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H-France Review Vol. 20 (January 2020), No. 35

Gilles Havard, *L'Amérique fantôme: Les aventuriers francophones du Nouveau Monde*.

Montreal: Flammarion Québec, 2019. 656 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$45.95 CDN. ISBN 978-2890778818

Review by Benjamin Hoffmann, The Ohio State University.

French contributions to the unfolding of American history have often been undervalued. Hollywood movies, for example, tend to gloss over French and Francophone individuals in their depiction of the Far West: cowboys, trappers, and explorers are decisively American heroes. Gilles Havard has a different perspective on this subject. His recent book, *L'Amérique fantôme*, argues that the discovery and colonization of the North American continent is *also* a French story.

A research director at the CNRS, Havard has published widely in the field of European and Amerindian relations in North America. A true *incontournable*, his *Histoire de l'Amérique française* (2004, paperback in 2014, cowritten with Cécile Vidal) is a rich synthesis on the French colonial empire in North America, embracing its full chronological scope, from Jacques Cartier's explorations of the Saint Lawrence River in the 1530s to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, a genuine tour de force precisely describing the role played by the colonial administration, the French army, and the Catholic Church in the progressive, and ultimately unsuccessful, French colonization of the North American continent.

Centered on individual itineraries, *L'Amérique fantôme* differs from the broad perspective adopted in *Histoire de l'Amérique française*. Havard's new book is indeed characterized by its conscious proximity with microhistory, a genre notably exemplified by Alain Corbin's *The Life of an Unknown* (French edition, 1998; English translation, 2001). Much the same way Corbin followed in the footsteps of a forgotten clog maker, giving life and speech to this illiterate man who barely left any traces of his existence, Havard resurrects shadowy figures who, from the Renaissance to the last decades of the nineteenth century, contributed to the exploration of North America and lived closely with a number of Amerindian tribes. Sharing with microhistory its ambition to illustrate collective tendencies through the meticulous analysis of specific cases, *L'Amérique fantôme* illuminates, thanks to step-by-step accounts on individual trajectories, the power relations between the various worlds that collided in America during the course of three centuries: the multifaceted world of Native American tribes, with their shifting alliances and specificities, as well as a number of shared cultural and religious practices; the French world across the Atlantic, growing around Montreal, Trois-Rivières, and Québec, which created an expanding network of commercial relations connecting the depths of the American wilderness to

the French metropole; and the thriving power of the United States, whose belief in their “Manifest Destiny” led to the progressive erasure from collective memory of the French trappers who, nonetheless, daringly contributed to the exploration of North America.

Precisely, *L'Amérique fantôme* boldly sets out to counteract a narrative conveniently passing over the very existence of these French explorers: “in the end, the adventure of these men did not mark profoundly the collective imagination, in part because of its Francophone component, neglected and even stifled in the United States, in part, too, because of a lack of headlines and leading figures among them” (p. 14, my translation). In many cases, Havard was indeed confronted with a paucity of historical documents that would have hindered a less tenacious researcher. Most of them illiterates, the adventurers he chose to portray in his book left no written marks of their own, besides the humble cross they used to sign legal documents, as Toussaint Charbonneau (1767-1843), for example, did. Havard’s daunting task consisted in reconstructing the itinerary of these evanescent figures, thanks to an astounding archival work whose results are elegantly presented in the successive biographical chapters that compose this hefty volume. The success of Havard’s book results in no small part from the consideration he grants to these long-gone figures, even the humblest ones among them, out of a desire to reconstruct, as carefully and truthfully as possible, who they were and what they managed to achieve in the course of their journeys into the unknown. In the chapter he dedicates to the fascinating expedition of the La Vérendrye brothers (1742-1743), the very first Europeans to cross the northern Great Plains and reach the Rocky Mountains, Havard for instance observes that two Frenchmen accompanied the more illustrious brothers, two ghosts whose memory has been almost entirely abolished, in no small part because Louis-Joseph de la Vérendrye barely mentions them in the account he wrote of his heroic journey. Piecing together the puzzle of their existences, which only left a handful of minuscule clues in various documents, Havard saves from complete oblivion the two travel companions of the La Vérendrye brothers, Amiot and Lalonde, and, with the deductive powers of a modern Sherlock Holmes, reconstructs how they, too, became the first Europeans to fix their gazes upon the Rocky Mountains.

