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# German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Simon Karstens, *Gescheiterte Kolonien – Erträumte Imperien:  
Eine andere Geschichte der europäischen Expansion 1492–1615*

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*German Historical Institute London Bulletin*  
Vol. XLIV, No. 2 (Nov. 2022), 126–9

ISSN 0269-8552

SIMON KARSTENS, *Gescheiterte Kolonien – Erträumte Imperien: Eine andere Geschichte der europäischen Expansion 1492–1615* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2021), 619 pp. ISBN 978 3 205 21207 2. €55.00

Simon Karstens has created an elephant. His *Gescheiterte Kolonien – Erträumte Imperien* is a large-format, 600-page long habilitation thesis and, in many respects, an unwieldy, cumbersome creation. It is even bound in a sturdy grey cover. Yet it is also enormously pleasing, in the improbable manner of elephants, and worthy of consideration as an important part of the research landscape.

Karstens's book is a monumental study of European colonial projects—mostly English and French—in the Americas between 1492 and 1615, which were for various reasons considered to be failures by contemporaries. It looks at the countless ways in which the notion of 'failure' was discursively produced and utilized in the creation of European colonial knowledge, as well as in the establishment of European polities as potential or putative colonial powers. The existing historiography here is often contradictory: whether a project is seen as a success or a failure depends largely on the historian's point of view and choice of material. Karstens chooses to tackle the subject and its many conflicting analyses comprehensively, taking a fresh perspective by going back to the historical sources—that is, the varied and divergent reports, analyses, justifications, and narratives written by European contemporaries, sometimes to educate or entertain a broader public or to please a monarch, sometimes to convince potential investors to pour money into new colonial ventures. The aim of this re-examination, as he puts it, is 'to analyse the source basis of these contradictory conclusions' (p. 15) in order to trace how and why colonial projects came to be seen as failures both by early modern writers and the historians who studied their texts.

The book's structure is pleasingly simple. The introduction (part one) is followed by three large parts each divided into a small number of subsections. Part two starts with a detailed overview of colonial projects during the early period of transatlantic expansion. Karstens places the well-known narratives of Spanish and Portuguese colonial successes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries into perspective, providing a more tempered and mixed picture of success and failure in

various Atlantic spaces and social contexts. He then introduces French and English efforts in the same spaces at the same time, showing the invariable entanglements and explaining the historical actors' varied knowledge of the Americas and their peoples, and how this knowledge was intertwined with accounts of failure and the preparation of new projects.

The core of the book consists of two large analytical sections. The first (part three) deals with failed projects and how they were portrayed between 1530 and 1615. This part is an extremely thorough history of early French and English attempts at colonization, thoughtfully set against indigenous perspectives to the extent that these were available to the author, and against existing historiographical interpretations of the events. The second analytical section (part four) addresses the issue of how failure was talked about (or not, as the case may be) in contemporary texts. It critically examines spaces of failure—such as the 'Atlantic', the 'New World', or the 'colony'—and interpretations and arguments addressing failure, finally tying the two together. Here, Karstens's text is highly analytical and the book is at its most interesting in terms of its own aims—namely, to investigate narratives of failure and the ways in which they became meaningful and powerful.

The metaphor of 'weaving' may be sadly overused in many texts, but in the case of this book, it is an adequate description of its method and narrative style. Going back and forth between Europe and the Americas, Karstens is constantly pulling in and interlinking threads relating to different peoples and their various interests and knowledge, as well as a multitude of places and spaces, processes, actions, and reactions. Through the lens of failure and its discursive production, Karstens unfolds an exhaustive, multifaceted history of French and English attempts to colonize and exploit, or at least to profitably trade with, various regions and indigenous peoples in the Americas. It is interwoven not only with the multitude of European contexts which these projects sprang from or referred to, such as political developments, cultural movements, lines of religious conflict, and so on, but also (as far as possible, given the source base and perspective of the study) with various indigenous interests and strategies not just to deter and deflect European intrusion, but also

to exploit it—for example, in a variety of internal conflicts. Karstens constantly attempts to highlight the absence of such voices from European narratives, and to reconstruct the indigenous perspectives left out or distorted by European writers who, in some cases, had themselves been colonizers.

This constant weaving together of so many strands, aspects, elements, and facets creates a narrative which is, at times, slightly overpowering, but also remarkably vivid. It is a huge, vibrant structure constantly in motion, composed of countless activities, people, and spaces; of power and manipulation and interests and money; of sea and ships and land and fur; of war and peace; of journeys made and stories told. It is knowledgeable, instructive, highly useful, and often simply fascinating. It is also a good read—Karstens has a talent for selecting anecdotes, including, for example, James I's intense desire to have a 'flying squirrel' from the Americas (p. 362). Parts of the introduction cannot conceal that the book is, indeed, a habilitation thesis as they are weighed down by methodological and theoretical considerations which, while necessary, make the text rather ponderous and cumbersome. However, a habilitation thesis has to satisfy the demands and standards of the academic field as well as the author's own, and all in all, Karstens has written a highly engaging book that is easy to like. Some parts of it, especially the huge, detailed part three, seem like the kind of grand narrative which one might expect to find in the work of a much older historian. *Gescheiterte Kolonien – Erträumte Imperien* is an excellent addition to the canon of European colonial historiography, and I hope it will be accepted into the fold.

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