

We Shall Be One People: Quebec



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Translated from the French by Michel Lavoie.

One more time, in this summer of 1633, a ship brought Samuel de Champlain back to Québec. The travellers spent more than two months at sea before reaching Percé where, finally, they were able to stock up with fresh water and be on their way towards Tadoussac, at the mouth of the Saguenay River, the destination beyond which sailing ships did not dare to venture. With its squalls, reefs, and fogs, the St. Lawrence River was seen to be far too dangerous. Four to five days were necessary still to navigate against the current in small crafts over a distance of 180 kilometres before reaching Québec, this small post so close to salt water and yet so far from the sea, and obstructed by ice five months a year. Champlain singled out this site as early as 1608, one reason being that from a cape, cannons could be installed to

control the narrows of this river leading upstream to the Great Lakes ("Quebec" means "narrows" in the Micmac language). Hazardous for the great sailing ships, Québec opened up the whole continent to the legendary canoe. By 1633, Champlain had already drawn detailed maps of the Saguenay and three of the Great Lakes, as well as the waterways leading to Hudson's Bay and even those that could potentially open the passage to China.

With a group of approximately fifty men, Champlain was taking over the small post left in a neglected state after its capture, in the name of the English Crown, by the Kirke brothers in 1629. The town he returned to was an establishment by the waterfront, composed of a few buildings in the lower part of the city, and, in the upper part, Fort St. Louis armed with a few cannons to block the entrance of the river to rival merchants. How many men had scurvy and winter cut down in the previous years? Champlain had only survived because, at the expense of his own men, he had saved for himself a more balanced diet. Game barter with the nearby Montagnais and the settling of a few French families had finally allowed residents to escape the initial hecatombs.

Champlain had dreamt earlier to make out of Québec the *Ludovica* of the New World, but misfortune had plagued the newborn colony. He understood the necessity to look beyond the simple logic of commercial interests expressed by merchants in the fur trade, for whom the arrival of new settlers meant increased competition. But who, rather than taking the direction of the West Indies, would prefer venturing into such a cold, harsh country? The Protestants? Had not a handful of them commanded or participated in the very first voyages in the seventeenth century? Could this have changed? Futile hopes, since the Catholic party had finally prevailed in France. The resumption of the religious wars led to the siege of La Rochelle in 1629 and to the death of 80 percent of the reformed residents. If the Protestants no longer had the right of establishment in the colony, they could, however, scuttle its foundation: eight ships and five hundred immigrants on their way to lay the basis of a new French and Catholic society were captured by English Protestants demonstrating solidarity with their counterparts in La Rochelle.

How to revive a French and Catholic *Ludovica* in the absence of French settlers? Worse still, how to do this while the very few men who immigrated decided to leave quickly, failing to find French wives? Champlain hoped that a solution, indeed, would present itself. Wasn't the small colonial post located within Indian country? To be sure, there were no more sedentary Indians; not since the 1580s, when the St. Lawrence Iroquois vanished, even before the French settled, probably under the combined effects of wars, climatic changes, and epidemics. However, every summer Québec played host to approximately fifteen hundred Algonquins and Montagnais. They came to fetch birch bark for their canoes, chase wildfowl, fish salmons and sturgeons, but above all to catch the phenomenal quantities of eels that they smoked and stocked up for winter. These Indians were gathering at the mouth of the St. Charles River, immediately downriver from the French post, and, upriver, at Ka-Miskoua-ouangachit, which would become Sillery (now a district of Québec City). This is not taking into

account those six hundred Hurons and Nipissings that a one-month trip and fifteen hundred kilometres from the Great Lakes brought annually to Québec for a one-week stay at the fur fair. They arrived in flotillas of canoes, up to one hundred and forty at the same time, wearing bear, beaver, or moose skins. They were, the Jesuits said, "well made men of splendid figures, tall, powerful, good-natured, and able-bodied." Their encampments, in close proximity to the establishment, easily outnumbered the French residents settled in the whole colony.



"Carte de l'entrée de Québec" in *Les Voyages du Sieur de Champlain Xaintongeois* (Paris, 1613), facing page 176. From the Musée de la Civilisation, Bibliothèque du Séminaire de Québec, Fonds Ancien. Loc. 23.7.4. Photographed by Pierre Soulard.

The various native groups held councils with the governor to renew friendship and alliances between brothers, as each and everyone considered themselves. The Jesuits were fascinated by the proceedings of these councils, especially those between French and Hurons. They who vowed the greatest admiration to Greco-Roman civilization, who mastered Indian languages, who could easily follow debates and decode rituals, wrote in 1633 regarding a talented Huron orator that he "arose to answer, but with a keenness and delicacy of rhetoric that might have come out of the schools of Aristotle or Cicero." The councils debated alliance conditions, warfare plans against the Iroquois, conflict settlements, and even alliance-threatening murders. Murder was not punished in the French manner—by the hanging of the murderer—but by redress and compensation in the form of presents handed out by the aggressor's family to the victim's family in accordance to the country's custom.

