

Much ado about nothing: The Royal Proclamation on the edge of empire

On October 7, 1763, only months after signing the Treaty of Paris and ending the Seven Years' War, Britain sought to confirm sovereignty over its newly acquired territories in North America through a Royal Proclamation. "The Royal Proclamation"—as it is now known—was a document designed to address the challenges born of conquest. The exigencies of an expanded empire necessitated imperial directives to bring new peoples and lands into the British imperial fold. In short, the Royal Proclamation prescribed a series of changes that attempted to re-define North America.

A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF NORTH AMERICA

For many historians, the Proclamation has become a crucial turning point where broader continental discussions of empires, colonies, and peoples give way to national discourses.¹ In Canada, there has been an overwhelming focus on one particular aspect of the Proclamation, the creation of the colony of Quebec. The new colony signalled an end to French North America and the beginning of two national historiographies—one for Canada and one for Quebec. American historiography, on the other hand, has focused primarily on the creation of Indian Territory in the trans-Appalachian West as part and parcel of the growing tensions that led to the American Revolution. Much like their English Canadian counterparts, American historians see French North America as having disappeared after 1763. It was replaced by a westward-marching American Frontier.²

A VIEW TO THE WEST: THE PAYS DES ILLINOIS

Looking at French settlements in the Illinois Country offers an alternative point of reference from which to understand the effects of the Royal Procla-

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mation and the consequences of imperial change in North America. While Quebec and Indian Territory received considerable attention from British authorities, the villages of the Illinois Country were mostly forgotten. In fact, the Illinois Country was not mentioned at all in the Proclamation. Yet at the western edge of the new Indian Territory, a group of five villages dotted the east bank of the Mississippi between the Ohio and Illinois rivers. Together they made up the most concentrated French settlement in what had been known during the French Regime as the *pays des Illinois*.³ Here, on the periphery of the British Empire, the effect of the Royal Proclamation was negligible.

It took nearly two years following the 1763 Treaty of Paris for the British to claim this newly acquired territory. When Captain Thomas Stirling and his men finally arrived on the banks of the Mississippi at Fort de Chartres in 1765, they found Louis St. Ange de Bellerive governing a French-speaking popula-

tion as if nothing had changed. The Royal Proclamation's directive to extend British law to the colony of Quebec did not apply to French settlements further west. General Thomas Gage's address—delivered to the inhabitants of the Illinois Country by Captain Stirling in 1765—made no mention of the rule of British law, the creation of a civil government, or the maintenance of a military regime. It simply reiterated the protections afforded under the Treaty of Paris, such as freedom of religion, the right to relocate, and a provision for an oath of allegiance. Thus, French law continued to reign despite British imperial rule. British attempts to handle local disputes and establish English courts were undermined by a revolving door of commanders and resistance from French settlers and merchants. In many ways, day-to-day life in the Illinois Country remained unchanged.⁴

THE ROYAL PROCLAMATION'S LIMITS

French settlements in the Illinois Country undermined the Royal Proclamation. Established French settlements dispelled the myth of Indian Territory as a settler-free zone with limited and tightly controlled trade. Moreover, *Canadiens* continued to migrate to the Illinois Country and marry into established families, which served to maintain the French character of many of the villages.⁵ Trade between the Illinois Country and Canada persisted, thanks in large part to Illinois merchants with ties to Aboriginal nations throughout the interior of North America and traders at Michilimackinac, Detroit, and Montreal. The British trade licence system initially slowed the southern fur trade, but it ultimately failed to stem the flow of goods and people to the Illinois Country. Hundreds of fur trade voyageur contracts signed in Montreal confirmed the

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re-emergence of robust trade with the Illinois Country in the years following the Proclamation.⁶ Merchants travelled back and forth between the St. Lawrence and Mississippi and helped families keep in touch with loved ones and settle business over long distances.⁷

The Royal Proclamation may have redrawn the imperial map, but it did not, in one fell swoop, break the historic French socio-economic linkages between the Illinois Country and Canada.⁸ Nor did it effectively assert British control over new subjects at the edge of empire. The Proclamation projected a new vision of empire with which colonial administrators and subjects were left to grapple. Examining the Illinois Country and French colonial continuity provides an opportunity to break away from our narrow national discourses, broaden our historical gaze, and ask new questions about the relationship between imperial directives and colonial historical realities. 🍁

NOTES

1. Allan Greer, "National, Transnational, and Hypernational Historiographies: New France Meets Early American History" *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 4 (December 2010): 698-699; Robert

Englebert, "Mental Mapping and the French River World in North America, 1763-1805," PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2010; Bethel Saler and Carolyn Podruchny, "Glass Curtains and Storied Landscapes: Fur Trade Historiography in Canada and the United States," in *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories*, ed. Andrew Graybill and Benjamin Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 275-302.

2. See Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders & American Expansion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

3. There was also Ste. Geneviève on the west bank of the Mississippi, but it became part of Upper Louisiana with the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762.

4. Colin G. Calloway, *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131.

5. Englebert, op. cit.

6. Ibid.

7. Robert Englebert, "Merchant Representatives and the French River World, 1763-1803" *Michigan Historical Review* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 63-82.

8. Although I have focused here on French settlements, equally important ties to Spanish Louisiana and Aboriginal peoples throughout the interior of North America make this a broader continental history. Robert Englebert and Guillaume Teasdale, *French and Indians in the Heart of North America, 1630-1815* (Michigan State University Press / University of Manitoba Press, 2013), xi-xxxiii.

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