Company and the negotiations that followed, culminating in the Great Peace of 1701 in which forty aboriginal nations agreed to cease hostilities.

For Skinner, that moment in Montreal when a French governor presided over such a vast assembly of aboriginal leaders pledging peace was New France's "high noon"

(p. 89). However, Louis XIV's 1698 decision to limit the fur trade and abandon the western posts in order to save money soon led to a loss of much of this prestige and goodwill. French expeditions to Louisiana and diplomatic efforts among the Mississippian tribes were largely failures. By 1713, the French had become embroiled in the Fox wars, which would last until 1737, making a mockery of the Great Peace and causing great disruption in France's alliance system and trade networks. The brutality and length of the conflict, according to Skinner, made aboriginal nations view the French as weaker and less trustworthy than before (p. 110). Chapter 5 focuses on the Illinois territory, which became a unique colony of Canadien and aboriginal communities based on farming, mining, slavery, and trade. Despite a period of relative prosperity and growth, this region too soon became mired in extended conflict, this time with the Chickasaw and Natchez nations. In chapter 6, Skinner describes the geographic height of the French interior empire, but also its inherent demographic weakness after decades of war and epidemics. Nevertheless, chapter 7 shows that both French and British aggressively contributed to the deteriorating relationships in the region that would ultimately motivate the French to fortify the frontier and the British to send Braddock's expedition into the Ohio Valley, thus beginning the French and Indian War.

In general, the narrative does an excellent job of telling us *what* happened. The account of military events, diplomacy, and relationships is thorough and coherent, admirably weaving together a vast geography extending from western Iroquoia to the eastern Prairies, from Michilimackinac and Detroit in the north, to the Illinois and the Mississippi valley. As such, it is quite successful as an introductory reference text for students. Further, there certainly is something compelling about Skinner's account of men like the indomitable mercenary Henri Tonti "Iron Hand" and the paragon military officer La Durantaye, forging an empire in the interior with their courage, hardiness, and the admiration they inspired in aboriginal peoples. David Hackett Fisher has recently argued, in a much more comprehensive fashion, for a similar interpretation of Samuel de Champlain, an exceptional man with a particular humanist vision who won over native peoples by his skilled diplomacy and his personal engagement in their struggles and concerns, thus creating the permanent foundation for New France in the Saint Lawrence Valley.[1] For the *pays d'en-haut*, scholars have long recognized that the limited European presence and the strength of aboriginal societies in the area required mutual accommodation and compromise, much of which would have been based on the kinds of personal relationships between French and aboriginal leaders that Skinner describes. Skinner would benefit from a greater use of Richard White's seminal work on the region, which further emphasizes that the displacement of aboriginal people during the seventeenth-century wars had made the *pays d'en-haut* a complex zone of refugees and migrants still trying to re-establish themselves, a key factor in the process of "mutual invention" that both Europeans and aboriginals engaged in to create a "middle ground" that met their specific needs.[2] On a few occasions, Skinner alludes to the complexity of these relationships. He notes the interdependence of the French and natives living at Michilimackinac, stating that "it was difficult to say just who ruled whom" (p. 149). Here again, the narrative would benefit from a discussion of Gilles Havard's research on how French claims to the *pays d'en-haut* reflected French views of sovereignty and vassalage and aboriginal reactions to these claims.[3] Far from complicating things for undergraduates, a basic discussion of the most relevant historiography would help them make sense of the complex series of events presented in the narrative.

This leads me to the primary difficulty of this text, namely that it is much less successful at telling us *why* these things happened. For example, Skinner argues that 1701 marked the end of the "Heroic Age" and a turn to more brutal fighting for "less lofty aims" (p. 89). Unfortunately, he never develops this idea. It is certainly true that, much later, beginning in the 1740s and especially in the 1750s, British and French conflict occurred on a much larger scale. But it is not obvious, at least from the evidence presented in the narrative, that fighting in the Upper Country during the Fox or the Chickasaw wars was any more or less brutal than the seventeenth-century wars with the Iroquois, nor that the motivations for these conflicts were dramatically different.

