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Jean-François Mouhot, *Les réfugiés acadiens en France, 1758-1785. L'impossible réintégration?* Quebec City: Septentrion, 2009. 8-448 pp. Abbreviations, maps, glossary, biographical sketches, bibliography, notes, and index. $34.95 CD (pb). ISBN 978-2-89448-513-2.

Review by Leslie Choquette, Institut français, Assumption College.

This excellent book is the most exhaustive study to date of Acadians in France from the arrival of the first refugees in 1758 to the mass departure for Louisiana in 1785. Based on thorough archival research, it describes in unprecedented and convincing detail the refugees' economic status and interactions with the French government over three decades. It also explores the vexed question of identity formation, arguing that Acadian ethnicity perhaps emerged during but certainly not prior to the diaspora. Mouhot's contribution to this ongoing debate, while thought-provoking, is necessarily less definitive.

As readers of John Mack Faragher's fine narrative of the *Grand Dérangement* will recall, British authorities deported 7,000 Acadians--roughly half of the total population--to the Thirteen Colonies in 1755 after they insisted upon remaining neutral during any Anglo-French conflict.[1] The expulsions continued during the Seven Years War, eventually totaling more than 10,000 (p. 19). Between 1758 and 1768, about 3,000 of these "French neutrals" were repatriated to France" (p. 22), where they clustered temporarily in seaports along the English Channel. Mouhot follows these refugees from their arrival on French shores through multiple failed resettlement schemes to 1785, when 1,600 Acadians boarded ships in Nantes to rejoin compatriots who had found asylum in Spanish Louisiana. In explaining their migration, he consistently downplays cultural identity in favor of economic advantage and fortuitous circumstance.

The first section of the book surveys the French state's various attempts to cope with the Acadian refugee problem. At first the dominant approach, endorsed by Minister Choiseul, was to resettle them elsewhere in the French empire, principally Guyana, the French West Indies, and the Falkland Islands. This policy failed dismally when the vast majority of Acadians, acting collectively, stood up to pressure and refused to go. With the loss of mainland North America, the only colony that interested them was Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, the tiny island fishing base off the Newfoundland coast. (The Acadians' stubbornness turned out to be fortunate, for the ill-planned French expedition to Guyana resulted in the deaths of thousands of colonists, mostly Germans and Alsatians).

To preempt a return of Acadians to British North America, Choiseul next conceived the idea of deploying them on the French agricultural frontier. In 1764, the first rural Acadian settlements were established on Belle-Île-en-Mer, an island off the Breton coast recently retaken from the English. Proposed settlements in Corsica, the forests of Normandy, and on the Chateaubriand estate in Brittany never materialized due to government inaction or Acadian disinterest; however, the most ambitious project, a line of Acadian settlements in the barren heath of Poitou, was carried out over their strong protest in 1773.

During this period, there was a stark contrast between the government's view of Acadians and the Acadians' view of government. Officials saw them as a virtuous people--French-speaking, patriotic,

pious, hard-working--superior in every way to shiftless French peasants. For their part, Acadians were unappreciative of the efforts made to resettle them in the French countryside. Only 78 families (363 people) accepted homesteads on Belle-Île because of widespread dissatisfaction with the meager allotments, poor farmland, and elevated dues; over two-thirds of these settlers would eventually re-emigrate. In Poitou, Pérusse d'Escars, an improving landlord, secured 1,500 pioneers for his "Acadian line" in 1773 and 1774 only after government recruiters employed strong-arm tactics. Mouhot hypothesizes that many came in hopes the experiment would soon fail, leaving them in a position again to request passage to Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, Boston, or Louisiana, as they had done in a petition in 1772 (pp. 109, 136). In any case, massive opposition persisted, dashing the marquis' hopes that the Acadians would set an example for his other tenants. Citing a dispute over land title, these formerly prosperous freeholders simply refused to farm. Nearly all of them picked up and moved to Nantes in 1775 and 1776.

At this point, the government began to rethink its Acadian policy. The refugees' political organization, which by 1774 included not only deputies, as in Acadia, but an elected council, a "*petite administration républicaine*," (p. 67) could not but rankle in these waning days of absolutism. During the Necker ministry, from 1777 to 1781, the goal was to "divide and dissolve them, so to speak, into society," rather than allow their "*corps particulier de nation*" to subsist "in the very bosom of the French nation." (p. 118, my translation) But Necker's fall from power aborted the attempt at forced assimilation, and the Peace of Paris made a return to North America feasible. Louisiana, in the end, was a compromise destination for both parties, the colony of an allied crown where an Acadian community had been taking shape since 1765.

