

Three Recent Books on Early New France

Yves F. Zoltvany

Volume 3, numéro 1, autumn 1973

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad3_1rv01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Zoltvany, Y. F. (1973). Compte rendu de [Three Recent Books on Early New France]. *Acadiensis*, 3(1), 97–102.

Three Recent Books on Early New France

Since 1971, the already considerable *corpus* of historical writing on early New France has been increased by the addition of three notable works.¹ The credentials of the two authors are sufficiently awesome to dazzle any reviewer. Winner of the first Balzan Foundation Award in History, of the gold medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for biography and history, of the Emerson-Thoreau medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for literature, of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, of the Pulitzer Prize on two occasions, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, Rear Admiral USNR (ret.), author of some twenty-five historical works, Samuel Eliot Morison is without doubt the most prolific and most honoured American historian of this century. Marcel Trudel does not occupy such an Everest of distinction but with his score of books on French Canada, one of which earned him a Governor-General's Award in 1967, he ranks high on the list of Canada's leading historians.

The European discovery of America was a topic admirably suited for a scholar of Professor Morison's training and temperament. Himself a seafarer, he has an intimate knowledge and great love of the sea and ships. Better than anyone, he can bring out the hazards that faced the sixteenth-century navigators as they sailed along unknown coasts in their unwieldy square-rigged vessels. His research technique, like that of fellow Bostonian Francis Parkman's, consists of supplementing the study of printed and manuscript sources with on-the-spot investigations. In preparing his biography of Christopher Columbus, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, published in 1942, he cruised the Caribbean by yawl and crossed the Atlantic from Palos, Portugal, in an expedition consisting of a 147-foot schooner and a 47-foot ketch. In preparing for *The Northern Voyages*, he flew at low altitude in a small plane from Maine to Labrador, around the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and along the North Carolina Outer Banks. This enabled him to identify almost every place mentioned by the discoverers in their writings. Finally, the subject of the discoveries makes for vivid story telling and Professor Morison is above all a great narrative historian. The upshot of all this is a book that is learned as well as entertaining. One suspects, however, that it will find a more receptive audience among history buffs than academic historians. The style is weighed somewhat too heavily on the side of popularization. Furthermore, a scholarship that consists largely of describing the itineraries of the discoverers and of pinpointing, or attempting to pinpoint, their landfalls clearly has more affinities with

1 S.E. Morison, *The European Discovery of America, the Northern Voyages* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1971); Morison, *Samuel de Champlain, Father of New France* (Toronto, Little Brown and Company, 1972); M. Trudel, *The Beginnings of New France, 1524 - 1663* (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1973).

the scholarship of the late nineteenth than with that of the late twentieth century. Be that as it may, in an age when history, through excessive use of jargon and sheer bad writing, is becoming less and less accessible to outsiders Professor Morison represents one of its last links with the cultured public.

The book covers all the voyages across the North Atlantic to the New World, real and imaginary, from the discovery of America by Irish monks in the ninth century — even Professor Morison is not certain in what category that alleged feat belongs! — to the voyages of John Davis and the founding of the first two Virginia colonies in the closing years of the sixteenth. The numerous controversies and enigmas that bedevil the field are dealt with skilfully, often with humour, and many theories are either damaged or discredited, particularly some of the curious ones advanced by the late Tryggvi J. Oleson in his Canadian Centenary Series volume, *Early Voyages and Northern Approaches 1000 - 1632* (Toronto, 1963). Of particular interest to historians of New France is the account of the French voyages constituting the middle third of the volume, especially the treatment of Jacques Cartier. Long an object of adulation often uncritical in both French Canada and France, Cartier finally became a casualty of revisionism in 1948. In his very influential *Les Voyages de découverte et les premiers établissements*, C.-A. Julien argued that the Malouin mariner “suivit une route familière aux pêcheurs jusqu’aux côtes canadiennes déjà connues avant lui et que son mérite propre consista à remonter le Saint-Laurent, ce qui ne constitua pas un exploit exceptionnel”.² Hold on, says Morison. Cartier made three voyages of discovery in dangerous and hitherto unknown waters without losing a ship. He entered and departed some fifty undiscovered harbors without serious mishap. The only sailors he lost were victims of an epidemic ashore. He justly deserves to be ranked “among the most expert seamen and careful explorers in the era of discovery”.³ Could it be that Julien is one of those historians who wrote about the sixteenth-century mariners without ever getting his feet wet?

When *The Northern Voyages* was published in 1971, the indefatigable Morison was already working on its companion, *The Southern Voyages*, beginning with Columbus and concluding with Cavendish. He then intended to return to the northern voyages of the early seventeenth century, those of Henry Hudson, Samuel de Champlain, Captain John Smith, and so on. But he took liberties with this self-imposed schedule. Ever since boyhood, when he went on cruises along the coast of New England, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia taking along a copy of Champlain’s *Voyages* as a companion, he has been a great admirer of this French colonial figure. In 1950 he resumed cruising along the Maine coast and resolved someday to write a new biog-

2 C.-A. Julien, *Les Voyages de découverte et les premiers établissements* (Paris, 1948), p. 162.

3 Morison, *The European Discovery of America, the Northern Voyages*, p. 445.

raphy of his "hero". The project came to fruition in 1972 with the publication in a very handsome edition of *Samuel de Champlain, Father of New France*.

