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James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xxviii + 484 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, appendixes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-521-82742-6.

Review by Saliha Belmessous, University of Sydney.

Historians have, with very few exceptions, taught and written the history of French colonialism in the Americas by focusing on individual colonies. Studying the French settlements as a whole is a big challenge, and James Pritchard should be given credit for trying to reunite the Northern and the circum-Caribbean (West Indies and South America) colonies in a single study. This book is therefore a welcome synthesis on French colonialism in the Americas.

Pritchard's main argument is that, before 1730, the French never managed to achieve an empire in the Americas, though what he means exactly by "empire" is uncertain as he does not define this volatile word. He also argues that metropolitan and even colonial governments had a negative influence on colonial developments. According to Pritchard, every colony suffered from central government's neglect or erratic involvement. French colonies in the Americas owed their development, so are we told, to the settlers who established new societies, economies and trading networks despite the metropolis's continuous attempts to frustrate colonial achievements.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part examines thematically how the colonies were formed. Pritchard provides a demographic, social, economic and political background to the military narrative of the second part of the book. Indeed, he then unsurprisingly switches to the history of the wars which pitted France against its European rivals in the Americas. Although he provocatively claims that this military history is "poorly known" despite so many publications on the subject, the main originality of this book is rather to focus on naval history whereas historians have concentrated on ground battles (p.xxi).^[1] Overall, it seems to be Pritchard's aim to rewrite French colonial history from the point of view of two victims of the state's "incompetence": the settlers and the navy. Despite the author's claim to bring new evidence to support his argument, he has based his study on well-known primary and secondary sources, notably Eccles's work.^[2]

"Colonies Formed", Part 1 of the book, examines how the settlers established their colonies despite governmental inadequacies. Pritchard blames the royal government for privileging continental interests over colonial developments. He argues that "colonial development, an inherently long-term concept, was sacrificed to the short-term demands of the French state for tax revenue" (p. 187). To account for the royal priority given to continental politics, Pritchard argues imprecisely that "Perhaps this should not be surprising, for the French do not distinguish between policy and politics. *La politique* includes notions of both, and in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries colonial policy was never anything more than domestic politics" (p. 187). Pritchard's harsh condemnation of the French crown's relation to its overseas possessions is surprising. Any specialist on early modern French colonialism knows that colonial settlements were meant to serve the metropolis. Territorial expansion and colonisation were encouraged to support the restless royal ambition for predominance over the rest of Europe. Between 1660 and 1670, Louis XIV assumed responsibility for the colonial territories which had previously been controlled by private trading companies. The political control of the colonies peaked with the creation of the central administrative institutions such as the Ministère de la Marine (1669) and the Bureau des Colonies in 1710. By the end of the seventeenth century, the French colonial

“Empire” covered a huge territory: Canada, the West Indies and Guyana in America; Madagascar which was transferred in 1671 to Mascareigne (Reunion island) in the Indian Ocean; Surate, Masulipatam, Tilcery, Calicut and Pondichéry in India; and later Bengal.

To increase the taxes that were necessary to support his hegemonic policy and extend his power overseas, Louis XIV encouraged the development of maritime trade based upon colonial exchange. That this trade had to benefit the kingdom to the detriment of the colonies was not a view particular to the French monarchy. The English, for example, also sought to organize colonial trade to benefit metropolitan growth. The role of the colonies was to enrich the kingdom, which would advance Louis’s ambition to be a hegemonic power. The king’s *gloire* was the end of policy. Blaming Colbert and his successors for subordinating colonial development to metropolitan (and especially royal) concerns would therefore be anachronistic. Pritchard acknowledges this aspect of early modern French colonialism much too late in his book. In the introduction to chapter 5, devoted to “Government and Politics”, he very briefly explains that the colonies were expected to augment royal greatness (p. 234). His low estimation of government policy is reflected in the organisation of the book. By relegating the action of the state to the end of the first part of the book, Pritchard wants to accentuate his central argument concerning the minor role of government in the creation of the colonies. Yet, though insufficient and inconsistent they might have been, the government’s actions have still to be examined thoroughly and simultaneously with colonial developments. The colonies belonged to the Crown, and finally, they depended upon the Crown for their survival. Territorial exchanges between European monarchies ultimately decided the colonial future. This is not to deny colonial agency but to call for a more balanced view of colonial/metropolitan relations.

