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Violence is often described and too easily dismissed as senseless. In Nobility Lost, Christian Ayne Crouch insists that violence is, in fact, full of meaning. For historical actors and historians alike, warfare is “a text to be read” (9), a “landscape” to be interpreted. This insight is by no means a new one in the field of early American history, but with this richly textured and engaging book, Crouch becomes one of the few scholars to bring it to bear beyond the Anglophone world and on the less well-trodden ground of mid-eighteenth-century New France. ¹

Crouch centers her book on the meeting of three groups and their divergent martial cultures. The first—the Native allies of France in the mission villages of the Saint Lawrence Valley and throughout the Pays d’en Haut of the Great Lakes basin—was willing to collaborate with the French against a common British enemy, but its ultimate priority was the maintenance of its own autonomy. The two other groups were the officers of the troupes de la marine, independent companies of colonial regulars active since the 1680s, and the troupes de terre, regular army battalions who began to cross the Atlantic only in the 1750s with the advent of the Seven Years’ War. The author’s focus, as far as the French are concerned, is on these elites, and she diligently avoids overextending her evidence and interpretation to the common soldiers and settlers. Marine officers were embedded in New France. They viewed themselves as defenders of the empire’s marches, and they were as active in the fields of intercultural diplomacy and trade as on the fields of battle. Army officers were, for their part, strongly rooted in metropolitan France and in European norms of conflict. They considered war to be an expression and justification of their special aristocratic status, an exercise in virtuous honor.

Unpacking the most infamous court controversies and incidents of frontier violence, Crouch traces an arc of growing tension through the years of the War of the Austrian Succession (1744–48 in North America) and the Seven Years’ War. In Europe army officers became increasingly critical of

the degeneracy of Louis XV and his entourage, growing ever more mindful of their personal honor and their role in defending the honor of their nation. In North America, inroads into the Ohio country strained relations between the French and their putative Native allies. The arrival in the colony of an expeditionary force of *troupes de terre* in 1755, first commanded by Jean-Armand, baron de Dieskau, and later by Louis-Joseph, marquis de Montcalm, brought these divergent martial cultures into contact and unavoidable conflict. Natives were annoyed by these new interlocutors’ disregard for local conventions of reciprocal diplomacy and frustrated by their lackluster performance on the battlefield. The newcomers were conversely exasperated and embarrassed, not only by what they considered their Native allies’ barbarous ways but by their colonial counterparts’ habit of tolerating, encouraging, and adopting these practices. As the war wore on, the problem of how to assert control over violence “grew into an obsession” (78) for the officers of the *troupes de terre*. To safeguard their honor, they chose to dissociate themselves from irregular warfare and degrade its practitioners. The failure to find a military middle ground greatly undermined the French war effort.

The author demonstrates eloquently how the experience of homecoming differed for the men in the two officer corps that returned to France in 1760. Montcalm had earned a glorious death on the battlefield. His officers on the whole maintained credit at court and in the army. Meanwhile, marine officers were marginalized, ruined financially and professionally. The crown went as far as to suppress the *troupes de la marine* altogether as a separate service in 1761 and to order the relocation of all the officers returned from Canada to Touraine, a province in east-central France. A few of these officers found ways to remain on the active list, and those who did relied on appointments in Senegal, the West Indies, or Guiana. Crouch’s discussion of this resettlement parallels and complements recent scholarship on the difficult integration of another group of colonial exiles into the fabric of French society at this time, the Acadians. She makes excellent use of the petitions submitted by the erstwhile colonial military elite, showing that they spent the remainder of their lives pleading for compensation, highlighting their zeal, loyalty, and patriotism and distancing themselves from their record as intercultural brokers and war party leaders.

*Nobility Lost*’s concluding chapter probes the renewal of French colonial projects during the 1760s, through the colony of Kourou in Guiana and explorations in the South Seas. Searching for personal and national prestige far from the bloodied and shameful grounds of the Seven Years’ War, French officers experimented with new models of colonization.

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Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, former aide-de-camp to Montcalm turned Pacific explorer, was the epitome of this new wave. Strikingly, during his circumnavigation, he abandoned the tropes of barbarism that he had used in his earlier writings from New France. Observed through a prism of science and pleasure, rather than of war and violence, indigenous peoples could seem like primitive innocents, the implication being that France could go on acquiring territories and establishing trade without endangering the nation’s honor. Circling back in her epilogue, Crouch stresses that though France might have abandoned its North American empire and found fresh premises for its colonial ambitions, the culture formerly embodied by the *troupes de la marine* did not vanish altogether. It endured on the ground through the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, in “the form of well-traveled trading networks between indigenous and French Canadian actors whose reserve cultural currency consisted of their common ties to the old French North American empire” (190).

A few of the book’s core arguments would have benefited from further development. The author’s contention that the mid-eighteenth century represented a crucial, dramatic turning point in the history of violence in the French Atlantic is a challenging one to appreciate in the absence of a discussion of the meeting of martial cultures in the colonial *longue durée*, insofar as violence had long been a site of bewilderment, friction, and negotiation. A century and a half before Montcalm, was Samuel de Champlain not railing against his Native allies’ military indiscipline and shuddering at their treatment of war captives? Equally hard to weigh is the author’s suggestion that, contrary to what has always been argued or assumed by historians, the French Crown’s ultimate decision to cede New France was motivated not only by geopolitical and economic calculations but also by a sense that its ill-fated defense had brought too much dishonor. This intriguing idea is difficult to either prove or disprove and will accordingly leave some readers unconvinced.

Then, too, Crouch’s argument that a cultural gulf separated the officer corps of the *marine* from that of the *armée* is yet another assertion that calls for additional development. Neither group of officers was uniform in origin or outlook, and there existed a measure of crossover between them. Some colonial officers were born in the metropole; others, though born in the colony, had deep roots in the *noblesse d’épée* and strong links to court. Meanwhile, some metropolitan officers had rather humble pedigrees, with mere merchants as their immediate ancestors. Some colonial officers were commissioned into Montcalm’s regiments as the war wore on; some army officers were detached from those regiments and took on, with gusto, the role of war party leaders and frontier diplomats. A more systematic survey of the backgrounds and roles played by the two officer corps would thus have given a more solid footing to the author’s argumentation, and
consideration of the various exceptions to the rules would no doubt have allowed for a more complex, nuanced, and accurate portrait. Perhaps a somewhat less polarized one?  

Finally, specialists will notice occasional infelicities of language: neither réserves (in reference to mission villages) nor troupes franches de la marine were period terms (the latter seems to be an inadvertent amalgam of compagnies franches and troupes de la marine). The term colliers is in one instance misleadingly translated merely as “necklaces” (72, 73), offered by Iroquois women to Montcalm, with the reader likely to miss the point that we are talking about wampum belts of considerable significance. Such infelicities are happily minor and rare.

Reservations aside, Crouch’s volume remains a fine contribution to the cultural and intellectual history of war in the French Atlantic. It is, indeed, an exemplar of Atlantic history, linking, as it does, not only the North American theater to the European one but also the years preceding the conquest of New France to those that followed. There is much to be gained, as this book demonstrates, by seeing bridges where others have tended to see breaks.