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Simon Desjardins and Pierre Pharoux. *Castorland Journal: An Account of the Exploration and Settlement of New York State by French Emigrés in the Years 1793 to 1797*. Ed. and trans. by John A. Gallucci. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010. xxx + 410 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8014-4626-9

Review by Thomas J. Schaeper, St. Bonaventure University.

This book contributes to several historical themes of the late eighteenth century: the explosion of land speculation beyond the eastern seaboard after the American Revolution; the settlement of northwestern New York in particular; the experiences of French settlers in America; the desires of many Frenchmen not only to invest in American lands, but to escape the turmoil of the French Revolution.

The core of this book is the so-called Castorland Journal. Gallucci provides the first published English translation of this important document. It was written chiefly by Simon Desjardins and Pierre Pharoux, two agents of the Paris-based Compagnie de New York. In 1792 a small group of Paris businessmen purchased a large chunk of northern New York land from William Constable, an American speculator who had purchased it from Alexander Macomb, who had purchased it from New York State. The Parisians purchased a tract comprising 220,500 acres. Its western boundary was Lake Ontario, with the southern boundary being the Black River. It lay mostly in what later would be Lewis County. Despite the fact that Constable had never visited the territory or had it surveyed, he confidently boasted of its fertile soil, ease of transportation, and grand potential for future settlement. The original investors were led by Pierre Chassanis, who became the director of the company when its charter was officially drawn up in 1793.

The story of land companies in that era is filled with sordid examples of outright fraud. Though the French investors in the Compagnie de New York were naive in their ignorance of the realities on the western frontier, they added their own dose of hucksterism. One of the supplemental documents that Gallucci includes in his book is the Prospectus that the company published in Paris to attract settlers to the new land. This document confidently proclaimed that canals and locks were already under construction, guaranteeing that Castorland would have easy communications with the outside world. The soil in Castorland had “a fertility which no terrain in Europe can equal” (p. 312). The state of New York was “in every respect, one of the most delightful places to live in North America” (p. 313). Taxes in New York were moderate and levied only on luxury goods. Furthermore, the document reported that, in America, the laws were based on liberty and toleration, and the Americans themselves were filled with a spirit of gentleness and benevolence.

Most of the shareholders had no plans to leave France. For them, Castorland was simply an investment. The ultimate goal was to sell the land in much smaller chunks to hundreds of French families who were seeking new lives for themselves in a country where they would be safe from the wars and the guillotine that were making life in France so unpleasant. The company appointed two of its shareholders to travel to the new land, the aforementioned Desjardins and Pharoux. Because the territory was said to be teeming with beavers (*castor* in French), the land was called Castorland.

The Castorland Journal commences in July 1793, when Desjardins and Pharoux were chosen to direct the company's affairs in America. Originally it was not a single document. Rather, Desjardins and Pharoux kept their own separate records of their daily activities and observations. Desjardins's younger brother Geoffrey (the company clerk) also kept some records of events as they transpired. Sometime later all of their observations were brought together (probably by Geoffrey) into a single handwritten journal of more than 700 pages. Pharoux's entries ended in 1795, when he drowned in the flooded waters of the Black River. The journal's last entries date from April 1797, when Desjardins was dismissed by the company's directors and replaced by Rodolphe Tillier.

The history of the manuscript journal itself is interesting. Nothing is known of its whereabouts from the 1790s to 1862, when it was discovered by mere chance by William Appleton, a young American on tour in Europe. He found the bound manuscript in Paris in a bookseller's stall along the Seine. The document was about to be sold for its rag content. He purchased it and donated it to the Massachusetts Historical Society, where it is now housed. In 1864, Franklin B. Hough, a historian of Lewis and Jefferson counties, found out about it and translated it into English. Hough's translation had numerous errors and was never published.

Desjardins and Pharoux were charged with a truly herculean task. They were supposed to survey the entire territory and divide it into small pieces that could be sold to the anticipated influx of French and American settlers. To prepare the land for "civilization," they aimed to build roads, sawmills, warehouses, log homes, and a host of other structures. They were then supposed to sell parcels of land to newly-arrived immigrants at prices that would profit the company in Paris. Instead, Desjardins and Pharoux faced one nearly insurmountable problem after another. Virtually every page contains remarks about the weather (foggy, rainy, cold, snowy), non-navigable waterways, or surly and unreliable American workers whom they had hired. The biggest challenge they faced was just getting an accurate survey of the land. William Constable had failed to provide such a survey, despite his promises. After many months of work, Desjardins and Pharoux finally achieved an accurate survey, but they discovered that the amount of land their company owned was thousands of acres below the figure of 220,500 that the company supposedly had purchased. The cause was the route that the Black River took as it flowed into Lake Ontario. That river formed the southern boundary of Castorland, but Desjardins and Pharoux discovered that the river meandered much further north than Constable had indicated. This led to much legal wrangling until a compromise was eventually worked out.

