Book Reviews

The French in the Mississippi Valley, 1740-1750. By Norman Ward Caldwell. (The University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1941. Pp. 113. $2.00 cloth; $1.50 paper.)

Perhaps the best means of reconstructing our knowledge of past times remains the examination of official records of the period under consideration. In the case of the years before the wars for control of the Mississippi Valley, Dr. Caldwell has used the reports and correspondence of French officers and observers with real skill to show the problems facing the administrators of such an extensive empire. Besides transcripts from the Archives Nationales, the Vaudreil Manuscripts and the Public Record Office, he has searched through the Jesuit Relations and other printed collections to find detailed and accurate data. Some of these have been consulted for the first time on this subject. There is, however, some neglect of other writers in the field. Despite Dr. Caldwell’s assurances that he has consulted the other printed sources he occasionally arouses the reader’s desire to know what others have said on the subject and whether the newly discovered evidence changes the previously accepted opinions. An occasional sentence or footnote on the findings of others would have increased one’s confidence in his critical ability.

In general, the author has set aside any preconceived notions about the inferiority of French colonial administration and has shown by contemporary observation and report that the paternalistic government of the French met with serious difficulties, difficulties which did not exist in the English colonies. His sketch of the French colonial administration (Chapter I) is clearly drawn, but is so brief as to be almost an abstraction; and his sharp conclusion (p.101) about the reasons for the failure of the French system should be modified to a statement of fact about what did happen. Generalizations based on the comparison (p.44) between the English and French colonial administration should include the observation that differences in national tradition, reasons for migration, climate and geography, and even in the faulty carrying out of a policy have been overlooked. Most American writers, following Parkman, have been too eager to see the superiority of democratic principles. Scholars, today, are not so sure of the democracy of all the Eng-
lish colonies and it would be more proper to judge the failure of the French on its merits and not on a hypothetical question of what the English would have done had they landed at Quebec instead of Jamestown and Salem.

Dr. Caldwell has shown from manuscript sources the great difficulties that the French faced in their colonial enterprise and in their attempt to build up and control the fur trade. He seems at times to attach too much importance to the opinion of one observer, particularly Kalm (p.39) or Beaulharnois (p.67), but his authorities are contemporary and he has endeavored to use them impartially. He has brought out quite well the relative importance of the various Indian wars which interfered with the general plans and has indicated the beginning of the Anglo-French conflict in the valley. He gives little significance to the superiority of English merchandise in quality and price and underestimates the importance of the French missionaries. The statements of values in actual cash figures is of slight use when the coin values were so changeable, but they do show careful work on the part of the author. His conclusions are rather large for such a brief study. Dr. Caldwell's mastery of the manuscript material is admirable and his style while not ornate, is quite clear. Not to be picayune, but because of local interest, it should be pointed out that the accompanying map places the St. Joseph portage improperly.

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It is only recently that adequate historical studies of the Grand Army of the Republic have been undertaken. It is a subject of significance for our own times, and Mr. Heck's contribution is of outstanding importance and excellence. In his earlier pages he describes the purpose, ritual, and nature of the Grand Army of the Republic, its slow start and early weakness in Minnesota, and its increased size and influence in the eighties and nineties. He then discusses veteran activities in the state with considerable light on matters of national scope. Some of the activities of the order