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Jennifer E. Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011. xv + 365 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$49.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4975-8.

Review by John Strachan, Lancaster University, UK.

In *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* Jennifer Sessions offers up a fine and illuminating study of the early years of *Algérie française* and makes an important contribution to the history of nineteenth-century political culture. In this anniversary year of the end of French colonialism, histories continue to privilege the Algerian War of Independence and the postcolonial era over earlier periods of conquest, settlement and consolidation.<sup>[1]</sup> For all their merits, moreover, those (comparatively few) works that do address this crucial period of early colonial history tend to focus largely, if not disproportionately on the role of the Armée d’Afrique.<sup>[2]</sup>

Sessions’ work corrects this imbalance whilst bringing nuance and insight to some familiar debates. Her twofold aim is to account for the policy changes that led France back to the imperial stage in and after 1830 and to provide an understanding of how contemporary culture shaped processes of military conquest and settler colonization. In doing so she attempts to bridge a gap between old and new paradigms of colonial historiography. She cautions against Gramscian/Foucauldian models of culture and power which, as she rightly suggests, risk obscuring the difference and interconnectedness of colonial and metropolitan cultures. In place of these, *By Sword and Plow* employs a Geertzian understanding of culture and a focus on text and representation—art and literature in particular—as a means of escaping the binary logic of coloniser-colonised and revealing the workings of a “broader symbolic logics” (p. 15). Running through all of this are core arguments about the importance of Algeria in bridging the gap between first and second overseas empires, telling us new and vital things about the political culture of the Restoration and July Monarchy, shaping imperial practices and marking the French political landscape to this day.

*Algérie française* began amidst the murky politics of the Restoration and powerful if latent desires to avenge national pride by exorcising the spectres of Waterloo. At the same time, France’s embryonic *mission civilisatrice* owed much to precedents established by Napoleon in Egypt, the moral and financial bankruptcy of older, slavery-based colonialism in the Caribbean, and social-imperialist efforts to divert attention from metropolitan unrest couched in the language of “a righteous attack on religious fanaticism and despotic rule” (p. 20). Here, Sessions provides close and detailed analysis of debates surrounding the conquest and the wider context of French Orientalism and shows the proliferation of terms like “barbarian,” “pagan,” “corsair,” “slavery,” and “pillage.” Justifications for the conquest ran the gamut from ultraroyalist conceptions of Christian kingship to increasingly influential secular and liberal articulations of the virtues and merits of empire. The Armée d’Afrique was venerated by secular and religious authorities alike, its members commonly likened to Saint Louis and represented as France’s “new crusaders” (p. 40). Without making explicit reference to collective psychology, Sessions nevertheless make a

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persuasive case for the cathartic function of the conquest after the revolutionary tumult of the preceding half-century.

The second and third chapters discuss the place of Algeria in the official and popular culture of the July Monarchy—which seized power in the same year as the capitulation of Algiers—and continue to explore iconography whilst moving into new territories of museology and discourses of imperial heroism. King Louis-Philippe’s Galeries Historiques de Versailles serve as a neat example of how *Algérie française*’s supporters tapped into visual traditions established by Louis-François Lejeune and Antoine-Jean Gros whilst venerating (and overstating) the military achievements of the Orléanist princes. The cult of Napoleon merged with commemorative practices that mobilized everyday objects—clothing, handkerchiefs, pipes, fans, coins, flags and the woodblock prints known as *images d’Épinal*—as means of legitimating and celebrating France overseas. As criticisms of the monarchy mounted, efforts were made to shift attention onto the supposed meritocracy of the Armée d’Afrique as an antidote to the moral and physical degeneracy of the metropole. This too proved problematic, however, in the wake of changes in the nature of colonial warfare, the move away from the set-piece battles of Napoleonic lore and the development of the scorched-earth tactic of *razzia*. Throughout, Sessions demonstrates the ambivalent place of Algeria in French political culture—serving both as a lightning-rod for opposition to the regime and as a means of legitimating it. These early chapters are dense and very thoroughly researched, showing the vivacity of newspaper culture and debates over empire and making an impressive contribution to the iconography of the conquest. At their best, they read like some of the classic histories of eighteenth-century print culture and desacralization.[3]

