

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 9 (July 2009), No. 94

Claiborne A. Skinner, *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xii +202 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliographic essay, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8018-8838-7

Review by Sara E. Chapman, Oakland University.

Claiborne Skinner wrote the *The Upper Country* for use in undergraduate history courses. In the preface, his stated primary goal is to provide a synthesis of the rise and fall of the French regime in the Great Lakes region from the 1600s until 1754. Specifically, he charts the chain of events that he sees as leading to the “fateful clash in Ohio” between the French and British and the ensuing French and Indian War (p. x).

In the prologue, the author provides an overview of Native American groups in the early 1600s in the Great Lakes area, and discusses the arrival of the first wave of French missionaries and fur traders. Drawing mainly from W. J. Eccles’s work, Skinner then turns to a discussion of Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s policies for New France in the 1660s and 1670s. Acting as Louis XIV’s minister for colonial affairs, Colbert sought to limit French expansion beyond the still-fledgling St. Lawrence settlements. These objectives, however, stood in stark contrast to realities on the ground. In defiance of these policies, fur traders and colonial officials continued to mount expeditions to explore and claim new territories while expanding trading activities and establishing forts in the Great Lakes region. Skinner ends the prologue by describing the region in the 1670s as hemmed in by English claims between Hudson’s Bay and New York. Charles II, Skinner writes, had “... an imperial vision for America and wished to cripple the French” (p. 23).

Covering 1673 to 1682, chapter one begins with the royal government’s attempts to control the fur trade in the Great Lakes region by issuing official licenses to a limited number of traders. Frontenac, the governor of New France, managed the selling of the permits that allowed traders to go into the Great Lakes to buy furs from Native Americans and then return to sell them for export to France at the main fur market in Montreal. Many colonists, however, ignored these measures and continued to stream, unchecked, into the upper country to trade. Skinner also describes how La Salle expanded French claims in this period by embarking on explorations down the Mississippi River that he launched from the upper country. The explorer, Skinner argues, saw the river as a dangerous “back door” entry for the English into French territories (p. 35). By the 1680s the fur trade and new territorial claims showed that Colbert’s efforts to contain expansion in New France had failed. Skinner writes “[t]he French were about to embark on an imperial experiment unlike anything the world had seen before” (p. 44). Skinner concludes by stating that England had opened their colonies to religious dissenters while Canada remained “[t]rapped within Louis XIV’s dictum ‘one law, one faith, one king’...”(p. 45). According to Skinner, by the 1680s, it was yet not clear which country would win the contest for the continent.

Skinner opens chapter two with biographical sketches of the newly named French and English colonial governors in the 1680s: La Barre, in New France, and Dongan, in New York. Skinner describes Dongan as bent on countering French claims and forging alliances with the Five Nations. As a result of Dongan’s measures, and La Barre’s ineptitude in countering them, Skinner claims “confrontation

became inevitable" (p. 47). Skinner then identifies the primary French settlement in the Great Lakes, the fort at Michilimackinac, as the center for fur trading, and provides short biographical sketches of some of its early commanders. He recounts French attempts to forge alliances with Indian groups near the fort, most notably the Huron, but argues that bouts of violence and strife undercut these efforts. Skinner describes La Salle's establishment of Fort St. Louis, in the Illinois country, and of Iroquois attacks on it. Skinner concludes with an account of French preparations for war with the Iroquois.

In chapter three, Skinner states that the English holdings in Hudson's Bay and Albany, and the warring Iroquois to the West "surrounded" New France by 1687 (p. 66). After an extensive narrative account of the wars from 1687 to 1701 in the Great Lakes and New York where the French and allied Amerindian forces were pitted against the British and Iroquois (Seneca and Mohawk), Skinner credits Frontenac, governor of New France, with the decision to invade Iroquois territory. This campaign using "guerrilla campaigns of attrition" ultimately paved the way for French victory and the Great Peace of 1701 (p. 80).

Skinner focuses on the Fox Wars (1701 to 1736) in chapter four. He argues that the new British settlement at Charleston afforded its settlers ample opportunity to engage in trade with Indian groups previously tied to the French: "... the Carolinians would use Tennessee as a highway in an enterprise aimed at nothing short of driving the French out of the west entirely. Their instrument would be the Chickasaw nation ...."(p. 91). The French countered this development by supporting new settlements in Louisiana and forging alliances with the Choctaw. Returning to the Great Lakes, Skinner briefly describes the founding of Detroit, in 1701, and gives a narrative account of subsequent French clashes with the Foxes around that new fort. Skinner concludes that the Fox Wars showed that the French were "... far weaker than the Indians had imagined ...."(p. 110). The wars also closed off the French from the Chicago and Wisconsin water routes linking their northern colonies to those in the Illinois and Louisiana, forcing them to exclusively rely on the Ohio water ways. In Skinner's view this set the stage for future conflict as "[t]he most vital artery of New France now lay more than 300 miles closer to the English of New York and the Carolinas" (p. 111).

