

# Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

## The Classics of Acadia Presidential Address

J. Clarence Webster

Volume 12, numéro 1, 1933

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300112ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300112ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce document

Webster, J. C. (1933). The Classics of Acadia: Presidential Address. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 12(1), 5–12.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300112ar>

# ANNUAL MEETING

---

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

---

### THE CLASSICS OF ACADIA

By J. CLARENCE WEBSTER

The sea-girt Eastern Provinces of Canada have had a large number of chroniclers,—explorers, soldiers, sailors, traders, missionaries and officials, who have, since the early part of the seventeenth century, described their physical features, natural history, aborigines, development of settlements, evolution of government, military operations and economic changes. Outstanding among these, I think I may safely state, are the French writers who covered the period from the arrival of the De Monts expedition of 1604 to the capture of Port Royal in 1710. They are the Jesuit missionaries, Champlain, Lescarbot, Denys, Le Clercq and Dièreville.<sup>1</sup> Their writings may be termed the classics of Acadia. Those of the Jesuit Fathers have been admirably reproduced and translated, with annotations, in the well-known monumental work, in seventy-three volumes, published between 1896 and 1901, under the editorship of Reuben Gold Thwaites, entitled *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, the first five volumes containing most of the material relating to Acadia, though elsewhere references are to be found.

Our Champlain Society has wisely decided to publish all the other classics, translated, and carefully edited, and with a reprint of the French text. Of these, the works of Lescarbot, Denys and Le Clercq have been issued. Four of the six volumes in which Champlain's writings will appear have been issued, and the remaining two volumes are nearing completion. Dièreville's book, which will complete the series, is now nearly ready for the printer.

When the works of these five authors are studied, marked differences in their presentations are to be found, though the range of subjects within the scope of their observations was common to all. The explanation is to be found in the aptitudes, training, and experience peculiar to each individual.

Samuel de Champlain came to Acadia in 1604 with the expedition of the Sieur de Monts, whose purpose was to establish a settlement, Champlain's status being that of Geographer. His previous experiences had been both interesting and varied. After several years' training as a sailor and navigator he served for ten years as a soldier during the Civil wars which were devastating France. When peace was declared in 1598, he left the army and took command of a Spanish vessel (1599-1601) in the West

---

<sup>1</sup> The works of Jacques Cartier are not included, because he merely touched on the north-eastern border of Acadia, and had no intimate knowledge of the country.

Indies, making extensive explorations among the Islands and along the coast of Mexico and Central America. On his return to France he wrote an account of his travels under the title, *Bref Discours*. For some unknown reason this was not published, but remained in manuscript until 1859 when the Hakluyt Society brought out an English translation. The French text was first printed in 1870 in an edition of Champlain's works published by the Abbé LaVerdière, of Quebec. As a result of the West Indian voyage, Champlain was given a pension by the King, and the title of King's Geographer.

In 1603 he went to the St. Lawrence with an expedition under Pont-Gravé, being commissioner to examine and report on the country, but having, also, in mind the purpose of searching for a northern passage to Cathay. On his return to France in the autumn of the same year, he was received by Henri IV, to whom he proposed a plan for planting a colony in Canada, and for carrying on missionary work among the Indians. The account of this expedition was published soon after his return under the title "*Des Sauvages*." It is thus evident that Champlain was highly qualified for the pioneer work in which De Monts' expedition engaged. He remained in Acadia for three years and during this period he explored and described, for the first time, the Atlantic coast of Acadia, the Bay of Fundy coast and the shore line of Norumbega (now New England) to beyond Cape Cod. He returned to France in the autumn of 1607, but did not publish any account of his Acadian explorations until 1613, when they appeared as Part 1 of a book, entitled "*Des Voyages*", accompanied with many maps, charts and plans, the rest of the work describing his explorations in Canada in 1608 and afterwards, which resulted in the founding of Quebec.

