Catherine Cangany’s *Frontier Seaport* is a social, economic, and urban history that traces the development of Detroit from a small colonial fort and trading post in the early eighteenth century through its rise as an inland Atlantic entrepôt in the 1830s. Teasing out Detroit’s frontier and Atlantic characteristics, Cangany offers a nuanced analysis of the tensions between the town’s historically entrenched localism and its growing cosmopolitanism. The result was a blending of British Atlantic and Great Lakes frontier customs that allowed Detroiter to take advantage of Atlantic commercial networks while resisting the homogenizing effects of American imperial expansion. Yet, as the author is careful to point out, by the time the state of Michigan entered the Union in 1837, Detroit was becoming increasingly American. The cultural hybridity that served Detroit so well during the years between the end of French rule and the beginning of American stewardship ultimately undermined and eroded Detroit’s local autonomy and distinctiveness. Examining Detroit across multiple imperial regimes—French, British, and American—Cangany provides valuable insights into changing imperial relationships.

Cangany takes a thematic approach, with her first two chapters focusing on Detroit’s links to an evolving empire of goods. Although the book begins with Detroit’s founding in 1701 and briefly treats the French fur trade, it is primarily occupied with the town’s incorporation into British and American Atlantic trade networks. Paying careful attention to trade routes, commodities, and consumption patterns, the author argues that the rise of non-fur-trade commerce—textiles, books, and dining ware—con tributed to Detroiter becoming Atlantic consumers.

Cangany uses advertisements for books such as Benjamin Franklin’s *The Way to Wealth* and Priscilla Wakefield’s *A Family Tour through the British Empire* to reveal literary tastes consistent with those in American cities on the Eastern Seaboard. Similarly, religious texts, schoolbooks, and Enlightenment works of political philosophy and economy, such as Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, David Hume’s *History of England*, translations of Cicero and Pliny, and various volumes of Voltaire, close ties to broader intellectual currents circulating throughout the Atlantic world. Building on John Brewer and Roy Porter’s *Consumption and the World of Goods*, along

---

with the work of T. H. Breen, Cangany contends that imports of silk, satin, ribbon, flannel, wool, tea, and tea sets represented Detroit’s entrance into British Atlantic consumer society.  

A detailed study of Detroit’s moccasin industry provides a counter-narrative to the one that depicts Detroit residents as Atlantic consumers by analyzing how merchants became producers and turned a local product into a widely distributed Atlantic good. Beginning with the indigenous and French-Canadian history of moccasin construction, Cangany details how Detroit merchants appropriated the moccasin, built tanneries, and developed local and Atlantic markets. A thorough examination of merchant correspondence and business records at Detroit, along with newspaper advertisements in Boston, New York, Hartford, Providence, Alexandria, and Baltimore, reveals the remarkable reach of the Detroit moccasin trade along the East Coast.

The moccasin trade offers an alternative to the economic model presented earlier in the book, where imperial Atlantic metropolitan centers produced finished goods for consumption by frontier settlers, who in turn exported raw goods. Though this Atlantic economic model is never explicitly described as mercantilist, Cangany uses the moccasin trade to contest notions of a traditional top-down imperial relationship from center to periphery. Moreover, she argues that Detroit residents, even while being drawn into Atlantic commercial networks, were able to develop this specialized shoe and boot industry, inverting the producer/Atlantic-consumer/frontier model and subverting imperial relationships. This case study (previously published in the *William and Mary Quarterly*) is one of the strongest parts of the book and serves as a reminder that, notwithstanding imperial hegemonic influences, colonial inhabitants exercised a great deal of autonomy.  

Cangany then turns from the economy to politics, examining the effect of regular regime changes throughout Detroit’s colonial history and the civic maneuverings to rebuild the town after it burned to the ground in the Great Fire of 1805. The author contends that imperial neglect and indifference characterized Detroit’s history before the creation of the Michigan Territory in 1805, thereby forcing residents to invent local solutions to address issues of governance and jurisprudence. This legacy of political autonomy manifested itself to delay, disrupt, and ultimately block the implementation of a plan by Congress to direct the rebuilding efforts.

---


following the fire. The detailed exploration of jurisdictional tensions, complicit agents, unintentional agitators, and the agency of local residents is one of the real highlights of the book.

