

H-France Review Vol. 11 (September 2011), No. 203

Conrad E. Heidenreich and K. Janet Ritch, eds., *Samuel de Champlain before 1604: Des Sauvages and other Documents Related to the Period*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press for the Champlain Society, Toronto, 2010. xxxi + 490 pp. Maps, tables, figures, appendices, references, and index. \$75.00 U.S. and CAN. (hb). ISBN 9780773537576.

Review by Céline Carayon, Utah Valley University.

If the seventeenth century was the golden age of European settlements in North America, the century of trials and errors that preceded it—one of first contacts with Natives, international competition, forsaken colonies, and meticulous harvesting of geographic and ethnographic information—was in many ways formative. The founding of Jamestown in 1607 by the English, of Quebec in 1608 by the French, and of Santa Fe in 1609 by the Spanish, were made possible and profoundly shaped by the sum of experiences, rumors, and the many writings circulating in the Old World since Columbus's fortuitous discovery of 1492. Yet, the early period of the colonial enterprise in the western hemisphere remains under-studied. Reasons for this scholarly inattention range from the actual scarcity of sources, to the less founded assumption that the information presented in early narratives is largely unreliable because of widespread miscommunication between Natives and Europeans, to a seldom acknowledged, yet persistent neo-imperial nostalgia for successes rather than failures. It is thus particularly exciting to witness the publication of a new edition of some of the earliest writings of Samuel de Champlain, covering events that preceded by several years (and paved the way for) his accomplishments in establishing permanent French claims to lands along the St. Lawrence River, which have earned him on multiple occasions the title of “father of New France.”[1]

Conrad E. Heidenreich and K. Janet Ritch offer a long-overdue re-edition of *Des Sauvages*, Champlain's account of his 1603 voyage to Canada, which the authors consider “one of the most important – perhaps even the most important—books in Canadian exploration literature” (p. xviii). This nicely illustrated edition also includes a disparate collection of documents about Champlain's early life and career, such as court and military records, the official commission for the 1603 voyage, and selected excerpts from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biographies of Champlain. The most interesting documents accompanying the central text, *Des Sauvages*, speak to the short-term reception and posterity of the piece: a 1605 summary of Champlain's writings by Pierre-Victor Cayet, the King's chorographer (official historian/geographer), which was more widely read than the original account; and the first English version of *Des Sauvages*, published in 1625 by Samuel Purchas, based on Richard Hakluyt's translation. The documents are printed in a convenient and highly readable way, with the original French text on the left and the corresponding English translation on the right. A preface and two interpretive essays by the editors offer useful biographical, historical, and editorial information best suited for a general public of non-specialists. While painstakingly gathering evidence and debunking previous claims about the French explorer's life, the authors admit that much remains a “matter of speculation” (p. 11) when it comes to drawing the portrait of this private man from Brouage on the French Atlantic coast, whose military training, Huguenot sympathies, and special ties to the French crown remain elusive.

This new edition comes to us from the Toronto-based Champlain Society, who had already sponsored the reference six-volume publication of Champlain's complete writings, edited under the direction of Dr. Henry Percival Biggar, between 1922 and 1936.[2] Heidenreich and Ritch's edition of *Des Sauvages* and

other documents (originally included in volume 1 of the 1922 edition) seeks both to correct and expand H.P. Biggar's version. As a result, an indisputable and sometimes problematic continuity exists with the latter, as demonstrated by the fact that some of the peripheral documents and excerpts included here are directly reproduced without further editing, and that many of the footnotes paraphrase the initial edition as well. Like the earlier edition and in accordance with the Champlain Society's mission, *Samuel de Champlain before 1604* is primarily directed to a general Anglophone audience of non-specialists and more specifically seeks to appeal to Canadian national memory, within the context of the recent celebration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec.[3] "There cannot be very many people," argue the authors, "who have made such an indelible imprint on the imagination and history of Canada as Samuel de Champlain" (p. 3). This intriguing reclamation of Champlain as a Canadian, rather than French, founding hero is omnipresent in the book's opening essays.[4]

If, admittedly, "Champlain's writings are of undeniable importance to Canadians" (p. xi), one must hope that the readers and scholars who will turn to this much-improved edition of *Des Sauvages* will also recognize the larger, transnational, and even Atlantic significance of this document. The expedition to the St. Lawrence Valley recounted in *Des Sauvages* took place from March 15, 1603 to September 20, 1603 and was sponsored by Henri IV, King of France. Henri had recently emerged victorious from years of violent strife against Spain and rival factions in Brittany, who persistently contested his claim to the throne even after he had abjured Protestantism in 1593. Since Jacques Cartier's exploration voyages in the 1530s, French involvement in Canada had been limited to fishing and fur trading activities, and the region had already developed a negative reputation in France as inhospitable and lacking opportunities for profit or an easy passage to China.

