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Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina

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Author:
Eric Jennings
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Michael Vann

After lagging behind the field of British imperial studies, in the last decade the historiography of the French colonial empire has become an increasingly dynamic and rich field. Since the completion of his doctoral dissertation and its subsequent publication as *Vichy in the Tropics: Petain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940?44* (1), Professor Eric Jennings of the University of Toronto has been one of the most prominent scholars of a new French imperial history. As with his 2006 *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas* (2), his recent *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina* confirms his position as a leader in the field of critical studies of the French colonial empire. While *Imperial Heights* focuses very specifically on the French-built colonial hill station in Dalat, Vietnam, a wide variety of readers will find much of interest in this book. This is because Jennings makes excellent use of the Dalat case study as a prism to explore the themes of medicine, labor, race, gender, politics, leisure, and power in the colonial encounter. With meticulous primary research and a strong command of the secondary literature, the book persuasively argues that all of the central processes, practices, and ideologies of empire came together amongst the pine trees, cool lakes, and mountain air of this remote outpost of Frenchness in the southern Vietnamese highlands.

The average reader may be forgiven for pleading ignorance as to the location of Dalat. Laying about 100

miles northeast of present day Ho Chi Minh City in the highlands of the Lang Bian Plateau, Dalat?s elevation ensures much cooler temperatures than the tropical lowlands of the Mekong Delta and Vietnam?s coastal regions on the South China Sea. Following the logic of early 20th?century colonial medicine that held tropical climates as the source of many diseases, French administrators hatched a plan to develop a city that would offer a respite from the torrid and allegedly unhealthy lowlands. As a hill station, Dalat would allow fragile European bodies to regain some of their vigor lost to the murderously steamy Saigon. That the region was sparsely populated by stateless ethnic minority groups and distant from the conquered Vietnamese population, offered a further benefit for the white colonial elite. Dalat was to be a site of white privilege and comfort, serving both a medical purpose and a symbolic function in the maintenance of colonial white supremacy. Yet, Dalat was never as successful as similar colonial highland retreats such as British Simla in India and Dutch Bogor in Java. As Jennings clearly details, the French faced numerous obstacles in building this hill station and it took a few decades for the project to gain traction and attract significant numbers. However, by the late 1920s the colonizers had created a decidedly French social space that served as a site of convalescence, leisure, education, and piety. That said, the Second World War induced a number of dramatic crises that unraveled both the colonial hill station and eventually French Indochina as a whole.

In 14 brief chapters Jennings paints a portrait of the French imperial project as beset by paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguities. Most striking is the un-reconciled incongruity of the white colonizers? overwhelming military, economic, and political powers with the construction of the white European body as inherently vulnerable in the tropical empire. But this is just the first of many colonial oddities that the author illustrates for us. Medical justifications for the hill station did not stand up to contemporary scientific knowledge. The violence of certain French explorers made a mockery of the empire?s famous ?civilizing mission?, as did the use of forced labor from both ethnic Vietnamese and highlanders. The need for cheap local labor made it impossible to establish the desired racial exclusivity. The rise of a wealthy class of Vietnamese further eroded racial barriers. Missionaries used the region as a monastic retreat rather than a center of conversion. The technocratic dreams of professional urban planners exceeded the limited economic realities of the colonial budget. Finally, the symbolism of Dalat as a space of white power made it a target for Vietminh attacks, including a bloody ambush and a series of assassinations during the war for national liberation. Perhaps the greatest irony is that post-colonial Vietnamese elites from Emperor Bao Dai and President Diem to Saigon-cum-Ho Chi Minh City?s entrepreneurial classes who benefitted from the economic stimulus of the American war and the Doi Moi ?renovation? of the communist system have adopted the colonial era resort as their own. Today the city founded by French trying to escape the weather and people of Saigon is dominated by a local tourist industry that promotes an atmosphere of romance and idealized honeymoons. According to Jennings, contemporary Dalat elides the brutal colonial realties of its past in favor of a timeless fantasy-land of colonial kitsch and questionable taste (seen best in the Wild West-themed businesses). Dividing his book into these 14 thematic and relatively short chapters, each containing numerous sub-sections of a few paragraphs to a few pages, Jennings guides us through the complex and, at times, quixotic narrative of the life of Dalat. While this strategy allows the book to consider a wide variety of avenues of inquiry (including a few dead ends), some readers may feel jostled about as pages shift from topic to topic. That said, the book has a clear coherence and significance beyond the essential focus on Dalat. The relatively large number of chapters and sub-sections represents Jennings? attempt to understand the city from a variety of angles, each adding different perspectives to the nature of this elusive subject.

