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**Kathryn A. Edwards**, *Families and Frontiers: Re-creating Communities and Boundaries in the Early Modern Burgundies*. Boston and Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002. xiv + 431 pp. Maps, figures, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-391-04106-1.

Review by Mark Potter, University of Wyoming.

With *Families and Frontiers*, Kathryn Edwards has effectively tapped into the growing trend of transnational history while providing us with a thorough study of urban elites in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Notions of frontier provide the conceptual framework for her study of the elites of Dijon, Dole, and Besançon, and she has rather originally reversed on their head recent theories of frontier society and applied them to the early modern Burgundian case.<sup>[1]</sup> Drawn largely from experiences in the American West, frontier analysis stresses the layers of negotiations made essential by the collision of cultures in specific regions. For her study of Burgundy, Edwards retains this notion of frontier as a zone of negotiation and recreation, but rather than seeing a frontier form through the encroachment of one culture upon another, she argues that a frontier formed in this case when a previously united Burgundy became divided.

Charles the Bold's death in 1477 marked the beginning of the frontier era as sovereignty over the territories was now contested by Louis XI of France and Mary of Burgundy, daughter of Charles the Bold and wife of the future Emperor Maximilian. But the frontier was not merely a product of contested sovereignty; it was also the creation of local elites whose flexibility in family relationships, commerce, investments, and politics shaped their communities into a frontier society. As the zones hardened toward the mid-sixteenth century, setting the county off from the duchy in more permanent terms, the era of frontier ended, and the division between county and duchy was transformed into a border. Edwards' notion of frontier society is thus specific in time and place, as she is very careful to clarify, and within this particular historical conjuncture Edwards argues that "'frontier' provides a useful heuristic device for appreciating the relationship between politics and society at various levels..." (p. 6).

Edwards thus sets out to demonstrate how the frontier affected elite family, business, and political relationships and how those sets of relationships in turn reshaped and redefined the frontier society. While each of the three cities bore their particular urban identities, they shared the common experience of frontier. The indications of that shared frontier experience (and the very forces that shaped frontier society) include flexibility in forming family alliances, opportunities for social ascension with mercantile elites in particular moving into political and judicial roles, and a fluidity with which elites could negotiate their status. As frontier gave way to border, on the other hand, this flexibility and fluidity was replaced by rigidity, dynasticism within local centers of authority, and greater dependence upon royal and imperial authorities.

In each of the three cities that Edwards sets out to study, a handful of lineages were particularly adept at renegotiating relationships and exploiting the volatile frontier conditions in order to assure their survival. The families who comprised these lineages were at the top of local urban hierarchies,

successfully redefining and protecting their positions within their communities. Edwards begins her investigation into these oligarchs with an examination in chapter two of family connections and strategies. Whereas the laws of both the duchy and the county privileged nuclear families led by male heads of household, “more often than not leading citizens deviated in their wills, marriage contracts, and other legal contracts from the confined, male-dominated family unit so defined,” thus demonstrating on one level the flexibility that was both a reaction to and a force in reshaping the Burgundian frontier (p. 39).

Chapter three delves further into the urban communities of which these leading families were the oligarchs. The social landscapes of Dijon, Dole, and Besançon were each comprised of communities within communities and overlapping layers of loyalty. Within such settings, Edwards finds multiple layers of frontiers that shaped, and in turn were shaped by, elite interactions. A primary goal of the oligarchs in each of the three cities was to construct an identity that underscored both their integration within and their distinctiveness up against the broader urban community. Building programs, civic regulations, and local tax policies all served this dual purpose. Ultimately, however, permeable frontiers within the urban social landscape and relative integration gave way to increased separateness. Professionally, for example, the distinct marker of elite status by the middle of the sixteenth century came to be formal legal training, and so it became increasingly unlikely that mercantile or artisanal backgrounds sufficed for acceptance within the circle of oligarchs.

In chapter four, Edwards focuses on those frontiers that transcended the urban landscape and that lay both between urban and rural zones and between duchy and county. As Burgundy’s frontier era gave way to the starker divisions characteristic of borders, links across the region, from duchy to county, faded, while those between urban and rural zones continued. One force shaping these trends was the heightened emphasis placed on constructing fortifications. Their very construction confirmed that a permeable frontier would be untenable in the face of increasing hostility between Valois and Habsburg sovereigns, and their cost, as well, prompted a reorientation of urban oligarchic networks toward their respective sovereigns. Likewise, commercial links across Burgundy, which had reinforced the interconnectedness of frontier life, became increasingly untenable in the sixteenth century in the face of this same dynastic hostility. As a result, merchants in the duchy turned increasingly to the West and the South where they acted to create networks along the Loire and in Lyon, while merchants in the county focused their efforts on reorienting their ties toward Lorraine and the Rhine Valley in the East and the North.

Chapters five and six cover the topics of office holding and privileges. Where we might expect the political disruptions of late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to have caused a rupture in the lineages dominating office holding, the same twenty to thirty families in each of the three cities managed to retain control, even in Dole where the upheaval of the late fifteenth century amounted to the physical destruction of the city. Officials in both Burgundies operated in a frontier zone where customary law and the qualifications to administer the laws transcended any boundaries. Oligarchs justified their social and political positions in part on claims that they could best defend urban liberties. With similar reasoning, they also argued that there was no need to codify a city’s rights and laws because the continuity of lineages within the ruling oligarchies would ensure that a sort of institutional memory would preserve intact the laws and customs. In this way, elites defined their position within the local hierarchy while negotiating their way through a frontier era during which instability threatened to extend to the very privileges that marked their status.