The Huron visitors traded their furs with the French for "blankets, hatchets, kettles, capes, iron arrow-points, little glass beads, shirts . . . and many similar things." They also traded their tobacco and their fishing nets with the Montagnais. They visited the chapel, admired holy images and had access to the Jesuits' carpentry workshop—although always under surveillance, for the fathers were afraid their tools would be stolen. The Indians even sampled European delicacies, including a lemon they tasted in the presence of the French, who were bursting with laughter. The visitors were scandalized by the chastisements

imposed by the French upon their children. French authorities of the then small village of Québec knew very well that they were guests in an Indian country over which they had yet to impose their control.

How to establish a French province in America without immigration? A solution presented itself in the transformation of Indians into Frenchmen. Would those "miserable pagans" renounce darkness in order to rise to the lights of faith through the missions? Wouldn't these poor nomads become sedentary farmers as soon as they were taught the ways of the trade? In fact, weren't they expressly asking for this transformation to happen? And, furthermore, why limit "progress" to the sole close neighbors? Hadn't Québec been allied to the powerful Great Lakes Huron since 1609? These Hurons would certainly recognize the pope as their spiritual father and the king as their temporal father and in this way become French naturals. They would doubtlessly be able to achieve this so much more easily since they were sedentary and some of them had already been converted to Catholicism.

For the French, generally intolerant of religious differences, the multiplicity of cultures, statuses, and traditions among the natives did not constitute an obstacle to integration. The successes of their colony in Paraguay, where Indians accepted collective protection under Jesuit patronage, showed that all that was needed were missionaries to preach, to teach children, to regroup and settle nomads within defined boundaries. There was also a need for the presence of a few good devoted Catholic families to set the example of faith and hard work, and to conclude matrimonial alliances. No heretics, no people with morally reprehensible habits such as the young single pregnant woman who, after she arrived in Québec in 1658, was immediately returned to France, presumably to give birth on the ship taking her back across the Atlantic. Soon, Montagnais, Algonquins, Hurons, and French, and how many more, would form a single people. Champlain formally affirmed this notion to the allied Montagnais and Huron chiefs in 1633 and 1635 when he said that "our young men will marry your daughters, and we shall be one people." While in agreement with Champlain's ideals, the Montagnais chiefs found the pledge amusing, since that promise had probably been vainly reiterated many times in the previous thirty years.

Sometimes they did seem to be one people. A few native interpreters had married in Huronia. Why then did the young Frenchmen at the post fail to act in a similar fashion? Perhaps they rejected the obligation of a Catholic marriage, over which priests in Québec and in the Sillery and the Huronia missions exercised a very strict control. And for this first generation of Frenchmen in America, getting married and becoming hunters must have been as remote and unimaginable as it was for young nomad Indian women to transform themselves into sedentary peasants.

The Jesuits took leadership of the project both in the distant Huronia and on site in Québec. They built a house beside the two principal Indian encampments, the main one being in Sillery. With funding from a devoted donor, Noël Brûlart

of Sillery, they supervised the clearing of lands and the construction of houses where two Christian Montagnais chiefs—Noël Negabamat and François-Xavier Negaskoumat, both reputed for their loyalty—and their families could settle and experience sedentary life. Furthermore, considering that they occupied ancestral Indian lands, the Christian newcomers were awarded a seigneurial concession that stretched for five kilometres along the river, and ran back fifty kilometres into the woods. While the Jesuits maintained a tutorial role, the few French settlers established in Sillery were in fact under the jurisdiction of Indian chiefs seigniors. Still missing were “three batteries” of French priests and nuns committed “to destroy the empire of Satan and unfurl the banner of Jesus Christ in these regions.” Providence supplied them in 1639 with the arrival in Québec of “a college of Jesuits, an establishment of hospital nuns and a convent of Ursulines,” that is to say, approximately a dozen religious figures. Taken to Sillery the very next day, the newcomers fell into tears at the sight of these Indians devoutly praying and melodiously singing Christian hymns in their own languages. The hospital nuns settled in quickly, treating patients that were already affected by fast-travelling epidemics, and helping the poor, homeless, and itinerant people who were, in their view, those indigent hunter-gatherers.

Very soon, little boys and girls, for the most part chiefs’ children, were studying in the Ursulines’ and Jesuits’ boarding schools established in Québec. The teaching was trilingual, in French, Montagnais, and Huron. Negabamat, elegantly dressed in the French fashion, receiving all ceremonial honours, presented himself as an ambassador of the French while travelling to Tadoussac and further down the river to negotiate commercial agreements. He even went to Boston and Plymouth to consolidate an alliance with the Sokoquis, the Pennacooks, and the Mahicans against the Iroquois.

Approximately forty families from various nations settled in Sillery, but the epidemics overwhelmed them quickly, bringing doubt in their wake. Weren’t Indians dreadfully dying since the arrival of the French? Couldn’t the latter be responsible for the deaths? On the other hand, weren’t the French here to resuscitate Indian nations, weren’t they caring for Indians, weren’t they constructing houses for them? Should Indians be cured with blessed water or the sound of drums? How and by which criteria should the chiefs of this small cosmopolitan universe be selected: according to heredity, secret vote, the intensity of their religious practice? Was it necessary to expel pagans from the mission, to punish polygamy, to chain adulterous women? Should Indians get closer to the French settlers who were established on the seigneurial lands, or move away from them because they were not equally possessed by the neophyte fervor, and, above all, because they did not dislike alcohol?

