

Making New France New Again



French historians rediscover their American past

In the first decades of the eighteenth century, even after the territorial losses of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, the French Empire in North America extended from Newfoundland to the Mississippi delta, and the French crown claimed to exercise its sovereignty over a large part of the North American continent. In theory, this huge territory constituted one single colony under the authority of the governor of New France; in practice, it worked as three different colonies (Acadia; Canada, which included the St. Lawrence Valley and the Upper Countries; and Louisiana), each with its own links to the home country. Less a single colony governed by the general governor at Quebec, New France functioned more like a loosely structured confederacy, unified by a collection of administrative, military, demographic, economic, and cultural links.

The pluralistic character of New France—the fact that it was really more a collection of semiautonomous regions—has had a strong impact on the writing of the colony's history. Although much of North America was claimed by France, Francophone historians—insofar as they have directed their energies to early French America—have tended to focus on Canada and have paid very little attention to Acadia and Louisiana. This is in part a reflection of the fact

that most of those Francophone historians are themselves Quebequois. But it is also indicative of the deep divide that has split Canadian society since the peace of Paris in 1763. To study New France, for many Quebequois, has been for a very long time an assertion of the primacy of French language and culture in Canadian history.

In recent years, however, historical writing about New France has changed dramatically. Far from privileging a single region, it has begun to treat New France in its totality, directing renewed attention to the hitherto neglected regions of Acadia and Louisiana. And, in a truly novel development, some of this work is being done by French historians—French nationals, trained in France. To appreciate the sea change this represents, it is instructive to consider the place the history of New France has occupied in French historical writing of the past two centuries.

For some time, French historical scholarship has been a very important presence in the history of New France. The *École des Annales*, in particular, has exercised a very strong influence on the way Canadian historians have studied New France, as demonstrated, for example, in the very important book by Louise Dechêne, *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVIIe siècle* (1974). Reflecting its *Annales* pedigree, the book is based on a quantitative analysis of censuses, parish registers, and notarial records. But for all their influence on the shape of French-colonial history writing, French historians themselves have been very slow to take up the subject—at least for the past half-century or so. This has not always been the case.

During the Third Republic (1870-1940), the history of New France occupied a prominent place in French history writing. This was largely a reflection of nationalist efforts to glorify the long history of French colonialism and its modern culmination in Africa, Indochina, and the South Pacific. The colonial historians of this era, who belonged to the imperialist lobby, sought to demonstrate that the “French race,” as Eugène Guénin put it in 1898, was “apt to colonization.” According to these pro-empire historians, there were no differences between French colonial expansionism in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both reflected the self-pronounced French capacity to civilize, which, in turn, came from the supposedly benevolent Catholic missionaries of the *ancien régime* and the equally benevolent ideals of the French Revolution of 1789. The history of New France was thus seen with nostalgia and, like the history of France’s modern colonies, was enshrouded in the rhetoric of French “*génie colonial*,” meaning a peculiar temperament to understand, love, and free non-European peoples.

This credo was particularly strong among historians of New France. In 1918, on the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of the founding of New Orleans, the French historian and diplomat Gabriel Hanotaux wrote that “France is loving and generous. She gives and creates. The world is full of her children.” And he suggested that her colonizers are not crass conquistadors but are instead

apostles for French civility. Hence, Hanotaux described La Salle, explorer of the Mississippi, as “a sower of civilizations.” This history of New France, even if it culminated in failure, was full of great heroes—La Salle, d’Iberville, Montcalm, etc.—who embodied French dynamism and constructive expansionism.

In Gabriel Louis-Jaray’s *L’Empire français d’Amérique (1534-1803)*, published in 1938, readers learned that “collaboration between races” was the “colonial vocation” of France and that “the success of the French policy towards Natives in America” reflected the colonizers’ “great skills.” A contemporary of Louis-Jaray, Georges Hardy wrote similarly that “removal and extermination of Natives, so much used by other countries, [was] repulsive to the government of the French king.” Meanwhile, as in the writings of nineteenth-century historians such as Francis Parkman, these historians continued to depict Indians as hapless primitives, unable to govern themselves—a view that was echoed in contemporary French views of the indigenous peoples of Africa and the South Pacific.



