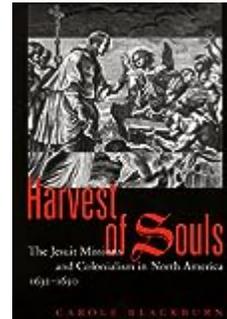




Carole Blackburn. *Harvest of Souls: The Jesuit Missions and Colonialism in North America, 1632-1650.* McGill-Queen Native and Northern Series. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000. xvi + 173 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2047-9.



Reviewed by James J. Harrington (Higher Education Program, Boston College)

Published on H-Catholic (December, 2001)

History and Theory: Colonialism Viewed Through the Jesuit Mission in Canada, 1632-1650

History and Theory: Colonialism Viewed Through the Jesuit Mission in Canada, 1632-1650.

This is an interesting volume that could prove useful for students and teachers of history, anthropology, ethnohistory, and political science, among others. It is a short book, 139 pages of text, with a concise purpose that the author holds to firmly. It is a scholarly book that is well written and easy to read. The topic produces a fascinating historical thesis, but successfully expands its theoretical reach into historical anthropology and ethnohistory.

The focus of the book is the Jesuit mission and the Jesuits in New France during the first half of the seventeenth century. It is the story of the Jesuits as it fits within the context of the operation of colonialism/colonialist model. It is a theoretical discussion that uses the Jesuit work as an example, rather than telling their story. Here the Jesuits are a source, and the title should not be misconstrued. This is not simply the story of the Jesuit mission but a very good story!

Harvest of Souls describes the conflict of two cultures:

one native and dominant, the other attempting to establish colonial control (e.g., its cultural system). The theoretical discussion dominates the first three chapters emphasizing the European vision being imposed upon America. Forest and nature/savage and nature provided a continuing strand that underlined both the colonialist aspirations and the (pre)conceptions of the French in North America at that time.

A short section of illustrations, paintings and period maps courtesy of the National Archives of Canada, add atmosphere as well as information to the introductory section. More of this visual data combined with the text would have strengthened the book. The notes at the end of the book, on the other hand, are encyclopedic and enlightening. The writing and research is excellent throughout.

The book will be of interest to varied disciplines and their differing definitions of the truth. The historian would be content with the documents detailing the Jesuit experience and present it as such. For those trying to extend the meaning of the Jesuit reports to other models and theoretical interpretations:

“The question of distortion is especially important in the case of the Jesuits’ often lengthy descriptions of the customs of the Aboriginal people among whom they made their mission” (p. 4).

As Ms. Blackburn states, the Jesuits were not writing as anthropologists or ethno-historians. The Jesuits wrote their observations without theory or paradigm. However, as she is careful to note, their work is to be understood in the context of seventeenth century America and Europe. As *Harvest* makes clear, one needs to know that these Jesuits wrote before the Enlightenment; that Europe in the seventeenth century was only developing a common culture; and, that national states in Europe were new and evolving their own cultures and national definitions. Those who drove the expansion and colonization were elites, but the Jesuits and traders who dominated the French effort in North America had differing goals and purposes.

The book begins by setting the scene in Europe and New France. The Jesuits were bounded by a culture that saw the Native people as savage and pagan. Blackburn’s description establishes the credibility of her source and the activities that they describe. While no source should be read uncritically, the context is well defined, freeing the data for interpretation. The book creates a knowledge of the views and beliefs of the Jesuits writing the *Relations*.

The first three chapters place the Jesuit Relations in the historical, anthropological, and ethnographic context. Blackburn introduces us to the Jesuits, other French colonials, and the Native people of the region known as Hurons and Montagnais. This is followed by a discussion of the Jesuits’ interpretation of the Native people and their ferocious (forested) land. The final two chapters discuss the implications and meanings of the Jesuit sources in the context of her research. These two chapters surpass the stated goals producing truly excellent history! Blackburn goes beyond simple discussion of conclusions and blends document and insight extremely well.

The theoretical emphasis changes in Chapter 4, where the Jesuits and their reports become the story, explaining as well the Native population and environment through Jesuit eyes. In the final chapters Blackburn succeeds in blending the historical and theoretical into a solid narrative.

