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Helen Dewar, *Disputing New France: Companies, Law and Sovereignty in the French Atlantic, 1598-1663*. McGill-Queens University Press, 2022, 368 pp. Notes, index, bibliography, photos maps. \$130.00 CAD. (cl). ISBN 9-78-0228008200; \$39.95 CAD; ISBN 9-78-0228008217.

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Helen Dewar's recent study addresses several relatively understudied aspects of the history of New France: the role of commercial companies in the French colonization of the Saint Lawrence River Valley and Acadia, the legal status of the companies themselves, and the ways in which French sovereignty was articulated in the region through the companies immediately following the beginnings of the French regulation of transatlantic trade around 1600. What emerges from the study is primarily a finely detailed examination of the companies themselves and of their functioning, but Dewar also capably ties these histories to much broader questions that are of perennial importance to the wider study of European colonization in the Americas.

First among these is the continuum of metropolitan-colonial authority in the foundation and evolution of overseas colonies in the early modern world, whether in the Atlantic world or in Asia. There were significant differences in the ways diverse European states conferred authority upon colonies (or in the ways colonies of differing imperial affiliations seized it), but also among colonies nominally controlled by a given state. Dewar brings the French case to bear in this debate, thus broadening the debate itself, persuasively arguing that for the French, authority in overseas colonization was squarely a domestic issue. Indeed, her fine-grained analyses of both the legal status of companies and the role of French courts in New France flow from this point. Individual (often rival) traders and fishermen, as well as the associates of the assorted chartered companies all agreed: conflict among and between them was to be settled in France by French courts, although the location of those courts within France shifted in meaningful ways over the sixty years of the story she is telling.

Dewar's study also provides a valuable perspective on the question of free trade, of particular relevance given the current resurgence of scholarly interest in the economic history of empire and specifically in the roles played by the demands for free trade in the formation of colonial merchant lobbies and creole elites. Again bridging the metropolitan-colonial divide, Dewar's sophisticated assessment brings the logic and culture of early modern metropolitan privilege-seeking into the realm of French imperial history. Throughout the book, Dewar questions whether the unceasing submissions to French courts, practiced by individuals and associates of chartered companies alike, to adjudicate the boundaries and application of exclusive privileges related to overseas trade represented a failure of the French Crown to uphold the privileges it

granted. She argues that to see the role of courts in this light is to misunderstand both the cultural and economic meanings of privileges: they “were a starting point for negotiation rather than a definite set of rules to govern French trading and colonizing activities in North America,” (p. 59) and were understood by all, including opponents, to be changeable and temporary. Trading privileges were, moreover, fundamentally relational: the power that privileges bestowed on one party depended on their being withheld from others. Conversely, how free, really, was the free trade that was called for by those who opposed the exclusive privileges that accrued to chartered companies? Although liberty of trade seems in principle to oppose the upholding of privileges, Dewar shows again and again that those in the Atlantic port cities of France such as Saint Malo who called for the freedom to trade overseas never sought a complete absence of all trade regulation, but rather the court-sanctioned protection of their own right to trade, a valuable perspective indeed, given the political importance that the rhetoric of free trade would assume 150 years later in the Atlantic world.

Through six chapters, Dewar traces the legal articulation and defense of French sovereignty in New France with the rise in chartered companies, beginning with the commissions for trade and colonization granted by Henri IV. After exploring the legal and immediate historical context for the restrictions placed on those who could travel overseas (the new necessity to be affiliated with a holder of a commission), the first chapter is devoted primarily to the last of Henri IV’s three commissions and the most ambitious to date, that granted to Pierre Dugua, Sieur de Mons, whose tenure as title-holder lasted from 1603 to 1612. Dewar explains the rights, obligations, and objectives of the commission, exploring in detail where de Mons worked among France’s Atlantic port cities and the manner in which he recruited traders to work with him, including his social and business networks and his relationships with his most important associates, Gravé du Pont and Samuel de Champlain. Perhaps inevitably, the bulk of this investigation involves understanding the challenges to de Mons’ authority and to his ability to carry out the commission including the defense of the customary fishing and trading rights by a range of vociferous opponents who immediately understood the threat to French provincial authority that this creation of exclusive privileges posed. De Mons attempted to protect his privileges, ultimately failing, suffering significant financial losses, and withdrawing from his commission, after which Henri de Bourbon, Prince de Condé was appointed to the governorship of the colony. Dewar carries the theme of creating and then defending commissions, accompanied by the same reliance on courts in France for the adjudication of conflict, into the second chapter, after considering the significant shifts in colonial policies and in the metropolitan political context triggered by Henri IV’s assassination in 1610 and the subsequent regency of Marie de Medici.

