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Eric T. Jennings, *Imperial Heights. Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2011. 352 pp, 37 ill. Notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00/£41.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-520-266599.

Review essay by Tyler Stovall, University of California, Berkeley

In *Imperial Heights* Eric Jennings confirms his reputation as one of the leading historians of French colonialism. Returning to issues of colonial health and medicine that he explored in his last book, *Curing the Colonizers*, Jennings makes a convincing case for the centrality of the body to France's imperial mission. In this new study he builds on his earlier work, but at the same time departs from it in at least two important respects. Unlike his previous monographs, which compared different parts of the French empire, *Imperial Heights* focuses on one colonial region, Indochina, and one city within that region, Dalat. [1] At the same time Jennings addresses to a much greater extent than previously the relationship between colonial and post-colonial life, seeing Dalat as a prime example of the important connections and slippery distinctions between the two. The focus on a single city in no way reduces Jennings' ability to consider broader themes of French colonialism. Rather, it permits him to address this history from a multifaceted perspective, offering what he says "is at once a local and a global history" (p. 4). *Imperial Heights* is based on impressive archival research, whose thoroughness underscores Jennings' commitment to achieving the most complete mastery possible of his subject. One comes away from reading this rich study not only with an intensive knowledge of the Vietnamese highlands, but more broadly with some of the key issues that frame the modern history of imperial France.

Eric Jennings approaches the history of Dalat, colonial Indochina's leading hill station, from several important perspectives, using them to explore the often contradictory nature of French colonialism. And yet he portrays the city not just as a mirror of broader imperial themes, but equally as a richly local culture with its own idiosyncrasies. One consistent theme in the history of modern Dalat is anachronism: the city frequently seemed to embrace ideas and patterns whose best years have come and gone. For example, French officials founded the sanatorium in 1897 as a place to cure French colonial soldiers and others from the dangers posed by Vietnam's tropical climate. The same year, however, the British scientist Ronald Ross convincingly challenged climatic theories of disease. More generally, the city achieved its greatest dynamism after 1940, when the Japanese had already dug into Indochina and the handwriting was on the wall for Europe's overseas empires. One of the ironies of the history of the city, and perhaps that of French colonialism in general, is therefore the chronic backwardness of a place that in so many respects symbolized modernity. Given the scholarly debates about whether European colonialism represented aristocratic atavism, what Benedict Anderson called "tropical Gothic," or visions of the future, Jennings shows how both could be true at the same time. [2]

Imperial Heights is also an urban history, one that makes an important contribution to the historiography of French colonial urbanism.[3] Jennings described how Dalat was planned and organized, how the French conceived of it as an urban retreat, and how they dealt with unexpected problems. Like many modern urban and suburban developments, it was originally conceived of as an escape from cities like Saigon and Hanoi, but ultimately developed its own share of urban concerns. In particular, the question of residential hybridity and segregation underscored that it was more than just a pastoral retreat, but rather an urban center in its own right.

At the core of Dalat's colonial history lay the conviction that French men and women could not long thrive in a fundamentally alien climate. Consequently, the nation's imperial mission required creating a little bit of France in tropical Indochina. The Lang Bian plateau, perched up in the highlands of central Annam, seemed ideally suited to this purpose, with its cool climate and scenic mountain vistas. The founders of Dalat ignored the rather troublesome fact that the plateau was not particularly salubrious, choosing it because it was cooler than lowland areas and looked (or could be made to look) more European. Throughout *Imperial Heights* Jennings explores in detail the tensions between the role of Dalat as a health center and its image as a European colony within a colony, a place for the sick versus a residence for those who wanted to stay healthy. Initially the city was supposed to serve members of the military and the administration in need of medical attention, but gradually it developed a new role as a center of European life in colonial Indochina. At times these roles came into conflict, such as when the local club tried to establish gambling in the city. But for the most part Dalat's culture emphasized healthy food (notably produce like green beans and strawberries common in France but rare in Indochina), sports, and physical fitness. This emphasis on health constituted a response not only to high sickness and mortality rates among French soldiers in Indochina, but more generally represented an alternative to the *cafard*, the stereotype of colonial decadence and degeneration.[4]

These two imperatives shared a key goal: that of preserving the health of the French, or European, race in colonial Indochina. Drawing upon studies of whiteness in imperial context, Jennings looks at colonial Dalat as an example of white racial formation.[5] Dalat was to be a white city in an Asian land, a stronghold of French civilization frequently defined in racial terms. Much ink has been spilled over the role of race in the colonial encounter, and in the history of modern France generally, and *Imperial Heights* makes an important contribution to this historiography by showing how what was intended to be a model community for colonial Indochina was built on the premise of white privilege and racial exclusion. Notably, whiteness in Dalat was defined by white women, so that the community became an important center of female life and of white domesticity in general.[6] Dalat is an important example of French efforts to suppress interracial sexual relationships, the *mariage à la mode de pays*, replacing them with French nuclear families centered around white women and children.[7] The heavy investment in schools, both lay and religious, for French children from throughout Indochina made Dalat a center for European domesticity and the future of colonial Indochina.

