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Jan Noel, *Along a River: The First French-Canadian Women*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 337 pp. Notes and images. \$32.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-4426-1238-9; \$32.95 (eb). 978-1-4426-9826-0.

Review by Micah True, University of Alberta.

Jan Noel's well-written and extraordinarily rich book traces the experiences and contributions of women in Canada from the 1630s to the 1830s, particularly along the 1,000-kilometer-long St. Lawrence River basin, extending from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to Lake Ontario. She opts for such an unusually long timeframe "because through the many and various changes of two hundred years, there was a surprising continuity in the way gender was perceived and performed among the region's French-Canadian majority" (p. 3). Noel organizes her material into four parts. The first, consisting of a single chapter, contextualizes her subject by examining the situations of women in France, Britain, and the American colonies to the south. Parts two and three, comprising three chapters each, respectively examine the two underlying themes of Noel's book: how the Canadian environment shaped the experiences of women there, and how their lives were influenced by hierarchical French social values. Part four is a single chapter devoted to continuities between Quebec at the end of the French regime and the beginning of British rule over the colony. Drawing on a vast array of primary and secondary sources, Noel shows that women participated actively in economic and political life there, in a wide variety of ways.

Chapter one is the sole chapter in the book's first part. It surveys the historiography of women in France, England, and the American colonies in order to test how Alice Clark's influential master narrative—"a Marxist-tinged theory that women's loss of control over economic production accompanied the rise of a loosely-defined 'capitalism' and lowered their status" (p. 25)—has held up in scholarship over the last century.<sup>[1]</sup> Noel is attentive to dissenting scholarship and careful in weighing the evidence, and concludes that Clark's basic idea is supported by the current state of scholarship on the history of women in all three places. Not only were women's work options and influence narrowing in France, Britain, and the American colonies during the period under consideration, their political clout was as well, at least in England and the American colonies. French women, on the other hand, "retained an unusually strong civic position" (p. 41) much longer than those in England or the American colonies. Observes Noel, "To a degree far surpassing anything seen during the American revolution, Frenchwomen had reached exhilarating heights as direct participants in their country's great political upheaval" (p. 48).

In the second part of the book, comprising chapters two, three, and four, Noel turns her attention to investigating how the Canadian environment influenced the economic and political status of women. Noel opts for "environment" as her frame because she finds it more neutral than "frontier," a concept connoting egalitarianism and innovation. Studying the role of the environment in women's lives also allows Noel to explore how geographical and climatological features of the New World shaped life there, an idea often rejected in metropolitanist, *Annales*-influenced scholarship that has seen the colony as "a microcosm of the old country" (p. 9). Chapter two presents the earliest groups of immigrant

women—female missionaries (*dévotés*) and immigrant brides (*filles du roi*)—and the various attractions that the New World held for them. Focusing on the stories of Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation, Jeanne Mance, and Marguerite Bourgeoys, Noel concludes that the *dévotés* “marched at the very forefront of an imperial project, not only serving it but also shaping it” (p. 74), giving them a degree of influence that women rarely, if ever, wielded in other places. Turning to the *filles du roi*, about 850 of whom were sent to the colony in the 1660s and 70s to marry male colonists and contribute, by giving birth, to the colony's growth from within, Noel offers an interesting portrait of who these women were and what their lives in Canada were like. Such women were recruited by the French crown, which paid for their passage and provided dowries. At an average age of twenty-four, the *filles du roi* quickly fulfilled their assigned role. In 1671 alone, 600-700 births were recorded. Although not a privileged group—only twenty-three percent apparently were able to sign their marriage forms (p. 77)—they nonetheless, Noel concludes, were able to exert some control over their lives, especially when it came to choosing a husband (p. 80). Such women also enjoyed a better life expectancy than women in many other places in the seventeenth century, no doubt because “Canada's resources had allowed the immigrants to rise above the sickness, poor diet, and bleak institutions of their youth” (p. 82). Noel concludes her chapter by observing that Canada's environment had much to offer both nuns and immigrant brides: “to the *dévotés*, Canadian woodlands offered the prospect of fresh converts. To the *filles*, the woods delivered a healthy new life” (p. 83).

