

Book review from French History journal by Ben Marsh, University of Stirling

Review of:

In This Remote Country: French Colonial Culture in the Anglo-American Imagination, 1780–1860. By Edward Watts. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xii, 275 pp. Cloth, \$59.95, ISBN 978-0-8078-3046-8. Paper, \$19.95, ISBN 978-0-8078-5762-5.)

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In this Remote Country explores when, how, and why nineteenth-century Anglo-American writers devoted attention to the fading footprints left by French colonialism in North America. Many antebellum writers contributed to a nationalistic historiography by portraying the experience of French colonial populations negatively. In their eyes, wherever they sprouted in the continent, the French were unrelenting failures – light in numbers, vulnerable in distribution, over-reliant upon trade, effeminate, and passive – all-in-all little more than another tribe to displace on the march towards progress, the Pacific, and the nation’s “manifest destiny.” But another set of dissenting writers interpreted the French example very differently. They viewed French colonialism as an alternative continental legacy that pointed away from narrow Jacksonian proto-imperialism centred on racial exclusivity, and pointed towards a more inclusive and progressive vision of America.

Watts’s study, based overwhelmingly on published primary sources from the 1840s–1860s, is an original and thought-provoking account. It takes the familiar teleological master narrative of “Anglo-Saxon” ascendance (as most famously outlined in the histories of George Bancroft, Samuel Eliot and Francis Parkman) and focuses unrelentingly on its intersections with the “Gallic” New World. The colonial French, like Africans and Indians, had their histories rewritten by Anglo-Protestant observers keen to harness scientific racism to the glorious lessons of the past. But as Watts argues, those seeking to challenge “Anglo-Saxonist nationalism” – be they abolitionists, Indian sympathisers, or libertarians – also found much grist for their mills in the continent’s French past. The more secular local histories compiled by writers, especially from western states, celebrated diversity as much as unity, and lauded the colonial French for their less restrictive attitudes to land and intermarriage. By closely reading state histories such as the *History of Wisconsin* published by William R. Smith in 1854, Watts sheds light on the complex and uneasy relationship between local and national identities in a United States that would shortly rupture along sectional lines.

There are some weaknesses in the scope of the study, and its historical grounding. How much of an impact the public literary debate actually had upon the lives of nineteenth-century Americans is left for others to fathom, for Watts makes no attempt to incorporate unpublished archival resources. Also surprising is the decision to exclude entirely any consideration of the Lower Mississippi or “texts relating to New Orleans” on the grounds that most of the antebellum representations of the region imagined it as equally Spanish and French. Finally, while Watts does a good job of engaging with the literature on the Midwest in the early Republic, he neglects to deal with the momentous ideological forces unleashed by the French Revolution and consequent Haitian Revolution, which most certainly affected the Anglo-American imagination in the mainland South, and profoundly influenced concepts of race, region, and national expansionism.

Ultimately, then, this is a book about the figurative deployment of caricatures of French colonialism by participants in an exclusively American (i.e. U.S.) set of

debates about nationhood. Readers of this journal would do well to heed Watts's own caution that his study "only indirectly contributes to our understanding of the historical French themselves" (p.15), or even, one might add, the historical Americans. But it does neatly highlight how both public defendants and critics of U.S. cultural nationalism deployed coarse conceptions of French colonialism in the Upper Mississippi and St. Lawrence to advance their cases.

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