

Owen Stanwood, *The Global Refuge: Huguenots in an Age of Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xii + 295 pp. Maps, figures, notes and index. \$29.54 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-026474-1 ; \$24.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN0-19-026474-8. Review by Ruth Whelan, National University of Ireland Maynooth.

Review Essay by Ruth Whelan, National University of Ireland Maynooth

This is a vast panorama of the emigration of Huguenots from France following the dragonnades (billeting of soldiers—*dragons* or dragoons—on French Protestant households to force them to abjure) in the Poitou (on the west coast) in 1681, and particularly after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in October 1685, which made Protestantism illegal in France, ordered their churches razed to the ground and their ministers, who refused to abjure, into exile. It is an original and admirably documented history, for which Stanwood has not only mined existing publications but also an impressive array of archival material, heretofore underexploited or ignored, held in repositories in three continents. Regrettably, the decision probably imposed by the publishers, not to include a bibliography, makes finding these sources again virtually impossible, as the index does not cover the footnotes or include the authors of the secondary sources. Readers take note and leave markers for the way back to the many nuggets unearthed by this exceptionally well-read author.

The perspective, as the title implies, is global—a first in Huguenot studies—as we follow French Protestant refugees from France to Switzerland, Holland and England (the first stage of the Refuge), and from thence to Germany, Ireland, British America, the Caribbean, the Cape of Good Hope and the Indian Ocean (the second stage of the Refuge). Readers will be thrilled to find this story, which in previous studies has usually been recounted from national or Atlantic perspectives, brought together in one volume that is a veritable tour de force. The chronological scope of this global history is equally ambitious. It starts in France in the 1680s and ends in the 1770s in the newly declared United States, with one Huguenot descendant in Germany trying to claim an inheritance from the estate of an uncle who had died in British America. His efforts proved unsuccessful because, in the vortex of political change in that decade, the networks of empire were crumbling and turning the Huguenots, who had benefitted from them, into mere “mere curiosities” (p. 232), no longer able to exploit the political connections made possible by systems of patronage and clientelism under the ancien régime.

The thesis at the heart of this study, while not original, is argued here on a global scale for the first time, and it will probably prove as unpopular as my own earlier argument that Huguenot Refugees in Ireland actively participated in, benefitted from, and identified with the British colonisation of our island.[1] Thus, Stanwood ably argues that Huguenot refugees were not just the subjects but also the agents of empire on the global scale previously noted and were actively recruited to build the British and Dutch imperial economies in successive colonial schemes over the period studied. In chapter two, appropriately titled, “Finding Eden”, he presents the propaganda for overseas destinations, written mostly by Huguenot leaders and their successors in Europe to promote an idealised even utopian vision of these distant places with the aim of attracting recruits. And throughout the volume, Stanwood outlines the dissonance between the “glowing descriptions” (p. 61) in the propaganda of lands ripe for colonisation, whose climates

are presented as benign, soil fertile, and inhabitants friendly (if they are mentioned at all) and the reality of one failed, or only partially successful, colonisation project after another.

Yet, despite repeated failures in British America, the Caribbean, the Cape, or the Pacific, relevant bodies in the imperial metropolises continued to fund many, although not all, of these schemes. Why? Because Huguenot leaders learned to promote themselves not only as persecuted Protestants and as God's elect, but also as a chosen or special people in the economic sense. And they constantly played up "their facility in producing silk and wine" (p. 85), even if there is little evidence that those who ventured to the edges of empire actually had the skills required to turn those dreams into reality, or that the lands they colonised were as ideal for such endeavours as they had been represented in the promotional literature (p. 101). This thesis, and its able demonstration is a welcome correction to the successive myths created around the Huguenot refugees: that they were "industrious, intelligent and high-minded Frenchmen," who had sacrificed everything for conscience; that they were key to Britain's economic success and France's economic failure; that they, seekers of religious liberty, were harbingers of freedom and toleration wherever they settled (pp. 232-235)—all of which myths, however, are also true up to a point and based on historical evidence.

