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Review - The Upper Country by Clairborne Skinner

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Review

Claiborne Skinner, *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

Claiborne Skinner's *The Upper Country* is a 200-page narrative of French-Native-British interaction, often belligerent, on the Great Lakes frontier, 1608-1754.

Dr. Skinner, an academy professor, wanted a concise but detailed primer on this often neglected period and region. By necessity episodic and character-driven, his account nonetheless moves smoothly from 1497 (Giovanni Caboto) to 1754 (Col. Washington), from the redoubtable Champlain to the rascal Cadillac to the provocateur Duquesne. Grounded in descriptions of the fur trade—THE enterprise in New France—the narrative is garnished with some pungent phrases:

America had a peculiar effect upon people, whether French or English. A sort of freedom flavored the air.... Finally there was Cadillac himself. As commandant of Michilimackinac, he had replaced La Durantaye's stern, just, efficient regime with a venal corruption which had reduced the most sensitive post in French America to a dram shop and brothel. . . . They were an extraordinary people, the Canadians of the upper country: tough, cocky, and capable. They had no counterpart in France and as such appeared a menace to good order. . . . It was a most peculiar empire, this upper country, built upon the manufacture of men's hats and held together by a class of men who seemed to threaten everything the Bourbons stood for.

Likewise, in his handy Glossary of French terms, weights, measures and currency, Dr. Skinner is succinct: "coureur de bois: early fur trader/smuggler." A series of maps, regrettably uncredited, clarify the geography, settlements, troop movements and even some of the critical portages uniting the water routes of the Upper Country, a satisfying dimension of historical writing often neglected. End-notes and a thorough Bibliographic Essay provide points of embarkation for readers who want to explore primary documents or secondary sources.

--Editor