The third and fourth chapters shift the focus of the book in particularly productive ways. In the third, Dewar assesses the maritime environment, both oceanic and riverine, that provided access to the resources at the heart of the expanding trade of New France. Dewar initially considers the earliest French challenges to Iberian claims to Atlantic navigation beginning in the 1520s and situates French overseas forays of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries vis-à-vis influential ideas about the freedom of seagoing navigation such as those articulated by the VOC’s Hugo Grotius in his *Mare Liberum* (1609). Regardless of theoretical understandings of the freedom of the sea held in common by European powers, however, claims to a given route and imperial sovereignty in a given terrestrial location were upheld and sustained by repeated maritime voyages that traced and retraced these routes, a practice that lay behind the decades-long French commitment to navigation across the Atlantic Ocean and up the St. Lawrence River. As Dewar explores in this chapter, this commitment reached a new phase with the appointment

of Admiral Montmorency, the brother-in-law of the Prince de Condé, as Viceroy of New France in 1620. This was the first time the control of New France was centralized in the hands of the French Admiralty, thus concentrating the maritime importance of imperial expansion. The newly-created Compagnie de Montmorency, inspired in part by the Admiral's study of rival English and Dutch chartered companies, provoked immediate changes in the governance and practice of colonization, creating new positions such as intendant, solidifying Champlain's position, and shifting the power base to Paris where the company was headquartered, away from the port cities that had traditionally played such a key role in the litigation of conflict. This chapter ends with a consideration of the maritime and geographic context for "the fragility of imperial authority" (p. 118), dwelling on the presence of illegal French traders and especially on Indigenous residents of the region whose control over their Wendat, Innu, and Algonquin homelands constituted an existential challenge to ongoing French claims to sovereignty, however they were articulated.

These Indigenous subjects form the backbone of Dewar's fourth chapter on the importance of religion to the French colonization of the Saint Lawrence Valley. To some degree, this topic informs the entirety of the book via the shadows of the recent Wars of Religion that dogged Henri IV's first overseas commissions and the uneasy balance of Protestant and Catholic metropolitan actors who directed the formation and governance of the first chartered companies (including some like Champlain and Henri IV who crossed the confessional divide). Dewar applies these omnipresent tensions to the new ways that colonization was legitimized and sovereignty was expressed with the arrival in the 1620s of Recollet and Jesuit missionaries. Although evangelization had figured in the earliest New France commissions, colonization became a means of conserving the Catholic religion only in this decade, and Dewar underlines the decreasing acceptance in New France of the coexistence of Protestants and Catholics after the arrival of these missionaries. Somewhat paradoxically, Champlain found himself in agreement with the Recollets through their shared focus on the peopling of the colony with French Catholics, which contrasted to a purely trade-focused colonial vision that insidiously implied connections between commerce, Protestantism, cosmopolitanism, and treason. Indigenous peoples emerged as ideal colonial subjects in these debates, Dewar argues. Indeed, the "interests of the Catholic Church and the French monarchy converged in the bodies of the Indigenous peoples in New France" (p. 145). In one of the strongest sections of the book, Dewar underlines the roles of francization and baptism in conversion, while clearly pointing to the range of potential motivations that Indigenous peoples could have had for adopting both the Christian belief system and French cultural practices. French imperial sovereignty, she concludes here, was, above all, dependent on people, specifically colonial subjects, and the definition of colonial subjecthood was increasingly controlled by Catholic orders in response to an expansionist Catholic Church for which Indigenous subjects constituted vitally important new members.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, Dewar returns to a close study of the statutes, objectives, governance features, and obligations of a chartered company, that of the Compagnie de la Nouvelle France (CNF). The Compagnie was the most successful and longest surviving French chartered company in the early modern period, established in 1627 and lasting, with important shifts in its powers and responsibilities, until the cession of the colony to Louis XIV in 1663. Here Dewar deliberately challenges the heterodoxy of French colonial scholarship that claims that the era of CNF ushered in a completely new era of colonial governance in New France. Instead, her focus in this chapter is on continuity, arguing that the creation of the company was consistent with the long-standing process of the consolidation of maritime authority that began

with the earliest commissions at the beginning of the century. Rooted in the immediate context of the appointment of Richelieu as *grand maître* of navigation in 1626, the creation of the CNF was a means of fostering the commercial potential of the colony in an era of the growth of European navies, in which commerce was increasingly understood to be intimately connected both to maritime power and overseas colonies. Dewar usefully devotes much of this chapter to an analysis of the form of the CNF itself: how it both resembled and differed from other European chartered companies, how the model of the company itself was evolving in this period, and how the CNF was constructed by Richelieu to be a solution to existing problems in the governance of New France.