Would that it had not. Professor Morison rushed into this subject because of the pleasant memories it evoked but without sufficient preparation. He read H.P. Biggar's six-volume edition of Champlain's works, a few other standard works and, it would seem, little else besides. He also took a quick airplane trip up the Ottawa and Mattawa River valleys, across Georgian Bay and old Huronia to Lake Simcoe, and then along the Trent Canal system to Lakes Ontario and Oneida. This hardly qualifies as profound research. Even his felicitous style is marred by colloquialisms which seem straight out of a tale of the wild west: Champlain gave the Iroquois "hot lead", the Mohicans were "rubbed out" by the Mohawks.⁴ And in the last chapter the errors come fast and furious. Father Paul Le Jeune, first superior of the Jesuit mission in Canada, was not a "future martyr".⁵ He died peacefully in Paris in 1664. The soldiers sent out by Louis XIV in 1664 did not "[give] Canada peace and stability for thirty years".⁶ Another war with the Iroquois broke out in the early 1680's. Champlain, with the assistance of a few devoted priests and laymen, did not "[nurse] struggling Quebec to sturdy life".⁷ Quebec was founded as a trading counter in 1608 and it was still a trading counter when taken by the English in 1629. Between 1632 and 1635 a missionary colony and a Canadian society began to appear in faint outline, but these were the work of Richelieu and the One Hundred Associates. The arrival on the scene of the cardinal-minister and his company relegated Champlain to the background.

Had the volume contained new information, fresh insights, or the hints of a new interpretation, it might have been possible to forgive these errors. Unfortunately there is nothing new in the book unless it be the intensity of the biographer's admiration for his personage, which, considering that historians have traditionally viewed Champlain with a respect bordering on adulation, is saying a great deal. He was a born explorer, an artist, a mapmaker, and a writer, we are informed by a statement on the dust jacket. He was most of all "a natural leader, an individual filled with humanity who inspired loyalty and obedience. The Indians liked and trusted him — he treated them fairly, and for months on end shared their lives in the wilderness — and with patience, valor and judgment he led his struggling band of colonists through the hardships of a foreign land into a bold new Canada". This is a good capsule summary of what comes within.

But, it might be asked, even if Morison could have painted his subject in more subdued tones is there any reason to doubt the soundness of his basic

4 Morison, *Samuel de Champlain, Father of New France*, p. 111.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

perspective? Until quite recently the answer to this question would have had to be no. Champlain's features seemed as immutable as those of his bronze likeness on Quebec's Dufferin Terrace (pardon, his supposed likeness since no authentic picture of him is known to exist). Over the past few years, however, questions have been raised about the man stemming not so much from the discovery of new as from the reassessment of old evidence. In an intriguing article published in 1971, Bruce Trigger, a McGill University anthropologist, argued that Champlain was either unable or so ethnocentric as to be unwilling to understand how Indian society functioned.⁸ Professor Morison himself, although he does not draw out their significance, cites instances that bolster this contention. On one occasion in 1634, after he had been in the country for nearly thirty years, Champlain showed that he still could not accept the Indians' refusal to use corporal punishment on children. On another occasion in the same year he wished to execute an Indian who had murdered an unarmed Frenchman although it was customary for Indians to settle matters like these by offering reparation payment. Only after Father Le Jeune, who had been two years in Canada, pointed out that to execute the murderer would precipitate a bloody vengeance by the prisoner's relatives on the missionaries in Huronia did Champlain relent.⁹ In brief in Trigger's article we may well have what has been needed for a long time: the starting point for a general re-evaluation of Champlain's life and works.

Professor Marcel Trudel's approach to history differs vastly from Morison's. He too is a narrative historian, but while Morison is selective in the use of his data and arranges it artfully to produce desired effects, Trudel presents the facts as he finds them and lets his personality intrude as little as possible. He does little interpreting or explaining, being satisfied to leave these tasks to the reader. Morison in brief is a spiritual descendant of Francis Parkman; Trudel, of the old positivist school.

The Beginnings of New France deals with the history of the colony from the voyages of Verrazano and Cartier to the inception of the Royal Regime in 1663. "[It is] a story often told and at least once in classic form", write the editors of the Canadian Centenary series.¹⁰ They are undoubtedly referring to Gustave Lanctot's *A History of Canada* whose first volume, published in French in 1959 and in an English translation four years later, covers almost exactly the same time span as *The Beginnings of New France*. This naturally invites a comparison of the two works, but it is not an easy one to make for the differences between them are not all that great. On the whole Trudel's may be somewhat better. It is more cleanly structured (mention should be made here of Patricia Claxton, the gifted translator who put it

8 B. G. Trigger, "Champlain Judged by his Indian Policy: a Different View of Early Canadian History", *Anthropologica*, New Series, XIII (1971), pp. 85 - 114.

