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France and Decolonisation 1900–1960

Raymond F. Betts

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Preface

This study is designed to analyse those twentieth-century activities that comprise colonial rule and colonial opposition, as well as those values and institutions which provided structure and purpose for both. However disparate in origin, setting and expression these cultural elements may seem, they have conveniently been gathered together under the overarching term 'decolonization', a term that suggests a process, if not a predetermined condition, that was first pronounced after World War II.

Spread around the world and across several decades, the changes that led to the end of the French colonial empire are a complicated part of a major shift in contemporary world affairs. That history, already debated acrimoniously and analysed carefully, merits being reviewed yet another time, 30 years after the last of the major colonial possessions gained their independence from France.

As an introductory history, the text that follows considers the course of empire, not as if projected on a mercator map, but topically, according to major issues and formative events. As with any work of synthesis, this one relies not only on the many scholarly monographs that have examined particular problems of French colonialism but also on preceding works which have examined broader issues and larger segments of France Overseas, as the collection of territories was once proudly described.

My own scholarly interest in the French colonial empire has been a long professional one, enriched by research in many libraries and archives, enlivened by visits to many of the places that once were part of that empire. Therefore, I acknowledge the beneficial cultural opportunities I have had to visit Algeria and Tahiti as well as the scholarly opportunities I have had to study and do research in Paris and Dakar. While I need thank no one individual for assistance in the writing of this brief text, I do gladly acknowledge a lifelong accumulation of indebtedness to the many who have assisted me, encouraged me and who have had the patience to criticise my previous work on this subject, work which provides the unseen foundation of this volume.

As I have done many times before with delight, I now do again: I express my deep appreciation for the strong support of my wife, Jackie, who has also kindly served as copy editor of this text and, before that, as counsellor urging on the completion of the book.

Many years ago, when I first travelled to West Africa, I found myself walking alone along a dirt road which was some distance north of Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. It was a hot day. An African suddenly emerged from the bush; he was carrying a machete and a bunch of palm fronds. I was carrying a camera. We approached; he smiled and then remarked in French, 'It certainly is hot, isn't it?' 'Yes, indeed,' I replied and smiled in return. We each continued along our individual ways.

Here was what sociologists would call an example of 'culture contact', one with little general significance, but of sufficient personal note to have caused me to wonder then, when it occurred, and to cause me to wonder still, as I now think back on it, what does it all mean, that French colonial experience, now that it has been silently transferred to the files of the archives and quietly reassessed on the pages of the history text?

RAYMOND F. BETTS

To the memory of Ambroise Jobert, teacher and friend, *grenoblois* whose vision extended far beyond his particular place.