Champlain's Acadian records from a work of the greatest importance, for they are accurate descriptions of a territory which had previously been only vaguely known, and still more vaguely mapped. But, in addition to his cartographical data, the book gives considerable information regarding the development of the colony, the physical features of the country, its natural history, and the aborigines, though these details do not rank in importance with his discoveries. Champlain's descriptive style is direct, simple, and unadorned. Perhaps his lack of literary training made him reluctant to attempt any other mode of expression. Often, he seems to have been so surcharged with information, that he relieved his mind of it without regard to form. Whatever be the explanation, certain it is that his writing is almost entirely devoid of rhetorical embellishment.

Marc Lescarbot was a young lawyer who had been called to the Bar in 1599. That he was highly educated is evident from his being selected to make two Latin orations before the Papal Legate in 1598, one of which he published in French, together with a number of poems; he also published in the following year translations of two Latin works, dealing with Church politics. In his legal practice he had as a client Jean de Biencourt, Sieur de Poutrincourt, who accompanied De Monts to Acadia in 1604, and acquired a tract of land at Port Royal. Having returned to France to arrange his affairs, he invited Lescarbot to go back to Acadia with him. Lescarbot decided to do so, influenced, as he stated, by "his desire to flee a corrupt Europe and to examine the new world with his own eyes". As a matter of fact, Lescarbot was at this time greatly disgruntled because of

some rebuff or injustice which he had suffered in court, and in this mood he decided to forsake Paris and his practice.

He and De Poutrincourt sailed in May 1606 and reached Port Royal at the end of July. He remained in the country exactly one year, departing on July 30, 1607. Immediately on his arrival he became active in the affairs of the colony, superintending building operations for Poutrincourt, who departed with Champlain on an exploring expedition, laying out gardens, sowing experimental crops, fishing and hunting. Having some knowledge of medicine he was able to give assistance both to the settlers and to the Indians. His evenings were spent in writing. About the middle of November he staged a dramatic performance, as a welcome to Poutrincourt, returning after an absence of nearly three months on the New England coast, the entire play, "*Le Théâtre de Neptune*," being written and staged by himself. A number of his poems, which, later appeared in his "*Les Muses de la Nouvelle France*," were also composed during the months of winter. On Sundays he gave some hours to the religious instruction of the men, and seems to have been well-satisfied with the results. He also took a great interest in the Indians, and was anxious to bring about their conversion to Christianity.

In the spring of 1607, word arrived from France that De Monts' monopoly, which had been granted for ten years, had been cancelled and that the colonists must return to France. Lescarbot left in the autumn, much disturbed at the abandonment of an undertaking which promised fruitful results, and which offered so rich an opportunity for the establishment of Christianity in the country. Amends having been made for the wrong which had been done him in the Law Courts, he resumed his practice in Paris, and, in 1608, he wrote his book "*Histoire de la Nouvelle France*," and published it in 1609.<sup>2</sup> A second edition appeared in 1611, and a third in 1617, the latter being much enlarged, and improved in style.

Lescarbot's work differs very markedly from that of Champlain. Though his experience of Acadia was very much less<sup>3</sup> than that of the latter, his book is much larger, chiefly due to the introduction of general historical topics which Champlain did not include. Thus, he gives a comprehensive account of previous voyages of discovery in the New World, both in North and South America, and, in describing the manners, customs and language of the Indians of Acadia (much more fully considered than in Champlain) he makes an extensive comparative study of various peoples of the Old World and South America, including the ancient Germans, Greeks, Gauls, Hebrews, Goths and many others. The cartographical descriptions, which predominate in Champlain's book, are very meagre in Lescarbot's, as might be expected. Lescarbot, was a master of the art of writing, and has a picturesque and lively style which at times is overflorid and even prolix, and his too easy flow of language is not always characterized by sound construction or precision of meaning. However, in these respects, the carefully revised edition of 1617 is an improvement on its predecessors.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It appeared the same year in an English translation by Pierre Erondelle, Huguenot refugee in London.

<sup>3</sup> He spent about one-third of the time there, and did not travel about as Champlain had done.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ganong tells me that Lescarbot seems to him to have much of the spirit of the modern reporter, with much the same instinct for presenting just what the reader desires to know.

