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Eric T. Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006. xi + 271 pp. Maps, tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$21.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 082233822X.

Review by Michael G. Vann, California State University, Sacramento.

Scholars concerned with the history of the post-1831 French colonial empire have reason to be optimistic, excited, and proud about their subfield. After several decades of French colonial studies paling in comparison to the history of the British colonial world and not being a major subject of concern for the majority of French historians (notable exceptions to this historiographical generalization include, of course, the pioneering work of William B. Cohen), the field is now vibrant.^[1] Colonial themed papers and panels are numerous at recent meetings of French Historical Studies and the Western Society for French History, the French Colonial Historical Society has grown and branched out (including holding its annual meeting in Dakar, Senegal, in 2006), and every month there seems to be new articles and monographs on various aspects of the French colonial experience. Furthermore, these contributions to the literature on the French empire have pursued the goal of not writing French colonialism as “overseas history” but rather creating a history of “imperial France,” an approach that weaves the colonial thread into overall narrative fabric of French history. Eric Jennings’ first book, *Vichy in the Tropics*, was a seminal contribution to this nouvelle vague of French colonial studies, showing how Pétain’s National Revolution played out in three colonial case studies.^[2] His latest work, *Curing the Colonizers*, continues in this direction and explicitly links the colonial to the metropolitan. Indeed, this second monograph is even more successful in writing a history of imperial France.

While the subject of Jennings’ work is seemingly narrow, he casts a very wide theoretical net, stating, “...the book contributes to the studies of empire, tourism, leisure, and medicine.” (p. 3). He uses the seemingly banal and mundane site of the colonial spa as a prism to view the various subjects stated above. One might even argue that banality and mundaneness are what makes the spas so important as windows into the French colonial experience. Jennings contends that the experience of taking the waters at a spa, acclimatization station, or hydrotherapeutic center became one of the commonplace rituals of the colonial world. When entering or leaving the tropical colonies French travelers were advised to use these medically rationalized sites of leisure to prepare their fragile bodies for the rigors of the tropics or heal themselves of the variety of poorly understood “colonial” maladies. Furthermore, colonials might make a temporary retreat from the heat and perceived dangers of the lowlands to the supposedly healing waters and airs of highland colonial spas. Thus, as foyers or as hideouts, these sites were crucial to the French colonial experience. In the colonial spas, Jennings tells us, we can see the dominant discourses of empire at work. His tactic then is to use the banal to illustrate the quotidian, which in turn explains the practice of empire. The end result is a success, giving us a very insightful portrait of the colonial encounter. A portrait made all the stronger because, with his analysis of Vichy itself, it considers the situation in both the colony and the metropole.

After a quick introduction that states the argument and briefly situates the work in the literature of empire, the opening chapter places the colonial spa in its scientific context. Here Jennings traces the various debates over how to prepare European bodies for the tropical colonies and how to treat their maladies after exposure to the new, and apparently hostile, environment. In these debates, he outlines the views of the practice of acclimatization in the official, medical, and popular colonial mind. After

enjoying an initial acceptance, critics viewed the technique with suspicion and then open hostility, as experts feared that it might result in the racial degeneration of white colonials. For some, acclimatization posed the threat of a loss of whiteness. Evidently, as modern biological racism reared its ugly head, turning French bodies into something that could survive in the tropics became a danger. However, it was clear that white colonials were getting sick in the tropics and that they liked to relax, rest, and recuperate in the various highland or beach getaways, respectively cooled by altitude or sea breezes. Thus, colonial medical authorities eventually justified the spas, hill stations, and other resorts as a method of slowly adjusting the white body to the alien tropics while also recreating a French social and cultural space to maintain their national identity.

The second chapter considers the wider history of French hydrotherapy and the advent of its colonial variant. Thus, Jennings notes that the colonial spas specifically recreated a milieu of Frenchness in a foreign land. More than Frenchness, what the spas gave the colonizer was a taste of French bourgeois society, or at least an idealized version thereof. This taste was accessible overseas when other reminders of France were absent. Jennings' analysis illustrates that the colonial power structure deployed a medicalized discourse to justify a comfortable, luxurious, and privileged lifestyle and to assure nervous colonials that they could remain French and not go native due to prolonged exposure to the tropical climate. However, he also implies but does not explicitly state that this medical discourse was one step removed from the world of make-believe. Despite the best efforts and, one can only hope, sincere intentions of these late nineteenth century colonial doctors, they simply had not achieved the level of scientific knowledge, technique, and sophistication to make sense of the various tropical maladies that were afflicting the white colonial body. Struggling to make sense of new diseases, they resorted to what now seem to be dubious explanations of liver problems, the catchall phrase "colonial anemia," and the wonderfully vague term "le cafard." Yet this pseudo-science won adherents, most likely because it promoted and rationalized white material privilege; investing the colonial good life with a sense of medical necessity.

