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Christopher Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora: An Eighteenth-Century History*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 260 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-973977-6.

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This engagingly written and excellently researched study is the first to explore fully the Acadians' role in the reconstruction of French imperialism after the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763. Drawing upon a vast and diverse range of both well-known and more obscure published contemporary works, manuscript sources, legal documents, and maps, Christopher Hodson tells the story of how dispossessed Acadians adjusted to the "harsh imperatives of a vast market for colonial labor" (p. 7). Hodson's work propels the study of the Acadians and their diaspora beyond the clutch of recent studies that have tended to focus on identity formation, Native-European cultural interaction, and the vicious means, if not ends, of imperialism.^[1] Yet some troubling issues remain. The title is somewhat misleading, since the author emphasizes Acadians *within* French imperial adventures, rather than the Acadian Diaspora *per se*. Nearly half the book is comprised of virtually unchanged versions of the author's published articles, and there is a reluctance to engage in contemporary historiographical debates. In addition, the argument about the centrality of the Acadians' labor in French imperial schemes leads to rather vague conclusions.

The first part of the Acadian story is familiar. Hodson handles quickly what would be a tome or two for most historians. French settlers arrived in the Bay of Fundy region in small family units from 1604 (three years before the founding of Jamestown) in search of furs. They built rough homes among the indigenous Mi'kmaq, upon whom they initially depended and with whom they traded. The migrants soon found they could apply dyking systems from Western France using local sod "bricks" [*gazons*] to cultivate the nutrient-rich tidal lands. These dykes provided not only rich harvests, but the basis of a strong folk tradition. Rich land in turn invited feuds between rival French claimants, and in the mid-seventeenth century, the attention of English adventurers. By 1710, the Acadians' lands had been conquered by British and British American forces. Dubbing the Acadians the "neutral French," British officials eyed them suspiciously, never quite sure of their true loyalty. Acadians survived by supplying food to French Louisbourg as well as to New Englanders and later the British naval base at Halifax, which made them smugglers *par excellence*. Loyalty seemed to depend on whichever side was in control at any particular moment and place.

Growing food was crucial, and here Hodson begins to make his most singular contribution. The "imperial contest for calories" (p. 46) meant that whoever controlled food supplies to the two major citadels controlled entry to their respective colonies, and this meant controlling Acadians. As war began to spread from the Ohio Backcountry in the summer of 1755, British lieutenant governor Charles Lawrence carried out orders to pre-empt the French enlistment of the Acadians by rounding up as many Acadian families as he could and shipping them out of the Bay of Fundy region. Hodson treats the expulsion itself in a few succinct paragraphs. In what will undoubtedly become one of the more quoted (and potentially controversial) passages in the book, Hodson writes that "the expulsion of the Acadians

unfolded as one of the smoothest, most successful applications of power in the history of the British Empire” (p. 45).

Once the roughly 7,000 Acadians were rounded up and placed on ships, British authorities dispersed them up and down the British-American seaboard. Hodson follows the plight of these “pariahs” through a series of personal and highly localized encounters between unwilling hosts and unwelcome guests. At first British Americans overwhelmingly saw the Acadians as “the entering wedge of popery and a financial burden” (p. 74) although animosity tended to soften somewhat as Acadians “began, haltingly, to remake themselves in relation to the landscape around them” (p. 63). They exhibited considerable initiative, agency, and imagination in petitioning local or imperial authorities for stipends, food, and employment in order to survive. Large segments of this chapter, as well as the corresponding North American parts of the Conclusion, appear to be lightly edited versions of a recent article from 2010.[2]

