Robert Michael Morrissey

Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 352. Hb, \$45.

The historiography of the colony of New France remains a relatively underdeveloped project, in spite of the excellent work done in the past several decades. If one does not include the scholarship that focuses specifically on French-Indian relations in Acadia, Québec, *le pays d'en haut* (the Great Lakes region), and Louisiana, then that historiography is even scantier. Allan Greer lamented this situation in his assessment in 2003 (see his chapter, "Comparisons: New France" in *A Companion to Colonial America*, Daniel Vickers, ed. [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003], 469–88), and, although there has been some intellectual movement on the topic (I would like to characterize the field as "emergent," but can not), it remains ill-formed.

A reason for optimism is this volume by Robert Michael Morrissey, which focuses on an even less developed subset of New France historiography: the Illinois Country during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. If that was all his volume did—add another substantial monograph to an anemic scholarship—it would deserve praise. But Morrissey's ambition is made of bigger stuff. He wants to chart a new path that takes on one of the most influential works of not only colonial North America but of any field in the past thirty or so years: Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). White's "middle ground" practically needs no introduction. It was a space in which Indians and European colonists of relatively equal power were forced to come to "creative misunderstandings," or new, hybrid cultural forms that enabled the competitors to reach peaceful agreements without either one capitulating completely to the other. Morrissey instead argues that Illinois, unlike White's *pays d'en haut*, represents a case not of necessary accommodation but of willing collaboration. The boldness of his claims represents a necessary step to a new way of understanding colonial development and settler-administrator-Indian interaction and cooperation.

To do this, Morrissey has first to overturn the older vision of the Illinois Country as marginalized, submissive to imperial power, and dependent on its colonial neighbors of Québec and Louisiana. Instead, he emphasizes a new vision of dynamism, engagement, and collaboration, one that could present a salutary lesson for historians of other regions. He argues that the people of the Illinois Country were not simply unambitious peasants who lived in a satellite colony to Québec and Louisiana, but were French and creolized "fur traders, farmers, missionaries, and Indians who sought to realize alternative visions

for colonial life at the edges of these competing powers”(5). The inability of France to control territory and peoples politically, economically, and legally forced the inhabitants to build alliances with natives, to be attuned to social mores that might contradict laws issued from Paris, and to follow a local, organic development of the economy. The absolutism that France attempted to impose on other regions never materialized in Illinois, he argues (although historians have argued that it never really happened anywhere in the French colonies, or even in France). That created an “idiosyncratic order” that has been simply understood as a “failure” when compared to the development of other colonies. But the creation of this different kind of colony was enabled “not by always clashing in a constant battle of hardheaded imperialists versus local rogues but through a rather functional and pragmatic collaboration” that was “often characterized by compromise and flexibility, by diverse people purposefully acting to create a mutually acceptable order” (7).

The result was a stable and prosperous colonial culture. The Illinois Country could not only amply sustain its own albeit small population but also supplied other colonies (mostly Louisiana) with substantial resources and maintained lasting alliances with local native peoples. But Morrissey is quick to note that the region was not a creolized North American paradise, devoid of conflict or tension. Power and the contests to acquire it were not foreign to the area. A cursory demographic glance at the colony alone could betray that tension: roughly half of the population of Illinois Country by the first quarter of the eighteenth century were enslaved African Americans and Indians, the latter accounting for forty percent of all slaves by the 1720s. But because the colony rested on the borderlands, with its isolation from European administrators and its proximity to many potential friends and enemies, people, even slaves, retained options that those in more populated and central spaces simply did not have. As such, French and creole settlers, French administrators, and Native peoples collaborated, all in a way that led to “a practical, pragmatic way of life at the heart of a distinctive kind of colonialism” [10].

For example, Jesuit missionizing among the Indians presents a telling example of Morrissey’s claim. Intent on converting the entire native population, the Jesuits encountered a nation suspicious of Jesuit intentions. It was also a nation split radically by gender, as Illinois men often abused and even mutilated their Indian wives. This situation created an opportunity for the missionaries, who were trusted less and less by Illinois men as the seventeenth century wore on. So the Jesuits shifted to work with young Illinois women, “to create an Illinois Christianity based on a mutual understanding of each other’s needs and values” [75]. It was in these ways that pragmatism often won out in this fledgling colony.

One can clearly see Morrissey attempt to nudge the prevailing scholarship away from forced engagement, in which social and cultural tension disintegrated into violence, toward a paradigm that emphasized mutual interest and collaboration. But, as the previous quotation makes clear, Morrissey has to rely on certain terms—not only “collaboration,” but also “pragmatic” and “practical”—to carry significant explanatory weight. Those terms might not be up to the task. Just what is “practical” in any given situation? What is “pragmatic?” These terms can oversimplify and obscure dynamics that are actually much more complicated. Or, even worse, they can mean almost nothing at all. Capitulating to directives from Paris or London might be pragmatic or collaborative in certain situations to certain people, for example, but that capitulation could just as easily be characterized as top-down administrative control in other situations to other people. Their meaning and import might completely depend upon who defines what pragmatic or practical actually is. Morrissey thus opens himself to criticism that his insistence on “collaboration” as a construct for understanding colonial interaction or center-periphery colonial control is simply a semantic, rather than analytical, distinction. That would be a shame, as the research, analytical eye, and theoretical scope of the work merit significant attention from scholars of early America and beyond.

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DOI 10.1163/22141332-00303008-16