

Marginal Colonies in the 17th Century

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Volume 12, numéro 1, autumn 1982

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad12_1rv02

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Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Dickinson, J. A. (1982). Marginal Colonies in the 17th Century. *Acadiensis*, 12(1), 116–120.

Marginal Colonies in the 17th Century

Once the Spanish and Portuguese colonial experiences became widely known in Europe, colonial projects usually took form in the minds of European promoters before being implanted in the American environment. In most cases, Europeans were able to adapt their ideas to the realities of the New World, and the positive interaction of both elements produced thriving colonies. This was not always the case, however, and some endeavours never reached maturity. Since success is usually more attractive than failure, the story of these anaemic colonies has been relegated to "Third World" status by the historiography of the colonial period. Sixteenth and 17th century Newfoundland, Acadia-Nova Scotia, and Maine have been largely neglected when compared with neighbouring colonies such as Canada and Massachusetts, whereas other colonies, such as Louisiana during the French Régime, still await a satisfactory general history. Considerable progress has been made in recent years and notably by historical geographers such as A.H. Clark and Grant Head, as well as by historians such as George Rawlyk, Naomi Griffiths and the group at the Centre d'études acadiennes at Moncton. Nevertheless, the 18th century continues to steal the show, and our knowledge of the earlier period is still deficient in many areas. All publications which shed new light on the beginnings of European interest in the Atlantic region are therefore welcome additions to its historiography. One excellent contribution to this field is John G. Reid's *Acadia, Maine, and New Scotland: Marginal Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981), which attempts to rehabilitate three "underdeveloped" colonies and demonstrate that the lessons drawn from failure can be as interesting as those drawn from success.

Apart from the evident interest of its subject matter, John Reid's book is innovative in that it is one of the few works to adopt an explicitly comparative framework. There has been some progress in this field in recent years,¹ but the demands of the comparative approach seem to daunt most historians. Not only is a complete mastery of the historiography of the various colonies required, but sources must be sought out in a wide variety of archival repositories. For this study, English, Scottish, French, American and Canadian collections were all put to use. Reid's skillful comparative analysis clearly establishes that, despite some minor differences in form, all three colonies were hampered by a weak economic and demographic base, the absence of any strong local authority, and the general indifference of the parent societies which intervened only to further disrupt the already confusing situation. The advantages of this method are also

¹ See, for instance, W.J. Eccles, *France in America* (New York, 1972), F. Jennings, *The Invasion of America. Indians, Colonialism and the Cant of Conquest* (New York, 1976), D.B. Quinn, *North America from Earliest Discovery to First Settlement* (New York, 1977), Denys Delâge, "Amérindiens et Européens en Amérique du nord-est", Doctoral Dissertation, Paris, Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1981.

clearly demonstrated, for by drawing on the lessons of the other colonies, the author is able to advance plausible explanations for events for which the sources are deficient.

All three colonies emerged as European concepts at the beginning of the 17th century, but the initial attempts to implant settlers under Pierre du Gua de Monts, Sir Ferdinando Gorges and Sir William Alexander, in an area with poorly-defined boundaries and uncertain resources, all led to conflict and disaster. By 1632, none had established a firm base. After this date, New Scotland remained only as a European concept which resurfaced to serve the needs of English diplomacy. During the 1630s, Maine finally took shape in the area between the Piscataqua River and Casco Bay, but remained completely dependent on Europe for economic and political survival. Isaac de Razilly's untimely death in 1635 left his infant Acadian colony in the throes of bitter strife between the rival La Tour and d'Aulnay factions. The weakness of both the French and English governments during these formative years created a power vacuum and an almost complete absence of any stable local authority. Because of this situation, Massachusetts was drawn to intervene in the internal affairs of its northern neighbours and this led to the virtual subjugation of both colonies — first economically and then politically with the incorporation of the Maine settlements as the County of Yorkshire between 1653 and 1658, and with Robert Sedgwick's conquest of Acadia in 1654. Euramerican control of the colonies was probably beneficial for the inhabitants since it guaranteed the presence of a strong local authority and provided some economic stability by integrating the settlements into Boston's commercial orbit. Even the Acadians, who quickly learned to adopt a very pragmatic approach to outside powers, seemed content with this situation.