After the detour in North America, Hodson turns his attention to what appears to be his more central concern: how Acadians came to be viewed as useful agricultural *beserkers*, or as one official put it, “vassals to be desired” (p. 105) by French imperial designers. Chapter three, which again is a slightly modified version of an article published in 2007, follows the fate of various Acadian migrant groups recruited to revive the French plantation colonies after 1763.[3] At war’s end, nearly 3,000 refugees languished in French Atlantic ports, while another 1,000 or so scraped by across the Channel. The Duc de Choiseul, Minister of the French Marine (which directed both the Navy and overseas colonies) recruited from both groups to launch two schemes in the tropics. Questioning the wisdom and cost of slave colonies, Choiseul envisioned the new colony of Kourou—a part of the moribund French colony of Cayenne on mainland South America—to be revived by the infusion of hardy Acadian and German Palatinate farming families. In the end, barely an estimated 200 Acadians (p. 98) endured the voyage and tried to take up their farms. Most returned disillusioned, but alive. Through mismanagement and sheer official stupidity, the German families fared far worse. An estimated 9,000 died. Of only marginally greater success was a second scheme launched in late 1763. As the Kourou disaster unfolded, Choiseul hatched another scheme to settle free laborers in the strategic but unhealthy northwest corner of St. Domingue (today’s Haiti), France’s most important and rapidly expanding Caribbean slave plantation colony. Once arrived, the leading Acadian spokesmen derided the soil and had the audacity to demand higher wages. In the end, the French reverted to African slaves.

Chapter four is a somewhat bizarre yet fascinating chronicle of Choiseul’s efforts to people the strategically situated but barren Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic. Hodson lavishes loving detail on the centuries-long French fascination with *terra australis incognita*, or the mysterious land mass below the equator that philosophers believed balanced those north of it. Central to this chapter is the story of Louis-Antoine Bougainville, the determined French Enlightenment explorer of the Pacific Islands. It turns out that Bougainville’s first major task included ferrying a few Acadian families to the Falklands to establish a forward base. The Acadians’ part is rather small: a mere eighteen are counted. They cut more sod, “otherworldly versions of the marsh grass *gaxons*” (p. 139) that they had fashioned back in Acadia, grew grain and peas, and produced a total of nine children in only a few years. But British claims to the island from 1765 eventually cut this burgeoning Eden of Peat short.

In the final two chapters, Hodson turns his attention to the launching of two major internal colonizing efforts within France itself. These two internal colonizing projects share many similarities, and are best considered together. Here, the evidential base is much stronger, the theoretical literature on French reform culture, internal improvements, the *agronomiste-physiocrate* clash over political economy and reforms more directly applicable, and the role of the Acadians as model agricultural workers is clearly discernible. The first colony was Belle Île-en-Mer, an island off the west coast of France, and the only metropolitan territory embarrassingly occupied by the British during the war. The last chapter retraces the even larger project to reclaim marginal land in impoverished Poitou. It is also essentially the author’s 2009 article, shorn of its critique of Atlantic World history.[4]

Hodson teases out the clash between reformist agendas and Acadian agency. In a defeated power looking for answers, agricultural reform appeared to offer the best vehicle for re-energizing French pride, expanding French resources, and improving the depleted morals in the French countryside. Reform-minded thinkers such as Anne-Robert Turgot, the marquis de Mirabeau, and the Marquis de Pérusse des Cars (the key zealous noble reformer in Poitou) seized upon the Acadians as perfect model colonizers. The refugees had not been exposed to the lazy, luxurious tastes of French peasants, were practical innovators, and best of all, “[T]heir fecundity had long been the stuff of legend” (p. 152). As Hodson reminds the reader, the fact that they were destitute, a drain on the Marine’s resources, and (presumably) an embarrassing reminder of defeat, surely helped frame improvement schemes.

