
H-France Review Vol. 21 (June 2021), No. 92

Thomas M. Carr, Jr. *A Touch of Fire: Marie-André Duplessis, the Hôtel-Dieu of Quebec, and the Writing of New France*. Montreal & Kingston, London, Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. x + 370 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$37.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-2280-00094-5; (cl). ISBN 978-0-2280-0094-5; (ePDF). ISBN 978-0-2280-0234-5; (eb). ISBN 978-0-2280-0235-2.

Review by Heidi M. Keller-Lapp, San Diego State University.

Marie-André Duplessis (1687-1760) was a woman of firsts. This is how Thomas Carr characterizes this nun, administrator, archivist, and author in *A Touch of Fire*, his illuminating biography of a New France nun whose leadership of the Hôtel-Dieu of Quebec spanned from 1732 to 1760. Through the methods of family history and friendship studies, Carr uncovers the formative experiences that prepared Marie-André Duplessis for her spiritual and professional roles.^[1] He reveals her family background, successive professional encounters, and significant long-term friendships with women as the fundamental experiences that shaped her “fire”: her disposition, sharp managerial skills, and range and quality of writing. Carr relies on colonial archives, records, and correspondence in this biography, but he also features Duplessis’s personal correspondence with family and friends on both sides of the French Atlantic. Doing so, he offers a welcome approach to understanding the colonial dynamics and emerging narratives of New France during the later stages of French imperialism before, and including, the 1759 British occupation of Quebec that would soon lead to the British conquest of Canada. In *A Touch of Fire*, we follow Marie-André Duplessis as she guided the Hôtel-Dieu and its core mission of care of the poor and sick through its transition into a military hospital, through the siege of her convent, and ultimately through a transfer of imperial power. Her biography offers an inside view of that process.

Marie-André Duplessis might be new to many readers of French-Canadian colonial history. In fact, Carr argues that the conventional, providentialist view of French colonial women has privileged Marie de l’Incarnation Guyart (1639-1672) and the Ursulines of Quebec, thereby overlooking other female historical actors such as Duplessis whom clerical literary sources had characterized as a *femme tendre* (a gentlewoman) in the shadow of the *femme forte* (heroic woman) Guyart. One cannot help but make a comparison between these two administrator nuns; this reviewer found herself doing the same. Carr, however, rightfully questions the fairness of this characterization. Employing family and friendship history and through an analysis of all of Duplessis’s spiritual, intellectual, personal, and administrative writings, Carr reconceptualizes her place in French colonial history as a woman of firsts among colonial administrators and among writers of New France, female or otherwise. Carr asks his sources: how was her fire a

product of her family background and early experience as a nun, and how did she channel this energy in her administrative and leadership roles (pp. 4-5)?

To address these questions, the book opens with Marie-André Duplessis, as a recording secretary for her mother superior, delivering an impassioned protest of the bishop's order to house sick priests near the nuns' quarters of the Hôtel-Dieu. Carr describes Duplessis's fiery disposition, overreactions, "resolute energy," a "playful spirit," and "intellectual drive" as expressions of her skills that were formed and tested over a lifetime of involvement in relationships with formative women and revealed in reactions to bishops' orders, intendants' budgets, and suppliers' delayed provisions for the hospital she supervised (pp. 18-25). This approach is one of the gems of the book. Carr traces the passage of Duplessis's life through five periods that shaped her personal and professional networks: her childhood in Paris; adolescence in Quebec; early years as a nun in the Hôtel-Dieu; growing administrative, spiritual, and literary ambitions; and full-time position as convent and hospital superior. Each chapter reveals a piece of her formation for these roles.