This analysis of the CNF carries over to the final chapter in which Dewar examines the evolution of the relationship of the company with the Crown, and the fractures in the governance of the colony that the company could not rectify: the splintering of authority across the multiple colonial settlements in New France, and the even more significant ruptures between New France and Acadia. The CNF's power waned in the 1640s only to recover its place before the imperial crisis triggered by the death of Mazarin in 1660 and the rise of Colbert, whose wide-ranging transformations of colonial governance did, indeed, usher in a new era.

Aside from some minor editorial problems with the book, such as several mistakes in the index, there are a few instances in *Disputing New France* in which a broadening of the immediate context would have helped the reader to understand more clearly what was at stake in the debates that Dewar so ably dissects. Particularly in the first chapter, more description of fishermen-traders of St Malo and other ports would have been instructive because, as they defended their customary rights, they formed the main opposition to the earliest regulation of trade. Who were these fishermen-traders, how many were there, and how did their customary rights develop into such a powerful legal force? While the historiography of the earliest North Atlantic cod fishery is extensive, summarizing key details would have helped the reader understand how and why the vigorous opposition to privileges was so longstanding and successful, and what privilege-seekers were up against.

More significantly, at several points Dewar evokes the wider Atlantic framework of French imperial expansion in the early seventeenth century as a means of breaking out of the narrow strictures that have ruled the study of New France (p. 107, pp. 158-59, p. 239). When this framework is employed, it is indeed effective, but more detail and consistency in its application would have been beneficial. It would be useful, for instance, to understand the state of French activity in the Caribbean in the earliest years of the seventeenth century, before the formation of the Compagnie de Saint-Christophe in 1626, in order to appreciate how the fur trade and cod fishery were considered by metropolitan actors in comparison to and alongside the activities of the *flibustiers* sailing around Hispaniola and the Lesser Antilles. Dewar evokes Montmorency's consideration of New France in the context of France's Asian trade (p. 107) without a mention of the wider Atlantic (primarily Caribbean) world in which French mariners were operating at the time. Again, more forcefully, Dewar discusses the formation of the Compagnie de Saint-Christophe (pp. 158-9) but doesn't name the islands or describe France's colonial settlements in the Caribbean until almost 100 pages later (pp. 229-30), and the book includes no map of this region that could help the reader.

Nevertheless, Dewar's book is a compelling and incisive study of early New France and a tremendous contribution to the flourishing field of French colonial scholarship. In particular,

Disputing New France succeeds wonderfully as a challenge to the odd historiographical wall of disapproval that inevitably faces those who study the history of France's overseas colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This disapproval is not rooted in a broader critique of empire, as one might expect, but rather in the longstanding idea that France in this period was simply bad at colonization, its colonies demographically weak, insufficiently supported by the metropole and economically inferior. (The numerous intellectual biases of this position are never examined by those who hold it: how and why does one define an empire as successful?) Dewar directly addresses this disapproval at one moment while discussing comparative historical studies of chartered companies that have typically considered French companies "failures" (pp. 12-13).^[1] But one of the great strengths of Dewar's study is that it constitutes an exceptionally strong and empirically-driven rebuttal to the entire idea that any one empire could ever provide a normative model against which all the others can or should be compared. In a powerful examination of these ideas in relation to French Atlantic scholarship, Brett Rushforth has stressed the process of experimentation in the process of empire building and the conceptual capaciousness that a consideration of the experimental nature of empire brings to historical inquiry.^[2] Using exactly this language, Dewar returns again and again to the experimental character of French empire-building in the Saint Lawrence River Valley, and to how the ever-evolving search by the French state for profitability and long term colonial viability shaped the form of the chartered company, whose claims to sovereignty in New France depended on the complex metropolitan legal frameworks from which it emerged.

NOTES

[1] Dewar cites Marcel Trudel, *Histoire de la Nouvelle France* (Montreal: Fides, 1963-83), Pierre Bonnasieux, *Les Grandes compagnies de commerce* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1892), and James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), but this view is also apparent in more recent works such as Gauvin Bailey, *Architecture and Urbanism in the French Atlantic Empire* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).

[2] Brett Rushforth, "Absolutely Atlantic: Colonialism and the Early Modern French State in Recent Historiography," *History Compass* 8, 1 (2010): 110-117.

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