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**Glenn J. Ames and Ronald S. Love, Eds.**, *Distant Lands and Diverse Cultures: The French Experience in Asia, 1600-1700*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003. xvii + 269 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$64.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-313-30864-0.

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It is not unsurprising that since the death of Edward Said, the question of orientalism should haunt us again with renewed and appropriate sensitivity. The question of how information intersects with, and in many ways precipitates, the legitimation of imperial power remains as relevant in a contemporary context as does the manner in which the construction of racial difference continues to serve broader political ends. In the case of the Muslim world, our representations continue to come through a lens of enduring racial stereotypes.

Nevertheless, the fine thesis of “orientalism” has been somewhat overworked in the historical repertoire. What has been frustrating for French (not to mention Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish) colonial historians is the ways in which the power/knowledge model has been haphazardly applied to all global cross-cultural encounters without due sensitivity and due diligence to the specific historical conditions in which such encounters took place. By essentializing the “East” and the “West”, by homogenizing “colonizers” and the “colonized”, we are left with a rather ahistorical binary view of some extraordinarily complex snapshots of how Europeans learned about distant cultures and how they transformed themselves in the process of that learning. Furthermore, there has been an emphasis in the global historiography on the British orientalist practices *vis-à-vis* eighteenth century Bengal as the example, *par excellence*, of the information craze, which often misses other interactions in other places. In some ways, it is research on the early modern period that is returning the focus back to historical specificity and relative complexity.

Entering this context is a collection of essays edited by Glenn J. Ames and Ronald S. Love that sits at the crossroads of the debate, offering a refreshing new contribution based on interpretations of French travel accounts to Asia in the seventeenth century. During a period of unprecedented demand in France for publications that satisfied the public’s curiosity for information on what was perceived to be the dangerous, alluring, and despotic East, the genre of travel literature flourished in proportion to the public’s appetite for mysterious adventure and voyeuristic intrigue. While cross-cultural travel narratives can be read in many different ways, from being an indulgent pastime of the European élite who could afford the roaming experience to stories that legitimated colonial power through their construction of exotic stereotypes, the act of traveling also culturally transformed the traveller. In the early modern period, where intercontinental maritime journeys were dangerous and fraught with logistic difficulty, wanderers could spend a fair chunk of their lives immersed in another culture. In that sense, they placed themselves in the liminal space between “self” and “other” but more importantly, they were radically changed by the experience.

The unifying thread of this collection is that the narratives of early modern French travellers to the Middle East and Asia provide a methodological corrective to both empiricist and postmodern interpretations of the cross-cultural encounter. Through the rich tapestry of diaries, journal entries, and letters, a veritable wealth of knowledge can be accumulated which, as the editors suggest, provide evidence that attest to a more sensitive and sympathetic appreciation of cultural diversity than has hitherto been acknowledged in the canon. The accounts of priests, ambassadors, merchants, physicians, and travellers demonstrate that the physical distance from France enabled them to report more sensitively on Asian cultures to a French audience and, hence, to assist in the dismantling of the crude stereotypes, superstitious prejudices, and xenophobic ignorance that were prevalent in the metropolitan imagination. Indeed, the collection suggests that travel literature from this period needs to be re-thought beyond its association with exoticism or the voyeuristic Western gaze. Rather than solely reflecting orientalist tendencies, it is argued, these perceptions constitute a form of cultural relativism where the seventeenth century travelogue was a kind of intellectual ancestor to more enlightened attitudes.

This important, engaging and scrupulously researched collection of twelve essays is divided roughly into four parts. The first section is devoted to the travelogues of Frenchmen who ventured to the Muslim world: Jean de Thévenot to Anatolia, Palestine, and Ottoman Egypt; Chevalier d'Arvieux to the Bedouins of Mount Carmel; and Jean Chardin to Safavid Persia, by Glenn Sundeen, Deirdre Pettet, and S. Amanda Eurich respectively. In them we see the classic pursuit of European travellers to catalog everything they saw from fauna and flora to geography, politics, trade, religion, and cultural habits and their attempt to make sense of them despite an historical legacy of venerable Christian/Muslim antagonism. In short, there was a tendency to humanize and revise European perceptions. For example, Deirdre Pettet articulates this well in her employment of the experience of the Chevalier d'Arvieux who said of the Bedouin Arabs that: "[t]hey are the best people in the world, civil in their fashion, hospitable, helpful, exact in their promises, and far more honest people than Europeans imagine them" (p. 23). Likewise, Jean de Thévenot goes to some length to understand the cultural nuances of Turkish Muslim rituals which included praising the values of cleanliness, kindness, and generosity that he saw in everyday practice (pp. 10-11). The relationship between early modern Europe and the Ottoman empire, as Daniel Goffman points out, was more complicated than one of absolute and enduring fear.[1]

