CHAPTER FOUR

PROPRIETORSHIPS IN FRENCH NORTH AMERICA

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If the current trend in historiography is to revise our understanding of colonial proprietorships rather than to presume their inherent unsuitability, then proprietorships in French North America pose something of a conundrum. After all, the French settlements in the St. Lawrence Valley, the Canadian Maritimes, and Louisiana lagged far behind the Thirteen Colonies in terms of both population and economic growth. Closer examination reveals, however, that the proprietary framework was not solely to blame for New France’s slow development. Indeed, settlements sometimes made swifter progress during proprietary phases than in times of direct royal control. This essay focuses on one critical aspect of proprietorships in New France: the recruitment of European immigrants. It argues that the proprietors’ achievements in that domain were not negligible given the structural constraints that they faced, namely, the limited demand for and supply of colonial labor. While supply could have been boosted, as in the British colonies, by permitting immigration of religious dissenters and foreigners, such immigration was prohibited by the state throughout most of the seventeenth century.

In France as in Britain, the early structure of colonization emerged from a series of failed attempts, as would-be colonizers discovered by trial and error which features to discard and which to retain. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, a viable organization had developed, which prevailed until Louis XIV chose to increase the level of state intervention in this, as in so many other, spheres of French life. Before 1663, immigration took place within a framework of proprietorship and private entrepreneurship, although proprietors ultimately bore some responsibility to the crown. After 1663, the crown intervened directly in both administration and recruitment. In the St. Lawrence Valley, the crown succeeded in reducing both proprietors and chartered companies to mere partners in an essentially royal enterprise, and proprietorship was abolished outright.
in 1674. On the margins of New France, however, in Louisiana and Île Saint-Jean (today’s Prince Edward Island), chartered companies remained the primary means of bringing Europeans, sometimes in significant numbers, to the colonies in the early eighteenth century.

The first systematic French attempts to colonize, rather than explore, America occurred in the mid-sixteenth century under the successive auspices of Francis I, Henry II, and Catherine de Médici. The resulting settlements differed in both location and intent. In Canada, the courtier Roberval agreed to work for “the augmentation and increase of our holy Christian faith and holy mother Catholic church,” while in Brazil and Florida, lieutenants of the Protestant Coligny tried to establish New World refuges for their co-religionists. The state adopted a similar attitude toward each of these efforts regardless of religion. Although it provided subsidies to the initial expeditions, it expected the established colonies to support themselves. The proprietors and their associates, as seigneurs and traders, took full responsibility for future defense, administration, and recruitment. The crown’s role in recruiting the first wave of colonists for these settlements was an indirect one. It furnished funds but left it to the proprietors to find suitable candidates. Roberval, however, received additional assistance from the king in the form of commutations of the death penalty, which enabled him to enlist convicted criminals for an “honest and salutary voyage.”

Roberval’s settlement succumbed to the Canadian climate, the two Protestant outposts to Portuguese and Spanish incursions. French colonization as a whole then fell victim to the Wars of Religion, remaining at a virtual standstill until the end of the century. When it resumed during the reign of Henry IV, the age of royal subsidies and Protestant refuges was over. Henry distributed property rights and commercial monopolies in lieu of direct funding, and he made formulaic profession of Catholic evangelism. A new framework for French colonization was now in place. From the outset, proprietors would finance colonization from the proceeds of commercial monopolies; they, and not the crown, would bear responsibility for recruitment. Although Protestants would not be excluded outright, and indeed would figure among the proprietors, the official religion of the colonies and the metropolis would henceforth be the same.

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