However, this reality did not fit European concepts and the colonies remained vulnerable. With the strengthening of royal authority in Restoration England and in the France of Colbert and Louis XIV, new pressure was brought to bear to force the maritime region to conform to the European idea of what it should be. The Restoration government sought to curb the power of Massachusetts, but succeeded only in sowing confusion as to the seat of legitimate authority. France succeeded in reclaiming Acadia, but by 1670, when the colony was finally surrendered, funds and enthusiasm for colonization were already dwindling, with the result that little concrete assistance was received. In Maine, the return of political uncertainty was accompanied by disastrous Indian wars which all but negated a half-century's efforts. Acadia still did not have the manpower to assure its defence and succumbed quickly to Sir William Phips' 1690 expedition. Throughout the century, marginal economies, internal dissension, and conflicting national claims had severely hampered growth. By 1690, all three colonies continued to exist as legal shells, but none had much real substance and Reid concludes that the Abenaki and Micmac Indians were still the most important forces in the region.

Reid is able to draw a very coherent picture of the reasons for the failure of these three European colonies, but it would have been interesting to take the comparison one step further to include the fourth marginal colony in the region: 17th century Newfoundland. Some of the essays included in a selection of seven papers read at an international symposium held at St. John's in 1979, G.M. Story, ed., *Early European Settlement and Exploitation in Atlantic Canada* (St. John's, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1982), can help to better understand the development of the more southerly maritime colonies. Although the Atlantic coast was the first area of North America to be known in Europe, the abundance of off-shore resources made the land mass of little interest, and, as David B. Quinn points out, it took more than a century before Newfoundland appeared on a map in a recognizable form as a single island (pp. 9-30). The cod fishery and whaling activities did not require permanent settlement and remained extensions of European economic activity rather than truly American undertakings. This explains, in part, why the coast, from the Gulf of Maine to Labrador, was not a prime target for colonisation. However, the intruders did leave some imprint on the land, and articles by J.A. Tuck and Selma Barkham make valuable contributions to our knowledge of Basque whaling operations in the Strait of Belle Isle during the second half of the 16th century (pp. 41-95). Concrete information on the European exploitation of aquatic resources remains sparse, but Tuck's article clearly demonstrates that archaeological evidence will be as useful to the historian as to the ethnographer in unravelling the mystery surrounding the exact scope of Basque activities.

Two papers which deal with the first serious English attempts to establish colonies on the island, G.T. Cell's study of the Newfoundland Company's settlement at Cupids Cove from 1610-1620 (pp. 97-114), and R.J. Lahey's examination of Lord Baltimore's colony at Ferryland (pp. 115-137), are particularly relevant to a comparison with Reid's work. Reid's explanation for the failure of Europeans to effectively colonize the northeastern maritime region is basically political. New Scotland ceased to exist when Charles I ordered the evacuation of Port Royal in 1631. Gorges never succeeded in establishing his authority in Maine, and the proximity of Massachusetts invited settlers to appeal to their powerful neighbour to settle differences. This is best illustrated by George Cleeve's challenge of the proprietor's authority before a Boston court in 1647. Acadia was torn apart by warfare between Charles de Saint-Etienne de La Tour and Charles de Menou d'Aulnay and then by Emmanuel Le Borgne's attempts to dislodge Sir Thomas Temple from 1654 to 1670. Political conflict and instability was undoubtedly a very important cause for the disruption of settlement and does provide a plausible explanation for failure, but it is not entirely convincing since other considerations are left to the side.

Economic development is treated in a summary manner and little precise information is included on economic activity or demographic growth. Yet, as

early as 1624, John Smith speculated that a resident fishing population in the Gulf of Maine could outproduce the Newfoundland fishery and provide an economic base for settlement (Quinn, p. 25). Both of the colonies in Newfoundland hoped to use the fishery to finance settlement and then use their bases to gain an advantage in the inshore fishery and eventually exclude competitors from the best beaches. Indeed, the site of the Ferryland colony was specifically selected because of its proximity to rich fishing grounds (Lahey, p. 116). The additional profits, when such could be made, could barely cover the expenses, however, and Cell's conclusion that "the successful exploitation of Newfoundland did not require settlement" (p. 111), is well-supported. It would have been interesting to know whether such considerations influenced the choice of sites in the more southerly colonies. Razilly's initial settlement at La Hève, for example, could exploit both the fisheries and the forest, and revenues from these activities would have financed some settlement. The transfer of the colony to Port Royal in 1636, too far from the Grand Banks and Europe and too remote from the major fur trading centres, was an economic error even if the land was better suited to agriculture. Indeed, one wonders if the resources of the maritime region could support settlement, or if Cell's conclusion is not equally applicable. It seems likely that a few trading posts were all that the area could viably support during the 17th century. Seen in this light, it is possible that 1690 did not mark a "great discontinuity" (Reid, p. 190). Phips' conquest of Acadia merely marked yet another change of ruler, but does not seem to have seriously disrupted the established Acadian settlers or marked a low point in their collective existence.² All three colonies had marginal economies and it is plausible to argue that their political position was a logical outgrowth of this weakness.

