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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

Response essay by Eric Jennings, University of Toronto

I am very grateful for these four generous, detailed, and engaging responses to *Imperial Heights*. In addition to reflecting their own scholarly horizons, the different approaches these reviewers have adopted speak, I believe, to my effort to utilize several brushes and techniques to present a particular colonial project. Thus, Tyler Stovall focuses on whiteness, corporality, and exclusion; Jennifer Boittin on colonial gender dynamics; Panivong Norindr on labor practices and colonial violence; and David Pomfret on education, architecture, and planning. All appear to find resonance in the absence of a single totalizing explanation or framework in *Imperial Heights*. Each also notes, in one way or another, the ironies embedded in Dalat's deeply entangled colonial and postcolonial histories. As moved as I am by the laudatory nature and content of the reviews, from this point on, I will take up their questions and handful of critiques, as this seems the most fruitful way of fostering dialogue.

Tyler Stovall's insight into the meanings of upland regions in France and Indochina is an interesting one. I read the French colonial escape to the Indochinese highlands along medical lines, as a phenomenon in lockstep with the apogee of European sanatoria. I also explore the Humboldtian logic inherent in the colonial quest for the "right altitude" in the tropics at which to clone France, along with its artichokes, strawberries, and livestock. Yet, Stovall asks, what of the image of mountainous areas as isolated and relatively underdeveloped? And how did Dalat's particular coolness become a shorthand for Frenchness in general?

The answer to the first question is that colonial planners saw the Indochinese highlands as a providential opportunity, a tabula rasa, and an ideal escape from disease. There is no doubt that a sort of regional-modernist flair prevailed at Dalat, although Stovall is right to surmise that metropolitan identities were in some ways flattened as well. Savoie was frequently invoked as a way of casting Dalat as the "Alps of Indochina" or to marvel at its temperature readings. Provençal, Breton, Auvergnat, Basque, and Savoyard styles can be detected in the resort's many villas from the 1920s and 1930s (though others found inspiration in Bavaria...). Still, the city seems to present more of a pastiche than a deep regionalist streak. Contrary to Saigon, there was no "little Corsica" at Dalat, although there certainly was a "little Saigon", insofar as the resort became a playground for the rich and famous of the nearby metropolis, colonizer and colonized alike.^[1] That Dalat could become synonymous with France in general was a contradiction that certain urban planners seized upon. For instance, architect Louis-Georges Pineau deplored that the holiday destination was beginning to resemble the Paris banlieue (p. 128). In other words, if France was being cloned at Dalat, as a wide range of colonial voices seemed to concur, the question of which France to clone was the subject of heated and endless debate. To many, the answer was a devoutly Catholic provincial France.

Stovall's second question is even more intriguing to me. I mention in chapter one that some colonial doctors sought to ascertain whether Algerians and Provençaux fared better than those from Northern France in mid-nineteenth century Indochina (pp. 6-7). In chapter two, I cite the

widespread belief, shared some forty years apart by famed Pasteurian Alexandre Yersin and obscure meteorologist Paul-Antoine Carton, that Dutch, Germans, Britons, and French people required different altitudes for their hill stations, precisely to match the ambient climate of their motherlands. While scientists debated exact climatic matches of race and place, colonials more generally came to conceive of Dalat as both a microcosm of and a surrogate for the metropole. Thus, Marguerite Duras effortlessly deployed the trope of Dalat as a racial regenerator (pp. 51-2).

Stovall also seizes upon the significant and vastly different ways in which Vietnamese people reacted to Dalat. The gamut of Vietnamese responses to the hill station—from a rejection of it as a site for “fattened bourgeois” to a far more widespread “bewitchment” at its sights, smells, and sounds (a fascination expressed by none other than Vo Nguyen Giap)—speaks to broader reactions to modernity, leisure, social change, and empire.