Chapter three examines the roles played by women in New France's leading industry, the fur trade. It shows that elite women—noble widows, spouses of military officers, etc.—participated in this trade in many different ways, some fleeting and others enduring a lifetime (p. 91). Lower class women participated as well, although in many cases not much is known about them. Women's participation in the fur trade included everything from acting as intermediaries in the exchange of goods to providing supplies for trading posts and actively trading for furs themselves (p. 107). Noel shows that women's role in this trade “was both smaller *and* larger than those of us who have written about it have suggested” (105)—smaller because it involved mostly lower class women, and larger because vast numbers of women, and perhaps even a majority, participated in it in some way.

In chapter four, Noel examines the many other ways in which women participated in the colonial economy. Women such as Marie-Anne Barbel and Marie Anne Charest, for example, ran businesses on behalf of their families, or took over for deceased husbands. Women took advantage of the fact that, in contrast to France and other places, manufacturing in New France was not restricted to members of guilds. According to Noel, “women made many of the fabrics and clothes worn by most of the population” (p. 113). Women also provided supplies to iron manufacturers at Trois Rivières (p. 115), made bricks and tiles out of clay (p. 116), and participated in harvesting forest products—ginseng, dyewoods, baskets made of bark, and timbers for use in Quebec's shipyards (p. 117). “An astonishing number” of women were listed, Noel reports, on crown payrolls for supplying materials to shipyards, and not just timber but also food, water, nails, etc. (p. 118). Women also earned money by cultivating or developing land, whether on their own or as part of family operations. Religious orders also were involved in commerce in the colony. Convent-based industries included making shoes, brewing beer, making pharmaceuticals, making tents and uniforms for soldiers, selling tobacco, and running a print shop. Concludes Noel after surveying these activities, “All this did not involve just a few exceptional women, nor was it a slightly larger ‘network’ that clung together for mutual support. As in France, economic production and exchange was common to both religious and laywomen of all classes” (p. 128).

The third part of the book spans chapters five, six, and seven, and shifts focus from the influence that the North American environment exerted on women's lives to Noel's second general theme: how French culture influenced the colonial lives of women. Chapter five examines the legal status of women with regard to property. It first sketches the situation of women in Britain, America, and France, and then compares those contexts to the legal status of New France's female population. Noel finds that “ancien régime French law was more gender-equitable than English law” (p. 137), at least until the Napoleonic

code curtailed women's rights in 1804. Canadian authorities, Noel writes, modeled their own legal framework on earlier legal codes that were more favorable to women, and particularly two main principles: "protection of family interests and equality among heirs" (p. 137). She concludes that female Canadians, although certainly in a weak position when compared to men or even Iroquoian women, enjoyed greater property and inheritance rights than women in Britain and the American colonies, as well as French women once the Napoleonic Code was enacted. Because New France did not adopt the Napoleonic Code when France did, "generation after generation of women [enjoyed] property rights that were fading elsewhere" (p. 145).

Focusing on three particular elite New France families, chapter six examines how Old World codes of nobility that governed women's engagement in public life were operative in New France. Noel's vivid portraits of the women of the Repentigny, Ramezay, and Vaudreuil families trace their relationship to the French military, how their households were composed and operated, their social lives, their business ventures and relationships, and service to the French crown. "These figures," Noel concludes, "operated so much within the rules of caste that it seems accurate to place them within an entrenched, highly ritualized order of Old World origin" (p. 180). They embraced convention, "but by moving deftly within the rules of the game they could out-manoeuvre opponents and outrun adversity" (p. 181).