Two events in 1602 directly played a role in the decision to renew efforts to settle in Canada: first, two Montagnais Indians had been taken to France by Captain François Gravé du Pont—who was to lead the 1603 voyage—in order to describe their country to the King himself, and had assured him that the river was navigable much farther westward, above the rapids that had previously blocked French advances. The 1603 expedition was thus at least in part based upon Indian reports regarding the resources and geographical features of their land, a fact that would become a staple of French exploration. About the same time, an official report known as the "Hayes treatise" was published in London describing a recent English expedition under Captain Bartholomew Gosnold to areas of Canada coveted by the French, adding international competition as a new incentive for immediate action. "The task set for Champlain and the others on the 1603 voyage was therefore to determine if the St. Lawrence Valley was suitable for colonization and to see if, in spite of Cartier's failed efforts, it was possible to explore westward from the Lachine Rapids to the Orient" (p. xviii).

Although relatively succinct, *Des Sauvages* is a mine of ethnographic information about the rich natural environment of the area, Native cultures and politics, French perceptions of the latter, colonial objectives and early diplomatic attitudes, as well as the still tentative methods of exploration and mapping used by Europeans in claiming parts of the New World. Readers may be surprised to discover, for instance, that "there is no evidence that [Champlain] was ever a pilot, captain, or navigator on a ship of any consequence" (p. 13) prior to the 1603 voyage and that his exact responsibilities on this journey remain unclear. The editors concede the murkiness surrounding Champlain's education and training, but Heidenreich's expertise as a geographer comes in handy by providing new assessments of Champlain's skills as an explorer.[5]

The narrative itself reveals the overwhelming reliance of the French on Indian informers and the surprising degree of trust they put in their geographical descriptions, which seemed to have successfully overcome language barriers. This edition includes the reproduction of seventeenth-century sketches of the Upper St. Lawrence River and eastern Great Lakes based on the accounts allegedly given by three Algonquins to Champlain, as well as a useful modern rendition of these sketches, along with a current map of the same region, which suggests that the Frenchmen were not mistaken in following directions by the locals.

In their essays, the editors repeatedly put forward the idea that “Champlain was also the first [European] to state unequivocally that the interior of the continent could only be explored by canoes and with Native cooperation” (p. xix). They further claim that Champlain may have been the first European to sit in a birchbark canoe (p. 70)—a doubtful possibility given the fact that fur traders had been active in the area for some time—and that he was the first to “[grasp] the full significance of the canoe to exploration” (p. 65), which may have given France a significant edge over their English competitors. In asserting that “it was Champlain’s observations and instructions on how exploration should be carried out that laid the foundations for successful French exploration and secured France’s position in North America” (p. 81), Heidenreich and Ritch highlight the potential contribution of *Des Sauvages* and similar early exploration literature to ongoing discussions about the unique nature and success of French colonization, primarily based on a long-lasting reciprocal dependence and alliance with the Natives.

In this regard, *Des Sauvages* also contains the account of a momentous event: a large-scale diplomatic ceremony and agreement between the French and the Algonquins of the St. Lawrence, which may have shaped the future of both groups in critical ways. The French expedition arrived to meet the local leader, Anabijou, on the day when a large multi-tribal crowd was gathered to celebrate a recent military victory against their Iroquois enemies. Besides rich descriptions of the ceremonies performed by the Indians on that occasion, the narrative also exposes the extent to which pre-existing native geopolitics and military agendas influenced European colonies. The French entered an alliance with Anabijou, which gave them free access (and precious geographical assistance) to the regions’ waterways and lands, but also bound them to provide support against the Iroquois if the occasion arose. A few years later, in 1609, Champlain, now “lieutenant for the country of New France,” would himself accompany a coalition of Montagnais, Huron, and Algonquin Indians against a band of Mohawks in Ticonderoga (at the border of New York, Vermont, and Canada), thus initiating a destructive pattern of enmity and endemic warfare between the French and their allies on the one hand, and the Iroquois and their allies (first Dutch, then English) on the other, which would shape the future of all groups involved, well into the eighteenth century.[6]

Scholars know well the importance of studying historical sources in their original language to best capture the intended meaning, and are rightfully cautious when using outdated English translations. What may seem a minor tweak in word choice may, and unfortunately has many times in the past, led to critical variations in substance and interpretation. This is where the main value of this edition resides: in offering a much more faithful English translation of *Des Sauvages* and making the translation process transparent to the reader. We must salute the choices the editors made to preserve in italics seventeenth-century Indian and French terms that cannot be appropriately transcribed into modern English, such as “*sagamo*,” “*sauvages*,” “*tabagie*,” and “*matiachas*,” and to refrain from identifying tribal groups like the people the French called “*Algoumequins*” when their identity cannot be formally established. According to Heidenreich and Ritch, the previous translators and editors, who consensually agreed that “Champlain wrote poor French,” almost systematically sinned by over-translation in an effort to “clarify” Champlain’s prose for twentieth-century English readers. As a result, crucial ambiguities and nuances in the original text were lost, to the point to which “it was sarcastically said that ‘Champlain wrote better English than French’” (p. xii).

