Claiborne A. Skinner. *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 202 + xiv pp. ISBN 978-0-801-88837-3, $50.00 (cloth).

Clairborne Skinner's *The Upper Country* offers a succinct overview of one of the great, if too often untold, theaters of North American history. Presented as a largely traditional narrative of "what happened," the book nonetheless strives to include introductions to important facets of the social history of the Upper Country of colonial New France: *les pays d'en haut*. It is, to be sure, a complicated tale. Like so many places on the margins of empires, the Upper Country's history was as much a history of what happened around it as what happened in it. Though nominally a French colonial story, its European residents were few and the story is really about the complicated frontier relations between the French, and the British, and their respective relations with various major and minor aboriginal tribes and the complications added by the often distinct positions of Canadians and Americans. The story takes place in the Upper Country and in Paris, London, Boston, Quebec, and New Orleans. Telling this tale clearly is no easy matter. While this clarity falters on occasion, Skinner allows us to understand the story well.

Intended as a teaching text, the book largely succeeds in setting out the history of the region (it is part of the John Hopkins series, Regional Perspectives on Early America) and placing that region in the Anglo-French-Aboriginal context of the century that preceded the Seven Years War. Skinner recounts the early French incursions, the basis for their "enterprise," the tangled web of aboriginal alliances and warfare that facilitated it, and of course highlighting its critical place in the competition with Anglo-Americans that ultimately removed the French from all of North America. The perspective is fascinating. As a Canadian (and one of French ancestry), it is a tale oft-told but rarely from this margin-of-the-margin perspective. When Canadians

think of New France—and when I teach New France—we think of Montreal, Quebec, and sometimes Acadia; these Upper Country frontiers figure as distant lands, occasionally traversed by voyageurs, missionaries, and explorers, but not the heart of the story. When we think of the fur trade, we think not of a French (or Canadian) place but of an aboriginal land; it is not only *pays d'en haut* but also *d'autre pays*. Yet, although drawing almost exclusively on Canadian authors (Delage, Miquelon, Eccles), it is really an American perspective, a history of a territory that while effectively aboriginal, and nominally French, will become American. And this, I think is ultimately the book's biggest failure: its inability to forget what the territory became and to remember what it was.

Much of this is a result of Skinner's focus on individuals. The author allows us to see enterprising Frenchmen engaged in holding the territory for the French Empire and Canadian trade. He clearly admires many of these men (and castigates just as many) and without fully sliding into heroic tale-telling allows us to see their strengths and weaknesses. There are also clear efforts to highlight aboriginal (especially Iroquois) roles, though these rarely exist beyond their place in the larger Anglo-French struggle. The focus on individual enterprise (and the vaguer aboriginal interest) means that ultimately, small shoulders are compelled to carry global burdens. Skinner enlivens his text with often colorful language, offering interesting insights into individuals' actions, upon which, we are repeatedly told, hung the fate of the French Empire. A long list of enterprising Frenchmen (and the odd woman) passes before our eyes. Variously "strong" or "duplicitous," "shrewd" or "vain" characters drive this story in a manner that historians of the centers of empire might find surprising.

This approach is successful in illustrating the cumulative impact of a series of French failures to secure the interior (especially in the Ohio River Valley), of the gradual extension of British American influence over the Appalachians (though this is a story we come upon very occasionally), of the gradual erosion of French–aboriginal relations (particularly cogent here is the sense of how small failures had larger consequences), and of the slow displacement of the Iroquois from their place as Imperial linchpins in eastern North America (though rarely are we taken *inside* that story). In the end, for all the efforts to tell a complex multi-sided tale, for all the several attempts to offer a social historical view of life in the Upper Country, and for the many attempts to point outside the region, it is a curiously insular vision that owes much more to the heroic, mythic view (that was once our only view of that history) than it does to a modern historiography that highlights the complex relationships between the worlds of the middle ground and European imperialism.

Having last year taught a senior undergraduate seminar on the margins of the British and French Empires in North America, I wondered whether I would have used this text. For all the concerns I have expressed above, I would. One of the troubles faced by undergraduates —and indeed many junior grad students—is that the Upper Country's place in the larger story is only occasionally seen, much less understood. Understanding how obscure battles connect to the larger commercial and military concerns of empire is not easy. This book makes those connections, perhaps not as strongly as I might like, but it is there. And thus as a point of entry for understanding that world, *The Upper Country* offers students a suitable level of detail to better understand the theater. It is, however, much less successful in linking it to any of the larger historiographical debates that are current. But as a foundation for understanding those debates, this book offers much.

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