In general, Skinner overestimates the influence of individual Europeans and underestimates aboriginal agency. Bruce Trigger, writing in 1986 in response to those who had written narrative histories of France's supposed heroic age in the Saint Lawrence Valley, provides a criticism that can be applied equally to Skinner's book about the Upper Country: "Historians have failed to recognize adequately that native peoples constituted an overwhelming majority of North Americans at that time; that they controlled the production and delivery of Canada's major export to European traders; that their cultures, if less advanced technologically than those of Europe, were adapted to local conditions while Euro-

peans were still learning to cope with North American environments; and that in most situations; again despite the limitations of their technologies, native peoples were militarily strong enough to expel the newcomers. If Europeans had gained a toehold in Canada, it was because a substantial number of native peoples wished them to do so."[4]

In Skinner's narrative, all native societies are one-dimensional: clan-based societies in constant search of honor and reputation, perpetual powder kegs that only needed a spark such as alcohol or an act of violence from a rival tribe to explode (p. 20). This simply does not capture the complexity of aboriginal cultures and the particular interests of different nations and groups. It further has the potential to reinforce stereotypical views of European superiority that undergraduate students might hold. In fairness, Skinner does have moments where aboriginals take the lead. His description of the role of the Wendat *sagamo* Kondiaronk in making the Great Peace of 1701 is a notable case in point (pp. 87-88). However, he proceeds to state baldly that "the Canadians had crushed the Five Nations" (p. 89), which is quite misleading given the far more important factors of attacks conducted by aboriginals and the devastating impact of disease, not to mention the continued resiliency of the Iroquois during the eighteenth century.

It is important to keep in mind that this book has a limited scope, and what Skinner accomplishes in less than two hundred pages is really quite remarkable. Still, given his interest in connecting the history of the Upper Country with that of the Thirteen Colonies, I think he missed an opportunity to draw comparisons with the Northeastern Borderlands. English, French, and aboriginal peoples in Maine, Massachusetts, and Acadie/Nova Scotia went through a similar experience of conflict, compromise, and trade. While Skinner notes William Phips's unsuccessful attack on QuÃ©bec in 1691 (p. 77), he neglects to mention that Phips had just finished capturing Port Royal, launching a new period of attacks and counterattacks in the region that extended from Newfoundland to Virginia. A man like the Baron de Saint-Castin, for example, would have fit in quite well with the cast of characters Skinner employs for the *pays d'en-haut.*[5]

Claiborne Skinner's book *The Upper Country* provides a readable narrative summary of French efforts to build an empire in the *pays d'en-haut* and suggests ways in which these efforts were central to the eventual confrontation between Great Britain and France for control of the continent. Written for undergraduates, it is perhaps not surprising that it will have limited value for experts. The lack of a conclusion at the end well reflects the fact that this book is more description than analysis, having limited engagement with modern historiographical trends and interpretations. The result is a somewhat unbalanced portrayal of European-aboriginal relationships that gives too much credit to individual European great men. Nevertheless, the book has considerable value in bringing to light the importance of the history of this region and its French presence, and it further has the potential to inspire meaningful conversations among students about historical sources, interpretations, and stereotypes of the past.

Notes

[1]. David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2009).

[2]. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43-51.

[3]. Gilles Havard, *Empire et mÃ©tissages: Indiens et FranÃ§ais dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660-1715* (QuÃ©bec: Septentrion, 2003), 482-490.

[4]. Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's 'Heroic Age' Reconsidered* (MontrÃ©al: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 298.

[5]. John G. Reid, *Acadia, Maine and New Scotland: Marginal Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981); Stephen J. Hornsby et al., eds., *The Northeastern Borderlands: Four Centuries of Interaction* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-french-colonial

Citation: Gregory Kennedy. Review of Skinner, Claiborne A., *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes.* H-French-Colonial, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32486

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