Nonetheless, Stanwood's very able and admirably documented interpretation runs the risk of creating another myth by over-emphasising (in my view) the agency, and perhaps also the commitment, of these global Huguenots to British and Dutch overseas imperial projects. The process starts with the dust jacket, which reproduces Jan Luyken's 1696 woodcut (also Figure 1.1, p. 18), which represents Huguenots fleeing France as a mass exodus on the biblical model, with ships at anchor, and on the horizon, poised to transport the refugees to overseas destinations. The theme is picked up on the back panel in the critical appraisals, which successively refer to the "forced exile of Protestants from France"; "driven from their homeland" and "scattered across Europe and around the Atlantic World, seeking their fortunes in the service of the British and Dutch empires"; displaying "willingness to relocate far afield in a time of European expansion"; in sum, "a wholly new global history of [...] the expulsion of 150,000 Protestants from France in the 1680s, scattering into Europe's Protestant nations, the New World, and even Africa." Although Stanwood correctly states that, far from being forced into exile, French Protestants were expressly forbidden from fleeing the kingdom (p. 16), his metaphors (e.g., scattering, plethora, ubiquity, legions, waves, streams, pp. 96, 105, 167, 183, 198, 208, 227), imply a mass movement of Huguenots streaming not just out of France, but also to overseas destinations.

However, two distinctions are important, both of which are stated, but (in my view) not sufficiently clarified or emphasised in Stanwood's ongoing analysis of the evidence presented. Firstly, only a minority of the estimated 150,000-200,000 thousand Huguenot refugees, who managed to flee France despite the risks and impediments, set out for overseas destinations, possibly five to ten thousand people, or an estimated three to six percent of the total (p. 6). Secondly, they did so for two reasons: on the one hand, they were recruited for these overseas colonial projects; and, on the other, they were pushed, as it were, from the 'first stage' of the Refuge, from destinations overburdened by providing for them, and therefore eager to move them on. Consequently, those who did venture onwards in the "second stage" of the Refuge, probably did so out of self-interest, as Stanwood repeatedly argues, but many if not most, also did so out of "desperation," as is stated only once (p. 129), as far as I recollect, because the living conditions where they had settled were so dire or inadequate. Thus, this story of a global refuge is in reality a story of a minority of French Protestant refugees who were drawn into overseas imperial projects by a tiny elite of more adventurous Huguenot prospectors, who were

the actual agents in “the story of Huguenot imperial mastery” (p. 167). Although Stanwood repeatedly argues from individual examples to a general interpretation of the agency of all, few letters and memoirs survive in support of this globalising interpretation. Admittedly, I have made similar arguments for Ireland; yet nonetheless acknowledging the limitations imposed by the sources and presenting the general populace of Huguenots, who have left little or no trace other than name, origin and occupation, and not always even that, as situated in an imperial discourse and project, which inevitably shaped them, but of which they were not necessarily agents—their leaders and elites excepted.[2]

The case of Élie (Elias) Neau is a pertinent example of the overstatement of the agency of these global Huguenots: he is rightly described as “the most famous refugee in British America at the time,” and a “key figure in the early history of black Christianity in North America” (p. 171 & 175). Stanwood opens his history with Neau, acknowledging that while he, like many other Huguenots, made “extraordinary sacrifices” for his faith, he also “deftly navigated the world of states and empires,” by means of his “access to institutional power”—in Neau’s case the Church of England—which “allowed him to prosper in a foreign world” (pp. 1-3). This interpretation is not untrue; but the way Stanwood outlines Neau’s involvement with the Church of England ends up airbrushing the complexities and ambiguities out of the story. In reality, Neau did not “navigate” his way into working on behalf of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), an Anglican missionary society founded in London by royal charter in 1701, he was recruited in 1704 to the work of “Making the Empire Protestant” (chapter six).