In chapter seven, Noel turns her attention to "the social and economic capital of convents, and the importance of noble clientage systems in assuring their well-being and survival" (p. 182). Focusing especially on the *Hôpital Général* of Québec, but also considering other religious establishments throughout the colony, Noel shows that convents profited from the nobility of many of their members and relationships with powerful patrons to preserve their independence, particularly from meddling male ecclesiastical and civil authorities. Indeed, nuns in New France do not seem to have been as isolated from the outside world as their sisters in Europe often were. One story in particular illustrates the degree to which they--and especially those at the *Hôpital Général* in Québec--were able to secure their situation by maintaining and building relationships with people outside their walls. By the time the British took over Québec City in 1759, Noel reports that the nuns there had already managed to ingratiate themselves to the colony's potential future political authorities by providing medical care to a British officer (p. 198). Concludes Noel, "In the centuries that pre-dated our modern, binary notions of public and private, sacred and secular, [nuns in New France] did not shed the persona of proud and well-connected elites when they knelt to take their vows. They knew how to joust with fuming officials and domineering bishops" (p. 203), skills that continued to serve them well even when British--and therefore Protestant--invaders arrived on the scene in the mid-eighteenth century.

Noel's eighth and final chapter serves as a kind of epilogue for the book, and examines how the British Conquest affected the status of women in Canada. It affirms the conclusions of other scholars that the regime change made little difference to women, at least initially. The 1774 Québec Act, for example, "enshrined timeworn legal principles" (p. 210) in the colony that kept many things more or less as they had they had been under the French regime: a legal system based on French traditions remained in place instead of the more restrictive British Common Law; Catholic priests retained their right to collect tithes; *seigneurs* were allowed to continue to collect dues; and customary ways of handling marriage and inheritance remained in force. Perhaps as a result of this, many travelers--both British and French--commented on the strong position of women in the colony relative to elsewhere in the world, even as the enduringly French way of doing things caused conflict between long-time residents and British newcomers (pp. 210-12). This situation would begin to change by the early nineteenth century, when the growing influence of British customs "narrowed a woman's ability to function as a citizen, as a person with authority in the public sphere" (p. 224). Noel concludes by noting that even though the colony had undergone a regime change that eventually and inevitably altered life there, many of the opportunities for women that existed in New France under French rule endured for seventy years after the British took control.

Noel's book is truly impressive in scope. Many other scholars have examined particular women or groups of women in Canada at various times,[2] but Noel is the first, to my knowledge, to offer such an exhaustive survey of how women of varying social status—poor immigrants, nuns, noblewomen, etc.—interacted both with their environment and with social and legal norms inherited from the Old World. The advantage of Noel's broad approach is that she clearly succeeds in highlighting the breadth and diversity of women's engagement in the colony's economic and political life. I would be hard pressed to make any serious criticisms of the book's content, except that the absence of a traditional works cited list makes it difficult to gauge the completeness of Noel's engagement with earlier scholarship on her subject. Short of reconstructing such a list on the basis of endnotes, the reader simply cannot be sure that Noel has engaged all of the scholarship she ought to, although one certainly has the impression of an encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject on Noel's part. Also missing from the book is an index, an important tool for scholars who might be interested in consulting Noel's broad work on more narrow questions. These omissions are, of course, more likely to be the fault of the University of Toronto Press than Noel herself. These two inconveniences aside, Noel's book is a fine work of scholarship that will no doubt prove highly useful to scholars of the colonial Americas and the history of women.

#### NOTES

[1] Clark's master narrative is articulated in her book *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1919). Reprinted in 1968 and 1992.

[2] As Noel herself notes, it is only recently that scholars have paid much attention to French-Canadian women (p. 239, n. 1). A number of excellent works, on the other hand, have been devoted to indigenous women and nuns in the colony. To mention only a few prominent examples, see Karen Anderson, *Chain Her By One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London: Routledge, 1991); Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Leslie Choquette, "Ces Amazones du Grand Dieu': Women and Mission in Seventeenth-Century Canada." *French Historical Studies* 17.3 (1992): 627–655; and Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

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