The second part of the book explores the less-than-enviable economic situation of Acadian refugees in France. Although they received government assistance, conceived in part as indemnity for their lost properties (p. 132), it amounted to a very modest sum, clearly insufficient to live on. Acadians therefore needed work, which they sought primarily in Breton and Norman port cities affected by high unemployment. Mouhot's thorough examination of the documentary record reveals that most Acadian men found jobs as day laborers, seamen (including on pirate ships and slavers), and carpenters (p. 165); Acadian women worked in domestic service, the needle trades, and petty commerce (p. 169). Although in Acadia, most had made a living from farming, they were, on the whole, quite unwilling to become French peasants (p. 167). They did, however, continue to practice one of their North American specialties: massive smuggling. Particularly around Saint-Malo, Acadians traded heavily in contraband tobacco and cod, using their knowledge of English to maintain illicit relations with the Channel Islands and even Halifax (p. 193). Although a number of Acadians worked in organized trades, they were handicapped by the absence of corporations in their homeland. Some attempted, with limited success, to obtain master's certificates; requests for masterships multiplied after 1785 on the part of Acadians who chose not to leave for Louisiana (p. 179).

The third part of the book, an argument concerning Acadian cultural identity, is more problematic. Mouhot takes leading historians to task, notably the *doyenne* of Acadian studies, Naomi Griffiths, for interpreting migration to Louisiana in ethnic terms.[2] In his view, the move was primarily an economic response to downward social mobility, not a mechanism to ensure ethnic survival; indeed, Acadian culture and identity were really inventions of the mid-nineteenth century (p. 34).

Mouhot concedes that pre-deportation Acadians "probably" saw themselves as a distinct group, the "neutral French," and that a distinct "Acadian" group "perhaps" took shape in France, only to disappear after 1785 (pp. 272, 293). He acknowledges that beginning in the 1770s, Acadians increasingly described themselves as a "nation," "*corps de nation*," or "people" (p. 233), but notes the possibility, first suggested by Christopher Hodson, that this language had its source in *parlementaire* rhetoric opposing Maupeou (p. 239).[3] The high levels of endogamy, up to 75 percent in Acadian urban communities, are dismissed as a practical response to the likelihood of resettlement outside of France. Additionally,

Mouhot points out that Acadians were divided to the end on where they wanted to go, with a significant minority, between 30 percent and 40 percent, opting to remain in France in 1785 (p. 69). In discussing the majority decision to embark for Louisiana, he emphasizes the role of serendipity. After all the chief organizer of the migration, Henri-Marie Peyroux de la Coudrenière, was not even an Acadian but a profit-minded Nantes apothecary with a brother in New Orleans.

To this reader, Mouhot's insistent denial of "*acadianité*" goes too far. What to make, for example, of the intense transatlantic correspondence linking Acadians in France, England, and North America? Mouhot characterizes the letter writers as members of an extended family concerned with its *survie*, yet it is clear they use the word "*frères*" in a metaphorical sense, while expressing their desire to rejoin "*parents et amis*" (pp. 66, 67, 122). As for the word "nation," even if it did originate with the *parlements*, couldn't Acadians be using new political language to express pre-existing identity? Nor does political dissention preclude ethnic identification, as the French of the past two centuries have reason to know. Yet what strikes me in reading this story is the extent to which Acadians did come together at crucial moments, regardless of the difficulty of doing so. Finally, I wonder if the Acadians who stayed in France assimilated as quickly and seamlessly as Mouhot suggests. For instance, in 1790, they petitioned the National Assembly to maintain their government assistance, and they succeeded in collecting it (as would subsequent refugees from Saint-Domingue) until 1884!

Mouhot's polemical stance may be natural in an ambitious young historian eager to take on his elders and say something new, but I think it has other roots as well. The controversial debate over colonial identity formation is often a *dialogue de sourds* between those who believe Atlantic migrants primarily recreated old worlds in the colonies and those who think they created new ones. Should our emphasis be on cultural continuity or on the construction of new societies? Did identities survive migration or emerge as a result of the settlement process? It seems that North Americans, from their vantage point as members of distinct societies, often privilege interactions with new environments and peoples, depicting colonists as incipient Quebeckers, Acadians, or Americans. Europeans, on the other hand, tend to be more sensitive to cultural transfers and to see replication of metropolitan identities. Members of both camps, of course, acknowledge that cultures are mutable. It is simply a question of whether to emphasize continuity or change. Perhaps one thing that gets lost in the shuffle is the incredibly complex nature of ethnicity in the New World, from the seventeenth century to today. Where Griffiths sees Acadians, Mouhot sees Frenchmen. But couldn't Acadians have seen themselves as both?

NOTES

[1] John Mack Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from Their American Homeland* (New York: Norton, 2005).

[2] See N.E.S. Griffiths, *From Migrant to Acadian: A North American Border People, 1604-1755* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005). This book is the culmination of four decades of Acadian research.

[3] Christopher Hodson, "Refugees: Acadians and the Social History of Empire, 1755-1785," Ph.D. diss. (history), Northwestern University, 2004.

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