Chapter seven studies the urban oligarchs as social arbiters, interested in promoting their particular elite vision of their communities and in preserving order in this otherwise fluid frontier era. Here, Edwards uses the examples of religious processions, festivals, royal entries, public welfare, and guild regulations to illustrate the widespread involvement of the elites and their care in promoting the ideal that they “could or should at least control their cities” (311). Finally, Edwards closes her study in

chapter eight by considering the impact that this frontier experience had on shaping Burgundian identity.

Such a brief chapter outline fails to do justice to the richness with which Edwards presents the multiple layers of urban elite politics, professionalism, and sociability. An impressive range of research supports her findings, and this study expertly lays out the history of Burgundian urban elites responding to and shaping the circumstances surrounding them. Yet while this book stands as an authoritative study of urban elites and their environment, Edwards' conceptual framework lacks a certain tightness and coherence.

By applying an inverse frontier theory to Burgundy, Edwards implies a degree of historical particularity apart from that experienced by mere *peripheral* provinces. To be sure, there are moments in her analysis where the Burgundian frontier, so defined, appears decisive in shaping developments. For example, Edwards argues that during the frontier era, a number of families generated acts of emancipation of minors wherein liberated sons were endowed with property (p. 51). Likewise, families practiced a sort of professional diversification wherein brothers would follow distinctly different career paths from one another. Both patterns indicate not only flexibility but also a form of risk management made necessary by the unpredictability and volatility of the frontier.

At the same time, though, there are numerous examples where the frontier does not seem so decisive in shaping developments among these urban elites. It may not be a function of the frontier, for example, that "women were granted greater benefits and far more independence" than what customary law allowed in such matters as management of communal property and the exercise of authority over minor children (p. 47). Barbara Diefendorf found the same willingness to deviate from the "letter" of the law, whether customary or written, in both the Dauphiné and the Paris basin from the sixteenth century to the end of the Old Regime.<sup>[2]</sup> Similarly, Edwards suggests that the increased difficulty in the sixteenth century for families with commercial wealth to enter into legal professions and establish themselves as magistrates indicates that "boundaries distinguishing elites were being redrawn" (p. 75). It does not, however, support her broader thesis of frontier conditions giving way to border conditions, since the same dynasticism and closing of ranks developed throughout the French magistracy—frontier or not—in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>[3]</sup> Finally, Edwards takes the conservatism of Burgundian elites—their preference to build on and recreate "existing institutions and sociocultural forms rather than inventing new ones"—as indicative of a flexibility characteristic of frontier society, but such conservatism was the norm certainly among the early modern French elite (p. 180).

To be fair, Edwards stipulates at several points in her study that causal relationships must not always be assumed between frontier conditions and evolving elite interactions. While she grants that "urban elites throughout western Europe existed in negotiated social spaces," she argues that Burgundy's uniqueness was one of degree: "What distinguished Burgundy's frontier era was precisely the degree of fluidity...." (p. 309). Yet if such a case is to be made for the uniqueness of this frontier society as measured by degree, it seems that a comparative framework for this study would have been more appropriate.

Edwards also dilutes her argument when she considers social frontiers in early modern Burgundy. She refers, for example, to "wealth and the qualities contributing to it" as markers of social boundaries, and she argues, further, that "the relationships between Church personnel and the laity also exhibit some of the qualities...described elsewhere as a 'social frontier'" (pp. 115 and 132-133). Indeed, a strength of this work is the deftness with which Edwards presents the multiple frontiers—political, social, and cultural—in which the Burgundian elite operated. At the same time, though, such a consideration of social frontiers leaves one wondering what region of early modern Europe would not be included within this category of frontier society.

It is my view that this work suffers from its author's ambition. I would have preferred *either* an extensive study of the Burgundian urban elite during this time of political volatility *or* a focused study on those features that made Burgundy unique as a frontier society (adhering to Turner's usage of the term and all it implies), but not both in the same tome. Of course, ambition is far from a negative trait, and conceptual laxity aside, we are left with an excellent study of Burgundy's elite as it set out to renegotiate its environment in this era of change.

## NOTES

[1] Contemporary theories of frontier society trace their origins to F.J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *American Historical Review* (1894): 199-227. Whereas Turner's thesis implied a progressivism as European cultures confronted non-European cultures, more recent scholarship points to the layers of negotiation and recreation that have taken place in frontier societies. See, for example, Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture: an Exhibition at the Newberry Library*, edited by James R. Grossman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

[2] Barbara B. Diefendorf, "Women and Property in Ancien Régime France: Theory and Practice in Dauphiné and Paris," in John Brewer and Susan Staves, eds., *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 170-193.

[3] In Normandy, for example, see Jonathan Dewald, *The Formation of a Provincial Nobility: The Magistrates of the Parlement of Rouen, 1499-1610* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

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