At the same time, Jennings explores the complexities of racial thinking in Dalat by considering the history of the local indigenous highland peoples and their relationship to the Vietnamese. Similar to the Kabyle myth in North Africa, the French in Indochina often viewed them as the "good" natives in contrast to the corrupt lowland Vietnamese.[8] Both whiteness and the *politique des races* were crucial components of racial ideology in the French empire, and Jennings gives us a fascinating glimpse into their interaction. Moreover, Dalat became a center of French sociability and tourism in southeast Asia, dominated by the hulking Palace hotel. Wealthy French tourists stayed in style at this state of the art resort or built their own private villas that to this day still dominate the city's architecture. A place where one could swim in the lake, enjoy the temperate climate, and eat fresh strawberries, Dalat represented an idyllic, privileged vision of France far from home.

It was also an artificial, unreal vision, as Jennings makes clear. The city of European leisure rested upon backbreaking labor by colonial subjects. Roads and railroads had to be built and the belongings and bodies of French residents carried by native porters, many of whom suffered and died from the ravages of disease in such a supposedly healthy locale. The sumptuous villas that so typified Dalat employed numerous Vietnamese servants, and the plantations that produced

the plateau's delicious fruit used Vietnamese labor. As a result, in spite of its reputation as a retreat for the French from the rigors of colonial life, by the 1930s the Vietnamese constituted the majority of Dalat's population. French authorities tried to respond to this by segregating the city into European and native quarters, but the increasing presence of mixed race people and of affluent Vietnamese, including the emperor Bao Dai, complicated this endeavor. Ultimately it proved impossible to create and maintain an isolated European enclave in colonial Annam, so that Dalat came to represent both dreams of whiteness and the realities of colonial hybridity.[9]

In chronicling the history of colonial Dalat, Eric Jennings situates his analysis between the extremes of admiration of the achievements of empire and uncompromising anti-colonialism. This perspective dominates current colonial historiography, and in significant ways goes back to George Orwell's seminal short story "Shooting the Elephant." [10] He also sees the city as an example of imperial weakness, of the limits of what the French were able to achieve in Indochina as much as what they did accomplish. In the case of Dalat, the French failed to reproduce themselves overseas, instead creating a new version of Vietnamese society that ultimately had no place for them. Some of the most interesting parts of *Imperial Heights* deal with Dalat as a symbol of Vietnamese modernity. Over time, for example, French tourism to the city gave rise to Vietnamese tourism there, and Dalat became a privileged location for colonial elites as well as French colonizers.[11] Ultimately Dalat was not just an imitation of a faraway France but equally a synthesis of French and Vietnamese culture. Its history underscores the fact that colonial rule was not simply imposed but rather the result of complex, if usually unequal negotiations between different parties, and that the legacy of colonialism belongs both to France and to its former colonies.

Imperial Heights gives us a concise and richly detailed case study of Dalat, which Jennings uses to connect to broader themes about the history of French colonialism and its postcolonial successors. His analysis inspires other questions and observations worth considering. For example, the image of Dalat as a French microcosm in the tropics begs the question, why did the city and the idea of a highland landscape more generally come to represent France? After all, France is not Switzerland, and mountains do not generally loom large in national symbolism and iconography. The contrast between temperate and tropical climates became a central marker of the difference between colony and metropole in imperial France as a whole, yet North Africa is no more tropical than Provence, so that it is worth thinking about why climate became such a key marker of colonial status.

It is also interesting to think about Dalat and colonial hill stations more generally in the broader context of highland and mountain cultures. Life in "the heights" often seems to reflect extremes of privilege or poverty. While elevated geography usually translates into social prestige in many modern cities, it is also true that mountainous areas have frequently lacked the resources, such as rich bottomland, of the communities that exist in the valleys. *Montani semper liberi* (Mountaineers are always free) runs the motto of West Virginia, yet the traditional image of that state has generally emphasized poverty rather than freedom. In metropolitan France, areas like the Auvergne and the Haute Savoie had similar reputations and social profiles.[12] This distinction between wealthy lowlands and poor highlands existed in pre-colonial Annam, of course, and was neatly reversed by the French, in some ways prefiguring the rise of mountain resort culture in the metropole itself. Dalat may have been modeled on France, but it is perhaps also true that contemporary resorts in the French Alps draw some inspiration from the colonial hill town ideal.