In some ways, the different peoples did indeed become close. Regularly, Indian parents chose French people of note as their newborns’ godmothers or godfathers, but the Jesuits were not very favorable to marriages between native converts and French: in thirty years (1638-68) only five ceremonies were held. The fathers also watched over morals and forbade “night visits” between

unmarried couples. A final obstacle was the Jesuits' great deception from which the sedentary way of life and conversion could not be dissociated: it was impossible, in a few seasons, to transform—or “reduce,” in the language of the day—a hunter-gatherer into a farmer. In fact, the reduction encouraged the nomadic way of life: couples entrusted, for the winter, their elderly and their young children to the missionaries and the nuns, which facilitated their travelling. And merchants encouraged Indians to keep trapping. They had no need for an Indian farmer who could not supply them with furs. Moreover, there was the threat of the Iroquois, whose warriors patrolled the St. Lawrence, laid ambushes, even threatened Sillery, which was weakly protected by a frail palisade erected on the riverbanks. Many families fled while the nursing nuns took refuge in the higher part of the city. Almost deserted, the mission burned down and was transformed into a refugee camp: for the Abenakis who were driven back by the English settlers, for the Hurons who were annihilated by the Iroquois and who were hounded down as far into the colony as Québec and *l'île d'Orléans*.

Over time, however, most of the refugees left and settled somewhere else. Finally, only approximately 150 Hurons remained in Sillery while, gradually, French families—roughly sixty in 1663—took over the seigniorial lands and settled permanently in Sillery. By that year, the French population approached three thousand. The project designed to create a French province peopled with peasant Indians having failed, the king took over control of the colony in 1663 to people it with immigrants and to conduct a war offensive against the Iroquois.

With the Indian depopulation and the French repopulation, Québec gradually emerged as the capital of a small French and Catholic colony along the St. Lawrence River from Montreal and downstream, while the Upper Country—the country of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi—remained Indian country. Immigration continued, however, to be heavily dominated by men, despite the arrivals of ships transporting numerous “*Filles du Roy*,” orphans to be married. There were easily, in this Lower Country, seven suitors for each woman. The small colony could not survive without the links established with the Upper Country, which it had lost after the Iroquois raids and the defeat of its allies and intermediaries in the fur trade. The arrival of French regiments in 1665 to conduct warfare against the Iroquois permitted the reopening of the Great Lakes trail while the men that could not marry in the colony and who did not wish to return to France became wayfarers or fur traders and went out to meet the Indians in the interior of the continent. Two very different types of Frenchmen embodied the bipolarity of the colony: the settled peasant and the nomad traveller. In the Upper Country, the latter took wife and “indianized,” the native societies transforming these Europeans into Indians where the reverse had proven impossible. But those marriages also gave birth to a new people: the Métis.

Why did intermarriages, not very frequent prior to 1663 despite the gender imbalance, later become an ordinary practice? Because following the

disappearance of the Indian merchants due to epidemics and fur wars, a new intermediary function in the fur trade opened up for the settlers' sons. This third generation, already designated as Canadian rather than French, appropriated the country, travelled the rivers to go out and meet the interior Indian nations, hence slipping out of political and religious controls. Furthermore these travellers and fur traders acquired in Indian country the prestigious function of suppliers of European staples. The marriages conducted according to the country's fashion, that is to say in the Indian fashion, became the norm in the Upper Country.

As he sailed up the river in 1633, did Champlain know that the new phase of Québec's history he began would be a history of an original encounter, of a religiously monolithic but ethnically and culturally pluralistic project, of alliance and interbreeding rather than apartheid?

Further Reading: For further reading on Québec and early New France, see Marcel Trudel, *The Beginnings of New France 1524-1663* (Toronto, 1972); Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers* (Montreal and Kingston, 1985); Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Montreal and Kingston, 1976); Denys Delâge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-1664* (Vancouver, 1995); Nathalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), Dean Louder and Eric Waddell, eds., *French America: Mobility, Identity, and Minority Experience across the Continent* (Baton Rouge, 1993); Rémi Savard, *L'Algonquin Tessouat et la Fondation de Montréal: Diplomatie Franco-Indienne en Nouvelle-France* (Montreal, 1996); François-Marc Gagnon, *La Conversion par L'Image: Un Aspect de la Mission des Jésuites auprès des Indiens du Canada au XVIIe Siècle* (Montreal, 1975); Paul-André Dubois, *De L'Oreille au Coeur: Naissance du Chant Religieux en Langues Amérindiennes dans les Missions de Nouvelle-France, 1600-1650* (Sillery, 1997). For several articles related to the history of French-Indian relations, consult the journal, [Recherches Amérindiennes au Québec](#).

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