Stanwood precedes his presentation of Neau with a summary of the Huguenot Claude Grosteste de La Mothe’s 1708 vision for the missionary work of the SPG in British America, and his conviction of “England’s special role in the Protestant world, as a ‘source of light for other Nations’” (p. 170). He adds that “many Huguenots did take up la Mothe’s [sic] call and join the SPG,” and that a “disproportionate number of refugees and their descendants became missionaries, ministers, or supporters of the society, and more than a few travelled to the Americas under its auspices” (p.170). However, he provides neither precise statistics, nor a reflection on how that disproportion or number is measured, whereas other sources indicate that French clergy in British American colonies were actually in a minority compared to other nationalities.[3] Having created this context, Stanwood then presents Neau as one of the first and the most exceptional of the “Huguenots who were already active in the SPG” (p. 171). He is correct, but this and his later statement that the SPG “had already been corresponding with him [Neau] for some time about missionary techniques in North America” blurs the issue of Neau’s agency, as it seems to imply that the initiative came from Neau. The reality is more complex.

After his unexpected release in July 1698 from the carceral universe of the French galleys, as a result of English diplomatic intervention on his behalf, Neau returned to his home in New York via London. During the months he spent in the metropolis, he was introduced to leading members of the Church of England, including the bishop of London Henry Compton, and of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, founded in March 1699. It was on their initiative that Neau was invited in October 1700 to become an overseas corresponding member of that Society, an invitation that he readily accepted. There can be no doubt but that Neau heartily shared the polarised vision of colonial British America prevalent at the time among the leading Anglicans in the SPCK; he pledged to do everything in his power to promote their educational and missionary work among the population of New York: raising money, distributing tracts, founding charity schools where possible in order to foster a fear of God and

greater religious observance in the colonies, whose population was deemed by all to be morally and religiously lacking.[4] But it is misleading simply to observe that Neau “dedicated himself to the design of a ‘reformation of manners and propagation of the knowledge of God’ in the English world” (p. 171); or that “as early as 1701 he was promoting this design to his fellow refugee Gabriel Bernon, sending along tracts for distribution in Rhode Island that may have come from [...] the SPCK” (p. 172). Clearly, Neau was promoting the designs of the Society and distributing tracts that had in fact been sent from London, as the letter he wrote to Bernon in June 1701 makes quite clear, but he did so at the behest and on behalf of the SPCK in his role as their appointed foreign correspondent.[5] The distinction may seem overly subtle to some, but it is nonetheless an important one: a tiny minority of the 150,000-200,000 Huguenot refugees, including Neau, were incorporated into the British imperial project of making the empire Protestant—indeed Anglican—but they were rarely the instigators of it; it is therefore inaccurate to refer to Neau’s involvement with the SPCK and later the SPG as “*his* (italics mine) project for the reformation of manners in the New World” (p. 173).

It is also less than accurate to present Neau’s move to Anglicanism as a “conversion” motivated by self-interest, or as a “sudden move towards the established church” (p. 172). Self-interest was undeniably a factor, as it is in all human action, but his move was also motivated by religious and political considerations, and, furthermore, was in some respects forced upon him. Neau was an elder and a member of the consistory (i.e., the body of ruling elders presided by pastor) of the French Reformed Church in New York before becoming a member of Trinity (Anglican) Church, New York in late autumn 1704. But the move cannot be described as a “conversion.” For generations, many in the French Calvinist elite had regarded the Church of England as a sister “Reformed Body” (to quote Élie Bouhereau who settled in Ireland in the 1690s), from which the Presbyterians had separated without due cause, and which the refugees could therefore join without scruple.[6] Although the majority of the rank and file among first generation refugees, and many pastors, did not share such a view, Neau did, as he had found spiritual sustenance in the Book of Common Prayer during his captivity and readily embraced the Church of England as a sister Reformed body. But he also had two other reasons for conforming to Anglicanism. On the one hand, he was appalled by the factionalism of New York, and believed that conformity to the Church of England would serve to unite the divided immigrant peoples of British America. On the other, he was forced into conforming, because William Vesey, the Church of England vicar of Trinity Church, and an able manipulator, opposed Neau’s appointment as an SPG catechist in 1703, unless and until he did so.