A collection of biographical essays deftly woven together, *L'Amérique fantôme* is also the demonstration of the contiguity between the very best historical writing and the art of the novel. If a parallel can be drawn between these two forms of writing, it is in no small part because the colorful characters presented in this book lived lives that could have easily become the subject of a bildungsroman. One of them, Pierre-Esprit Radisson (1636-1710), certainly thought so himself as he wrote a travel narrative directly influenced by the picaresque tradition, at the same time retracing his adventures in Amerindian territories and constructing a heroic representation of himself in which the resourcefulness of the humble picaro is transported into the context of the American wilderness and used as an implicit narrative model. In the chapter he dedicates to this French fur trader and explorer in New France, perhaps one of the most compelling chapters in the volume, Havard follows the *Voyages of Peter Esprit Radisson* (written in England in 1686 and published for the first time in 1865), to depict the ups and downs of his hero’s checkered career. Here, as in many other instances throughout the volume, Havard deploys his authentic literary talents in order to portray the interior world of his character, a young man wavering between the French world from which he comes and the Amerindian way of life he progressively discovers. Much the way a novelist portrays the evolution of his or her character and the complex interplay of chance, social forces, circumstances, and personal decisions that interact to create a person’s itinerary in this world, Havard illustrates how the young Radisson, who first finds his place within the Amerindian world during his youth, ends up despising Native Americans at the

twilight of his life: “Grown during his long years at the service of the Hudson Bay Company, colonial arrogance drives [Radisson] away from the spontaneity that, at a younger age, led him to appreciate his life among the ‘Savages’” (p. 163). In reading *L’Amérique fantôme*, one is bound to ask: when does an historian become a novelist? Respect for the truth is not a valid criterion to distinguish between these two creative figures, since writers, especially when undertaking historical novels, usually accomplish a staggering amount of research and develop, as historians do, an intimate familiarity with the period they describe. Perhaps the question itself needs to be disqualified as, when all is said and done, both novelists and historians attempt to come as close as possible to an understanding of the complex interplay between personal choices and external circumstances, or, in other words, an understanding of the lived experience of their object of study. This lived experience, always deeply singular while also reflecting larger social and historical trends, is closely approached by Havard as he follows ten different itineraries; and the fact that he writes with a genuine attention to the material and sensorial world of his various heroes, is another credit he deserves. Havard’s efforts to reconstruct the world in which his characters lived is likewise demonstrated by the rich iconography he selected for his volume. Numerous photographs present locations in France and America mentioned in the course of the text while a significant section at the core of the book compiles portraits and paintings that help the reader imagine these lost worlds and their long-gone inhabitants.

Overall, the wealth of information shared in this erudite volume is truly astounding and fills numerous gaps in the available scholarship. Havard’s research demonstrates, for example, that even one of the most iconic events in American history, the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1806), has its own “French connection”: the contribution of a Francophone trapper, the above-mentioned Toussaint Charbonneau, who crossed the western United States with Lewis and Clark, along with his wife, the famous Sakakawea, providing the two Americans with his intimate experience of the wilderness and his linguistic skills as a translator. Effectively realizing the program laid out in his introduction, which consists in connecting the *petite histoire* to the great one, the “minuscule lives” of forgotten trappers to the social, cultural, historical, and geopolitical evolutions they witnessed, Havard constantly links the specific itinerary of his various characters to larger trends. His chapter on Étienne Brûlé (1592-1633), the first European to journey beyond the St. Lawrence River, offers fascinating insights about the life of the various Native American tribes living in what is now known as Canada while demonstrating the creation of a Franco-Amerindian world in which coexistence, cooperation, and intimacy took place. Similarly, the chapter on Étienne Provost (1785-1850), “the man of the mountains,” is the occasion to underline the terrifying destruction of the American fauna, beavers and buffaloes being killed by the thousands during the course of his life. Most importantly, French and Francophone trappers were also key witnesses of the progressive decline of Native American tribes: Radisson observed the fall of the Huron Confederacy in the 1640s, while Charbonneau saw the devastation caused by the outbreak of smallpox that decimated the Hidatsa and Mandan tribes two centuries later. The ten main characters of this fascinating book allow us to revisit from a new angle the story of Canada and the United States, while inviting us to follow suit and pursue this enterprise in our turn by rediscovering French and Francophone travelers who also ventured across the Atlantic. The list is still long, and much remains to be done: numerous French ghosts, who also wandered throughout North America, are still waiting to be resurrected, and it will be the task of future historians to measure up to *L’Amérique fantôme*.

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ISSN 1553-9172