Recruitment and implementation in both cases proceeded more slowly than might be expected of such a destitute bunch. Invited to tour lands, Acadian representatives sniffed at their poor quality, vigorously negotiated for better terms (or to be released from those promised), and in the case of Belle-Île, insisted upon living close together. Upon arrival (seventy-eight families on the island, eventually some 1,400 persons in Poitou), conflicts with indigenous farmers erupted immediately, clerics chose sides and clashed, land-clearing proceeded in fits and starts, and eventually poor harvests ensued. But behind these everyday problems there arose another of greater consequence. Hodson points out that the use of Acadians as model laborers highlighted a major conundrum for French reform efforts. To deal effectively with the Acadians meant fixing their identity and treating them as a *corps de nation*, that is, an identifiably distinct social group that could legitimately claim rights and privileges from the Crown. Even determining exactly who was a “true” Acadian proved very difficult in several cases (pp. 167-69). But reformers, such as Turgot, clearly understood that the very nature of *corps* defeated reform. In fact, it recreated the kind of privileges that halted reform. As Hodson succinctly notes, “Turgot... saw the Poitou project less as a colonial innovation than as a costly eyesore populated by serial whiners” (p. 190). Fecund, *oui*; but models of docility? Decidedly *non*. In the end, both projects collapsed. The Poitou experiment provided, with a twist of intrigue, the main body of migrants who would found settlements in Spanish Louisiana after 1785, and whose settlers would become the Cajuns.

The structural elements of each chapter support the epic style of the book. Useful maps abound, and most illustrations nicely reinforce the bucolic dreams of French imperialists. Each chapter is prefaced by grave warnings drawn from Deuteronomy 28, which outline the punishments should the Chosen People not honor the one true God. The exact connection with the Acadians’ predicament is a little puzzling here (after all, the Acadians had just been expelled from the land of milk and honey and *gazons*), but the quotes at least lend an appropriately ominous air. The first two or three pages of each chapter consist of vignettes which peer over the shoulders of a particular emblematic player, after which Hodson pulls back to reveal the much larger panorama upon which that player, and so many others, labor in their minutiae of interaction. Finally, Hodson writes with a distinct and lively flair, one that might best be described as bemused irony, peppered with nifty one-liners. On the plight of Acadians trying to win acceptance in British-American towns, he observes that, “Loyalty made good copy, but Acadian labor ultimately paid the bills” (p. 73). Or on the problems facing one of the first efforts at scientific land management and improvement in France in early 1763, he notes that “[t]he main impediment to Bitche’s development was dirt” (p. 155). Rarely has French imperial history been simply so much *fun* to read.

It is always uncomfortable to critique an author for what is not in a book. Nevertheless there remain several major shortcomings to this excellent work that at least rate a mention. Given the title, it is perplexing and even frustrating that the transplantation of more than 1,600 Acadians from Atlantic France back to North America after 1785 (and counter to the French attempts, these migrants were successful) is covered in only one minor section of barely four pages (pp. 197-200). Readers wishing fuller treatment on this group are still best served by Carl Brasseaux’s earlier works.[5] The flight of Acadians to New France during the war, or what became New Brunswick, the *patrie* of Acadians today,

is barely mentioned. A further drawback to the last two chapters is the puzzling silence (aside from three brief citations) that Hodson maintains on Jean-François Mouhot's award-winning and, it must be said, controversial book on the Acadians and identity formation in France.[6] Given that Mouhot literally covered the same territory, and his work's importance to the discussion of early modern identity and French internal reforms (not to mention to the history of the Acadians themselves), it is a glaring omission.

A second major point is less a critique than a lament for several lost historiographical opportunities. While Hodson gives a nod to previous histories of the Acadian Expulsion and Diaspora in the introduction (devoting more print, one should note, to Longfellow's epic *Evangeline* than to any historian), he does not engage directly and at any length with his peers on the more theoretical issues of diasporas, colonial identity formation, John Mack Faragher's suggestion that the *grand dérangement* pioneered "ethnic cleansing" in North America, concepts of eighteenth-century empire, or a fuller discussion of eighteenth-century labor regimes.[7] Although the book is superbly positioned to offer a major re-evaluation of Atlantic History, Hodson does not mention the term. As evidenced by his brief but intelligent previous critique of the concept (in 2009, note 4 below) Hodson has clearly thought about the topic, and has something to say. The absence of this dimension limits the value of the book among at least academics and graduate students.

