

ing. In one letter, for example, he writes that “with the rainy night, the hammock helped a little, although even with a poncho over head the soaking rain made it difficult to sleep” (p. 53). Overall, these letters represent an interesting set of historical artifacts for anyone wishing to get a sense of a young officer’s trials and tribulations in Vietnam. It would be of interest to read FitzGibbon’s letters alongside those of non-officer-level draftees who experienced combat—the kind that

appear, for example, in *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*. Read together, they would reveal a wide spectrum of experiences, thoughts, and feelings about a war that does not seem to go away.

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In This Remote Country

French Colonial Culture in the Anglo-American Imagination, 1780-1860

By Edward Watts

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Pp. ix, 275. Notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$59.95; paperbound, \$19.95.)

In this intriguing book, Edward Watts explores how Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century constructed and used the history of French colonialism in North America. That history, Watts persuasively argues, became a tool in debates about “what type of nation the United States would become,” with one model—the destructive and racist British empire—set against its kinder, gentler French counterpart. Thus, “even as the French *themselves* were erased” from the North American continent, “their memory retained a powerful presence in conversations the nation had about itself” (pp. 11, 13).

Watts has uncovered a remarkable array of nineteenth-century sources treating the history of French

colonialism in just this way. The French show up in discussions of Indian policy, interracial marriage, middle-class masculinity, and the politics of westward expansion, and Watts treats these topics in some detail. Watts also pays attention to the differences between the interpretations advanced by western and eastern intellectuals and politicians. Western models, he argues, tended to include the French as part of the story, embracing their adaptation to the wilderness and their ability to build relationships with the region’s Indians. Less locally-driven histories, however, tended to treat the French as backward, if sympathetic, failures.

Watts also considers the manner in which Americans used the French

in their efforts to negotiate the shifting currents of middle- and upper-class masculinity. Nowhere is this analysis more successful than in his discussion of Francis Parkman's ambivalent analysis of the French and the West they once controlled. Watts demonstrates that Parkman's dismissive and highly critical reading of French colonial history in his seven-volume *France and England in North America* contrasts with an earlier, more admiring portrait in *The Oregon Trail*.

Watts offers an especially rich analysis of the role of the French in national debates about the nature of the white, patriarchal family. Proponents of strict, white, patriarchal social structures considered the French and their Métis children "monstrous exceptions" to the desired norm, while opponents of this stifling homogeneity noted the humanity and hope offered by the alternative French society (chapter 4).

Whether through "idealization" or "debasement," then, nineteenth-century writers marginalized the actual French by turning them into caricatures to serve political ends. Perceptive of this historical trend, Watts seems less aware of his own idealization of the French colonial past. For Watts, French *habitants* in the Illinois country lived largely free of greed, eschewing the grasping capitalism of British America in favor of a "neighborly, egalitarian, and village-based" way of life (p. 57). Amplifying Carl Ekberg's optimistic

interpretation of Illinois society, Watts insists that "the ethos of inclusion and egalitarian cooperation [was] practiced by the habitants" (p. 89). A brief look into Louisiana's court records might temper this hopeful portrayal of French social relations.

In the area of Indian relations, Watts argues that the Illinois French "rarely were in conflict with their Indian neighbors," living instead in the progressive bliss of *métissage* (p. 58). Illinois inhabitants' leading role in the Fox Wars or their active participation in French efforts to destroy the Chickasaws—bloody conflicts that together lasted half a century—remain unexplained, as does Illinois' important place in the Indian slave trade to Louisiana and Canada.

Perhaps nowhere is Watts's rosy view of French colonialism more apparent than in his discussion of French slavery. Eighteenth-century Illinois had a per capita slave population that rivaled many counties in contemporary Virginia, but Watts still makes the incredible claim that "most habitants had little or no contact with forced labor" (p. 60). In his view, French slavery, governed by the "Code Noire" [sic], was designed not to extract a maximum of profitable labor, but to move slaves toward emancipation and racial integration. Even after omitting lower Louisiana from his study, this argument is hardly persuasive.

To be fair, this is not a book about actual French colonial history. But Watts loses an opportunity to explore

the creative elisions and even outright fabrications of this nineteenth-century historiography because he may not recognize them as such. Readers would do well to remember that the French write “empire” in the same way as their neighbors across the channel.

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City of American Dreams

A History of Home Ownership and Housing Reform in Chicago, 1871-1919

By Margaret Garb

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Pp. xv, 261. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$40.00.)

Home ownership was a common trait among Chicagoans well before the great fire of 1871, according to Margaret Garb. In fact, she writes, it served as a marker distinguishing the city's middle class from the working class. The surprising twist is that working-class Chicagoans—through extended family, neighborhood networks, and other inventive means—scraped together down payments with greater urgency than did the city's middle-class residents. Houses were so basic in construction (often without utilities) that they offered a sounder financial investment for wage laborers (both skilled and unskilled) than they did for the middle class who preferred apartments or long-term leases on single-family homes, while investing their surplus dollars in higher-earning business ventures.

This ownership pattern continued after the Chicago fire, although, as the author demonstrates in her

opening vignette, attempts by the city council to regulate fireproof building materials such as brick and stone threatened to curtail affordable housing for the working class. Workers' protests against these new construction codes devolved at times into physical confrontations, heralding an era of increased class strife. The working class's capacity to purchase their own residences eroded during the 1880s as a combination of technological improvements, the mortgage market, and stricter housing codes limited their purchasing power. Water and sewer hookups, for example, entailed installation assessments and ultimately raised property taxes. The growing involvement of financial institutions in the residential mortgage market formalized a lending process that had been previously flexible and creative. As housing prices climbed, the collateral once used by young couples to buy their first