Emma Anderson

The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. 480. Hb, \$39.95.

Reading Emma Anderson's most recent book, *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs*, was at once pleasurable and daunting. Pleasurable because Anderson is one of the most gifted storytellers I have encountered, and daunting because of the extremely high bar she raises for academics. What Anderson has accomplished in this book is stunning. She has written a book that is on one level about the ebbs, flows, and rise of the cult of the eight Jesuit missionary martyrs, from the 1640s to the 1930s. Anderson provides us with a textured and deeply researched book about multiple perspectives—about those hurt by Catholicism and the hagiographic anti-Native pro-Jesuit martyrdom culture, those who have challenged the church's "clerico-nationalism" (99), and those who have been transfixed and moved by the stories of the martyrs. Anderson takes seriously her roles as historian and ethnographer, as well as the professional task of presenting multiple perspectives and displaying empathy. As she writes, "One view, however, does not ultimately trump or negate the others. All are important. All are true" (53).

Anderson provides her reader with detailed intellectual and cultural histories of the transatlantic and North American borderland cult of North American martyrs from the 1640s to the 1930s. She sets out to understand how the eight Jesuit missionaries have been understood and experienced over a four-hundred-year time period by First Nations peoples, Francophones, and Anglophones alike. Were the martyrdoms of René Goupil, Isaac Jogues, Jean de la Lande, Antoine Daniel, Jean de Brébeuf, Gabriel Lalement, Charles Garnier, and Noël Chabanel really clear-cut struggles between good and evil—between a moral Catholic cosmology and depraved Wendat and Iroquois cosmologies? This is, at least, how it has been told in standardized mythical accounts. Anderson answers with a resounding no, and in doing so provides a much needed corrective to previous (and ongoing) interpretations of missionization and conquest.

The martyrs' lives and deaths have been commemorated, imagined, and reimagined in paintings, stories, and shrines for the past four hundred years. What makes this book so remarkable is Anderson's skills as a historian and ethnographer. The text reads like a novel, full of rich details, plot twists and turns, and intrigue. But *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs* is historical scholarship at its finest. Anderson's mixed methodological approach transforms history into a living story whose contemporary implications abound. For what she shows us is that any story that romanticizes and glamorizes a group of individuals—in this case a set of French Catholic missionaries—is in reality

complicated and messy. People are hurt by stories and words cut deeply. She writes that for Sioui, one of Anderson's contemporary Wendat interlocutors, "the cult of the martyrs has not only negatively impacted the self-perception of countless native children by presenting them with a false and distorted view of their pre-contact spirituality and culture, it has also created a pernicious contrast between the Wendat and Iroquois confederacies" (245).

The events which led to the deaths of eight men were not nearly as simple as the hagiographic accounts would have it. Anderson shows, rather, that "in the hands of textual and visual redactors of the martyrdoms, native ambivalence or dissent was generally ignored in favor of an interpretation that strongly stressed *odium fidei*" (69). Certain positions and interpretations were privileged, as she illustrates with ample details, and provided the basis for a meta-narrative. The ongoing trope of the "white civilizers" has constantly been juxtaposed with the trope of the "irrational Indian" since the seventeenth century. Seventeenth-century promoters of the cult of martyrs, like Paul Ragueneau and his protégé Catherine de Saint-Augustin, worked hard to further the idea of the blood of martyrs as the seedbed of Christians. In 1954, Saint-Augustin taught Sioui that his ancestors "were savages with no knowledge of God. They were ignorant and cared nothing about their salvation [...] Now, thanks to God and His Church, you are civilized people" (243).

History can open wounds as much as it can soothe them or offer hope for change. Anderson is a master storyteller, offering a virtuoso account of myth-making and its casualties, and a model of and for engaged history and ethnography. This is a book that will have a very long shelf-life, for Anderson offers us a way to write history in a meaningful and relevant way. I plan on assigning *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs* in graduate-level seminars on American Catholic Studies, method and theory, and genealogies of religion, and I urge my colleagues in history, religious studies, and related disciplines to do the same.

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