

Les tonneliers au Québec du XVII^e au XX^e siècle. Par Eileen Reid Marcil. (Sainte-Foy : GID, 2003. 191 p., ill., tabl., lex., ann., bibl., index. ISBN 2-922668-15-0 \$29.95)

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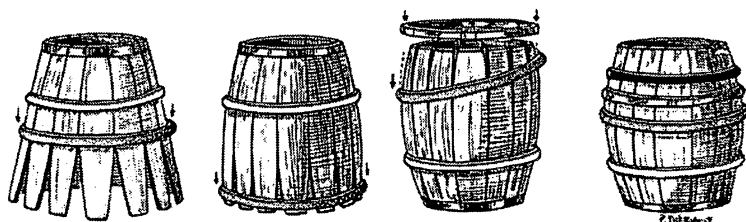
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***Les tonneliers au Québec du XVII^e au XX^e siècle.* Par Eileen Reid Marcil. (Sainte-Foy : GID, 2003. 191 p., ill., tabl., lex., ann., bibl., index. ISBN 2-922668-15-0 \$29.95)**

When Eileen Reid, a Canadian naval officer's British war bride, left her homeland she could not have anticipated her future as a historian of Québec's material culture or know that the then-popular pub song "Roll out the Barrel" foretold a scholarly interest. Her doctoral thesis on wooden shipbuilding at Quebec City and a study of the related trade of barrel makers grew out of her research for Canada's Museum of Man. Ships' crews included a cooper to keep storage barrels for food, drink and cargoes sound and their contents intact. Seaport barrel makers provided containers for exporters' goods and the artisans served as legal evaluators of incoming cargoes. Some commodities were shipped in cloth-covered bales, but the barrel was essential for liquids and provided protection for perishable goods. The round shape allowed barrels to be rolled about and moved with more ease than chests and bales. Barrels were the preferred containers for transporting dry goods and fluids and their general use justifies this specialized study.

Les Tonneliers au Québec is a work of love. It amplifies an account first presented in 1983 by Dr. Marcil in the National Museum of Man's Mercury Series. The 2003 edition of this descriptive work has a more attractive layout although the number of appended, illustrative documents has been reduced. The new narrative draws on additional research in

Europe and now addresses industries that used wooden barrels in the twentieth century. The range of sources used was already impressive: notarial records, censuses, pre-confederation newspapers, contemporary illustrations, surviving artifacts, oral interviews with coopers and on-the-spot observations in the 1970s of these men at work. When no period illustrations are available to illustrate a detail, explanatory drawings are provided. The author's thorough knowledge of her subject allows her to explain arcane practices, such as the method used by assessors to measure the capacity of a closed barrel (p. 141). Sometimes the reasons for something are assumed to be self-evident and no explanation is provided, as in the case of the shipboard workers in the green fishery who would stand in casks while heading, gutting and cleaning fish (p. 114-115). More of the details could have been conveyed in tabular form, as was done for different barrel types.



Le serrage du tonneau au moyen des moules

(Illustration : Pierre Thériault.

Source : Eileen R. Marcil, Les tonneliers du Québec, 57.)

The book combines a general account of barrels and coopers in Europe and the Americas with a particular study of Quebec City's barrel makers up to 1940. The enlarged third section on post-industrial barrel making encompasses Montreal, where the last cooperage closed in 1978. By this time craftsmen were assembling barrels from machine-made components and refurbishing containers. Rural coopers are briefly mentioned; they were mostly self-taught menders of barrels and tubs who might also make piggins (*bacquets*) and buckets for domestic use. They were really *boisseliers* (white coopers) rather than *tonneliers*. Biographical sketches of urban craftsmen illustrate individual careers. The geographical concentration of coopers along Quebec City's Côte de la Montagne (p. 72) and, later, on Sault-au-Matelot and Sous le Cap streets (p. 92) is noted. More could be said about the similarities shared by these artisans, such as their other economic activities. Despite the boom in their trade

from the 1730s to the 1750s, they still needed to supplement their income as coopers. The barrel makers' character, as a social group, remains elusive.

One hungers for more information on the peculiarities of coopers in New France, and in the later provinces of Lower Canada and Quebec, that set these workers apart from other coopers. Two distinctive expressions of Canadian coopers (p. 165)—in comparison with the vocabulary in Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* of the 1760s—are noted as is their different method of securing cask ends, in contrast with the use of a cross bar in France (p. 61). Local barrel makers relied on splined boards seated in a recessed, interior groove ("the croze") to seal the ends. Some of the illustrated tools (the hand axe, p. 52; circular knives, p. 177) are unlike those used in the pre-1776 British North American colonies.

The book is generously illustrated and a glossary with pictures explains the technical terms of the trade. The reader will still need a dictionary and some words, such as the verb *maganer* (which means to treat something harshly) appear only in specialized lexicons of Quebec's language. The new section on the twentieth century is an industry-by-industry survey that moves back and forth in time. It is a challenge to integrate these accounts into a coherent narrative, yet the concluding paragraph (p. 151) could make a fine introduction to this segmented section.

Dr. Marcil's book is an admirable survey of the materials and manufacturing techniques of coopers, the range of their products, as well as of the many uses of round, pieced and hooped, wooden vessels. The diversity of the coopers' products, their widespread use, and the extensive range of clients served justify a monograph devoted to this subject. The aid to scholarly publications programmes of the Canada Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council would do well to underwrite an English translation of this book.

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