Marshal Soult’s observation that “[V]ictorious liberty will keep it [Algeria] as a trophy captured from absolutism” (p. 69) showed the persistent importance of Algeria to French political culture and the necessity of continually reimagining it. The second section of *By Sword and Plow* focuses on the second decade of the July Monarchy in which Bonapartist notions of masculinity and ever-closer collaboration between soldiers and civilian settlers came to the fore. “Liberal” imperialism becomes an increasingly important part of the story at this juncture. Sessions argues that “the redefinition of empire had its roots in the cosmopolitan intellectual world of the Enlightenment” (p. 179) and shows how post-Revolutionary Frenchmen sought to distance themselves from the older colonialism of the New World and to fashion imperial practices that fitted with their new and hubristic self-image. Jean-Baptiste Say’s combination of a moral critique of colonial society and an economic critique of slavery was representative of this shift. Say reflected on the classic—and seemingly benign—examples of ancient Greece and Rome and, with others, romanticized France’s new empire of virtue.

Touching briefly on the allure of the Algerian landscape and Diana Davis’ concept of a “declensionist” narrative of environmental degradation [4], Sessions’s final chapters address land, emigration and politics. A decree of 1836 required settlers to improve, cultivate and build dwellings on their concessions. Distinctions between *cantiniers* (auxiliaries of the Armée d’Afrique) and *agriculteurs* (the ideal or ‘true’ type of settler) became increasingly important as the fledgling colony was beset by disease, alcoholism, prostitution and land speculation. Nonetheless, emigration rose sharply in the 1840s, popularised by new illustrated media like *Le Magasin pittoresque* and *L’Illustration* and public works projects proliferated. Sessions demonstrates a regional pattern of emigration centred on Paris, Strasbourg and their respective hinterlands and argues for a faster pace—comparable to the settlement of Australia or New Zealand—than historians have hitherto assumed.

*By Sword and Plow* is an impressive, highly readable and meticulously-researched piece of scholarship that deserves the attention of all historians of France overseas and France in the first half of the nineteenth century. Sessions deserves considerable credit for doing justice to a hitherto understudied and undervalued period of French colonial history. Her focus on art and literature is refreshing but gives way in the final chapters to a more conventional analysis of administrative data. Similarly, the theoretically inclined may regret that the early promise of a sophisticated framework combining Geertz with Said, Bourdieu and Certeau is not carried through with conviction. Nonetheless, Sessions shows French imperialism in a new and (sometimes radically) different light. Overseas expansion could be a simultaneously unifying and dividing force in the political culture of the era. The second overseas empire is incomprehensible without reference to the remains of the first (and the relationship between the two appears increasingly complex) and the later history of *Algérie française* must be understood in the context of this fascinating and contradictory legacy. *By Sword and Plow* makes all of these points clearly and effectively.

## NOTES

[1] See, for instance, the chronological structure of Benjamin Stora's *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[2]. Kenneth J. Perkins, *Qaids, Captains and Colons: French Military Administration in the Colonial Maghrib 1844-1934* (London: Holmes and Meier, 1981); Douglas Porch, *The Conquest of the Sahara* (New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984); Jacques Frémeaux, *Les Bureaux arabes dans l'Algérie de la conquête* (Paris: Denoël, 1993) George R. Trumbull IV, *An Empire of Facts: Colonial Power, Cultural Knowledge, and Islam in Algeria, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); John Strachan, "Murder in the Desert: Soldiers, Settlers and the Flatters Expedition in the Politics and Historical Memory of European Colonial Algeria, 1830-1881," *French History and Civilization* 4(2011): 210-222.

[3] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1984); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, N. Y.: Norton, 1996); Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101(1996): 13-40.

[4] Diana K. Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

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