In *Harvest of Souls*, Blackburn works to add an element of fullness and literal accuracy (p. 6) to the reports of the Jesuits adding more voices to the Native vision

of the period. She still values, understands, and emphasizes the *Relations* as a primary source that describes the French view as well as an eyewitness description of the environment and conditions of the Native peoples.

An important goal of *Harvest of Souls*, presents this case as a part of “colonial discourse studies” and the concern of that field with colonial reports that homogenize natives according to the vision of the colonizer. Here the Jesuit Relations are used as:

one portion of the multifaceted relationship between Native peoples and Europeans on this continent...to uncover the logic that underlies the Jesuits’ accounts identifying the principal themes of the *Relations* and the hierarchical vision that these themes served...not to produce a history of ideas but to situate these meanings in relation to the politics of colonialism and conversion (p. 11).

The view of nature presented in this book was dynamically different for the European than the Native population. The French Jesuits described this new land as deserted: “barren, empty, and frequently hostile” (p. 42). North America was a stark contrast to the cleared lands of Europe and its increasingly centralized society. New France was characterized as “having lain fallow since the birth of the world.” The forest presents a metaphor for wild:

the physical characteristics of the site metaphorically conveying the spiritual condition of its inhabitants...the Jesuits who came to New France promoted the reduction of the forest and the transformation of the cleared land into agricultural fields that bore the mark of human agency (p. 45).

Blackburn does a wonderful job in fulfilling her goals of combining these purposes with the intent to apply the goals of historical anthropology and ethnography to the Jesuit writing in the struggle to create new meaning in the study of colonial North America. The Jesuits themselves are just part of the story, while providing the evidence for much of the story. The Jesuit writing hints at the dominant relationship that did not exist in reality at the time, but was a goal of French colonialism.

Reading *Harvest of Souls* was a joy! It created a conversation with the reader, creating many more comments and questions than can be included here. I did find some of its emphasis to be contrary to other descriptions of the Jesuits’ work. There is no discussion of the Jesuits’ fabled willingness to take things as they came and not to insist on imposing their own paradigms. Some of the interpre-

tations of language likewise seemed arguable in the context of Blackburn's conclusions. Yet, throughout the discussions, the contrast and conflict of European and Native understanding and belief is fascinating. A most intriguing link is made comparing the Jesuit attitude toward the *sauvages* to the evolving myth of the European Wild Man and Wild Woman (p. 69). In this vision men and women descend (return) to aboriginal status—having lost the characteristics of civilization but not the human attributes that gave them a soul, and thus the possibility of redemption.

Many of the points that are raised in *Harvest of Souls* fit the model of colonialist theory, applying the European context to those working in New France. Yet there is an individual quality to these actions that resist generalization. The colonial government sought to control the missionaries and traders as well as the Native people. The clergy trying to adapt Christianity to Native belief and custom were further restricted by the regulation of the Church and by its internal politics. Just as Ms. Blackburn emphasizes, the interpretation of the evidence needs to be tempered by the reality of “the time given.” I would contend that a culturally dominant colonial power was

far less rigid in the Jesuit model. Their more gradual approach, using Native language and custom, was more likely to lead to an accommodation and an understanding between the two cultures. A Native Christianity was certainly possible proven by the existence of Huron converts and Jesuit successes in other parts of the world.

On the other hand, the evidence shows that the merged missionary and state-building activities in New France linked the Jesuit efforts with the greater French goals. The Jesuits, if exceptional in many ways, were convinced Europeans as well as inspired missionaries. The book balances the issues of history and theory extremely well. The Jesuits fit into Colonialist theory as proposed by Carole Blackburn, and the use of anthropological method also expanded an understanding of the evidence contained in the *Jesuit Relations*.

It must be clear to all that the book drew this reader deeply and enjoyably into its discussion. Overall, this is an excellent book that is useful as a course text and enjoyable as a reader expanding our knowledge and understanding of the Jesuits and their Native clients in New France between 1632-1650.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

Citation: James J. Harrington. Review of Blackburn, Carole, *Harvest of Souls: The Jesuit Missions and Colonialism in North America, 1632-1650*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. December, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5755>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.