The small second section of two chapters acts as a signpost from Africa to the Indian Ocean area with the inclusion of Theodore Natsoulas's essay on Charles Poncet's travels to Africa and Carl H. Sobocinski's employment of Rennefort's unique account of the first voyage of the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* to Madagascar. The former provides a rare view into the court of Emperor Iya'su and the cultural landscape of Ethiopia. As the first European to officially travel to the ancient Christian kingdom in more than fifty years since the Portuguese were expelled in 1632, Natsoulas employs Poncet's travelogue as a way to get to the heterogeneous and ethnically diverse heart of the Ethiopian landscape and to try and understand the context for the Ethiopian mistrust of both Western European Christians and Muslims. The position of Madagascar as the original focus of French imperial ambition in Asia, before trading operations were shifted to Surat on the west coast of India and then on to Pondichéry, has been resurrected with the careful archival research of Sobocinski. By using Rennefort's original account of the journey and subsequent settlement, he is able to delve into the internal political dynamics of the Company as well as the political splits between the Malagasy peoples, thus providing the context for the eventual failure of the operation.

Startlingly obvious to the contemporary reader from the first half of the book are the cultural contradictions and social complexities of French encounters that render any simplistic notion of "West" versus "East" highly problematic. The axes of cultural difference were as likely, if not more likely, to be religious than racial in a late seventeenth century context, and both observers and observed cannot be easily homogenised into neat binary groups. The examples that come to mind are the Huguenot Jean Chardin, himself coming from a religious minority in Catholic France, who eventually settled in England to escape persecution, and the unique cultural subjectivity of Ethiopian Coptic Christians whose phobia against Europeans was as much a reaction against the fear of Catholic proselytism than it was a reaction against the fear of foreign conquest.

The central arena of the book appears to be the section on south Asia. While some of this material was showcased at last year's Western Society for French History conference in Newport, California with a panel that featured the French in south Asia in the seventeenth century, there are also new additions in the edited collection. Diane Margolf gives us a fine rendition of the fascinating account of François Pyrard de Laval, paying especial attention to his five years on the Maldivian islands, a strong Muslim kingdom with formidable trading networks across the Indian Ocean, and to his subsequent travels to Bengal, southeast India, to Calicut and Goa. She argues that Pyrard's reflections "conveyed a sense of similarity between Maldivian and French society that showed each could be understood in relation to the other" (p. 119). Such cultural sensitivity, however, was tempered with the qualification that these were terms "that would have appealed to an elite of readers in early seventeenth century France." Indeed, one of the literary devices employed by writers such as Pyrard was to render class affinities between the hierarchical social structure of the Maldivian nobility and those of the court of Versailles. Hence, the recognition of difference was conducted through the lens of privileged sameness.

Perhaps the most popular French travelogue of the seventeenth century was that of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier whose reflections on India were reprinted twenty-one times by the mid-eighteenth century. Anne York's chapter stresses that "India as seen through Tavernier's eyes, revealed to Europeans a diverse continent--one that was politically, religiously, and socially varied" (p. 142). Another famous wanderer through India, François Bernier, is the subject of Glenn Ames's first of two chapters in the book, and the author illuminates how his travelogue was employed to gain

the favor of Louis XIV by warning of the dangers of delegating authority in the manner of Shah Jahan. Hence, it was a covert defence of absolutism. The second chapter by Ames looks at the perceptions of Charles Dellon and his witnessing of the Goa Inquisition in which he, himself, was convicted of heresy. As the only detailed first-hand account that describes the political structure and cultural dynamics of this institution, *Relation de l'inquisition de Goa* was subsequently manipulated as a text to support anti-Catholic *philosophe* rationalism in the eighteenth century and British denunciations of Portuguese imperialism in the nineteenth century.