Carte de La Louisiane Cours Du Mississippi et Pais Voisins, N. Bellin, ingénieur de la Marine. From Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Histoire et description generale de la Nouvelle France*, vol. III (Paris, 1744). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. [Click image for enlargement in new window.](#)

The methodology of this Third Republic scholarship reflects the ideology of its creators. In its quest to illuminate the greatness of France’s colonial past, it treated every region of New France (the St. Lawrence Valley region as well as Louisiana and Acadia). But with the exception of Emile Salone’s book, *La colonisation de la Nouvelle-France* (1905)—where the author, even more than Canadian historians until the 1970s, explores the economic and social development of Canada—this work made little attempt to transcend the prevailing top-down conception of the French Empire. The history of the colonies was only treated as the history of government policies and the political and military events they elicited.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the history of New France seemed to drift from

French historical consciousness. Insofar as French historians were at all interested in colonial history or anthropology, they tended to focus on South and Central America, regions that saw very little French colonial activity. After the disasters of Indochina and Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s, the nation seems to have done with its imperial past more or less what it did with the Vichy regime—the pro-Nazi government that controlled the country during World War II. With the traumas that accompanied the French Empire's collapse came a long bout of collective amnesia as the nation attempted to recast its collective identity. France wished to start from scratch again.

More recently, while the period of Nazi collaboration has finally been integrated into collective historical memory, the French colonial past remains outside the national narrative. As the historians Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Françoise Vergès have argued, “colonization is always a real black hole (*trou de mémoire*)” in modern France. While the Old Regime monarchy was one of the greatest colonizing powers in history and while the Third Republic could hardly have existed without its extensive imperial undertakings, French historians—and the nation as a whole—continue to neglect the French imperial past. A history of colonization and domination simply does not comport with the modern French self-image of a people committed to the ideals of republicanism and universalism.

One must add that French amnesia is particularly strong for the first French colonial empire, mostly because it disappeared in 1763—before the Revolution of 1789, the matrix of the French nation-state and the founding event for contemporary French national identity. Finally, if New France is even less studied than the French West Indies, for example, it is certainly because Louisiana and Canada had a very limited social and economic impact. Much as had been the case for the British Empire, it was the West Indian sugar islands that constituted the political and economic centerpiece of the early French Empire. The nationalist tendencies of French historians might also have played a role in the disappearance of the history of New France from the history of the French nation. For this was the colony lost to Great Britain in the humiliating peace that brought the Seven Years War to an end. Colonial failure remains, for many French, impossible to reconcile with national greatness.

Despite the forces arrayed against French interest in New France, the field survived thanks to the work of several maverick historians. Of particular importance in this regard was Marcel Giraud (1900-1994). Not surprisingly he is often better known among North American historians than French ones. Elected in 1946 to the Collège de France, the most prestigious French academic institution, Giraud held the chair of the history of North American civilization, a position he held until his retirement in 1971. Though he wrote many articles, especially in the esteemed journal *Revue Historique*, he is best known for his books, particularly his *thèse d'État*, *Le métis canadien* (1945), translated into English in 1986, and the five volume *Histoire de la Louisiane française*, published between 1953 and 1991, and also available in English. Significantly, the fifth volume of the latter, which appeared in 1991, was

never published in French, but only in English, thanks to the Louisiana State University Press. Although Giraud's work reflected very little deference to the dominant Annales school (the demographic and economic history of New France was of only slight interest to him) and although he had very little to say about race relations and social patterns in Louisiana, he did point the scholarship in an important new direction. By studying colonization on a local level, he overcame the metropolitan bias that had shaped most other French work on New France. Giraud, however, worked in a very solitary way and was never interested in training and leading a group of young scholars; thus, he did not create any French colonial school.

