

[Igartua on Stanbridge, 'Toleration and State Institutions: British Policy toward Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Ireland and Quebec'](#)

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Karen Stanbridge. *Toleration and State Institutions: British Policy toward Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Ireland and Quebec.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003. 208 pp. \$63.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0558-0.

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The British Empire, Institutional Transformation, and Toleration for Catholics.

In this challenging work of "historical institutionalism," Memorial University sociologist Karen Stanbridge asks a provocative question: how did British authorities--the British Parliament, the Cabinet, the King, and local authorities in Ireland and in Quebec--resolve to relieve, in Quebec (1774) and Ireland (1778), penal laws (restrictions of civil rights) imposed upon Catholics that had been centuries-old state policy in England and the British empire?

Stanbridge is dissatisfied with the "growth of toleration" answer found in British constitutional and political history. She finds this interpretation too "insular" in that it pays attention only to events in Ireland or in Quebec, with little attention to the workings of political power at the center of the empire. She also criticizes the "growth of toleration" interpretation as resting on attitude changes that are hard to substantiate. Instead, she offers a broader, comparative perspective that attempts to explain changes in British policy toward Catholics by evolving configurations of formal and informal political institutions. Her analysis is based on a wide reading of Irish, British, and Canadian historiography rather than on an examination of primary sources.

The author begins by examining the ratification of the Treaty of Limerick of 1690, which had put an end to the Catholic military challenge to William III in Ireland, by the Irish Parliament in 1697. She shows that the ratification of the treaty by the Protestant-dominated Irish Parliament failed to recognize some of the rights granted to Catholics in the treaty, and she attributes this to the resistance of the Irish Parliament and the lack of informal institutional tools of coercion that the British executive could apply to Irish parliamentarians. For the reader who, like me, has a limited acquaintance with Irish history, this chapter provides a handy introduction to the mechanics of political power in Ireland at the end of the seventeenth century.

Stanbridge then turns to the process whereby the British Parliament adopted the Quebec Act in 1774. Among other clauses, the Quebec Act allowed Canadian Catholics to hold political office, something that remained prohibited for British Catholics. The first of the two chapters on the Quebec Act outlines the formal British political institutions that came into play in the framing of the Quebec Act, namely British laws pertaining to colonial administration and constitutions, but stresses the informal institutions that came into play, such as the practices of the Board of Trade and the rising influence

of pressure groups within and without the British Parliament. Stanbridge then delineates the role played by the political actors whom these institutions brought into interaction: the British King, the Board of Trade, the colonial secretaries, the British Privy Council and the imperial Parliament, the colonial governor, the British colonial merchant group in Quebec, and the French Canadians. She makes no mention of the political activities of French-Canadian merchants.[1] The two pages on French Canadians merely outline the competition between British and Canadian merchants in the fur trade after the Conquest and the influence of the clergy and the seigneurs in Quebec society, which is presented as undisputed historical fact (pp. 101-102). Stanbridge ignores the "Petition of French Subjects" to the King, of December 1773, which thanked the king for granting "the free exercise of our religion" in the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and asking for all the rights and privileges of British subjects, and especially the right to hold public office. This document is reproduced in Adam Shortt and Arthur Doughty's *Documents Relating to the Constitutional History of Canada, 1759-1791* (1918), cited in Stanbridge's bibliography. The petition is a rather important document: former Quebec Attorney General Francis Maseres noted that the petition "has been made the foundation" of the Quebec Act.[2] Stanbridge's second chapter on the Quebec Act traces the political and constitutional history of Quebec from the Conquest to 1774. Here the specialist of post-Conquest Quebec history will learn little, although perhaps the Irish history specialist will learn more.