As stated above, the book?s central thesis lies in the paradoxical power and vulnerability of the white colonial community. As such the opening two chapters consider first the high white mortality rates of 19th?century colonies, especially French Indochina, and then the subsequent unnecessarily violent quests to find a refuge above the allegedly murderous lowlands. Right away, Jennings gives us this contrast between a French community afraid of not just the people but the very land and air that had been recently conquered and the French willingness and ability to seize more territory by force. In particular, chapter two presents Captain Victor Adrien Debay?s murderous rampage during his mission to find a fitting site for an alternative hill station. Racing against Dr. Alexandre Yersin and his pet project in Dalat, Debray threatened, terrorized, beat, and even murdered a number of his Vietnamese and highlander servants, troops, and porters and as

well as the local inhabitants he encountered on his trek. The chapter not only details his individual crimes but situates them in the larger context of colonial violence where white colonizers were not held to account for crimes against the bodies of colonized Asians, Africans, and Pacific Islanders. This chapter should dispel any romantic, nostalgic, or apologetic visions of empire that might still be cherished in some quarters.

The next chapter considers the conventional wisdom of early 20th-century medicine and theories of tropical diseases and the need to find refuge in altitude. Despite some contrarian voices, the official and popular consensus held that the cooler temperatures of the highlands would revive depleted white bodies. Jennings suggests a racist benefit in that Dalat was also a refuge from the Vietnamese population of the lowlands. One of the first developments in Dalat was a retreat for French sailors. The book?s illustrations show iconography from the time period with images of naval personnel enjoying the alpine retreat far, far above sea level. Other civilian projects soon followed. Importantly, Jennings notes that Dalat?s medical function may be reconsidered as a pretext to create a site of white privilege and pampering. Arguing for the need to preserve the fragile European body from the dangers of the tropical climate, the hill station?s luxuries, soon seen in the construction of numerous large villas and the Palace Hotel, were deemed medical necessities. The subsequent chapter on the actual building of the hotels, villas, roads, and railways contrasts white leisure with the brutal conditions of non-white labor. Describing a variety of strategies, including forced, coerced, corvée, and wage labor, Jennings? portrait of the making of Dalat reads like a study of a second era of slavery with both Vietnamese and ethnic minority communities trapped in a racially structured labor system. One source describes how the local community remembered the building of the road to Dalat in tragic songs of exhausting, if not murderous, forced labor. The lyrics struck this reviewer as hauntingly reminiscent of Negro spirituals and field hollers from the American south. The chapter also discusses the degrading practice of Vietnamese porters carrying French patients on their backs up the steep mountains before the roads were complete. This contrast between the white and non-white experiences of Dalat is an excellent contribution to the study of the colonial encounter.