The relations between Champlain and Lescarbot at Port Royal seem to have been happy. During the winter of 1606-7 they must have had many opportunities to exchange ideas on the subjects which interested them, and, certainly, in the entertainments provided by the Order of Good Cheer, at Poutrincourt's hospitable board, they co-operated in the fullest degree. Their religious beliefs were the same, and though their tastes, attainments, and interests were dissimilar, there is no record of any friction between them while in Acadia. Lescarbot even wrote a sonnet to Champlain and published it, later, in his book of poems. They sailed back to France in the same ship in 1607. Yet disharmony developed between them in the following years. The early editions of Lescarbot's book referred to Champlain in a friendly manner, and acknowledged various items of information which had been communicated orally to the author by Champlain. Trouble began after the appearance of the latter's work on Acadia in 1613. In it Champlain stated that Lescarbot during his residence in Acadia remained in Port Royal all the time with the exception of one short trip of fourteen or fifteen leagues (This refers to a visit made to the Ste-Croix river; but Champlain makes a slip as regards the distance, as Lescarbot points out in his edition of 1617; it should be twenty-five leagues).

The question arises as to whether Champlain was not peeved by noticing the success of Lescarbot's book, for the conflict is fundamental and irreconcilable between the man of action, who makes discoveries at the cost of toil and danger but cannot express them in form which appeals to a reading public, and the man of letters who uses the discoverer's results to win fame by the use of a facile pen in the comfort of his study. Did not Champlain mean to suggest that his own work, based on a much longer experience in Acadia, and involving very extensive traveling, was much superior to one written by a man who lived in one place all the time? Lescarbot took great offence, and, in his revised and enlarged edition of 1617, indulged freely in criticisms of Champlain not only in regard to the latter's work in Acadia, but elsewhere. He criticised his bad style of writing, accused him of magnifying his own performances and ignoring those of Cartier, jeered at him for swallowing fabulous tales as truth, blamed him for selecting the island in the Ste-Croix as the first settlement, which led to disastrous results, pointed out geographical errors, etc., etc. While Lescarbot was undoubtedly correct in some of his criticisms he was wrong in others. His entire performance seems rather trivial and unworthy of him and indicates that he was inspired by a spirit of petty vindictiveness. However, readers of his book scarcely notice these pin-pricks as they are carried along by the flowing current of the author's graphic descriptions, which always charm and rarely weary.

Nicolas Denys came to Acadia with Commandeur Isaac de Razilly in 1632, at the termination of the tenure of the country by the Scots. Little is known of his previous life, save that he belonged to a family of distinction, but had a very poor education. For many years he was engaged in trading and fishery enterprises, chiefly in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and established several stations on the coast. He incurred the enmity of d'Aulnay de Charnisay, Governor of Acadia, and several others who resented his mercantile activities, and in his conflict with them, he suffered considerably. However, he persevered in his work, and was victorious in the

end, for in 1654 he was made Governor of the coast of Acadia from Gaspé to Canso, with a monopoly of sedentary fishing throughout that great territory. La Tour, long his friend, had become Governor of the rest of Acadia, and their relations were very cordial.

In the winter of 1668-69, his large establishment at St. Peters on Cap Breton Island was burned, causing him great financial loss. He retired to another post at Nepisiguit, and commenced writing an account of his Acadian experiences. In 1671, he went to France to arrange for its publication, and the work in two volumes appeared in the following year. It bore the title "*Histoire Naturelle des Peuples, des Animaux, des Arbres et Plantes de l'Amérique Septentrionale, et de ses Divers Climats*". It is described by Ganong as a handbook of immigration and was intended mainly to attract notice, population, capital, and government protection to a country in which he had the utmost faith and he, doubtless, hoped that his extensive knowledge and experience would ensure for him some profit in the development which he expected would follow.

