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James O'Neill, *Garrison Tales from Tonquin: An American's Stories of the French Foreign Legion in Vietnam in the 1890s*. Ed., and intro by Charles Royster. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. lix + 119pp. \$30.00 U.S. ISBN 0-8071-3180-6.

Review by Edmund F. Wehrle, Eastern Illinois University

Precious few Americans traveled in French Indochina until its waning days after World War II. A striking exception was James O'Neill, of Bridgeport, Connecticut, who enlisted in the French Foreign Legion in 1887 at the age of twenty-seven. By 1890, he found himself waist-deep in the horror and turmoil of the colonial war in the Tonkin region of Vietnam. Given the scarcity of sources on this early era, a set of short stories penned by O'Neill in 1895 represent a rare and remarkable chronicle of the French conquest—and of evolving American perceptions of Southeast Asia and its struggles.

As historian Mark Bradley argues, despite the paucity of interaction, notions of a “special relationship” between Americans and Indochinese, born of mutual ignorance, yet supposed shared sympathies, marked early exchanges.^[1] O'Neill's stories provide ample support for Bradley's thesis. Likewise, for those seeking compelling primary sources capable of holding the ever-diminishing attention spans of our students, the “tales” still compelling over a century later, proffer a useful classroom tool.

Yet as historical sources, the short stories, thirteen in all, are not without problems. Bias, the tricks of memory, and other challenges wreak sufficient havoc on direct accounts of events. But here we have fictional “tales” that presumably have a basis in actual experiences. Whatever historical insights can be gleaned come through the prism of O'Neill's imagination—the exact nature of which remains unclear. Likewise, O'Neill's primary interest focused on portraying the interior anguish of his fellow soldiers rather than reflecting on the culture and society he encountered, although such reflections are present in the stories.

“Père Loraine,” one of the best stories in the collection, suggests the corrosive impact of the French incursion on the conquerors themselves. O'Neill weaves a tale of a popular Parisian priest who, in the 1860s, gives up comfortable surroundings to serve as a missionary in Vietnam. While winning few converts, Loraine acclimates, learning well local customs, language, and geography. O'Neill then fast forwards two decades to 1884. French soldiers arrive to request the priest's help mapping the local geography to advance their military campaign. Loraine convinces himself, despite pangs of guilt, that this would not be “the act of a traitor” (p. 17). In the story's final frame, however, betrayed villagers descend on the “traitor” hacking off his head.

The painful plight of Annamite collaborators also is explored. “The nicest native I ever met,” recalls the narrator of “The Worst of the Bargain,” “was Pho-Xa” (p. 89). Missionaries convert Pho-Xa to Catholicism as a young boy, but he later returns to Buddhism out of loyalty to his father and brother, fighting with anti-colonial “pirates” in the mountains. Still Pho-Xa remains conflicted, caught between two cultures. Eventually he takes a job as a Catholic school teacher, determined to compartmentalize his loyalties: “‘Catholic’ in school-room and ‘Buddhist’ in chamber” (p. 93). Again in the final frame, tragedy crashes in. Pho-Xa's pirate brother is revealed to have betrayed his fellow insurgents, for which the conflicted school teacher sharply berates him. The brother retaliates, “accusing Pho-Xa of apostasy,” and killing him with the blow of “a large axe-like knife” (p. 95).

Similar to Pho-Xa's tragic tale is that of Youp-Youp, an elderly widow who had lost her entire family to cholera. Too resigned to her fate to flee incoming French troops with her fellow villagers, Youp-Youp remains and warmly greets the troops "worn out by fatigue and hunger, wounds and sickness." She becomes their "unselfish benefactress" (p. 42), finding food for the invaders, treating wounds, and providing what comfort she can. For her services the French award her a medal, which, in a state of confused, child-like naiveté, she wears with pride. Soon, however, especially as villagers begin trickling back, "shame and regret" set in (p. 44). In the final scene, Youp-Youp earns redemption, journeying all night to block the gates of a village targeted by French troops. Bayoneted, she is pushed aside. (Violently killing off characters to end stories obviously is one of O'Neill's preferred literary devices.)