Marie André Duplessis was born in Paris where her childhood was shaped by a "trinity" of three independent women in whose care she was placed: her maternal grandmother, her aunt, and a friend of her aunt, whose daughter Marie-Catherine Homassel became an intimate and life-long, transatlantic friend (pp. 4-8). It was here that Duplessis observed an independent female-run business, female-headed household, and the tenacity and resilience of women's networks. Torn from these foundational relationships to return to her family in Quebec, she began the next period of her life. Her adolescence was marked by a growing bond with her sister Geneviève, while her family worked through scandals resulting in the loss of her father's position in the colonial treasurer's office, his *seigneurie*, and the family's financial status in Quebec. While their brothers were educated by the Jesuits in France, Geneviève and Marie witnessed the resilience of their mother's efforts to mitigate the family's decline through legal interventions, property management, and negotiations with colonial agents. While their mother's independence, financial acuity, and "feisty temper" made strong impressions on the girls, she could not ultimately prevent her husband's death nor her family's losses (p. 47). Upon her death, Geneviève and Marie maintained regular correspondence with their brothers Charles-Denis (who returned and remained in Quebec) and François Xavier (who became a Jesuit and sought-after preacher in France).

Marie Duplessis shared the same vows and spiritual formation with Geneviève in their early life in the convent of the Hôtel-Dieu under the direction of a significant mother superior Jeanne-Françoise Juchereau, who, with a fiery temperament of her own, mentored Duplessis and appointed her as her personal secretary and redactor of the convent's archives. This promotion launched Marie and Geneviève into the world of convent and colonial affairs that bound them together, as Carr argues, by "inclination as much as blood" (p. 5). More could be said about how their spiritual formation as active Hôtel-Dieu nuns impacted their relationship as sisters, their life in this particular female-centered community, and their developing professional partnership as sister-nuns and convent leaders, but it is clear that their attachment grew into a significant personal and administrative partnership throughout their adult lives.

Marie-André Duplessis was a first among administrators. She held the primary leadership offices of mother superior (six times over 16 years), assistant superior, and bursar with increasing involvement in community and imperial affairs. She had become the administrator of a "powerhouse of a central colonial institution" with direct access to intendents, bishops, suppliers,

patrons, and generals (p. 6). Because the primary purpose of her religious order was hospital care, she could focus on the administration of hospital budgets, supplies, personnel and the negotiations necessary to maintain these. For this Carr recognizes her as a “managerial *femme forte*” whose heroic virtue was attained with the success of the Hôtel-Dieu (p. 261). Geneviève served several terms with her, as bursar and assistant.

Marie-André Duplessis was a first among Canadian writers, women writers in particular. Although not unique in the scope of her direct correspondence with colonial officials, intendents, and bishops, Carr argues that no other eighteenth-century woman in New France, and perhaps no man, left a corpus written with such “versatility, verve, and range” (p. 16). Marie was a narrator who “found multiple ways of writing New France” (p. 7). Her works include *Histoire du Ruma* (a literary narrative), *Histoire de l’Hôtel-Dieu de Québec* (first book published by a Canadian woman), *Musique spirituelle* (first North American treatise on music theory as a spiritual allegory), and *Dissection spirituelle* (spiritual reflections negotiating theological tensions). Carr uncovers the full corpus of Duplessis’ writings and makes it accessible to scholars and students. He positions Duplessis as “a major figure of colonial Canadian letters” (p. 16).

One of the most illuminating aspects of this biography, at least to this reviewer, is Carr’s analysis of Duplessis’s personal correspondence to illustrate the transatlantic transmission of Jansenist ideas in New France. While Marie sustained a regular personal and professional correspondence with her brother (an ardent and active Jesuit who regularly sent her spiritual advice), she also nurtured her friendship with Marie-Catherine Homassel who, Carr’s research informs us, was a committed Jansenist. Whether or not Duplessis fully realized this, she continued to negotiate these delicate and consequential relationships through the transatlantic post, a skill that we can only observe because Carr has centered family and friendships in the telling of Duplessis’s story. This triad relationship, however, raises many questions that are not answered in this book, but might inspire others: Where are the Jesuits of Quebec in this story, after having played such a pivotal role in founding religious institutions in Quebec? What was the relationship of the Jesuits to the Hôtel-Dieu, to the spiritual formation of the hospital nuns who served there, and to Duplessis? Did they serve as spiritual directors or confessors as they had with other Quebec convents? In other words, was Ignatian spirituality or Jesuit collaboration significant to the hospital nuns under Duplessis’s charge as they had been earlier in Canadian history? If so, what impact might this have had on Duplessis’s efforts to maintain her relationships with her Jesuit brother or her Jansenist friend, or their influence on her? [3] Carr rightly attributes the hospital nuns’ mixed-life vocation to their spiritual formation, but he only hints at Jesuit influences and interactions. Perhaps there is more to examine here, especially when considering the relationship between Marie and her Jesuit brother and Marie and her Jansenist friend.