A revealing example of the difference an improved translation—one based on “fidelity to the full meaning of the French text and, whenever possible, the authorial intention” (p. 94)—can make, is given by comparing a short but critical excerpt from chapter three of *Des Sauvages* as it appears in both editions. From the same French text describing the ritual dances performed by the St-Lawrence Natives in celebration of military victory, H.P. Biggar’s 1922-1936 edition has:

“They do not stir from one spot when they dance but make certain gestures and motions of the body, first lifting one foot and then the other, and stamping upon the ground. While they were performing

this dance, the Sagamore of the Algonquins, whose name was Besouat, was seated before the said women and girls, between two poles, on which hung the scalps of their enemies.”[7]

Heidenreich and Ritch, in contrast, offer a much more literal translation, and most notably preserve the ambiguous use of “heads” (*têtes*), which could possibly refer to scalps or actual severed heads: “While dancing they do not budge from one spot, but make some gestures and body movements, lifting up one foot and then the other while stamping upon the ground. Now, while this dance was being performed, the *Sagamo* of the *Algoumequins*, who is named Besouat, was seated before the said women and girls, between two poles, upon which the heads of their enemies were hung” (pp. 269-271).

By offering a high-quality edition and translation of important sources, *Samuel de Champlain before 1604* represents an invaluable contribution to current and future research on the pre-settlement phase of European colonization in North America. One must deplore, however, the unevenness of the opening essays and textual introduction to *Des Sauvages*, which, while including valuable information on Champlain’s life, time, and writings, also often fail to reference current scholarship on the subjects at hand, instead relying disproportionately on Anglophone literature (leaving out major Francophone scholarship) and outdated texts (often directly borrowed from the previous edition and dating back to the early twentieth century). One can hardly forgive the citation of an erroneous Wikipedia article on page 92, wrongly claiming that the Canary Islands are “part of Africa.” Finally, the authors systematically minimize the ethnographic value of Champlain’s observations and use a double standard when it comes to understanding French and Native actions, pitfalls that a more thorough scholarly review may have helped avoid.

However, the most problematic weakness of this edition is, in my opinion, the failure to include Champlain’s earlier narrative, *Brief Discours*, which chronicles his journey to the West Indies and Yucatán on board a Spanish ship in 1599.[8] This choice, justified by the authors by the fact that “it does not relate directly to Champlain’s later career in Canada” and that “its authenticity has been called into question” (p. xiv) seems arbitrary and short-sighted, and is undermined by the multiple references Heidenreich and Ritch end up making to this same text in parts of their essays (p. 32). This omission is regrettable because it undercuts the scholarly potential of Atlantic comparisons between sources documenting early European exploration and presence in the Americas. The successful colonization of Canada by the French in the seventeenth century may owe more to early voyages to the Caribbean and failed settlements in the southern hemisphere than the authors of this edition realize. Nevertheless, *Champlain before 1604* should be greatly esteemed, but for different reasons, by lovers of nice books, biography and exploration enthusiasts, and scholars alike. One must hope this book will be the first in the more comprehensive re-edition and updated translations of the rest of Samuel de Champlain’s writings.

NOTES

[1] Recent biographies that celebrate Champlain’s foundational role in New France include David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain’s Dream: The European Founding of North America* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 2008); Raymonde Litalien, Denis Vaugeois, and Katherine Roth, eds., *Champlain: the Birth of French America* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004); Francine Legaré, *Samuel de Champlain: Père de la Nouvelle-France* (Montréal: XYZ éditeur, 2004); Samuel Eliot Morrison, *Samuel de Champlain: Father of New France* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

[2] H. P. Biggar, H. H. Langton, William Francis Ganong, John Home Cameron, John Squair, and William Dawson LeSueur, eds., *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*. 6 volumes (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1922-1936). Only 550 sets were printed and the special sets for the general public that had initially been envisioned at the start of the project never came to be.

[3] “The mission of The Champlain Society is to increase public awareness of, and accessibility to, Canada's rich store of historical records,” <http://www.champlainsociety.ca/> (consulted April 16, 2011).

[4] The authors offer a rather odd justification for the selection of the originals upon which they base their French text. “Since Champlain was a French citizen *at the time*, we have chosen to respect this French heritage by comparing RES-LK 12-719 in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, as the no-date edition [1603], with the contiguous book on the shelf, RES-LK12-719 (A), representative of the second edition, clearly dated 1604” (p.112). My emphasis.

[5] “His greatest weakness was in estimating distance, failing to convert these estimates to a common scale on his small-scale maps, and on occasions using more than one prime meridian on the same map without indicating he had done so” (p. 14).

[6] Biggar, *The Works*, 2: 80-100. On French-Iroquois relations see Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) and Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[7] “Ils ne bougent d’un lieu en dansant, & font quelques gestes & mouvemens du corps levans un pied, & puis l’autre, en frappant contre terre. Or en faisant ceste danse, le Sagamo des Algonmequins qui s’appelle Besouat, estoit assis devant lesdites femmes & filles, au millieu de deux bastons, où estoient les testes de leurs ennemis pendües.” Biggar, *The Works*, 1: 108-109.

[8] *Brief Discours des choses plus remarquables que Sammuel de Champlein de brouage a reconneues aux Indes occidentales...* in Biggar, *The Works*, 1: 3-80.

Céline Carayon
Utah Valley University
ccarayon@uvu.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief for H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172