The book was written almost entirely from memory when the author was over seventy, and describes events which took place over a period of nearly forty years. It is not, therefore, surprising that it should present inaccuracies in various places. Yet in spite of these defects Denys' work must be regarded as one of the most important accounts of the historical events, physical features, natural history, the Indians and fisheries of Acadia, in the seventeenth century. Nearly one-half of the second volume is given to a description of the cod-fishery, and Ganong points out that this is "the most complete and authoritative exposition" on the subject, particularly of the summer fishery. The book had no literary quality or style, a defect which the author admitted, saying that he had given little attention "to the symmetry of words or their arrangement." In the account of the fisheries, a subject which he knew in every detail, he is at his best, writing with enthusiasm and expressing himself with complete clearness. In his natural history descriptions, however, fact and fiction are so intermingled that, as Ganong points out, it is difficult to know what to believe. However, even thus, the accounts are of value since they give the views and beliefs which were held by the inhabitants of Acadia at that time. Father Chrestien Le Clercq, an able and devoted Recollet priest, began his labours in 1675 among the Micmacs in the Gaspé peninsula and the territories south of it as far as the Miramichi, and worked there for twelve years. He then returned to France and published a book, in 1921, entitled "*Nouvelle Relation de la Gaspésie, etc.*" This work is entirely different from those of Champlain, Lescarbot and Denys, for it deals solely with the Micmac Indians and is to be commended for its thoroughness and comprehensiveness, and clearness. Besides giving an account of their manners, customs and beliefs this devoted Missionary mastered the native language and invented a remarkable system of hieroglyphics, as an aid to the memories of the Indians in saying their prayers and, as Ganong points out, this system, improved later by Abbé Maillard, played an important part in the religious instructions of the Indians, and has not even yet become wholly extinct.

The last of the classics to which I wish to direct your attention is the volume published in Rouen by M. de Dièreville in 1708, entitled "*Relation*

*du Voyage du Port Royal de l'Acadie ou de la Nouvelle France.*" It has four sections. The first describes the outward voyage from France in 1699; the second gives an account of the customs of the settlers and Indians; the third deals further with the Indians; the fourth describes the homeward voyage to France in 1700. In 1710 the book was reprinted in Amsterdam with only minor differences. In 1714 a very condensed abstract of the work in English prose was included in a London publication "The Travels of several learned Missioners of the Society of Jesus into Divers Parts of the Archipelago, India, China and America, etc., etc." This work was the translation of a French original published in Paris in 1713. It was described as an "Extract of an Account of the Country of Acadia, in North America, yielded up in the last Treaty of Peace by the King of France, to the Crown of England, containing a Description thereof, with the Customs, Manners, and Religion of the Natives, etc. Written in the year 1710, by a French Gentleman, and sent to a Missioner of the Society of Jesus." The last sentence is quite wrong. The work was written before 1710 and was not meant for the Society of Jesus; the English author evidently regarded it as a Jesuit Relation. The abstract is in no sense to be considered as a translation of Dièreville's book.

In 1751, an abridged German translation in prose appeared in a Collection of travels, entitled, *Sammlung neuer und merkwürdiger Reisen, zu wasser und zu Lande.*

In 1885 L. V. Fontaine published a volume in Quebec, entitled "*Voyage du Sieur de Dièreville en Acadie, etc.*" In it is found much of the text of the original, but certain portions which the editor considered as "*trop naïfs, ou plutôt trop gaulois pour notre époque*" were omitted, to suit the chaste minds of Canadian readers. The last section of the book in which Dièreville's return voyage is described is entirely left out. The book is a strange mixture of comments on Dièreville's writing, with rambling articles on various phases of Canadian history, including Signiorial tenure, the troubles of the Acadians in 1755, letters of Moorsom from Nova Scotia, biographies of Charles Lawrence and John Winslow, and other tit-bits. As regards Dièreville's place in this mélange, one might well ask "*qu'allait-il faire dans cette galère?*" Nothing further need be said about this work. I have referred to it because it is the only attempt at a study of Dièreville's book which has hitherto been made.