Panivong Norindr engages with my analysis of colonial labor strategies and resistance to them. He takes note of worker fatality rates, forced conscription and migration, and pay on the murderous campaigns to build Dalat and link it to the rest of Indochina. His one “quibble” concerns my mention of Emile Zola, whose oeuvre he quite rightly suggests is not to be used as a secondary source in labor history. I think this particular point hinges on a simple misunderstanding. My single reference to Zola (p. 66) is to mention that Dr. Etienne Tardif, one of the colonial agents witnessing the bold workers’ strike on a suspension bridge construction site on the road to Dalat in September 1899, had been, by his own account, reading *La faute de l’abbé Mouret* at the time. I add that the events unfolding before his eyes might have called another Zola novel, *Germinal*, to Tardif’s mind (going on the hunch that Tardif would have been familiar with this more famous work in the same Rougon Macquart series). Lastly, I indicate that Paul Guynet, the leader of this road and bridge project, introduced a parallel with the labor situation in France. Guynet remarked that in the metropole he would have called upon dragoons to break up the strike. This particular section aimed only to show a degree of situational and comparative reflection at work, not to suggest that Zola himself sheds any light on this colonial case.[2]

Norindr’s point about the indigénat (about which much has been written in recent years),[3] and the arbitrariness of conscription, taken in tandem with my description of abusive labor practices and unpunished murder, fall in line with a theme that recurs at Dalat. A great deal of colonial activity seems to have transpired in a kind of legal void. Try as colonial legislators might to render Dalat a French enclave in Indochina, to forge alliances with ethnic highland groups and create a mountain bastion, the fact remained that Lang Bian province in which Dalat was located had been wrenched at the outset from the empire of Annam. Here, the complexities of Indochina, its series of exceptions and particularities—protectorates, colonies, European centers, each bearing its own statutes—come into play (p. 225). However, in some ways, this deck of cards crumbled remarkably easily. Shaun Kinglsey Malarney has recently shown how complex jurisdictions drawn up by colonial authorities ultimately made it impossible to police prostitution across internal Indochinese borders.[4] Similarly, baroque legal and jurisdictional complexities surrounding Dalat’s unique status (annexed territory within Annam, putative federal capital of Indochina) ultimately backfired. With the advent of civil war in the late 1940s, colonial jurists began to argue for highland autonomy, precisely as the Viet-Minh invoked national impartibility.

Jennifer Boittin rightly suggests that as much as some planners perceived Dalat as a paragon of whiteness and bourgeois gender codes, the hill station soon saw these ideals shatter. To be sure, one commentator in 1943 perceived Dalat as a site where “colonials can be themselves again... where anemic children can, under temperate climes, prepare to become men” (p. 72). And Dalat did seem to fulfill its role as a haven for European women and children. But as

Boittin underscores, at the turn of the century European women began to challenge traditional gender roles by joining colonial hunting parties; and by the 1930s Eurasian, Thai, and ethnic Vietnamese children shared benches with white French students at the prestigious Couvent des Oiseaux de Dalat and under the brick spire of the Lycée Yersin.

Boittin's point about neurasthenia is an interesting one. She observes that Victor Adrien Debay, who committed serial murder in his bid to find an oasis in the tropics, invoked a disease that in Boittin's words was considered "[a] very upper class, urban illness, and one that in the metropole was usually associated with women and Jews." Yet I remain convinced that neurasthenia was also coded as a colonial affliction and that it took on a different valence in the colonial sphere. Dane Kennedy has demonstrated this persuasively, documenting the colonial invention of this condition as a particularly tropical ailment and the eventual waning of tropical neurasthenia in the 1930s. He further establishes that tropical neurasthenia constituted the "heir" to a host of other mysterious symptoms imputed to the tropics. Moreover, Kennedy, like Warwick Anderson, links tropical neurasthenia strongly with colonial masculinity, observing that the strongest medically endorsed safeguard against the malady involved marrying a white wife and avoiding liaisons with native women.[5]