Overall, the travelogues dealing with south Asia are dazzling and compelling testimonies for the increasing, and enduring, affection of French readers for Indian cultures, and the strategic part played by French sympathies in defending the sanctity of Hinduism against foreign interference. The insights of Bernier, Tavernier, and Pyrard in many ways acted as the precursors to the later travels of Robert Challe in the seventeenth century and to the insights of the Comte de Modave, Law de Lauriston, Luillier, and the Abbé Raynal in the eighteenth century, who all set the scene for the sophisticated work of French Indology and for a perspective that was often at odds with the perspective of British imperialists.[2]

The fourth section looks at French perceptions of East Asia with chapters by Ronald S. Love on Simon de la Loubère's descriptions of Siam and another on Phillippe Avril's travelogue on the search for a secure passage from Europe to the fabled Cathay via Siberia. Finally, there is an essay, also in the Chinese context, by Linda S. Frey and Marsha L. Frey on *Le Comte's Nouveaux Mémoires*.

The destruction of the Siamese archives during the assault on Ayutthaya by invading Burmese armies in 1767 highlights the importance of Loubère's reflections, and European sources in general, in recovering seventeenth-century Thai history for a contemporary audience. We are treated to the breadth and depth of the Frenchman's penetrating and insightful look into the cosmos of Siamese society largely through Love's graceful virtuosity and formidable research. Of particular note is the self-reflexivity in Loubère's approach that was both highly critical of the use of European terms to describe Asian cultural practices and dismissive of referring to the Siamese in absolute terms (p. 185). These were insights ahead of their time. The use of the highly ambiguous term "Grand Tartary" to describe the expanse of central Asia and Siberia that was situated between Europe and China is a poignant example of this and leads us to Phillippe Avril, whose account of the extraordinary journey is as equally breathtaking. That the act of traveling that was often conducted as part of a broader missionary endeavour to save heathen souls is a recurring theme in the volume, nicely encapsulated in the final chapter. In it, the European mind's encounter with Sinocentrism, and its concentric view of the centrality of China and the barbarian others, is a timely reminder that travel was not just about *la connaissance de l'autre*, but about revealing the clash of world views. As Frey and Frey illustrate, Le Comte's relativist understanding of the divine role of the emperor as other-worldly caused a sensation both at the Bourbon court and amongst theology academics whose own world-view, informed by the doctrine of His Most Christian Majesty and the civilizing mission of the Jesuit enterprise, was seriously undermined (p. 239).

In a context where Europeans start to become aware that they were not the only people who inhabited this planet, that there were rich, ancient, and complex cultures outside their often blinkered self-obsessions, these pioneering travel narratives were the vehicles for a significant paradigm shift in cultural consciousness in the early modern world. What followed in France was a questioning of the centrality of the Christian moral mission in the underpinning of political affairs and an increasing acceptance of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist world-views as legitimate organizers of social affairs in an era where "tolerance" was a new, novel and often dangerous concept. These chapters form this view with imaginative and tasty *soupons* from the original texts and largely successful attempts to step inside the cultural retina of the European gaze.

Having said this, however, reviewers must find some shortcomings that reflect the concerns of a contemporary readership. I found myself drifting back to the relationship between knowledge and power. The unifying arguments are that these travelogues need to be put in their proper historical context, that many depictions of Asian cultures were not framed by Eurocentric parameters, and that the representation of Oriental despotism was often a literary strategy by which to reflect upon French absolutism. These are all well made. However, the orientalist tendencies of French tourist narratives and the broader epistemological relationship between the practices of observing Asian cultural practices, the strategic use of travelogues by the French state, and the exercise of European power cannot be overlooked in this volume. Who were these narratives for and how were they employed in the wider pursuit to secure Asian markets in a period of maritime expansion? Understanding the intimate dynamics of how knowledge

produces power in the very act of observation and description is an indispensable avenue of critique that cannot be easily dismissed. Perhaps the recuperation of Arab travel narratives to Europe in the seventeenth century may give us more perspective in a world context. [3]

Gender is another issue. Although the scarcity of women's perspectives is understandable for the context concerned, much of the volume downplays the patriarchal gaze under the banner of a celebratory cultural relativism. Furthermore, the gendered nature of the travelogues themselves may have required further elaboration. To be sure, many contributors, such as Glenn Sundeen and Deirdre Pettet, to name but two, were sensitive to the ways in which Muslim women were represented in travelogue accounts (pp. 9-10, 38-39). These often highlighted the sharp awareness of the travellers themselves whose perceptions were often extraordinarily enlightened for the time, but the mechanisms by which gender operated as a broader political metaphor are often missed opportunities.

The fine exception is the chapter by S. Amanda Eurich who addresses these issues beautifully. She delivers a captivating critique of the central role played by representations of the harem as the arena by which notions of gender and sexuality intersected with French perceptions of the exotic East. The author also directly addresses how the travelogue "depicted richly endowed, undeveloped, and early exploitable landscapes" ripe for capitalist expansion (p. 64).