Skinner's fifth chapter provides an overview of the Illinois and Chickasaw Wars (1700 to 1740). First, he describes the founding of settlements in Louisiana and the Natchez attacks on them. Then, he turns to a discussion of posts in the Illinois region. Though primarily focused on agriculture, these colonies were tied to the upper country by an active, seasonal fur trade. Chickasaw raids on French Mississippi River convoys between the Illinois settlements and Louisiana endangered these settlements and evolved into sustained warfare between the French and the British supported Chickasaw. While the parties made peace in 1740, Skinner adds that the Chickasaw "... would remain a threat to the southern frontier of the upper country well into the 1740s" (p.134).

Skinner opens chapter six with the declaration that between 1736 and 1754 the French "imperial venture" in the Great Lakes had reached its "zenith." "Time was running out" for the colonies because of their weakened Indian allies and economic dependence on the declining fur trade (p. 136). Meanwhile, the British had begun to infiltrate the Ohio Valley through their relationship with the Iroquois. Skinner then provides a brief overview of the state of French forts in the upper country: Detroit, Saint Joseph, Vincennes, Ouiatenon, Miami, Niagara, Michilimackinac and Chequamegon. He concludes that the French spread themselves too thin as "... it was one thing to claim a continent and quite another to hold and exploit one" (p. 155).

In the final chapter (seven), the author traces the escalating tensions between the British and the French that culminated in the clash at Fort Necessity in 1754. Skinner argues a major turning point in colonial policy came in 1749, when the French king and ministers received a memoir, written by the outgoing French colonial governor, La Jonquière. In it, the governor presented a "domino theory," warning that if the Ohio region fell to the British, then France would lose Illinois, then Louisiana, and perhaps even the rest of its Atlantic colonies (p. 164). According to Skinner, the king and his ministers adopted this

concept for subsequent colonial policy. While the Fort Necessity incident predated any formal war declaration between the two nations, in Skinner's view, it showed that both the French and the British believed they had to control the Ohio Valley to hold onto their North American colonies and that "... both sides had now succumbed to domino logic" (p. 172). In Skinner's view both countries' adoption of the domino theory and the attack on Fort Necessity ushered in the French and Indian War, although neither side understood "what they had blundered into" at the time (p. 173). The author concludes by noting that Britain would win the French and Indian War (Seven Years' War in Europe), but eventually lose its American colonies.

Skinner's ambitious survey history of the upper country is timely. As he notes in the preface, Fred Anderson's recent book on the Seven Years War, has focused more attention, especially for American colonial historians, on that period as a major turning point.<sup>[1]</sup> Moreover, historians studying colonial and frontier regions have recently produced a body of work on borderlands and cultural encounters that provide a rich jumping off point for a survey history of the Great Lakes region.<sup>[2]</sup>

Skinner's short work covers a great deal of ground in both time and space; this is one of its great strengths as well as its great weakness. While, as the title suggests, the author does focus on the "upper country" (or the Great Lakes region), the book really attempts to include Illinois, Louisiana, and the Ohio Valley as well. No doubt the author is to be lauded for not imposing anachronistic, artificial territorial boundaries. In fact, historians, for far too long, have tended to study these French regions in North America as separate entities. Skinner urges us to look for the connections between regions, and the Ohio Valley was really an extension of the Great Lakes region, at least as contemporaries conceived it. This large scope, however, means that many issues and events for the Great Lakes region, such as colonial society, daily life in the region, the impact of the peace between the French and Iroquois in 1701, the founding of Detroit, and the fur trade, are all covered with relative brevity and without thorough analysis. In this work, the author primarily views the upper country as a starting point for further French territorial expansion and claims that lead to clashes with the British.

In many respects this work adheres to the "great man history" tradition as much of the narrative focuses on the lives of colonial officials, explorers, and commanders such as Frontenac and La Salle. Skinner uses primary sources from the French perspective in a somewhat uncritical way to supplement the description of events. In doing so, he omits a broader understanding of colonial society beyond these figures.