It is also worth considering what the history of Dalat reveals about French colonial ideology in general. Scholars have long noted the role of the *mission civilisatrice* in shaping not just French overseas expansion but the identity of modern France in general.[13] Yet the very genesis of

Dalat, and its subsequent evolution, seems to acknowledge the failure of this mission. It began as a place to cure soldiers and other representatives of France in Indochina from the travails of colonialism, an implicit admission of the weakness of the imperial endeavor. Its attempt to create an isolated bastion of Frenchness high above the problems and rigor of colonial rule symbolized a retreat, in more than one sense, from the civilizing mission. Seen from this perspective, even the racial segregation so key to Dalat represented the failure of the French to convert their subjects to their own ideas of civilized behavior. It represented a kind of upside-down policy of association, one that emphasized preserving threatened French culture rather than native traditions. French imperialism may have had visions of remaking the world, but in the end it could not even recreate France overseas.[14]

Eric Jennings ends his study of Dalat by analyzing the city's role during the collapse of French rule in Indochina and the subsequent American war. Paradoxically World War II constituted a golden age for the city, whose population grew sharply thanks to all those French who did not or could not return to the occupied metropole. Compared with a France that had itself been colonized by Germany, Dalat represented not just a vision of France overseas but also an authentic remnant of what seemed to have been lost in Europe. Although postwar plans to make Dalat the capital of an anti-Communist Indochinese Federation came to naught, the city gained in prominence during the South Vietnamese regime, its population increasing to over 100,000 by 1975. Since then Dalat has reemerged as a major tourist center in Vietnam, using its colonial-era architecture and pristine mountain air to appeal to affluent Westerners and Vietnamese honeymooners, among others. As in the colonial era, the city remains a hybrid, attracting both former colonizers and the formerly colonized, but for different reasons.

All in all, *Imperial Heights* is a fascinating look at French colonial and Vietnamese history through a global analysis of one community. Thanks to his exhaustive research, Jennings succeeds in considering both French and Vietnamese experiences in and perspectives on Dalat and on colonial Indochina in general. It is tempting to write the history of such places as narratives of failure along the famous lines of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Yet Dalat's appeal ultimately survived the colonial era, and if its failures were those of French colonialism in general, its successes testified to the enduring need for romance, beauty, and a place far above the storms of everyday life.

NOTES

[1] Eric Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); and Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's national revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina. 1940-1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); and Paul Rabinow, *French modern: norms and forms of the social environment* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

[3] David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Zeynep Celik, *Urban forms and colonial confrontations: Algiers under French rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and W. Brian Newsome and Tyler Stovall, eds., "French Colonial Urbanism," special issue of *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 33, no.2 (Summer, 2007).

[4] See David Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blindspots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Michael G. Vann, "Of *le Cafard* and Other Tropical Diseases: Perceived Threats to White Colonial Culture in Indochina" in Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee, eds., *France and 'Indochina': Cultural Representations* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005).

[5] On colonial whiteness see Leigh Brucker, Janey Carey, and Katherine Ellinghaus, eds., *Re-orienting Whiteness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Radhika Mohanram, *Imperial White: Race, Diaspora, and the British Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); and Cecily Jones, *Engendering Whiteness: White women and colonialism in Barbados and North Carolina, 1627-1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[6] On French women in the empire see Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: race, gender, and family life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998); and France Renucci, *Souvenirs de femmes au temps des colonies* (Paris: Balland, 1988);

[7] Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie: les métis de l'empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris: Découverte, 2007); Owen White, *Children of the French empire: miscegenation and colonial society in French West Africa, 1895-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[8] Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: stereotyping, prejudice, and race in colonial Algeria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

[9] Michael G. Vann, "White City on the Red River: Race, Power and Culture in French Colonial Hanoi, 1872-1954," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999).

[10] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[11] Vu Trong Phung, *Dumb Luck: a novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), edited and with an introduction by Peter Zinoman.

[12] Emilie Carles, *A life of her own: a countrywoman in twentieth-century France* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), translated by Avriel H. Goldberger.

[13] Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[14] Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

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