And Neau genuinely wanted to be a catechist, but not to the Native Americans, which was the task he was originally asked to undertake. In line with Thomas Bray’s vision for the SPG, rather than Grosteste de La Mothe’s, Neau’s piety and ability to speak French seemed to the Society to make him the ideal instrument for winning over to Protestantism the Native Americans who had been converted to Roman Catholicism by French Jesuit missionaries, and whose presence on the border between Nouvelle France and British America was perceived as a major political threat—a Native American outpost, as it were, of the popery that Britain had been fighting against for generations. Instead, Neau replied to the SPG proposing that he be appointed to catechise the enslaved men, women and children in the city of New York, for whom he felt a compassion unusual for the time, probably because he knew from his experience on the galleys and in the prisons of Marseille what it was like to endure a life in chains. In this too, Neau was of course participating in the imperial project of making the empire Protestant, especially as he was also no abolitionist, as Stanwood mentions (p. 174-175), because he believed that the economy of British America would collapse without the enslaved labour of thousands of forcibly displaced Africans.[7] Nonetheless, far from prospering in a foreign world as a result

of his access to institutional power within the SPG and the Church of England, Neau was caught up to his detriment in power plays between metropolis and colony, and within the colony itself, which ended in his being dismissed from his position as catechist in 1718, although he was reinstated the following year.[8]

In his conclusion, Stanwood remarks that his “global saga” of the Huguenots is “a tale of how individuals often get swept up in the current of history and taken to unusual places.” That it certainly is. But the tale he tells might have been even more compelling if the complexities, ambiguities and difficulties that often resulted from being strangers in lands occupied and controlled by others had been written more explicitly into the story.

NOTES

[1] See the debate over my pointing up a “colonialist mind-set” among French Protestants in Ireland: Ruth Whelan, “Persecution and Toleration: the Changing Identities of Ireland’s Huguenot Refugees,” *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (hereafter *HSP*) 27/1(1998):20-35; C.E.J. Caldicott, “On short-term and long-term memory,” *HSP* 27:2(1999): 279-280; Ruth Whelan, “Remembering with Integrity,” *HSP* 27:2(1999):281-283; Ruth Whelan, “Representing Ireland through Imperial Eyes. A Huguenot Recruitment Document in 1681” in Phyllis Gaffney, Michael Brophy, Mary Gallagher, eds., *Reverberations. Staging relations in French since 1500. A Festschrift in honour of C.E.J. Caldicott* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2008), pp. 351-64; Ruth Whelan, “The Huguenots and the imaginative geography of Ireland: a planned immigration scheme in the 1680s,” *Irish Historical Studies*, 35/140(2007): 477-95.

[2] Whelan, “Representing Ireland through Imperial Eyes,” p. 356-357; and “Repressive Toleration: the Huguenots in Early Eighteenth-Century Dublin,” in Ruth Whelan and Carol Baxter, eds., *Toleration and Religious Identity. The Edict of Nantes and its Implications in France, Britain and Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 179-195.

[3] French clergy served in disproportionate numbers to the French population of colonial Virginia, according to John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 97-100, but when compared with the number of clergymen of other nationalities, they formed a minute two percent of the total (p. 370, n. 2).

[4] John Chamberlayne to Neau, London, 18 October 1700, in Edmond McClure ed., *A chapter in English church history: being the minutes of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge for the years 1698-1704* (London: SPCK, 1888), p. 78, 82-84.

[5] Neau to Bernon, New York, 25 June 1701, Rhode Island Historical Society, Bernon Papers, Ms 294, f. 25. I am most grateful to the librarians at the RIHS who supplied me with photographs of this manuscript.

[6] See Ruth Whelan, “Sanctified by the word: the Huguenots and Anglican Liturgy,” in Kevin Herlihy, ed., *Propagating the word of Irish Dissent* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp. 74-94.

[7] Neau to John Hodges, New York, 10 July 1703, Weston Library, Oxford, SPG Letter Books Series A, CVI.

[8] See Ruth Whelan, “The extraordinary voyage of Élie Neau (1662c.-1722), naturalized Englishman and French Protestant galley slave,” *HSP* 29/4(2011):499-527; and “Soul Songs: A Snippet View of Élie Neau’s ‘Hymne ou cantiques sacrés’ (1718),” *Lias* 48/1(2021): 63-122.

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