Once the hill station is built, the book then spends several chapters examining various aspects of high colonial Dalat. In a discussion of the various pastimes available to the white colonizer, Jennings shows how hiking, relaxing, and hunting were forms of displaying white colonial power. Stalking animals was a particularly important ritual in the pageant of empire not just in Dalat but throughout the wider colonial world. Revealing one of the many paradoxes of empire, the book also explores the boredom and discomfort many French colonists saw fit to gripe about in their memoirs and in popular writing. The following chapter explores the intellectual construction of the ?Montagnards?, the highland ethnic minority groups. Presenting a noble savage discourse, the analysis shows how the colonial economy marketed the indigenous population as part of the wild yet charming scenery of the destination. Jennings? discussion of the highlanders would have been helped by some consideration of James C. Scott?s most recent book, *The Art of Not Being Government An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*.(3) Here, the paradigm-setting Yale scholar argues that the people of what he calls ?Zomia? (the high altitude tribal communities that live in the mountains of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma) are not backwards folk from an earlier era of human development but rather are communities that chose the freedom of the hills over the state-controlled river valleys. Seeing them as rational anarchists and not as primitives would make for a fruitful comparison with the French colonial project?s emphasis on state control and enforced order. The next chapter describes the various urban plans for Dalat, most of which were too grandiose for the limited municipal coffers and remained unfulfilled. One impressive example of Dalat?s growth was the construction of hundreds of villas in various French provincial styles. Many of these structures survive to this day as curious artifacts of the colonial era. Subsequent chapters cover the Dalat Palace Hotel, the experience of women and children in the city, and the French Catholic presence. An important chapter explores the Vietnamese in Dalat. Here we find yet another colonial contradiction. While the hill station was supposed to be an escape from the colonized population, there was always a substantial community of Vietnamese there as laborers. Later, as the indigenous bourgeoisie began to enjoy new wealth and acquired Western tastes, Dalat became a destination for elite Vietnamese tourists. Jennings described how this phenomenon challenged the colonial boundaries of race and class, revealing contradictions inherent in the system.

The final three chapters capture various moments in the collapse of the French colonial project in Southeast Asia. With the onset of the Second World War, Dalat again found itself in a paradox. While the fall of France in Europe and the relatively peaceful invasion of pro-Vichy Indochine by the Japanese military signaled a steady collapse of French power, Dalat enjoyed a level of importance it had never known before. This was due to the fact that an increasing number of French sought refuge from the Japanese in the isolated hill station. Thus, as the colony as a whole fell apart, Dalat became the center of French authority, such as it was. As the dust from the world war settled, the Vietnamese war for national liberation began and Dalat again assumed a level of importance because of its perceived of safety. Jennings describes how this perception proved illusory as the Vietminh specifically targeted Dalat for its symbolic value as a site of white colonial privilege. In this chapter the book?s otherwise meticulous research begins to break down. This is no fault of the author; rather it is an issue of archives in France and Vietnam that remained closed. The penultimate chapter considers the various schemes to make Dalat the key to a non-communist political strategy. While Jennings gives us an important contribution to an often-neglected history, these failed projects read like an account of rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*. The final chapter takes Dalat from the outbreak of war against the French in 1946, through the American War, and to the final moment of national unification in 1975. Continuing with the paradoxes of empire, here we learn of massacres and assassinations but also the city?s new role as a relocation center for Catholic refugees fleeing Communist rule. This brief chapter might have been helped by comparison with other brutal incidents in colonial endgames in Kenya and Algeria. The book?s epilogue briefly contemplates Dalat in the context of what Panivong Noridr and Penny Edwards have described as ?Indochic?, a kitschy and superficial nostalgia blissfully ignorant of the brutal realities of French colonial rule in Southeast Asia.

In terms of its research, argument, and prose, *Imperial Heights* is an excellent work and it is difficult to find much to criticize. Jennings does a much more sophisticated job at using race as a meaningful category of historical analysis than in his previous books. He weaves insightful discussions of the colonial construction of race and the nature of racism in the empire throughout the majority of the monograph. In contrast, the use of gender is neither as strong nor as consistent. Indeed, aside from a discussion of hunting the only sustained gender analysis is ghettoized into a chapter on women, children, and mixed race individuals. An analysis of white masculinity would help rectify this lacuna. Yet it must be said, that this is a very slight shortcoming and only bears mentioning in contrast to the strong discussions of the theory and practice of race in the colonial encounter. As with his earlier publications, Jennings most recent book testifies to his prominent position in the field of French colonial history.

Notes

1. Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Petain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940?44* (Palo Alto, CA, 2001).Back to (1)
2. Eric Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas* (Durham, NC, 2006).Back to (2)
3. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, 2009).Back to (3)

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