
H-France Review Vol. 20 (June 2020), No. 99

Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, *The British and French in the Atlantic, 1650-1800: Comparisons and Contrasts*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019. xvi + 150 pp. Maps, chronology, documents, glossary, references, and index. \$155.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781138657571; \$42.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781138657588.

Review by Christopher Hodson, Brigham Young University.

The twenty-first century is an age of entanglement and division. With each passing year, the interdependence of the global economy's component parts becomes more clear; at the same time, resurgent nationalism offers its adherents the psychic comforts of difference and superiority, at once seeking the material benefits of distant connections while attempting to attenuate the political and cultural linkages that often accompany them. Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton's slim synthesis of the British and French experience in the early modern Atlantic world suggests the deep history of such Janus-faced sensibilities. As a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated, the seventeenth-century oceanic turn saw agents of the two kingdoms become geopolitical opponents as well as on-the-ground copyists and collaborators, at once deepening ties and cementing mutual suspicion.

Morgan and Rushton are frequent writing partners on matters of criminality and punishment in the early modern period. The present volume, part of Routledge's venerable Seminar Studies series, is intended to offer students an introduction to the history of British and French engagements with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, African slaves, and each other. As the authors state in the introduction, the book's four chapters can function as standalone explorations of a particular theme, but, taken in order, they offer a broadly chronological treatment of two interrelated Atlantic histories. Beginning with "Exploration and settlement," the authors tour readers through "New societies," "Wars across the Atlantic," and "Resistance, rebellions, and revolutions." Sections within each chapter mark out important sub-themes, and a collection of documents (all of which are referenced in the text) further illuminates the authors' points of emphasis.

Not surprisingly, given their areas of expertise, Morgan and Rushton are strongest when they consider law, coerced migration, and print culture. After a discussion of the rise of the Atlantic world as an interpretive framework (now a virtual obligation in these sorts of synthetic works), the authors' introduction makes a crucial point that reverberates throughout the book—that the traditional distinction between a decentralized, politically diverse British Empire and French Atlantic dominions characterized by absolutism and weak local institutions is largely untenable. Colonial projects undertaken by subjects of both kingdoms were instead administered by an ever-

shifting “hodgepodge of organizations,” making legal pluralism a boundary-transcending reality of Anglo-French Atlantic life and, in the eighteenth century, a thorny problem for power-grabbing imperial authorities (p. 8). Morgan and Rushton are also attuned to what they describe as the “thin distinction” between free and forced migration (p. 23). African slaves, of course, were the most numerous and least free laborers to make the Atlantic crossing, toiling under oppressive conditions and deprived of legal personalities in distinctive ways. And yet ostensibly free migration to both the British and French realms was also shaped by various forms and degrees of coercion, whether rooted in class, gender, or culture. This volume also pays admirable attention to print culture, both in the creation of narratives that framed the presence of British and French subjects in the Atlantic world, and as a marker of structural difference between colonial societies—although differences can be overstated, Anglo-Americans did develop creole print cultures in ways that colonists in New France and the French Caribbean did not.

Its brevity notwithstanding, Morgan and Rushton’s book does offer a coherent and, in many ways, innovative analysis of the interrelated British and French empires in the Americas. I say “Americas,” and not “Atlantic,” deliberately, because while the book certainly takes the slave trade and the creation of slave societies in the western hemisphere seriously, it does not, unfortunately, do likewise for Atlantic-facing Africa. This is an unfortunate omission. Among the most important developments in Atlantic history over the past two decades has been a growing appreciation for the centrality of West African cultural, political, and economic history to the broader field. Attention to Senegambia in particular, where the French and British engaged with indigenous peoples and polities in complex and competitive ways throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, would not only have widened the book’s geographical scope to match historians’ conceptions of the Atlantic world, but would also have given greater weight to the authors’ “comparisons and contrasts” (p. 1).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morgan and Rushton are somewhat less sure of their footing in the French Empire than in the British. References to the *Code Noire*, rather than the *Code Noir*, suggest as much. More substantively, historians of New France’s seventeenth-century relations with indigenous peoples will recognize the mismatch between the authors’ contention that French colonists “controlled the Saint Lawrence and routes to the Great Lakes” and the reality of indigenous power-brokers who shaped and sustained the network of alliances stretching from Québec into the west (p. 16). The Haitian Revolution, which in many respects represents the interpretive nexus of Atlantic history—the point at which the strains of capitalism, imperialism, slavery, and the politics of colonial autonomy and personal liberty come together—gets a strangely abrupt treatment. In a little more than a full paragraph, buttressed by a helpful quote from the work of Laurent Dubois, the authors cover the early period of the French Revolution on Saint-Domingue (mislabelled as Haiti) and the slave revolt of 1791, while gesturing toward the declaration of an independent Haitian state in 1804. Far more coverage is afforded to Fédon’s Rebellion, in which French-speakers of mixed-race descent and enslaved Africans rose against the British regime on the tiny island of Grenada. Julien Fédon is a remarkable figure, and there may be a rationale for emphasizing his uprising, and the British response to it, over the far better-known and globally significant events in Saint-Domingue. Such a rationale is not fully articulated in the chapter, however. Whether intentional or not, the authors’ choices here imply that the French Empire’s importance lies primarily in its impact on Britain’s dominions—an implication that the book’s conclusion, which casts the modern relegation of the French language to the Caribbean and Québec (again no mention of Africa) against the “overwhelmingly dominant” position of English, does little to dispel (p. 109).

Christopher Hodson
Brigham Young University
chris_hodson@byu.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172