I also wondered whether the title, and the accompanying subtitle, of the collection gave justice to both the subject matter of French travel narratives or, indeed, to the significant historiographical voids that the book so admirably fills. Before opening the volume, or knowing anything of its contents, I assumed wrongly that this was a collection of essays on the first French settlements in Asia rather than on French travel narratives.

However, readers will not find that these minor quibbles detract them from the incredible value of such a collection or their enjoyment of it. It is an eloquent, rich, and compelling source for understanding the extraordinary observations of French travellers in Asia during the seventeenth century which will provide new avenues for enquiry to researchers engaged in topics on both early modern French and early modern Asian histories. I found the passages that related to the friendships and relationships formed by French travellers who immersed themselves in local cultures, learned local languages and social mores, and abandoned their own metropolitan prejudices the most compelling. Hence, we travel to an interpretive space where the French were as Asianized in their pursuits to explore, trade, and colonize as were parts of Asia "gallicized" in that process.

It places these narratives at the contextual crossroads of contemporary debates on the broader nature of writing the historiography of orientalist writers and the specific location of the French experience in that rendition. The volume makes a conscious effort to steer away from historiographical approaches that stress European "discovery" and "conquest", themselves highly contentious terms, to an emphasis on cross-cultural symbiosis where Asian cultural forms were appreciated and valued in their own right without measuring them against a universal European yardstick. The collection also expands our existing knowledge of the more well-known British, Dutch, and Portuguese maritime encounters in Asia during this period in a canon where much research is devoted to the experience of *Nouvelle-France* in particular, and the privileged domain of the wider Atlantic world in general.

In these senses, it uses the travel narrative as a site by which to recuperate the French-Asian encounter as part of a more rigorous and comprehensive historical revision that will attract a wide cross-section of readers. Both French and Asian colonial specialists working in the field and those coming to early modern French texts for the first time, perhaps wanting something in English that ignites their interest, will immerse themselves and be transported by this roaming cultural experience.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

- Glenn Sundeen, "Thévenot the Tourist: A Frenchman Abroad in the Ottoman Empire."
- Deirdre Pettet, "A Veritable Bedouin: The Chevalier d'Arvieux in the Camp of the Emir Turabey."
- S. Amanda Eurich, "Secrets of the Seraglio: Harem Politics and the Rhetoric of Imperialism in the *Travels* of Sir Jean Chardin."
- Theodore Natsoulas, "Charles Poncet's Travels to Ethiopia, 1698 to 1703."

- Carl H. Sobocinski, "The Travails of Madagascar: *Rennefort's Relation du premier voyage de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales*."
- Diane C. Margolf, "Wonders of Nature, Diversity of Events: The Voyage de François Pyrard de Laval."
- Anne York, "Travels in India: Jean-Baptiste Tavernier."
- Glenn J. Ames, "Mughal India During the Age of the Scientific Revolution: François Bernier's Travels and Lessons for Absolutist Europe."
- Glenn J. Ames, "The Perils of Seeking a Multi-Cultural View of the East Indies: Charles Dellon, His Travels and the Goa Inquisition."
- Ronald S. Love, "Simon de la Loubère: French Views of Siam in the 1680s."
- Ronald S. Love, "In Search of a Passage to China: Philippe Avril's Quest for Grand Tartary, 1685 to 1690."
- Linda S. Frey and Marsha L. Frey, "The Search for Souls in China: Le Comte's *Nouveaux Mémoires*."

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#### NOTES

[1] Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[2] Robert Challe, *Journal d'un voyage fait aux Indes Orientales* (1690-1691), eds. F. Deloffre et M. Menemenciaglu (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983); Louis de Grandpré, *Voyage dans l'Inde et au Bengale fait dans les années 1789 et 1790, contenant la description des îles Séchelles et de Trinquemaly* (Paris: Dentu, 1801); Jean Deloche, ed., *Voyage en Inde du Comte de Modave (1773-1776)* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1971); Jean Law de Lauriston, *Mémoires sur quelques affaires de l'Empire Mogol, 1756-1761* (Paris: Libraires de la Société de l'histoire des colonies françaises, 1913); Sieur Luillier, *Nouveau voyage aux Grandes Indes* (Rotterdam: Jean Hofhout, 1726); Guillaume Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 3ème édition, (Genève: Jean-Léonard Pellet, 1781), X vols.

[3] See Nabil Matar, ed., *In The Lands of The Christians: Arab Travel Writing in The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

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