The author's general sympathies rest with the anti-colonial resistance. The conflicts and hardships imposed on the conquered population are palpable, but so is the orientalist lense through which O'Neill views the natives. In his brief introduction to the stories he describes the Annamites as "[i]nferior to the Chinese...but this is probably the result of long subjection, rather than the innate mediocrity" (p. 4). O'Neill depicts characters like Youp-Youp, Pho-Xa, and the earnest teenager who volunteers for conscribed labor in place of his elderly father in "The Coolie," as simple, child-like figures caught up in tragic currents well beyond their control—or understanding.

Yet despite cultural gulfs, for O'Neill, the land and culture have their allure. In "A Spiritual Combat," the narrator is entranced by the exotic dance of a former stage performer turned mistress to a French officer. Elsewhere, in "The Pagoda," characters are strangely attracted and then repelled by the mysticism and eeriness of an abandoned religious site. O'Neill's empathy for a people under extreme pressure colors several of the stories, but he can offer little more than a sensitive though uneducated tourist's perspective. The "tales" are perhaps best read for their insight into the western mindset as it grapples awkwardly with questions of colonialism and power.[2]

The author's depiction of the adversity facing French foreign legionnaires—disease, combat exhaustion, homesickness, opium addiction, depression, repressed sexual desire—appear less filtered and more immediate. Story after story reveals the toll of combat on soldiers: "more sickness and more death" (p. 29). Several stories end in suicide; those who persevere are haunted by dreams "stained with blood" (p. 72). These stories, like all those in the collection, are told in stark, clear, unsentimental prose. They are as moving as they are bleak.

Military historian Charles Royster provides an extended introduction to the trim volume of stories. Although meandering at times, Royster, an award-winning expert on U.S. military history, knits together what he can of O'Neill's biography. Absence of evidence, however, leaves essential questions such as O'Neill's motivation for joining the Legion and his fate after 1897 mysteries. We do learn about the initial publication of the tales and how the book failed to find an audience. While Royster briefly surveys the essentials of the French invasion and offers some details about legionnaire life, students, with limited knowledge of these subjects, will probably desire more background.[3] Royster also briefly considers the complex question of overlap between O'Neill's fiction and his actual experiences in Tonkin. Noting that place names, garrison locations, and geographic designations provided are accurate, Royster concludes the tales offer "the impression or illusion of an eyewitness narrative by a trustworthy source" (p. xxxix). Most useful are Royster's reflections on the individual stories, some of which he is able to ground in historical developments of the time.

Decades after O'Neill's departure from Vietnam, American visitors remained rare. His tales, however problematic as historical sources, are rare, valuable, and fascinating. His depiction of the "poor 'savages'" struggling to accept "their new masters with the resignation of the rat that welcomed death when the trap snapped" (p. 3), falls squarely into the general orientalist discourse of the era.[4] Yet his "tales" also suggest a vain endeavor to break from the imperialist paradigm, to better understand a people so

different, yet committed to values of independence and resistance—ideals quite familiar, at least in the abstract, to an American. The uneasy, conflicted relationship between Americans and Vietnamese, it appears, has deep roots.

NOTES

[1] Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America, The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 47. Bradley posits early American perceptions toward Vietnam as grounded in the condescending “wider Orientalist discourse” but also influenced by “the superior claims of American political and social models to reshape backwards peoples.” For explorations of French perceptions of Indochina see Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (New York: Berg, 2001), and Kathryn Robinson and Jennifer Yee, eds, *Indochina: Cultural Representations* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books., 2005).

[2] On American “orientalizing” of Vietnamese during the 1920s and 1930s, see Bradley, pp. 47-59.

[3] On the French invasion of Indochina see Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954* (Paris: Découverte, 1994); George Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); and Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). On the French Foreign Legion see Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion* (New York: Harper Collins, and London: Macmillan, 1991).

[4] On the orientalist discourse see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Gavin Bowd and Daniel Clayton “Tropicality, Orientalism, and French Colonialism in Indochina: The Work of Pierre Gourou, 1927-1982” *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005): 297-327.

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