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Letters from New France: The Upper Country, 1686-1783

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PEYSER, JOSEPH L., ED. AND TRANSL. LETTERS FROM NEW FRANCE: THE UPPER COUNTRY, 1686-1783. CHAMPAIGN: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS, 1992. XV + 248 PP. ILLUSTRATIONS, APPENDICES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX. $34.95 CLOTH.

For those interested in the history of New France, Joseph Peyser’s Letters from New France is a valuable addition to the literature with its eclectic blend of previously untranslated archival documents. The book also includes a selection of essays published by Peyser, many excellent maps and tables, and an appendix with lists of French governors and intendants and definitions of French terms. The manner in which the book is organized suggests it evolved as a text for teaching undergraduates. Its primary value may be as a teaching aid and reference work.

The book begins with a lucidly written historical summary based on secondary sources by such leading historians as Cornelius Jaenen, Yves Zoltvany, W. J. Eccles, and Bruce Trigger. In this introduction, Peyser presents the thesis that French imperial relations with Native peoples in the pays d’en haut developed from the interdependency of the “three major components of French colonialism in New France: government, church, and commerce” (p. 24, and Fig. 2, p. 37). The book is then divided into seven chapters and a postscript, each covering a different period and including primary documents. This format allows Peyser to include a wide range of thematically unrelated documents—from Cadillac’s correspondence to military rosters and baptismal registers to a Fox chief’s oration—all sewn together by Peyser’s lengthy and informative editorial comments.

The material included is interesting, for it sheds more light on the tensions inherent in the governance of New France, an intriguing topic that Richard White has recently explored in The Middle Ground. Failing miserably in her imperial aspirations to create a sedentary, obedient, and orthodox population in New France due to the engagement of so many of the colonists in the far-flung activities of the fur trade, France forged a number of expedient compromises. For example, official policy forbade sale of alcohol to Natives, yet commanders at western posts—facing the very real problems of the high costs of supplies, desertions due to meager pay, the vulnerability to attack of remote and undermanned garrisons, and native pressures for material displays of French generosity—demanded leniency for all those French subjects (including themselves) engaged in this contraband activity, thus opening the door for illicit profiteering by the opportunistic and the unscrupulous. Peyser’s selection of documents attests not only to the ineffectuality and hollowness of French trade policies, but also to the fickle and hypocritical nature of Onontio’s political relationships with Native people. While making promises of fatherly generosity and protection, the officials of New France also periodically condemned genocidal acts against those groups—like the Natchez, Fox, and Chickasaws—for whom she had developed an irrational fear. The less-than-honorable behavior of the French is borne out clearly in Peyser’s chapters on the Fox and Chickasaw Wars of the 1720s and 1730s. If according to Francis Parkman’s dictum the French embraced the Indians, it was a seduction followed in short order by infidelity and abandonment.

Some readers may be non-plussed by what appears to be Peyser’s random
selection of documents and topics. A widow’s appeal for a land grant in Labrador is included, for instance, for no apparent reason. Ostensibly, one unifying feature of the book was the focus on Fort St. Joseph, emerging from Peyser’s work for the Niles Historical Commission. In addition to the translated documents, Peyser includes in this volume of Letters-inconsistently in this reader’s view-articles he has previously published on both the fort and the Fox Wars. While at least half of the documents have the barest connection to Fort St. Joseph, Peyser disappoints the reader further by not giving a full treatment of issues directly related to the Fort’s history; for example, by exploring the French dealings with the Miami and Potawotomi people. One could argue he does not even stay within the regional scope defined by the title, “the Upper Country.” Nor does Peyser follow through in developing the introduction’s thesis in the body of the book. In sum, Peyser has adopted a very flexible format in order to display much of his accumulated knowledge about the history of New France. The book is not very successful in its design, but Peyser should be given credit for making valuable information available to the general reader.

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