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**Seed, Patricia. *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World 1492-1640*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 199 pp.**

*Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World 1492-1640* is one of the first monographs of comparative colonial history that has appeared in almost a century. Despite the frenzied scholarship commemorating, or desecrating, the quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean, very little has been done to explore the multifarious natures of European colonial practices in relation to each other. In contemporary historical research, the recent trend has been to study small and tightly focussed topics, rendering comparative research as unpopular as it is difficult. In her discussion of the colonies in the New World, Seed shows a remarkable command of several languages and many branches of the historical discipline.

As her title suggests, Seed explores the ways in which the major European colonial powers communicated their possession of various parts of the New World. Although they spoke more to each other than to the natives whom they dispossessed, she argues that these ceremonies were cultural constructions that were mutually incomprehensible to other Europeans who did not share in the same linguistic and cultural background. In her carefully argued introduction, she shows how anthropological and linguistic methodologies can be used by historians to disassemble, analyze, and compare the ritual structures and symbolic languages of these ceremonies performed by the English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch colonizers.

Seed begins her discussion with the English penchant for founding their territorial claims upon the improvement of land. She shows Medieval English law granted perpetual ownership of land to those who improved it with a house, a garden, or crops. To the English, this constituted a perfectly transparent mode of possession of New World territories, but other Europeans did not perceive it that way.

For the French, the enthusiastic participation of the indigenous peoples in a public ceremony of alliance was required to establish legitimate possession. Seed shows how these processions derived from the long and important tradition of royal entrances into the major cities of France. These public displays of royal and corporate solidarity were transported in reduced form to the New World to serve a similar function.

The Spanish also established their claim in the New World in relation to the natives. For legal possession, conquistadores read a document known as the Requirement, which called for the natives to accept Spanish missionaries peacefully or be attacked and enslaved. Seed demonstrates that the legitimacy and legality of this document was founded on a hybridization of the "just war" theories of both Islamic and Christian theologians.

The Portuguese manner of claiming new lands also derived from contact with Islamic peoples who taught them the arts of astronomy and navigation that were essential to their long-range voyages to the East and West Indies. Having the technology to discover and fix the latitudinal position of unknown lands gave Portuguese merchants the right to establish trading monopolies with the natives.

Like the Portuguese, the Dutch depended upon the maxim that prior discovery was tantamount to possession. In the place of latitudinal charts, the Dutch produced detailed maps and descriptions of discovered lands to show which lands belonged to them. Seed shows how the act of describing and naming a place gave sovereign rights to the company which supported the expedition.

In a strangely abrupt conclusion, Seed provides a new way of explaining the unity and diversity of European colonialism, based upon cultural differences similar to those she discusses in the body of her book. While all but the Dutch borrowed from the Roman imperial model, she summarily dismisses the idea that this centralizing rhetoric of a pan-European colonialism explains anything. She also demolishes the common misconception that religious differences provide an explanation for the widely divergent natures of the colonies. Instead, she argues that colonial activities can only be explained in relation to the specific cultural backgrounds of the participants. Finally, she suggests that nationalism, a sense of a unique cultural and political identity, was fostered by these acts of claiming, exploiting, administering, and defending the colonies from other European states. This allows her to conclude with the fascinating assertion that as colonialism and nationalism blossomed together in the sixteenth century, they withered together in the twentieth.

This conclusion is the most problematic section of this fine monograph. In order to use ritual as a conceptual tool, she has to stretch its definition to include activities as diverse as taking the height of the sun with an astrolabe to determine latitude, planting gardens, and drawing maps that minutely describe new lands. While her discussion of the relationships between colonialism and nationalism is alluring and relevant to her research it seems imperfectly organized and hastily done.

This book suffers from other defects. First, there are numerous typographical errors that quickly become irritating. More importantly, Seed's choice of chapter organization is unfortunate in that she ignores both the chronology of and some of the continuities between the ceremonies of possession she describes. One assumes that she began with the English (whose interest in the New World came rather late) in order to catch the interest of a primarily English audience.

Despite these problems, Seed's book deals clearly and concisely with a difficult topic that scholars have avoided for too long. Her deft use of anthropological and linguistic methodologies shows how historians can explore comparative topics in the monograph format. Another strength of this work is that Seed maintains the comparative discussion throughout. At the end of each chapter, she addresses the differences between the different modes of possession and she cites examples of how they were baffling to other Europeans who did not share the same cultural background. These strengths make this book useful for specialists in colonial history and invaluable as a teaching tool.

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