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Josette Brun, *Vie et mort du couple en Nouvelle-France: Québec et Louisbourg au XVIIIe siècle*. Montreal, Que., Kingston, Ont., London, U.K., and Ithaca, N.Y.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. xi + 185 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0-7735-3067-6, ISBN-10: 0-7735-3067-3; (pb). ISBN-13: 978-0-7735-3068-3, ISBN-10: 0-7735-3068-1.

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Josette Brun makes a significant contribution to the history of gender in colonial North America with her *Vie et mort du couple en Nouvelle-France: Québec et Louisbourg au XVIIIe siècle*. She explicitly refutes the idea, first proposed by Jan Noel in 1981, that there was a golden age for women in New France.^[1] As the title indicates, the book focuses on the life and death of married couples in the colonial capitals of Quebec City and Louisbourg in the eighteenth century. It is actually death rather than life that takes pride of place, since three of the work's four chapters are devoted to widows and widowers. Brun justifies this emphasis by pointing out that while widow(er)hood was an ubiquitous phenomenon in early modern societies, it has been understudied due to the prevalence of remarriage. Her decision to concentrate on two urban centers, one in the St. Lawrence and one on Cape Breton, highlights the importance of towns in New France, even though rural *habitants* comprised the majority of the population.

Brun bases her conclusions on an analysis of 162 first marriages, 137 in Quebec and 25 in Louisbourg. She describes these couples as a homogenous and representative group composed largely of artisans and merchants, together with a smaller number of day laborers and officials (p. 6). Her first chapter examines the marital life of these couples from an economic standpoint, and subsequent chapters explore the fate of surviving spouses. Her essential source throughout consists of the notarial archives, the records of property transactions during the French regime.

According to Brun, the marital authority of husbands, as seen through the lens of the notarial archives, was no less extensive in New France than in the metropolis. Husbands alone were responsible for 75 percent of familial transactions, husbands and wives together for about 20 percent, and wives alone for only 4 percent (pp. 20-21). The joint transactions reflected recognition by the Custom of Paris, the French civil law code in force in the colony, of the wife's share in community property, and the few solo transactions by married women demonstrated the right of a duly authorized wife to act in her family's interest. While several merchant wives in both towns stood apart from the norm for their extensive involvement in their husbands' businesses (p. 24), Brun concludes that the colonial context did not, in general, favor a freer distribution of roles and power within the family (p. 33). In contrast to those who would claim a greater room for maneuver for the women of New France, she emphasizes the continuities, with regard to gender, between the Old and New Worlds.

The behavior of New France's widows and widowers was also largely traditional. Men were more likely to remarry than women (except where they greatly outnumbered women in the general population), and they were able to remarry at a more advanced age (p. 38). For a widower, remarriage was seen as not only desirable but necessary (p. 36), there being a veritable taboo against men performing lower status domestic tasks (p. 14). Widows, on the other hand, were permitted to engage in paid labor to compensate for the loss of the primary bread winner, since their customary rights rarely sufficed to maintain their standard of living (p. 58). Although paid work by widows was common in New France, it was not unusually extensive, and it in no way signified female emancipation (p. 67).

The widowed of both genders relied upon familial support networks to get by, but these networks, together with institutional charity, were more critical for widows due to the greater precariousness of their economic situation. Widows were seen as members of the deserving poor by both church and state, although the state was more concerned with the relative poverty of elite widows (particularly the widows of military officers) than with poverty per se. Interestingly, state attempts to maintain the social order by subsidizing upper-class widows brought colonial officials into conflict with their metropolitan superiors, who wanted to limit colonial expenditures. Brun views these tensions as indications of the significance of gender in eighteenth-century society, demonstrating that this social construct lay at the heart of power relations between the metropolis and its North American colonies (p. 96).

In her conclusion, Brun stresses the similarities between the lives of married women in New France, ancien régime France, the Anglo-American colonies, and early nineteenth-century Quebec. Common characteristics include female subordination, distinct gender roles, fear of female sexuality and power, insistence on female observance of social convention, high rates of male remarriage, and disdain for female aging (pp. 97-98). She notes, however, that the rights and privileges of wives, as established by the Custom of Paris in order to provide for widows, were indeed more generous in French North America than in the Thirteen Colonies.

Brun's refusal to view the women of New France as especially fortunate is in line with recent revisionist scholarship by France Parent, Geneviève Postolec, Maurice Basque, and even Jan Noel herself. [2] Noel today interprets the situation of women in New France as one typical of preindustrial economies, where the labor of all family members was required; only with industrialization could western societies afford to confine women—or some of them anyway—to a separate domestic sphere.

While it certainly makes more sense to describe New France as a struggling preindustrial economy than as a paradise for women, it is also important not to ignore what William Henry Foster has termed “an extreme difference in opinion concerning the legitimacy of women's authority in colonial North America.” [3] In Catholic New France, women exercised considerable influence, both temporal and spiritual, as members of religious congregations, and married women were better protected under the Custom of Paris than by English common law. During the French and Indian Wars, female captives from New England were more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to acculturate into French Canadian society. [4] Josette Brun's book provides part of the explanation why.

NOTES

[1] Jan Noel, “New France: Les Femmes Favorisées,” *Atlantis* (Spring 1981):80-98.

[2] France Parent, *Entre le juridique et le social. Le pouvoir des femmes à Québec au XVIIe siècle* (Quebec City: Groupe de recherche multidisciplinaire féministe, Université Laval, 1991); France Parent and Geneviève Postolec, “Quand Thémis rencontre Clio: les femmes et le droit en Nouvelle-France,” *Cahiers de droit*, 36 (1995): 293-318; Maurice Basque, “Genre et gestion du pouvoir communautaire à Annapolis Royal au XVIIIe siècle,” *Dalhousie Law Journal*, 17 (1994): 498-508; Jan Noel, “‘Nagging Wife’ Revisited: Women and the Fur Trade in New France,” *French Colonial History*, 7 (2006): 45-60.

[3] William Henry Foster, *The Captors' Narrative: Catholic Women and Their Puritan Men on the Early American Frontier* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London, U.K.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 19.

[4] Foster, p. 16.

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