For his part, David Pomfret shrewdly notes, across chapters, the multiple ways in which racial segregation was breaking down in 1930s Dalat, in the realms of education and zoning, most notably. And he asks what precisely was driving these changes. I speculate on page 183 of *Imperial Heights* that the advent of the Popular Front, as well as shifts in racial thinking, may have contributed to the trend. Certainly, this explanation seems in line with much recent scholarship: Alice Conklin's current work shows how leading French anthropologists in this period set about contesting racial science in an era of intensifying racism. Owen White's reading of the Guernut Commission's 1938 fact-finding mission in French colonies points in a similar direction. However, it goes without saying that the 1930s also witnessed a hardening and intensification of racial thinking in other circles. Thus, Clifford Rosenberg has demonstrated how even centrist French politicians of the 1930s were increasingly embracing exclusionary forms of racial thought.[6] This said, Pomfret's question mostly begs local answers. On page 172 of *Imperial Heights*, I show the remarkable upward curve of Vietnamese tourism in the 1930s: Dalat was becoming a playground not merely for the French, but also for bourgeois Vietnamese, who relished its waterfalls, game, tennis courts, cuisine, hotels, artificial lakes, hikes, and vistas, and tended to view it as quintessentially modern. In other words, over the course of the 1930s, Dalat's strict segregation was not so much dissolving, as it was being smashed by a new generation of increasingly mobile middle class Vietnamese people obsessed with "progress"—precisely those being lampooned by novelist Vu Trong Phung's biting satire.[7] To be sure, the Great Depression was, to borrow Daniel Hémery and Pierre Brocheux's phrase, nipping part of this growing Vietnamese middle class in the bud.[8] Nevertheless, this bourgeoisie still managed to branch out in this era, at Dalat and elsewhere.

Why did the colonial race for altitude ultimately flag, asks Pomfret? In a sense, it never did: during the Vichy era, when trips to France became at best intermittent, and ultimately impossible, even minor Indochinese hill stations like Tam Dao, Bokor, and Bavi began to thrive—the latter welcoming uniformed Vichy youth leagues seeking to build a new France (inspired by Gaul) atop this 800 meter hill.[9] And altitudinal rationales are still invoked to this day to justify Dalat's postcolonial role as Vietnam's leading honeymoon destination. Instead of seeing the race for altitude flagging per se, I posit two central ironies. The first involves the gradual scientific discrediting of climatic determinism in the very decades after Dalat's creation, with the confirmation in 1897 that mosquitoes, rather than heat, were responsible for the transmission of some of the deadliest tropical diseases. The second hinges on the fact that European death rates began steadily to decline around the time Dalat was created, thanks to improved disease control

across the colony.[10] Thereafter, Dalat's momentum carried it. Its healthfulness and inherent goodness became entrenched as colonial common sense.

How did Dalat go from languishing circa 1909 to thriving by 1914? As Pomfret remarks, the two world wars lent considerable momentum to Dalat. It was at the start of the Great War, I contend, that Dalat became Indochina's prime hill station from the standpoint of the authorities in Hanoi. As for why it had nearly been mothballed prior to 1914, the answer lies in the huge cost overruns the hill station incurred: the human and financial costs of hauling supplies to the small number of Europeans posted on the hill station were apparent by 1904 (p. 58). As it became clear that both the road and rail line to Dalat would require massive *emprunts*, not to mention the dislocation and forced recruitment of thousands of workers, Dalat was increasingly contested within French circles, most notably among those alarmed over excessive spending. Indeed, the skeptics, first and foremost among them the clairvoyant captain Fernand Bernard, were gaining momentum against the Dalat enthusiasts, until World War I turned the situation on its head.

How ultimately could Dalat still remain a potent symbol of imperial power in spite of its many failings? That is the million piastre question. I posit that the site became so deeply entrenched in the colonial consciousness as an effective antidote to the tropics that failure bounced off of Dalat like water off a duck's back. Neither epidemics of malaria, nor even plague seemed capable of overturning its reputation as a colonial sanctuary.

