



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/JVON5553>

Nancy Christie, *The Formal and Informal Politics of British Rule in Post-Conquest Quebec, 1760-1837: A Northern Bastille*

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To cite this book review: Nancy Christie, *The Formal and Informal Politics of British Rule in Post-Conquest Quebec, 1760-1837: A Northern Bastille* by Phillip Buckner, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 1, issue 2 (December 2021): 144-145, <https://doi.org/10.52230/OKDO6047>

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Nancy Christie, *The Formal and Informal Politics of British Rule in Post-Conquest Quebec, 1760-1837: A Northern Bastille* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 432pp. Hardback. £75. ISBN: 978-0-1988-5181-3.

In this study of British rule in Quebec from 1760-1837, Christie concludes that post-Conquest Quebec 'can usefully be seen as a colonial site on the same continuum as Bengal and Trinidad' and that the French Canadians were and remained in the same position as other unfree peoples in the British Empire (p. 388). In chapter one Christie claims to give us a revisionist account of British policy immediately following the Conquest. Yet here, as elsewhere, Christie sets up a straw man that she then sets out to demolish. I do not know of any historian over the past fifty years that would claim that British policy in Quebec was essentially benign nor any that would deny that the *Quebec Act* was based upon a pragmatic approach to incorporating the French Canadians into the British Empire. Even Christie admits that 'when one envisages the colonial regime in Quebec from the point of view of its formal laws, government structures, statutes, and narrowly legal definitions of subjecthood it appears that the new and old subjects were treated equally' (p. 38).

Christie insists, however, that the French Canadians remained an oppressed people over the next 75 years, downplaying the fact that the *Quebec Act*, whatever its motivation, did extend religious and cultural protections to the French Canadians that were never rescinded. She further glosses over the fact that the *Canada Act* of 1791 granted the vote to Catholics in Quebec at a time when it was denied to Catholics in the United Kingdom and therefore gave the French Canadians more political rights than many free-born Englishmen. In fact, the French Canadians had a degree of political power in the early nineteenth century that was denied to the inhabitants of Bengal and the Black majority in Trinidad until well into the twentieth century. Indeed by creating a franchise in Quebec wider than that in Britain, the British government made it inevitable that the French Canadians would dominate the Assembly and exercise increasing control over how Quebec was governed. It is clear from Christie's sources that she has read virtually nothing about British policy in the early nineteenth century and so fails to recognise that by the 1830s the balance of power in Quebec changed decisively in favour of the French-Canadian majority in the Assembly. Thus she shows little understanding of the rebellion of 1837 whose importance she dismisses in a few sentences.

Christie criticizes other historians for downplaying the importance of political ideologies but at times she gravitates to the other extreme and exaggerates their significance. In chapter one she focuses on the small but articulate British minority in Quebec after the Conquest, who demanded the rights of free-born Englishmen but also sought to deny French Canadians those same rights. Although Christie accepts that the British minority failed in their efforts, she insists that the French Canadians 'were relegated to a marginal status within the hierarchy of colonial identities, so that frequently they were compared with people of colour, women, and subservient others' (p. 385). But words written in partisan newspapers are not the same as political reality and the reality was that the French Canadians were certainly not powerless slaves. The British government undoubtedly did not believe in the concept of a multicultural and multilingual society but neither did the French-Canadian majority in the Assembly who refused Jews the right to vote, and who undoubtedly would have restricted the rights of British immigrants if they could have done so. The British government certainly believed in patriarchy but so did the vast majority of French Canadians. And prejudice and ethnic stereotyping was not confined to the

British minority. For all their talk of believing in a form of civic republicanism many French Canadians saw elections as an opportunity to kick 'an Englishman in the balls' (p. 379).

The most interesting chapters in the book are based upon a detailed study of the massive civil and criminal judicial archives in Quebec. In chapter three on 'Interpersonal Violence in Quebec, 1763-1837' Christie argues that common assault was 'an everyday occurrence' in Quebec (p. 167). Christie tends to see Quebec's colonial status as the major source of much of this violence, but nativism led to clashes throughout North America between the original settlers (in this case the French Canadians) and immigrants. Christie's own (rather selective) micro-studies also show that much of the violence in Quebec was between members of the same ethnic group. Nor can British colonialism alone really be blamed for the high volume of male violence against women in French Canada. Ironically in chapter four Christie makes a convincing case that New France was a relatively impoverished place and that the French Canadians benefited from their integration into a more dynamic market economy. So this is a book worth reading even if the basic argument is somewhat misguided and lacking in nuance.

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