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Yann Lagadec and Stéphane Perréon, with the collaboration of David Hopkin, *La bataille de Saint-Cast (Bretagne, 11 septembre 1758): Entre histoire et mémoire*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009. 445 pp. Documentary annexes, maps, figures, notes, bibliography. 22€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-7555-0948-1.

Review by Michael Duffy, University of Exeter.

This is an in-depth study of how a population is acculturated to war, starting with a *longue-durée* approach, but then centring on a very illuminating case study of the course and impact of the second British raid on St Malo during the Seven Years War in 1758, which saw the British rearguard largely destroyed as it attempted to re-embark from the beach at Saint-Cast. The study arose from the commemoration surrounding the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what its authors admit to have been a “*très modeste victoire*” over a British raiding force, but which in the subsequent centuries achieved cult status in Breton historiography, occasioning 80-100 publications, mostly between 1820 and 1914, which took memory far into the realms of mythology.[1] They offered their findings in a number of French journals, and, in English, in an article in *French Historical Studies* in 2008.[2] In the book here under review their argument is fully developed and documented.

Their case is set out in three parts. Part One seeks to resurrect the battle from the singular episode of Breton mythology it became and to set it in the *longue-durée* perspective of Anglo-French conflict, cross-Channel raiding, the “Second Hundred Years War,” and the strategy of the Seven Years War in particular. The context becomes that of the population of the western coast of France being in a frontier zone, regularly experiencing war and the threat or actuality of invasion. This is traced in increasing detail, perhaps too considerable since it starts in 1487, but the point is well made that after the War of the Spanish Succession this frontier remained the scene of military action throughout the rest of the eighteenth century while France’s other frontier populations became accustomed to peace until 1792.

The study looks at the economic impact of these events on the coastal frontier communities, Brittany in particular, and how Bretons were involved in local defence alongside a growing state military presence. After being threatened in 1693 and bombarded in 1695, the commercial and privateering port of St. Malo was only targeted again by the British after attacks on the French naval ports of Brest (1694), Lorient (1746), and Rochefort (1757) failed. Seemingly, it was believed to be less strongly defended, more remote from major troop concentrations, yet big enough for its threatened destruction to alarm French ministers into diverting troops from the German theatre to reinforce the coastal defences—which was what Frederick the Great had asked his British ally to accomplish. A raiding expedition landed east of St Malo at Cancale on June 5, burned merchant ships sheltering at Saint-Servan, and withdrew unmolested on June 11. It subsequently raided and ransacked Cherbourg in August, again without molestation, and in September the British had another try at getting close enough to bombard St Malo by landing to the west at Saint-Lunaire.

Part Two provides a detailed reconstruction of events from the British landing of 7-8,000 men on September 4, 1758 to the battle on the beach at Saint-Cast on September 11. The British were again thwarted from bombarding St. Malo when they found no means of getting over the river Rance. When bad weather forced the fleet from its anchorage to seek refuge at Saint Cast, the army marched in a rather leisurely fashion to re-embark at the new

anchorage, doing as much damage as they could along the way. What then happened has been determined from a careful weighing of the contemporary evidence, which is essential in order to distinguish the reality from the heavy layers of subsequent myth. The authors have made a commendably thorough scrutiny of the French primary and secondary sources at the local and national level, incorporating accounts from soldiers and civilians: seigneurs, bourgeois and parish priests, and also from printed British sources. Although they admit that more might have been done through exploring British archival primary sources, they have gathered enough evidence from the British side to support their case, particularly as regards the attitudes of the Breton population. The way the civilian population reacted to this incursion into their locality is a crucial part of this study.