As Pomfret contends, a cosmopolitan Dalat coexisted with a reductionist one. The latter is perhaps best encapsulated by the cité-jardin Jean Decoux, founded under Vichy, which provided social housing chalets for white *familles nombreuses* and stood across town from a newly designated "Annamese village." Here was the realization of Paul Doumer's early vision for Dalat: that of providing a respite for "fragile" colonizers and climatic re-immersion into the motherland between *permissions* to the metropole. Meanwhile, the worldlier Dalat attracted hunters from the United States and Britain, elites from Siam, missionaries from Québec, and most famously Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai, who took a fancy for the hill station. The two visions entered into conflict repeatedly: the settler press lambasted Dalat as a sinecure, and during the Great Depression hotel owners refused to cut their staffing on the grounds that such a measure would directly undercut French grandeur in the colony. Indeed, this was one of many delicate balances: military and civilian Dalat coexisted with some difficulty (soldiers had to be told to cease using the resort's deer for target practice), as did functionary and entrepreneurial Dalat. Yet these clashes and contrasts sometimes conceal remarkable connections: thus, I suggest that highland ethnic guides and scouts likely exerted a moderating influence on big game hunters from abroad (p. 85).

Several of Pomfret's observations concern Dalat in comparative perspective. He points to *colonies de vacances* at the smaller hill station of Bana. Indeed, Tam Dao, Sapa, Bokor, and other hill stations dotted Indochina.[11] Yet Dalat cast a shadow over all of them, in no small part because it was connected to Indochina's urban centers by rail. Then too, the sheer size of the Dalat plateau, and its virtually unlimited extension possibilities, help explain its domination over the competition. As a result, Indochina's web of hill stations lacked the kind of specialization featured in spa-towns in metropolitan France or in other colonies (Indochina did possess some hydromineral spas, including Binh-Thuân in Annam, but these never rose to prominence).[12] Thus, Dalat did not target the liver and Tam Dao the spleen, for instance. Rather, Dalat emerged rapidly as a panacea and, within decades, as a viable candidate for Indochina's capital, a putatively neutral site forged by the colonizers. Some colonials in Hanoi only grudgingly utilized Tam Dao and Bavi, for motives of convenience during short holidays, Dalat being further afield. In short, as early as 1914, Dalat had emerged as "Indochina's Sanatorium" to borrow the phrase of a 1938 brochure.[13]

Externally, why and how did Dalat supersede Hong Kong, Yokohama and Singapore from the standpoint of colonial furloughs, or rather why did the French feel the need to erect a hill station at Dalat when these other alternatives existed? In part, this had to do with French Indochina's colonial leaders insisting upon a convalescence site on location. As I demonstrate at length in chapter one, the idea of utilizing British hill stations in Burma or seeking reinvigoration in other British colonies was simply not an acceptable long-term solution for the Ministry of the Colonies in Paris. Indeed, Dalat's very *raison d'être* rested upon the French matching what the English already had achieved at Simla and Darjeeling. In this way, as in many others, Dalat appears a replica, or perhaps a recirculation of past colonial methods, ideals, and solutions. Beyond this, I should note that hill station experts of various colonial nations (among them Portugal, Great Britain, Belgium, the U.S.A. and the Netherlands) regularly visited one another's sites, and shared findings. Indeed, in a separate study for an edited volume, I show that from the late nineteenth century onwards, extensive comparative hill station surveys were conducted inter and supra-imperially.[14]

In conclusion, I am delighted by all four readers' enthusiastic comments. Tyler Stovall remarks the shift in my own trajectory from comparative to single-site history. No doubt inspired by a steady diet of microhistories in graduate school, I have long wanted to confect a study of a single colonial site. While my previous books considered, respectively, the exporting of Vichy ideology to different colonies and an empire of spas, *Imperial Heights* trains its sights on a specific place over the *longue durée* (circa 1860 to the present, although the core of the book spans from 1890 to 1954). This seemed an alternate manner of taking up Frederick Cooper's call to "take seriously what it meant for a polity to think like an empire"[15]—from a specific vantage point. Only this way, I believed, would I be able to untangle what Pomfret terms a "multiplicity of anxieties, ideals, sensibilities, and petty rivalries." Only this way could I trace—with the requisite depth and detail—the unpredictable outcome of colonial utopian schemes, rather than settle for a discussion of colonial blueprints. Only this way could I at once utilize multiple angles and brushes, bridge the colonial-postcolonial divide, and even the historiographical gap between colonial and area studies. Thus, the book is part of a Vietnam history series, although I consider myself a French colonial historian. While drawing an accessible portrait of an Indochinese city (the field features few urban histories outside of Hanoi and Saigon),[16] I hope to have exposed and analyzed some of the central ironies and tensions at the heart of French colonial Indochina. A few are surely place-specific—to answer David Pomfret's query. But the vast majority, like colonial anxieties, social upheavals, ethnic triangulations of power, a variety of colonial codes, anti-colonial strategies, violence, and labor practices, are in fact transposable and transposed to French Indochina more broadly, and well beyond.