Dièreville's work is not only the last to be made known to English readers, but it is probably the least known of all the classics. Hence it will doubtless be studied with critical eyes in order that its relative merits and demerits may be ascertained and measured. Certainly, when compared with the volumes of his predecessors, Dièreville's small duodecimo appears like a pigmy. The little volume is no way to be considered as a competitor for the honours which historians have given to the older classics. Dièreville's aim was not to produce a comprehensive or authoritative account of Acadia. The book was really written on the suggestion of Michel Bégon, the distinguished collector and patron of the arts and letters, before Dièreville's departure for Acadia. The latter had previously published some poems in *Le Mercure galant*, and these evidently impressed Bégon favourably for he suggested that Dièreville describe his Acadian travels in verse. Dièreville had, however, another important qualification for his task. He

had been trained as a surgeon in Paris, and must have had considerable scientific knowledge, for he was requested to study the flora of Acadia and to collect new specimens for the Royal Botanical Gardens of Paris. Thus trained as an accurate observer, possessing cultivated tastes, and gifted with the ability to express himself with charm and clarity, both in prose and verse, his *Relation* was but the register of his observations and experiences, both on sea and land, and, so dominant was the poetic instinct in him that he was doubtless glad to adopt Bégon's suggestion and write the entire work in verse. The change, in part, to prose was made after his return to France, and was due to the insistence of friends. Whatever may have been the views of these critics as to the value of his poetry, modern readers find it most entertaining. As a descriptive medium it is employed with marked skill, and though it teems with imagery and allusions, facts are usually presented with accuracy, yet without the dulness so often found in prose descriptions. While Dièreville must have known of the previous writings on Acadia, and, possibly, may have read some of them, there is not the slightest indication that he made use of them in writing his book. Considerable space was given to the description of his outward and homeward voyages, and these were written with the charm and simplicity of style in which Robert Louis Stevenson, in our own time, described his *Inland Voyage*, and his travels through the Cevennes with a donkey.

His account of the French settlers in Acadia was entirely original and could not have been copied from any other source. His section dealing with the Indians is not an exhaustive treatise, but comprises a series of descriptions of manners and customs which could easily have come under his observation during a residence of the greater part of a year in Acadia. They are recorded with accuracy and simplicity, as might have been expected from a trained scientist. His poet's imagination, while adding to the charm of his descriptions is not employed in the distortion of facts. It is interesting to note that Dièreville scarcely refers to political conditions or to the relations existing between New France and New England. During the ten years previous to his arrival in Acadia, the country had been considerably disturbed. In 1690, Phips' expedition from Boston had ravaged Port Royal, and one of his subordinates had destroyed the fort and depot of the Trading Company of Acadia at Chedabucto. As a result of these exploits, Massachusetts claimed to have conquered Acadia. Phips made the people of Port Royal take the oath of allegiance to King William and Queen Mary, and set up a local government of citizens acting under a French sergeant, meant to serve until an English Governor should be installed; this never really took place, and the French gradually resumed control in Port Royal, though for several years the people were uncertain as to whose subjects they were. De Villebon, who had arrived after Phips' visit to take control (in the absence of Governor De Meneval, who had been granted leave but had been taken prisoner to Boston) thought it best to abandon Port Royal and to establish his government on the river St. John, first at Jemseg, then at Nashwask, and, finally, at the mouth of the river, where he built a new fort. It was at the latter place that Dièreville met De Villebon, just before the latter's death on July 5, 1700.

During these years there had been a series of bloody encounters between the French and Indians on the one side and New Englanders on



the other. Border towns of the latter had been mercilessly ravaged, pirates infested the waters of the Bay of Fundy, and, in 1696, Iberville, the famous Canadian fighter, had, with the aid of De Villebon and the Indians, captured the strong fort at Pemaquid, which was garrisoned by New Englanders; in the same year New Englanders ravaged Beaubassin in Chignecto and attacked De Villebon at Fort Nashwaak. Yet, of all of these happenings, there are only a few vague references in Dièreville's book. He led a quiet life, carrying on his business (he acted as agent for a French Trading Company), helping the local people to develop their fishing industry, and making observations among the settlers and Indians, and, in his spare time, working hard on his metrical descriptions.

After his return to France in 1700, he settled in his home town, Pont-l'Évêque, in Normandy, and practised as a surgeon in its hospital. His book was not published until 1708. In the meantime, he changed much of the verse to prose, and must have revised his text thoroughly. Of his career nothing is known, except that he held his hospital position for ten years. No other writings have been discovered. Nothing is known of his private life, nor of the time or place of his death.