This research has produced a veritable iconoclastic slaughter. Breton historiography has marked the key point of the campaign as the delay imposed upon the British by the resistance of local civilian volunteers as they attempted to cross the tidal River Arguenon at Guildo. This allegedly gave time for the force to arrive which defeated the British at Saint Cast. Resistance there undoubtedly was, but the authors question whether it could have stopped the British had they been determined and had they been more attentive to the tides. They point out that even when they crossed next day, the British continued westward to ransack Matignon rather than northwards to Saint-Cast so that it was British overconfidence rather than Breton resistance that led to their defeat. They were lulled by the lack of military opposition in their earlier landings into believing they could take their time, and not until the evening before they at last tried to withdraw did they realise that large French forces were close at hand. The French commander in Brittany, the Duc d'Aiguillon, had learned a different lesson from the earlier landings and taken steps to speed up the concentration of his forces to overwhelm the British rearguard on the beaches. This study restores d'Aiguillon as the hero and casts great doubts on Breton claims that their volunteers won the battle rather than the regular troops of the French army.

Part Three then considers the results of the battle, how the memory of this event became exploited for subsequent political purposes and how the popular "memory" evolved according to changing circumstances. This is a task that the authors are well qualified to tackle due to their knowledge of Breton politics and culture. Yann Lagadec works on relations between rural populations and local state officials, and Stéphane Perréon has studied eighteenth-century military-civil relations in Brittany, while David Hopkin, besides providing a British dimension, is a leading authority on the interplay between peasants and soldiers in French folklore.

Neither the British nor the French governments got what they originally wanted from the result. No French troops were withdrawn from Germany, but the British learned the lesson that the French mainland was too hot for expeditionary landings, and their attention switched to closer coastal blockade and expeditionary landings overseas which had far greater success. The French Crown tried to hype the victory to make up for earlier defeats and the contemporary loss of Louisburg, but the defeats continued and worsened. The prestige of d'Aiguillon and the French State and its troops plummeted when the commander quarrelled with the Parlement of Rennes and the Estates of Brittany in the "Brittany Affair" in the 1760s. In consequence a Breton version of events gained hold which glorified their own efforts. Breton priests commemorated divine intervention and that of local saints in miracle stories. The dominant part of the Breton volunteers was proclaimed and the role of the royal troops downplayed. This picture was colored after the French Revolution by comparisons with the Chouannerie of the 1790s when faithful peasants sided with their *seigneurs* against outside attack. The concept of independent Breton action was reinforced further in the face of the centralising regimes after 1830, and it was fuelled by Anglophobia every time disputes broke out with Britain in the nineteenth century over traditional Breton fishing rights in Newfoundland. As late as the 1880s a new local hero, Rioust des Ville-Audrains, was found and readily accepted to supplant d'Aiguillon as the self-proclaimed leader of the resistance at the ford of Guildo (the authors point out that he only made his

claim twenty years later when applying for ennoblement and that he was not mentioned by other accounts at the time!).

This third part is in many ways the most interesting and significant part of the study. It shows how history/memory can develop an independent life or lives of its own, producing different meanings to different groups at the same time as well as at different times. Rioust de Ville-Audrians is a good example, accepted as a hero by the right because of his declared act of religious devotion on the way to the fight and by the left because he was a bourgeois who led even the local *seigneurs*. The way that Breton politicians, clergy, historians and writers were able to appropriate the battle and develop a mythology from it which until now has remained largely unchallenged is seen by the authors as an example of the consequences of French academic and intellectual disinterest in military history and the cultural impact of war on French society earlier than the twentieth century. They lament the neglect of the military history of the *ancien régime* in general and of the unsuccessful Seven Years War in particular, claiming that French historians, with some notable exceptions, have failed to continue the path of Corvisier (fifty years ago) towards the New Military History. As a result, most of the best recent works on French military and naval history have been by North American and British scholars. They note the absence of a French journal comparable to the American *Journal of Military History* or the British *War and Society*. They hope through this study to show how even one apparently small and insignificant battle could have a cultural impact out of all proportion, and wish that it might open more eyes in France to how military history can provide new insights into the politics and culture of local, regional and national societies. It is to be hoped that they succeed.

#### NOTES

[1] David Hopkin, Yann Lagadec, and Stéphane Perréon, "La bataille de Saint-Cast (1758) et sa mémoire: une mythologie bretonne," *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest*, 114 (2007): 195-215.

[2] David Hopkin, Yann Lagadec, and Stéphane Perréon, "The Experience and Culture of War in the Eighteenth Century: The British Raids on the Breton Coast, 1758," *French Historical Studies* 31 (2008): 193-227.

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