NOTES

[1] On Saigon's "little Corsica" see Jean-Louis Pretini, "Saigon-Cyros. Les Corses à Saigon" *Saigon 1925-1944, Autrement*, 17 (September 1992): 92-103.

[2] Indeed, if anything, Emile Zola's *Fécondité* suggests that he was deeply imbued with the same colonial ethos and perhaps even a similar climatic determinism to the ones I analyze. See Martin Steins, "L'épisode africain de *Fécondité*" *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 48 (1974): 164-18; and Martin Steins, "Zola colonialiste" *Revue des langues vivantes* 1 (1975): 15-30.

[3] Gregory Mann, "What was the Indigénat? The 'Empire of Law' in French West Africa" *Journal of African History* 50 (2009): 331-353; and Isabelle Merle, "Retour sur le régime de l'Indigénat : Genèse et contradictions des principes répressifs dans l'empire français" *French Politics, Culture and Society* 20:2 (2002): 77-97.

[4] Vu Trong Phung, *Luc Xi: Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi*, trans. and intro. by Shaun Kingsley Malarney (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 15.

[5] Dane Kennedy, "Diagnosing the Colonial Dilemma: Tropical Neurasthenia and the Alienated Briton" in Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, eds., *Decentring Empire: Britain, India and their Transcolonial World* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006), 157-181; Warwick Anderson, "The Tresspass Speaks: White Masculinity and Colonial Breakdown" *The American Historical Review* 102:5 (December 1997): 1343-1370.

[6] Alice Conklin, chapter four of "In the Museum of Man: Racial Science, Anthropology and Humanism, 1850-1950," and *In the Museum of Man: Racial Science, Anthropology and Humanism, 1850-1950* (forthcoming, 2013); Owen White, *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa, 1895-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 119-121; and Clifford Rosenberg, "Albert Sarraut and Republican Racial Thought" *French Politics, Culture and Society* 20:3 (Fall 2002): 97-114.

[7] As Peter Zinoman has shown, Vu Trong Phung took particular aim at a new "predatory business class." Vu Trong Phung, *Dumb Luck*, edited and introduced by Peter Zinoman, trans. by Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Peter Zinoman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 3. On the language of progress in Popular Front era Indochina, see page two of this same book.

[8] Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: an Ambiguous Colonization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 213.

[9] Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 194-195.

[10] Gilles de Gantès, "Coloniaux, gouverneurs et ministres: l'influence des Français du Vietnam sur l'évolution du pays à l'époque coloniale, 1902-1914," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Paris VII, 1994), 28.

[11] For a broad analysis of Indochina's resorts, see Aline Demay, "Tourisme et colonisation en Indochine, 1898-1939" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Paris I/ Université de Montréal, 2011).

[12] A 1931 Madrolle guide describes Binh-Thuân's water as "pouvant être bue à la manière des eaux de Vals et de Vichy." Claude Madrolle, "Climatologie, sources thermales d'Indochine," (Paris: Madrolle, 1931), 9.

[13] *La France touristique, thermale, climatique*, fascicule 23, 1938, "L'Indochine," 6.

[14] Eric Jennings, "Le Club des hauteurs: Savoirs, réseaux et stations d'altitude coloniaux," in Hélène Blais, Florence Deprest, and Pierre Singaravélou, eds., *Territoires impériaux: Une histoire spatiale du fait colonial* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), 301-306.

[15] Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 200.

[16] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, including David Del Testa's very interesting study on Vinh. David Del Testa, "Vinh, the Seed that Would Grow Red: Colonial Prelude, Revolutionary City" *Historical Reflections/ Réflexions historiques* 33:2 (Summer 2007): 305-325.

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