For example, the author offers a somewhat outdated characterization of the fur traders, or *coueurs de bois* and *voyageurs*. Skinner writes "... the coueurs de bois attracted more than their share of rogues and scoundrels" (p. 28). This description is typical of those offered by missionaries and colonial officials; both groups possessed their own reasons to criticize the traders who flaunted their respective aims and interests.<sup>[3]</sup> Recent works by Louise Dechêne, Carolyn Podruchny and Susan Sleeper-Smith, however, have challenged this interpretation and provided a rich analysis of the traders' roles in colonial societies and economies.<sup>[4]</sup> Likewise, Skinner has scant discussion of the colonial soldiers who were so central to these forts and settlements.<sup>[5]</sup>

While Native American groups figure somewhat prominently in the narrative of events, they are often depicted as one-dimensional and primarily as checks on French expansion. Part of this likely stems from, again, the author's reliance on somewhat uncritical readings of contemporary accounts, rather than recent secondary works by specialists on Native American history.<sup>[6]</sup> As a result, the author doesn't fully explore Indian nations' interests in alliances with each other or with European powers. For example, in his section on the Fox Wars, Skinner provides this explanation for why the Fox sought war: "The Fox nation, a fierce, proud people had few friends, Red or White, and sought none" (p. 93). Employing more recent approaches and methodologies likely would have yielded more nuanced interpretations of Amerindian motives. Throughout this survey, Skinner emphasizes conflict between

the French and Native Americans which contrasts with an existing body of scholarly literature that equally focuses on trade, alliances, and diplomacy. Skinner's emphasis on conflict rather than collaboration perhaps leaves readers with an unbalanced view of the scope of French and Indian encounters.[7]

Skinner also fails to tie together his narratives of these French and Indian conflicts with his ongoing account of growing tensions between the French and British. As I have discussed above, Skinner attributes the start of the French and Indian War to the French and British governments simultaneously adopting a "domino theory" that purported that if either relinquished claim to the Ohio Valley, it would lose its hold on outlying regions and, ultimately, its colonial empire in North America. Other historians, such as Francis Jennings and Fred Anderson, however, have argued that the decline of Iroquois power played a major role in paving the way for the clash between the British and French in the Ohio Valley, because they served as a buffer between the two European powers.[8] Given that the Iroquois played such a central role, not only in the Ohio Valley conflicts, but also in Great Lakes region (going back before French arrival), the author could have drawn more from the wealth of scholarship on the Iroquois and weighed in on this, and other related debates.[9]

Finally, from the evidence provided, it is not clear that the clash between the French and British in North America was inevitable, as Skinner suggests throughout this book, or that it would necessarily lead to a sustained, major war in North America. Even after the start of the war, the kings and ministers in Britain and France viewed the fighting in North America (the French and Indian War) as relatively insignificant. Instead, both focused their energies and resources on the war that waged in Europe (the Seven Years' War). That is, they did until December of 1758 when William Pitt radically changed British strategy, committing military forces and concentrating on victory in the North American theater as a way to win the war. Even then, however, the course and outcome of the war was not a foregone conclusion.[10] One could argue that the war of empire in North America between the French and British stemmed more from decisions made in a ministerial office in England, than as a result of shots fired in the Ohio Valley in 1754.

In general, however, it is quite difficult to write a survey history, and it is rather easy for reviewers to complain about what was left out of such a work. One major contribution this book makes is that it will likely expose more American students to the notion that the history of America is not just the story of the British colonists. The history of New France, as this work shows, is an important and central aspect of the North American colonial experience.

## NOTES

[1] Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2000).

[2] Many of the works on borderlands and colonial encounters stem from the seminal book by Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Recent works include, Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell, eds., *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500-1850* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[3] The missionaries viewed the traders as libertines who made it more difficult to win over Native American converts. Colonial officials, such as Frontenac, were critical of them because they defied bans on unlicensed trade.

[4] Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal*, trans. by Liana Vardi (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) and Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006). For ties between Amerindian women and traders see Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

[5] Arnaud Balvay, *L'Épée et la plume: Amérindiens et soldats des troupes de la marine en Louisiane et au pays d'en haut, 1683-1763* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006).

[6] For example, on the Foxes see R. David Edmunds and Joseph L. Peyser, *The Fox Wars: The Mesquakie challenge to New France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), and for the Iroquois, Daniel Richter's works, including *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). See also, Gordon Sayre, *Les sauvages américains: representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[7] For example, the author cites Gilles Havard but does not incorporate Havard's arguments about diplomacy as a case study for French and Indian interactions into his survey. Gilles Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701: French-Native Diplomacy in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

[8] Anderson, *Crucible of War*; Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York: Norton, 1988).

[9] Relevant works about the Iroquois include José Antônio Brandão, *Your Fyre Shall Burn No More: Iroquois Policy Toward New France and Its Native Allies to 1701* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Daniel Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, and *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: The Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with English Colonies from its Beginning to the Lancaster Treaty of 1744* (New York: Norton, 1984); Richard Aquila, *The Iroquois Restoration: Iroquois Diplomacy on the Colonial Frontier, 1701-1754* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Daniel Richter and James H. Merrell, eds., *Beyond the Covenant Chain: The Iroquois and Their Neighbors in Indian North America, 1600-1800* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

[10] Anderson, *Crucible of War*; William Nester, *The First Global War: Britain, France, and the Fate of North America, 1756-1775* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000).

Sara E. Chapman  
Oakland University  
chapman@oakland.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print

form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172