Cangany’s study concludes by examining the rise of smuggling at Detroit after the transition to American governance in 1796. Attempts to enforce the new international border between the United States and Canada and to impose new tariffs, created all sorts of problems, not least of which was the division of a community straddling the Detroit River whose people were now living in two different nations. Cangany argues that smuggling of quotidian staples was simply another “local response to deleterious federal interference” (171). However, as she appropriately notes, smuggling was hard to reign in, and even when smugglers were caught the final outcome was far from certain. The acquittal of Alexis Maisonville Jr., a French Canadian who crossed the Detroit River to mill his wheat, provides a perfect example of how new borders could not simply erase historical practices.

This is an impressive book. Cangany has done extensive archival research and has presented a very nuanced and insightful analysis of various aspects of colonial Detroit’s development and character. Frontier Seaport can be seen as part of the growing trend of bringing frontier and Atlantic histories into conversation with each other, in works such as François Furstenberg’s “The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History,” Brett Rushforth’s Bonds of Alliance, and Christian Ayne Crouch’s Nobility Lost. And yet the Atlantic aspect of this study seems a bit muted and underdeveloped at times. The first half of the book most certainly engages with Atlantic trade, but the second half deals overwhelmingly with local/federal politics and local/regional economic concerns.

Cangany contends that the rise of non-fur-trade commerce ostensibly made Detroiters into Atlantic consumers. Moreover, she ties this consumption to stores and shops selling Atlantic goods, mostly during British and American regimes. Yet the fur trade was never just about the fur trade. Growth of French frontier settlements in the late 1730s and 1740s created a demand for Atlantic goods. These goods did not always go through a shop as such but rather went through fur trade merchants and their networks. French goods flowed from Quebec City, Montreal, and New Orleans into the interior of the continent, linking the frontier to the Atlantic. A detailed examination of estate inventories preserved in French notarial records, similar to Natalia Maree Belting’s seminal work on French

---

Kaskaskia, would have elucidated the extent of Detroit’s French Atlantic connections.\(^5\)

How, then, did Detroit transition from French Atlantic to British Atlantic networks after 1760? Though the rise of Anglo-American commerce at Detroit is detailed nicely, there is little in the book about what happened to French merchants. This seems an odd omission given Cangany’s observation, in chapter 6, that French residents on either side of the Detroit River still formed a majority of the population by the early nineteenth century. Were French merchants simply cut out by incoming British and American competitors? It appears unlikely, considering the book’s evidence of local autonomy and French-British resistance to American imperial overtures. Though somewhat dated, Dale Miquelon’s investigation of Montreal merchants after the British conquest demonstrated that a number of Canadien merchants maintained important trade connections with Detroit after 1763.\(^6\) Indeed, the extensive financial records and correspondence of the Louis-François-George Baby Collection held at the Université de Montréal make evident the important role French Detroit merchants played in the transitioning Atlantic-frontier trade and its effect on Detroit as an emerging British Atlantic entrepôt. Cangany offers glimpses of these dynamics, but it is clear that much more work remains to be done.

Despite the emphasis on Atlantic networks and growing cosmopolitanism, Cangany’s narrative has a surprisingly local focus that belies larger contextual realities. Beyond occasional references to Montreal, there is little in Frontier Seaport to connect Detroit to what Jay Gitlin has described as the French “Creole Corridor.”\(^7\) A broader view of the French colonial transition to British, Spanish, and American rule in North America reveals how similar Detroit was to the region’s other colonial settlements. For instance, French towns in the Illinois country experienced similar problems to Detroit in establishing courts and reforming the judiciary under British and American rule. Continuity, at times informal, of French civil law and notarial practice persisted, at times informally, from Quebec City to New Orleans. Petitions to British and Spanish commandants, and later to the U.S. Congress, were a favorite method of trying to secure land titles and fair governance, not only in Detroit but also in Quebec City, Montreal, Kaskaskia, Michilimackinac, Saint Louis, and New Orleans.

None of this takes away from Cangany’s excellent research; rather, it demonstrates the challenge of unpacking Detroit’s multifaceted and

---


\(^7\) Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion* (New Haven, Conn., 2010), 27 (quotation).
many-layered history as both center and periphery for indigenous, French, British, and American peoples. Cangany’s work makes a valuable contribution to urban, socioeconomic, and early American history and will undoubtedly generate much discussion and inspire future scholarly work.