The last chapter delineates the process by which the Irish Catholic Relief Act of 1778 was adopted. This Act allowed Catholics to lease land for 999 years, providing Catholics with a more secure form of land tenure; it also removed impediments to the transfer of land through inheritance. These were very limited concessions to Catholics, opposed by anti-Catholics in the Irish Parliament, but forced through that Parliament by the Irish executive under the leadership of the British governor of Ireland, the Irish Lord Lieutenant. The chapter touches upon the same general themes as in the earlier chapters, sketching the formal and informal institutional structures that provided the context for the political actors' policy choices, and then outlining the role of each of these actors. The head of the Irish executive strengthened his political influence through the judicious use of patronage and appointments and the dismissal of government officials who disagreed with the executive (pp. 160-163). Of particular interest to Canadian historians of the pre-Confederation period is the new political role played by the Irish Lord Lieutenant, as it can be seen to prefigure the role colonial governors would attempt to play in British North America in the 1820s and 1830s. In contrasting the Irish situation in 1697 with that of 1778, Stanbridge stresses the changes in the character and role of informal institutions, particularly the power of the Irish executive, through which British policy for Ireland was effected. These informal institutions, Stanbridge argues, worked in the same direction as formal institutions to ensure that the Irish Parliament ratified the British Cabinet's policy for Ireland.

Stanbridge offers a cogent presentation of British formal and informal political institutions as they relate to Ireland and the North American colonies and highlights their transformation over the course of the eighteenth century. She also offers a clear delineation of the role of the various political actors. However, her general thesis, that the growing weight of informal political institutions such as the Cabinet, political parties, and factions made possible the change in policy toward Catholics in Ireland and in Quebec, amounts to casting in more contemporary terms the story of the "unwritten constitution" already well known to British constitutional historians and political scientists. More specifically, Stanbridge argues that these new informal institutions gave a greater role to "public opinion" as expressed by political parties and interest groups. She writes, "The rise of 'public opinion' in Britain and colonies [sic] during the eighteenth century influenced the informal institutions

surrounding the formulation of government policy, including colonial policy" (p. 87). She makes the same point later about Ireland (p. 166). This line of argument comes very close to replacing "the growth of toleration" argument with a similarly Whiggish argument for the growth of public opinion.

Notwithstanding her insistence that she wants to explore the question of *how* more than that of *why* in the adoption of tolerant legislation concerning Irish and Quebec Catholics (p. 185), Stanbridge offers evidence for a causal explanation that, in this reader's view, relegates institutional factors, both formal and informal, to a secondary role in the story she tells. The three episodes she analyzes all occurred in times of military tension, and military concerns, as Stanbridge indicates, were of paramount importance. The ratification of the Treaty of Limerick occurred at a time when William III "needed supplies to fight his wars" (p. 61) and thus had to mollify the Protestant-dominated Irish Parliament in order to obtain money for his army. The Quebec Act was adopted because the British executive could not spare troops for securing the loyalty of Canadians (pp. 135-137). The Irish Catholic Relief Act of 1778 was intended to allow George III's army to draw badly needed recruits from the Irish Catholic population (pp. 146-147). One wonders whether different institutional arrangements would have made the adoption of these strategic measures any less likely.

I have a minor quibble on interpretation. In her discussion of the North American colonial situation during the Seven Years War, Stanbridge repeatedly considers the Acadian deportation of 1755 an anti-Catholic measure of repression (pp. 5, 6, 7, 93). This is a debatable reading of the deportation. The Acadians' religion was less an issue than their refusal to swear complete allegiance to the British crown.[3]

I also have some quibbles on form. The book is derived from a Ph.D. dissertation and required more substantial editing. There are frequent repetitions of conceptual definitions and of arguments, as well as occasional misspellings (for example, on pp. 5, 10; also including this reviewer's name in footnotes and the bibliography) and inappropriately used words ("concede" for "accede," pp. 85, 86; "encouraging the wrath" for "incurring the wrath," p. 87). And the very small type makes the book difficult to read.

This book will be useful for teachers of colonial history who want a handy schema to introduce students to the structure of British political administration. Because of its style and heavy conceptual apparatus, it would be less appropriate for undergraduate students. Historians of the British eighteenth century are likely to find the "historical institutionalism" approach illustrated here rather reminiscent of old-fashioned political history.

Notes

[1]. See José E. Igartua, "The Merchants and *Negociants* of Montreal, 1750-1775: A Study in Socio-Economic History" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1974), pp. 265-276.

[2]. Quoted in Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty, *Documents Relating to the Constitutional History of Canada 1759-1791*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: Historical Documents Historical Publications Board, 1918), p. 504 n. 2.

[3]. See Naomi Griffiths, *From Migrant to Acadian: A North American Border People, 1604-1755*

(Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

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