The core of the book is Jennings' three chapters on the tropical spa and hydrotherapy stations at Guadeloupe, Réunion, and Madagascar, followed by a further discussion of the more northern centers in Tunisia and Vichy. In each of the tropical cases, we learn how colonial authorities co-opted and transformed existing thermal areas into sites of French leisure and power. Jennings gives us a brief sketch of the various locations and situates the history of the spas into both the local and larger French colonial contexts. He notes some very strong similarities in each case: the denial and de-legitimizing of pre-colonial and/or non-French traditions; the need to find a place of refuge from both the climate and medical concerns as well as from the non-white population; and the creation of an idealized bourgeois space that reminded the colonials of home (or at least something close to it). In each case, conventional medical opinion called for the creation of these refuges. Jennings notes that the desire for racial separation was as strong as, or even stronger than, the health concerns. In some of the most fascinating sections, he reveals a clear nexus between race and health where only the comfort, luxury, and pampering of the spas can rejuvenate the ailing whites of the tropical colonial world.

In his discussion of the Tunisian site at Korbous and the French site at Vichy, Jennings literally brings the colonial home. It is here, when we see the explicit linkages between colonial and metropolitan practices, that the true strengths of the book become apparent in its creation of a narrative of an imperial France. Korbous operated as a sort of temporary place of re-acclimation where the cool Mediterranean breezes would slowly and carefully bring the white body back into the temperatures more common in France. The goal of the station was to avoid shocking the returning colonial by an all too quick return. The spa was almost a therapeutic halfway house for the colonizer. However, the tale of Korbous has a great irony at its heart as the site had a long Roman, Arab, and Turkish history prior to the French conquest. In order to make it a French space, the colonizers had to deny the pre-colonial traditions and essentially re-invent it as their own. Vichy operated in a somewhat similar fashion.

At this venerable institution, generations of colonial officials, soldiers, and civilians took the waters in order to cure themselves of maladies acquired in the tropics. Indeed, due to its clientele, the diseases it supposedly treated, and the advertising campaigns which promoted it, the image of Vichy became inseparable from the French colonial empire. It was where one went after time in the tropics. Taking us through the streets of the spa town, Jennings introduces us to the settlers, administrators, soldiers, missionaries and other colonial elites who were trying to not only cure their alien ills but even to “re-whiten” themselves. With references to architectural motifs and various social centers, he notes that aspects of the colonial encounter were institutionalized and inscribed into the very space of Vichy. The town essentially became a colony of colonialists deep in the heart of France. The irony would be pleasantly amusing were it not for the sinister connotation the spa would acquire in the coming years.

Criticisms of this book are fairly mild. Starting with the final major chapter, there are a few issues that are, if not lacking, something short of fully developed. While the author has a previous work on the Pétainist National Revolution in the tropics, one would expect a bit more than one paragraph on the fascist-colonial nexus so geographically, symbolically, and institutionally embodied in this unique place-name. That the city of Vichy is synonymous with fascism and, according to Jennings, crucial to the French colonial identity and practice, raises the question of whether there was something that predisposed the French colonial cultural, political, and social world towards extreme authoritarianism if not outright fascism. Or was it mere chance that the colonial oriented spa town of Vichy became the home base of l'État Français, the Gallic experiment with fascism? This reviewer believes that there is a clear connection between colonial theory and practice and would like to have seen more here. Perhaps, along with colonial anemia, liver problems, and dysentery, a fascist predisposition was one of the illnesses caught in the tropical empire. Another area touched upon but not fully developed was the issue of the colonial labor market. Jennings mentions the use of indigenous labor and notes the widespread use of forced labor in Madagascar, but does not explicitly describe the labor system whereby a small number of white colonials could live in luxury thanks to the work of numerous and poorly paid non-white colonial subjects. Indeed, the book would greatly benefit from an analysis of the racialized political economy of labor at these spas. Discussions of gender are rare in the text. However one attempt to include some insight into gender as a social practice came to a rather odd, if not disturbing, conclusion. Twice, Jennings argues that the use of black prostitutes in the brothels of Antsirabe, Madagascar, “...appear to have tolerated and even encouraged mixity” and this “challenged the municipal council’s apartheid objectives” (pp. 147, 213).

This conclusion reveals some serious confusion about the history of Apartheid and of racial segregation in the colonial world. The racialized colonial power system was not designed to simply build a wall between two racial groups. On the contrary, the colonial order of things was a system of racial exploitation, established for the material benefit of the white colonial population. To say that the sexual utilization of impoverished non-white prostitutes by white colonial men undercut the colonial power structure completely misses the point. Finally, while each chapter includes some observations on the current state of these former colonial spas, the discussions are uneven, supplying more information for some sites and less for others. Readers would greatly benefit from a sustained and more rigorous analysis of post-colonial reality.

In the end, however, these criticisms are rather minor when compared with the overall strengths of the book. Jennings displays an excellent command of the primary and secondary literature and uses these sources to create a coherent and persuasive argument about the important role of medical anxieties, white privilege, and the culture of the empire. Furthermore, his ability to integrate the French colonial into the French national is almost seamless, achieving that illusive goal of a history of imperial France. That he is able to accomplish this in multiple colonies within the empire in such a slim volume speaks to both the breadth and the precision of Jennings’ thinking about the nature of French colonialism. Students of imperialism and colonialism, French national history, and the history of medicine will gain much from this important contribution.

NOTES

[1] See, for example: William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Responses to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), originally published in 1980.

[2] Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-44* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

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