In the 1970s and 1980s, he had only two main followers in France: Philippe Jacquin, whose most important publication is his book on *coureurs de bois, Les Indiens blancs Français et Indiens en Amérique du Nord, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (1987), and French-American historian Joseph Zitomersky, whose works deal with the spatial and social structures of what he labels "Greater French Louisiana."

The neglect of New France has not, as we have seen, been solely a French problem. Anglophone historians of North America, particularly those trained in the United States have until relatively recently paid very little attention to the French portions of colonial North America. Louisiana has been particularly neglected. Part of the reason for this is that the way the colony developed does not fit the models of colonization presented by New England and Virginia. Over the past decade, this neglect has given way to a remarkable surge of Anglophone scholarship on French Louisiana. Not only have monographs multiplied but their results have been increasingly integrated into syntheses devoted to "colonial America." French (and Spanish) Louisiana, in particular, has attracted growing attention from American historians, as the number of new Ph.D. theses about the "colony of Mississippi" demonstrates. This new interest is rooted in two books, both published in 1992, one by Daniel H. Usner—*Indians, Settlers and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*—and the other by Gwendolyn M. Hall—*Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. Hall's work, in particular, has played an essential role in this scholarly resurgence by sparking debate about the character of slavery and race relations in colonial Louisiana.

Although this new historiography deserves credit for having attracted the attention of historians of British North America, it is not without its faults. First of all, Anglo-American scholars tend to characterize French (and Spanish) Louisiana as a frontier colony or a borderland. This would not be problematic if the concern were simply the British colonies' point of view, since Louisiana was truly located at the margins of all French, Spanish, and British Empires. But for the Louisianans themselves, the designation would have had little real meaning. Secondly, most American scholars have been interested in the lower Mississippi valley—even if several books and articles have also been published on the Illinois Country—and they have focused mainly on the territory that in the present day constitutes the state of Louisiana. This too has a distorting effect on the full dimensions of French North America. "Greater French

Louisiana" extended from the Great Lakes south to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Appalachian Mountains west to the Rockies.

Fortunately, Anglophone and Francophone Canadian historians have begun very recently to adopt a continental framework in their study of New France. Influenced by the claims of Francophone minorities living outside of Quebec, Canadian geographers in the 1980s developed the concept of "Franco-America" or "French America." This notion has been most useful to the increasing numbers of North American historians who in recent years have begun studying all the French colonies of the Americas, including those of the Caribbean, from a comparative perspective. Moreover, the new Atlantic history has stimulated new interest in French America among Canadian scholars. The annual conference of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture in Quebec in June 2006 had a special emphasis on the French Atlantic; this conference and the recent large grant received from the Mellon foundation by McGill University in Montreal to finance a program on the French Atlantic constitute signs of the rapid development of this field in Canada. In the same way, some American historians studying French colonization in the Americas are now more and more inclined to conceive of their field of study as the whole French Atlantic world, encompassing the mainland colonies, the Caribbean possessions, and French outposts elsewhere around the Atlantic basin.

All of these developments have been accompanied in recent years by a resurgence of French interest in New France. In part, this trend reflects the recent debate in France over the need to better integrate the history of colonization and slavery into the national narrative. The trend also reflects important domestic problems that have plagued France since the 1990s. As the 2005 riots made plain, France is in the midst of a profound struggle to understand its multicultural present. Understanding that present, many French seem to have recognized, will involve a more complete understanding of the nation's colonial past.

Further Reading

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Gilles Havard is first class chargé de recherche at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) and a member of the CENA (Centre d'études nord-américaines), at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences) in Paris. He works on the history of relations between Europeans and Indians in North America.

Cécile Vidal is an associate professor in history at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. She works on French and Spanish Louisiana and the Atlantic world.