Most serious are the fuzzy conclusions reached about the meaning of the Acadians' experiences, and their role in post-war French imperialism. Hodson asserts early in the Introduction that the book "serves to resurrect not one but two lost worlds, and to show the depth of their entanglement" (p. 7). These two worlds he identifies are the Acadians' actual experiences, and the impact of "imperial experimentation" that "made and remade Acadians even as it was, in part, made and remade by them" (p. 7). He later adds that his work "seeks a reorientation, a new take on those same vivid elements that captivated the poet [Longfellow]" (p. 11). To what conclusion does the "entanglement," "making and remaking," and "reorientation" lead? What he arrives at in the end is that Acadians "rebuilt in the ever-changing present, using the materials at hand. The results, like their destinations, were nothing if not diverse" (p. 211). This is less a conclusion than a truism.

What appears to animate Hodson's analysis is a misplaced insistence that French imperial efforts did not end in 1763. In a very selective review of the literature, including (an unfortunate misinterpretation of) work by this reviewer, Hodson claims that after the defeat in 1763, "[t]he French Monarchy, the usual narrative runs, responded... by giving up on overseas expansionism" (p. 7).[8] By considering the situation from the Acadians' perspective, however, he believes that we can see how "[t]he shock of 1763 triggered an outburst of colonial schemes aimed at shoring up what remained of the French Empire" (p. 8), a point he briefly reiterates near the end of most chapters (pp. 78, 116, 172, 195, 211). However, this is a "straw man" argument. Few historians, again including this reviewer, have ever suggested the French gave up on imperial ventures after 1763. Hodson is more accurate when he writes that "many [elite] Frenchmen rejected colonialism altogether, declaring Europe's overseas ventures morally repugnant" (p. 91). But as the immense growth in the French Atlantic slave trade alone bears witness, this repugnance was never enough to stem dreams of French imperial revitalization after 1763.

The Acadian Diaspora ensures that the Acadians can no longer be seen in essence as mere victims of imperial cruelty, whose *Evangeline*-like devotion to reconnecting community and locating lost loved ones brands them as "beautiful losers." Christopher Hodson shows instead they were energetic and canny actors who survived against tremendous odds on the cutting edge of French Enlightenment agricultural experimentation. It is this emphasis on Enlightenment experimentation that marks this return to the best tradition of grand and erudite imperial history as a quintessentially "*Eighteenth Century History*."

NOTES

[1] Aside from Hodson's published articles (see below), major recent monographs dating from the period of the 250th anniversary of the Expulsion in 2005 include John G. Reid *et al*, eds., *The 'Conquest' of Acadia, 1710: Imperial, Colonial, and Aboriginal Constructions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Ronnie-Gilles LeBlanc, ed., *Du Grand Dérangement à la Déportation: Nouvelles perspectives historiques* (Moncton, NB: Chaire d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton, 2005); N. E. S. Griffiths, *From Migrant to Acadian: A North American Border People, 1604-1755* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); John Mack Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from Their American Homeland* (New York: Norton, 2005); and Jean-François Mouhot, *Les réfugiés acadiens en France, 1758-1785. L'impossible réintégration?* (Quebec City: Septentrion, 2009).

[2] Christopher Hodson, "Exile on Spruce Street: An Acadian History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 2, (April 2010): 249-78.

[3] Christopher Hodson, "A Bondage So Harsh: Acadian Labor in the French Caribbean, 1763-1766," *Early American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2007): 95-131.

[4] Christopher Hodson, "Colonizing the Patrie: An Experiment Gone Wrong in Old Regime France," *French Historical Studies* 32 no. 2, (Spring 2009): 193-222.

[5] In particular, Carl Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) and the succinct overview in the same author's *Scattered to the Wind: Dispersal and Wanderings of the Acadians, 1755-1809* (Lafayette, La: Center of Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991)

[6] Cited in note 1.

[7] Cited in note 1.

[8] Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), quote, p. 7; see also pp. 38-39.

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