The role of the aboriginal populations in the maritime region, despite A.G. Bailey's fine pioneering study on the *Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures* (Saint John, 1937), remains poorly understood. Although Reid assures us that "it was the Indian peoples of the northeastern maritime region who held sway in 1690, and not the European colonies" (p. 185), the Abenaki, Maliseet and Micmac remain rather shadowy figures in the narrative. It is important to understand how European conceptions of the Indian were formed and how these conceptions influenced actions, but knowledge of life cycles, of beliefs and values, of the traditional patterns of trade and warfare of the tribes involved, is also essential to properly understand events. A closer examination of Father Biard's 1611 *Relation*, of the writings of Samuel de Champlain, Marc Lescarbot, Nicolas Denys and Chrestien Le Clercq, as well as the information from volume 15 of the new *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington,

2 Although Port Royal did stagnate during the early 1690s, other settlements did very well. The Minas Basin area quadrupled its population and cleared acreage in the period 1686-1693. Cattle and swine increased in a like proportion, whereas sheep multiplied more than tenfold (A.H. Clark, *Acadia: The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1968, p. 150).

Smithsonian Institution, 1978), which are all listed in the bibliography, would have enabled Reid to give a clearer picture of Indian life. Admittedly, present knowledge makes this an especially arduous task, and it must be hoped that archaeological evidence will eventually open new perspectives and contribute to our knowledge of these peoples. Although not very instructive on the Indians of the Atlantic region, B.G. Trigger's contribution to *Early European Settlement and Exploitation* (pp. 139-155), does stress the importance of archaeology in renewing our understanding of past societies. But it does seem a bit optimistic to view these tribes as dominant in 1690. At this time they were approaching their lowest population level and must have been quite demoralized. Moreover, although the Western Abenaki were closely allied to the French, the Eastern Abenaki were dependent on English trade and could not afford prolonged warfare with their neighbours. The weakness of Indian tribes is also illustrated by the fact that the Acadians could not count on Micmac assistance when they were invaded by the English, despite the excellent relations that they had always maintained.

These comments on economic evolution and Indian relations are not meant to detract from what Reid has accomplished. The scope of his work was already vast, and proper treatment of all aspects would have required at least one more full-length study. *Acadia, Maine, and New Scotland* is a very significant contribution to the history of the northeastern maritime region and to colonial history as a whole. It throws a new perspective on the politics of colonization and offers an original comparative approach. Its value has already been recognized by the jurors of the prestigious Sainte Marie Prize who unanimously selected it as the winner of the 1976 award, and one can only be dismayed with the long delay before this study finally appeared in print.

For its part, Memorial University is to be congratulated for publishing the proceedings of a conference on the early history of the Atlantic region. Yet, regardless of the excellence of individual contributions, a collection of miscellaneous essays with no guiding theme cannot address a broader historical question. Important new information is given on Basque whaling operations and on English conceptions of Newfoundland, but the reader is left somewhat dizzy after spanning several centuries and travelling from Ellesmere Island to the Avalon Peninsula in 150 pages. This volume serves mainly to highlight the gaps which still exist in our knowledge of the early European exploitation of the region, where legend and idle speculation have used up more ink than the scientific study of reality. Cabot's landfall will never be ascertained, so let's forget it and all the stories of imaginary pre-columbian mariners, and finally concentrate on the activities of those men who really came and lived off the Newfoundland coast during the 16th and 17th centuries. Their ships, their catches, their relations with the aboriginal populations, their contribution to the Atlantic economy, still await thorough analysis.

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