The under-population of the French colonies, particularly compared to their English rivals, was one of the main weaknesses of the colonial policy pursued by Louis XIV (although, again, it must be judged against the government’s belief that the power of the French state was based upon the size of its population). The demographic synthesis which starts the book is supposed to illustrate the government’s failure to establish long-term colonies. The Crown never encouraged emigration for fear of depopulating the kingdom. While Pritchard rightly emphasises the government’s inability to organise the demographic development of the colonies, he is generally silent on the charter companies’ failure to transport emigrants and finally on the reluctance of French people to emigrate overseas. Furthermore, Pritchard lightly dismisses the government’s demographic plans to populate the colonies: “The story of French colonial immigration is only one illustration of government ineptitude in virtually every sphere of activity it undertook in the colonies” (p. 28). Yet, more could have been said on their content, unrealistic though they were. In Canada, for example, Louis XIV and Secretary of State Jean-Baptiste Colbert promoted the miscegenation of a small group of settlers with assimilated Amerindian women. The failure to assimilate native peoples and create a *métis* society does not mean that this project was not serious, and it deserved more than one sentence (p. 28). Similarly, the “Filles du roi” programme, which Pritchard hardly evokes, was, considering the limits of royal finances, an example of active involvement in colonial development. Between 1665 and 1673, the state funded the transportation of about 770 single women to Canada at the cost of about 410,000 *livres*.^[3]

The numerous tables provided to estimate colonial populations are interesting and useful, though Pritchard recognizes that some of these figures have to be used carefully: “Amerindian demographics for Acadia are no more than guesswork” (p. 425); similarly, unreliable data concerning Saint-Domingue calls for cautious use of the figures given. Moreover, the distribution of the population by “race” is highly contestable: Appendix 1 estimates population “by Race and Region” (p. 423); and tables categorize colonial population as “Red”, “White”, “Black” and “Coloured”. (“Coloureds include free and slave Caribs” in table 1.5 [p.50]). Racial language is currently the subject of a substantial debate in American history and the reification of racial categories to the point of placing them in a statistical table is to move well beyond that debate or rather to ignore it.^[4]

When discussing the creation of colonial societies, Pritchard overlooks important issues related to European colonialism in the Americas. The question of racial mixing, for example, is neglected. Colbert's project for the *francisation* of the Amerindians is ignored, and so are the reasons why racial mixing happened, was promoted or rejected. The issue of race in the creation of settler societies is also ignored. Recent scholarship on race could have provided good insights on the subject. It has shown, for example, that Governor-General Philippe Rigaud de Vaudreuil's condemnation of intermarriage, which occurred in 1709, had more to do with the development of the idea of race in Canada than with traditional class reasons, as Pritchard put it.[5]

The Amerindian impact on French colonial societies is similarly overlooked (p. 103). Pritchard rejects Richard White's immensely innovative concept of the "middle ground" in a footnote--White's *Middle Ground* is even missing in the bibliography--without even taking the trouble to discuss the concept. White has argued that the French and the Algonquians in the Great Lakes region constructed common cultural conventions to avoid violence and assist each other against their enemies. The "middle ground" refers to that fragile compromise and its constant evolution.[6] White has written one of the most innovative and influential books of the last fifteen years in European colonial history, and his book deserves certainly more than a footnote.

The second part of the book is devoted to the military history of the French Americas. Pritchard goes into great detail when discussing the Franco-Dutch War (1672-1678), the Nine Years' War (1688-1697, also known as the War of the League of Augsburg) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713). European wars spread to the Americas (the Seven Years' War is the only one which started in America before expanding to Europe), and the French colonies found themselves included in that European turmoil. Yet, the French government did little to protect them against their belligerents or to take charge of the proper supply of the colonies. French colonies had to assume their own protection. This is surely the most interesting part of the book, and though most of this narrative is well-known, Pritchard offers a clear picture of these conflicts in all parts of the French Americas. James Pritchard is a naval historian and he is at his best when he provides a naval reading of colonial conflicts.

Unfortunately, one cannot finish this review without pointing out how execrable the proofreading and the copy-editing are. (Indeed, it is very disappointing from CUP). References in French are massacred: some articles are missing, or the gender is incorrect; spelling and grammatical errors seem to be the norm. These errors are not even consistent between the text, the footnotes and the bibliography. Poor demographer Arlette Gautier has her surname often wrongly spelt (it is Gaultier in the bibliography, and Gauthier or (fortunately) Gautier in the footnotes). Finally, the "Abbreviations" page and the bibliography are enough to give a headache to any French-speaking reader.

NOTES

[1] For example, William J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier, 1534-1760* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969); and Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: the Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with English Colonies from its Beginnings to the Lancaster Treaty of 1744* (New York: Norton, 1984).

[2] William J. Eccles, *Canada under Louis XIV, 1663-1701* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964). Pritchard also makes use of Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-century Montreal* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1964).

[3] Allan Greer, *The People of New France* (Toronto, 1997); Guillaume Aubert, "'The Blood of France': Race and Purity in the French Atlantic World," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3/61(July 2004):439-478.

[4] See Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500-1676* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Jennifer M. Spear, "Colonial Intimacies: Legislating Sex in French Louisiana," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3/60(2003):75-98.

[5] Spear, "Colonial Intimacies."

[6] Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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