Prior to the formation of the Compagnie de New York, several Frenchmen had traveled through North America and published their findings. The most famous of these accounts was St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, which was published in a French edition in 1784. Crèvecoeur's book extolled the salubrious climate, the fertile soil, and friendly people in the several states that he had visited. The marquis de Chastellux's *Travels in North-America* also was available in France in the late 1780s; in it Chastellux recorded his favorable impressions of prominent men whom he met, particularly George Washington. Desjardins and Pharoux's encounters with Americans were often less amicable. During their journeys between New York City, Philadelphia, Albany, and the "cold country" of Castorland, Desjardins and Pharoux met many Americans but were disappointed that none of them ever invited the two Frenchmen to stay in their homes overnight. Repeatedly Americans defrauded or overcharged them for horses and supplies. The journal bemoans these "bothersome Yankee dealings" (p. 129). Along the way Desjardins and Pharoux had occasion to meet several prominent citizens. This is what they had to say about Robert Morris and Thomas Jefferson. "Mr. Robert Morris...received us without ceremony, as he saw that there was nothing which he could gain from us. Mr. Jefferson, minister of foreign affairs, did not offer us any chairs, but we knew enough to take some. He asked us if many French people would come to America. We answered that, in all probability, several thousand families would come here seeking

tranquility and true liberty. That made him grimace, which we found amusing, all the more so, as we knew his hatred of foreigners, which he did not even hide in his notes on Virginia” (p.68). Desjardins and Pharoux then proceeded to broaden their critique of Americans. “Europeans are dreaded here. The businessman fears that the foreigner, newly-arrived, will want to share the profits of his business; the farmer, that he will make the price of land go up; the land jobber, that he will unmask him; the man of reputation, that he will prove his ineptitude; and the ambitious man, that among these immigrants, there might be found a person who will eclipse him through his talents. In short, Americans of every station and condition look at us the way children, busy with a nice treat, would view others approaching with whom they foresee that the cake will have to be shared” (pp. 68-69). Desjardins and Pharoux were so put off by the lack of hospitality that they decided not to seek an audience with George Washington, though the American ambassador in Paris had provided them with a letter of introduction.

One cannot be sure why Morris and Jefferson received the visitors so coldly. With Morris it is possible that he perceived Castorland to be a rival to his own plans to recruit French immigrants to a proposed settlement in Asylum, Pennsylvania. The case of Jefferson is particularly surprising, given his avowed affection for the French and their Revolution. His reaction to Desjardins and Pharoux might have been caused by the acrimonious debates in American politics over the issue of neutrality in the war then raging in Europe. A large influx of French immigrants at that juncture could have inflamed the sentiments of the anti-French wing in Washington’s government. As Gallucci notes, Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* expresses some reservations about the intermingling of settlers from different parts of Europe.

Like so many other land companies of that era, Castorland proved a failure. When the directors in Paris dismissed Desjardins in 1797, they assumed that he bore much of the responsibility for the lack of any profits. As of that year, little progress had been made in developing roads or attracting French settlers. Only a couple of dozen families had purchased small plots of land in the company’s holdings. The later history of the company demonstrated that Desjardins had not been the problem. The enterprise went downhill from 1797 to the dissolution of the company in 1814, when its lands were disposed of at a significant loss for the original investors. Probably the two most important reasons for the disappointment were the failure to comprehend the difficulties of settling a region so inhospitable and inaccessible, and the reluctance of the Paris shareholders to provide enough funds for the roads, sawmills, and other things that were needed to attract settlers.

Gallucci’s book is a nice companion to Edith Pilcher’s *Castorland: French Refugees in the Western Adirondacks, 1793-1814* (Harrison, NY: Harbor Hill Books. 1985). It also helps to fill a chapter in the story of French emigration to the early republic.[1] Gallucci’s annotated edition and translation are superb. The many endnotes give full explanations and identifications of the various terms and names that appear in the text. The journal will be of interest mostly to Americanists who study western expansion, land companies, and the early settlement of New York State, but aspects of it will also interest French historians.

NOTES

[1] Other works that have dealt with this theme include Frances Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790-1800: An American Chapter of the French Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940); T. Wood Clarke, *Emigrés in the Wilderness* (New York: Macmillan, 1941); Peter P. Hill, *French Perceptions of the Early American Republic, 1783-1793* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988); and Catherine T. C. Spaeth, “America in the French Imagination: The French Settlers of Asylum, Pennsylvania, and Their Perceptions of 1790s America,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38 (2008): 247-74.

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