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Bronwen McShea, *Apostles of Empire: The Jesuits and New France*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. xxix + 331 pp. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4962-0890-3.

Review by Eric Nelson, Missouri State University.

In *Apostles of Empire*, Bronwen McShea offers an important revisionist reassessment of the Jesuit mission in New France by convincingly showing that from start to finish, Jesuit missionaries were “enthusiastic, enterprising empire builders for the Bourbon state” (p. xvi). Far from single-minded “harvesters of souls” operating on the fringes of the French colonial world as presented in much traditional historiography, they “were men planted knee deep in an untidy world of politics, social pressures, and war” (p. xxvii). Not only were the Jesuits *both* Apostles of Christ *and* Apostles of Empire, argues McShea, but they viewed the success of their religious mission as intimately related to the success of the wider French imperial project. Time and again she persuasively shows how mission and empire, religion and politics, conversion and culture were inextricably intertwined in the minds and actions of Jesuit missionaries.

Encompassing eight roughly chronological chapters, this well-written and carefully organized book advances its thesis primarily through a close reading of well-known published sources, especially the famous annual accounts of the Jesuit mission to New France known as the *Relations*. But McShea also incorporates to good effect important and less used published and manuscript material, including previously neglected letters, journals, and drafts of reports. She pairs this research with a deep immersion in both the scholarship of missions in the Americas and the social, cultural, and political history of early modern France.

*Apostles of Empire* takes a consciously Atlantic World perspective that casts new light on a topic that has in the past been framed mostly in North American contexts. Two primary advantages accrue from this approach. First, developments on both sides of the Atlantic are explored together, contextualizing each, as for example in chapter three, where the Fronde and Beaver Wars are considered together. Second, examination of the social, cultural, and educational experiences of future missionaries during their formative years in France provides an important prism through which to understand their initiatives and activities in North America. Indeed, a critical element of McShea’s analysis is how Jesuit missionaries incorporated elite urban and especially Parisian thinking that they brought with them to New France into their initiatives among indigenous peoples.

This Atlantic World frame will offer new insights even for those well acquainted with the mission. Perhaps most fascinating and surprising to this reader was the extent to which Sébastien

Cramoisy, the Parisian publisher of the *Relations*, became entangled in a broad set of activities in support of the mission in New France. I also gained a new perspective into the ongoing importance of Mission Superior Paul Le Jeune after he returned to Europe. This trans-Atlantic focus and framing does, however, come with costs in terms of coverage. As McShea acknowledges in her introduction, her focus on the metropole and French imperial history leaves indigenous perspectives largely unexplored in a way that some might find “regressively Eurocentric” (p. xxii). Thus, *Apostles of Empire* is the most detailed account of the Jesuit mission to date, but its revisionist framing means that it is not comprehensive.

The book is organized into two parts. The first, “Foundations and the Era of the Parisian *Relations*,” focuses on the period between the mission’s foundation in the opening decades of the seventeenth century and the early 1670s. Drawing primarily on her careful and innovative reading of the *Relations*, McShea shows how the Jesuits on the ground supported and aided French imperial and commercial interests by, among other things, serving as go-betweens for French authorities with the indigenous populations to whom they ministered. She also explores how the Jesuits, despite frequent opposition from colonial officials, consistently pushed both in New France and Paris for an aggressive imperial agenda involving the incorporation, by conquest if necessary, of Iroquois peoples and territories. Jesuits on the ground often pursued this goal without official state support and viewed it as essential for securing both their mission and France’s empire.

In pursuit of both stronger Catholic communities and useful and loyal subjects for the French monarchy, the Jesuits worked in these early decades to foster and promote values among indigenous leaders modelled on those of French elites. They also established charitable institutions and permanent farming communities based on French models. More so than many colonial authorities and officials in France, the Jesuits viewed these initiatives and the cultural changes they were intended to promote as essential for creating stable and sympathetic indigenous communities to support France’s wider imperial enterprise. Their vision resonated among some urban and court elites in France who donated resources for their activities, even if this support fell far short of Jesuit hopes.

Part two, “A *Longue Durée* of War and Metropolitan Neglect,” examines the mission’s declining fortunes from the late seventeenth century to its ultimate demise about a century later. One of the real strengths of *Apostles of Empire* is its scope. Too many studies of the Jesuit missions in New France focus on their heroic early decades, ignoring a century or more of their history. This story of decline and scaled-back ambitions is less engaging, and the source base for this period is less rich, with the *Relations* ceasing publication in the early 1670s. Yet, despite scholarly neglect, the later Jesuit mission has an important story to tell. It was far from clear in the late seventeenth century that French imperial ambitions and the Jesuit mission were ultimately destined to wither away. For a time, both empire and mission continued to expand into the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley. But metropolitan neglect, both governmental and within the Jesuit hierarchy, took its toll as French imperial and Jesuit missionary priorities shifted to Asia. Through time the Jesuits in New France became more realistic about what was possible, even if, as McShea shows, some never entirely gave up on their religious or imperial ambitions until the very end.

A notable strength of this book, especially in part one, is an attentiveness to the specific language used by Jesuit missionaries. In particular, McShea explores how they described civility and the charitable needs of indigenous communities using the language current among French urban

elites. Her analysis bears its most important fruit in chapter two, “Rescuing the ‘Poor Miserable Savage,’” where she shows how the Jesuits employed language current in Paris to describe the reasons for poverty among indigenous communities in New France and sought to create a social infrastructure modeled on French urban poor relief to address this poverty. In general, McShea does an admirable job distilling and interpreting her sources for the reader. Only in the final chapter does the research have an undigested feel as the reader is confronted with a flurry of individual biographies of the last Jesuit missionaries. But a granular account of the final act in this long drama perhaps reflects the demise of the mission itself, as the collapse of France’s North American colonial empire and the suppression of the Jesuit Order left a few stranded missionaries largely alone in a completely transformed world.

*Apostles of Empire* is a must-read for scholars of the early Americas, the Catholic Reformation, early modern French imperialism, the Society of Jesus, and the Atlantic World more broadly. In addition, historians of modern France will be interested in McShea’s conclusion that many elements of the “civilizing mission” of nineteenth-century imperialist France were present in the seventeenth-century Jesuit North American mission. The book also contributes to recent scholarly interest from early modern historians in the New Diplomatic History, specifically the role of non-state actors with their own agendas in international relations.[1] The Jesuit missionaries frequently advanced their ambitious vision of French imperialism in their interactions with Native American communities and nations without permission or approval from French colonial and metropolitan political authorities. In this way, the Jesuit missionaries of New France bear some resemblance to modern non-state actors that have become a focus of the New Diplomatic History. Perhaps in this context, the Jesuit *Relations* should be seen as a distant predecessor of the modern digital public awareness campaigns promoted by non-governmental organizations intent on influencing the foreign policies of twenty-first century states.

#### NOTE

[1] See for instance Maurits Ebben and Louis Sicking, *Beyond Ambassadors: Consuls, Missionaries, and Spies in Pre-Modern Diplomacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

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