9 Morison, *Samuel de Champlain, Father of New France*, pp. 219 - 220.

10 Trudel, *The Beginnings of New France*, 1524 - 1663, p. x.

into English) and the judgments are more restrained. Trudel refuses, and it would seem rightly, to see in Jean de Lauson, governor from 1651 to 1656, merely "a greedy, cunning man"¹¹ and in the royal decree of 1657 the establishment in New France for a brief period of a government based on popular representation.¹² Turning to Acadia he refuses, and this time it would seem wrongly, to see in Charles de Menou d'Aulnay a man who sought to establish a lasting colony in the country.¹³ According to Trudel he was a fur trader like his celebrated rival Charles de Saint-Etienne de La Tour. In addition he wished to rule alone and eliminated all those who might have served the cause of Acadia.¹⁴ But historians have been disagreeing on the subject of La Tour and d'Aulnay for nearly a century! Trudel's volume remains a rigorous piece of scholarship.

But also in the last analysis a very traditional type of scholarship which never strays very far from familiar paths. It would admittedly have been difficult for Trudel to submit this period to the "broad conceptual re-examination" which is in vogue in historical circles today. One suspects that there is not enough documentation available. Furthermore, neither the format of the series nor the author's inclinations were conducive to an exercise of this sort. But he could at least have broadened the framework of his narrative. Since he states that this period "saw [. . .] the appearance of social structures transplanted from France"¹⁵ could he not have described French society at the time of the colony's foundation? Since the moving force behind most of the early French voyages of discovery was Jean Ango, did not this great Dieppe merchant-shipowner deserve more than two incidental references? Might not a discussion of economic and political theory around 1600 have helped to understand why the French, after Roberval's misadventure of the 1540's, were once again thinking of founding a colony in North America when trading and fishing voyages sufficed to tap the natural resources of that part of the continent?

The framework could have been broadened most of all by giving the Indians the place they rightly deserve in a volume that almost touches upon the pre-contact period. Indeed, one would have thought that this inclusion was important enough for the editors to insist on it. At a time when New France was little more than a puny seasonal trading counter a well developed Huron society of 25,000 souls existed in the Georgian Bay area: the formidable

11 G. Lanctot, *A History of Canada*, Vol. I, *From Its Origins to the Royal Regime, 1663* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 159.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 291 - 294. Consult René Baudry, "Charles de Menou d'Aulnay" in G.W. Brown, ed., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, 1967), I, pp. 502 - 506 for a succinct account of d'Aulnay's efforts and achievements as an Acadian colonizer.

14 Trudel, *The Beginning of New France, 1524 - 1663*, pp. 198 - 203.

15 *Ibid.*, p. xi.

Iroquois Confederacy was in gestation in northern New York: Algonquian bands roamed the St. Lawrence north shore. Yet there is nothing in this book about the economic, political, and social organization of the aborigines or about their religious and cultural life. There is only a token and highly superficial chapter entitled "The Meeting of Cultures" and another one called "Problems of Indian Policy". How it is possible to study problems of Indian policy without having first studied the Indians is not very clear.

Some readers may also find that the volume suffers from a certain imbalance. Canada before 1632, to use the colourful expression of Father Le Jeune, was little more than "a storehouse for the skins of dead beasts". After that date settlers began to arrive, the Jesuit mission in Huronia was begun, the company of the Habitants was founded, political institutions were created, and the Iroquois war broke out. Canadian society was being born. Professor Trudel, however, devotes 180 pages to the years between 1524 and 1632 and only 110 to those from 1632 to 1663. In other words, an excessively detailed account of a period largely devoid of significant happenings is followed by a rather summary one of years that are rich in developments of all kinds. The Jesuit mission in Huronia, which the author himself calls "the most spectacular phase of the entire religious history of New France",¹⁶ receives a little less than four pages; the early history of Montreal, a most interesting experiment in colonization, three pages plus some scattered references; the first Iroquois war is no more than sketched out; the turbulent late 1650's and early 1660's are expedited in the conclusion.

Finally, those who would like to pursue the study of the origins of New France will not find much assistance in this volume. Professor Trudel has listed the primary sources, manuscript and printed, that he used to prepare his book. Many of these references, like the one to serie Z¹D of the *archives nationales* in Paris, are highly esoteric. But except for sixteen standard works — none on the Indians — he has not seen fit to give secondary sources. Readers are simply referred to the bibliographies appended to his other works in the field. This is regrettable for the Canadian Centenary series should provide bibliographical guidance; doubly regrettable since, as the new national history of Canada, it should also honour by citing their names and works the scholars who have made significant contributions to Canadian history over the years.

YVES F. ZOLTVANY

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237.