A Touch of Fire is a welcome and significant contribution to the scholarship that centers Catholic nuns and *quebecoises* women in the story of colonial governance. It is first a significant, updated biography of Marie-André Duplessis that more clearly positions her and the Hôtel-Dieu in the history of New France and as a bridge between two continents in the years leading up to the British occupation of Quebec. It provides an inside view of the British siege and the transfer of power from women’s perspective, and it stimulates further interest and questions. Moreover, it is an excellent model of the use of family history and friendship studies to demonstrate symbiotic relationships between the personal and political in colonial history and of a method to trace the transmission of ideas across the Atlantic. With gender as a lens of analysis, *A Touch of Fire* will

be of special interest to scholars and students of gender and French colonial history, colonial writing, and Jansenism in French colonial history.

NOTES

[1] Carr relies on the following family studies: Josette Brun, "Gender, Family, and Mutual Assistance in New France: Widows, Widowers, and Orphans in Eighteenth-Century Quebec," in Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau ed., *Mapping Margins: The Family and Social Discipline in Canada 1700-1975* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 35-68; Sara E. Chapman, "Patronage as Family Economy: The Role of Women in the Patron-Client Network of the Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain Family, 1670-1715," *French Historical Studies* 24 (2001): 11-35; Benoît Grenier, "Jean Rioux: émigrant breton, seigneur canadien," *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'ouest* 111 (2004): 73-88; Julie Hardwick, "Introduction: Centering Families in Atlantic History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70 (2013): 205-24; Jean-Paul Macouin, *Les Familles pionnières de la Nouvelle France dans les archives du minutier central de Paris* (Montreal: Société de recherche historique, 2016); Pierre-Georges Roy, *La Famille Guillimin* (Lévis, QC: 1917); Julie Wheelwright, *Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright: Puritan Child, Native Daughter, Mother Superior*, (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2011). On friendship and spiritual friendship: Julie Chandler Hayes, "Friendship and the Female Moralizer," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 39 (2010): 171-89; Ulrich Langer, *Perfect Friendship: Studies in Literature and Moral Philosophy from Boccaccio to Corneille* (Geneva: Droz, 1994); Terence A. McGoldrick, *The Sweet and Gentle Struggle: Francis de Sales on the Necessity of Spiritual Friendship* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996); François Melançon and Paul-André Dubois, "Les Amitiés féminines et la construction de l'espace savant du XVIIIe siècle," in Manon Brunet, ed., *Érudition et passions dans les écritures intimes* (Montreal: Éditions Nota Bene, 1999), 97-113; Patricia Smart, *De Marie de l'Incarnation à Nelly Arcan: se dire, se faire par l'écriture intime* (Montreal: Boréal, 2014); Tara K. Soughers, "Friendship with the Saints: A Practical Theological Reading of Teresa of Avila as a Spiritual Companion," (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2013); Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

[2] Mita Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2004) and Heidi Keller-Lapp, *Floating Cloisters and Femmes Forte: Ursuline Missionaries in Ancien Régime France and Its Colonies* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2005).

[3] J. Michelle Molina and Ulrike Strasser, "Missionary Men and the Global Currency of Female Sanctity," in Daniella Kostroun and Lisa Vollendorf, eds., *Women, Religion, and the Atlantic World (1600-1800)*, 233-267, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

Heidi Keller-Lapp
San Diego State University
hkellerlapp@sdsu.edu

Copyright © 2021 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

edistribution/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 republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172