

Culture



François-Marc GAGNON, *Ces hommes dits sauvages : L'histoire fascinante d'un préjugé qui remonte aux premiers découvreurs du Canada*, Montréal, Libre Expression, 1984. 190 pages, maps, illustrations, \$19.95 (paper)

Bruce G. Trigger

Volume 4, Number 2, 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078270ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078270ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Trigger, B. (1984). Review of [François-Marc GAGNON, *Ces hommes dits sauvages : L'histoire fascinante d'un préjugé qui remonte aux premiers découvreurs du Canada*, Montréal, Libre Expression, 1984. 190 pages, maps, illustrations, \$19.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 4(2), 67–68.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1078270ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1984

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

François-Marc GAGNON, *Ces hommes dits sauvages: L'histoire fascinante d'un préjugé qui remonte aux premiers découvreurs du Canada*, Montréal, Libre Expression, 1984. 190 pages, maps, illustrations, \$19.95 (paper).

By Bruce G. Trigger
McGill University

The art historian François-Marc Gagnon traces the roots of ethnic prejudice directed against native North Americans in the writings and artistic representations of early New France. He examines in detail the works of Samuel de Champlain, whose attitudes he maintains typified those of ordinary Frenchmen. He also studies Champlain because only his works illustrated as well as described native people to any degree.

Gagnon's approach is implicitly structuralist. He maintains that 17th century Europeans had no doubt about the superiority of their own civilization and regarded cultural diversity as a scandal to be eliminated by assimilation. Hence native people were assumed to lack culture and were assigned as savages to a liminal position between human beings and brute beasts. Their customs were conceptualized in opposition to European ones, with similarities mostly restricted to European peasants, vagabonds, and gypsies. At this period no clear distinction was drawn between innate and learned behaviour. Nudity constituted evidence of a lack of moral sensibility, beardlessness indicated cowardice and lack of intelligence, and elaborate body painting and fancy hairstyles were manifestations of vanity and folly. Indian men were classified as good hunters but hopeless warriors and incurably lazy. Women were drudges but also extremely cruel. It was denied that Indians had religions, their medical practices were ridiculed, and their art described as primitive. Yet their respect for the dead was admired. A distinction was drawn between wandering and sedentary tribes and these were henceforth subjected to differing colonial policies.

Gagnon's analysis tells readers much about the stereotypes that influenced how Champlain and other 17th century Frenchmen viewed native people. Yet it also reveals the inadequacies of a structuralist

approach that does not pay sufficient attention to the historical and social context of its data. He assumes that Champlain's views about Indians closely resembled those of ordinary Frenchmen. But can the opinions of a leading promoter of colonization and the aspiring Governor of New France be regarded as more typical than are those of a lawyer, such as Marc Lescarbot, or Jesuit and Recollet missionaries? Surely all available sources must be considered in an effort to understand the views of a particular period. We also know that Champlain's attitudes toward Indians altered considerably as he evolved from being the employee of a trading company to being a vice-regal official. However important a role certain stereotypes may have played in shaping these opinions, the particular circumstances in which he was writing and the goals that he was pursuing at any one time, as well as the audience he was addressing must be carefully taken into account in interpreting his works.

The broader historical context is also ignored. In *The Myth of the Savage* Olive Dickason has documented how a century of often bitter experiences with the native peoples of the New World shaped the policy of *douceur* that the French had adopted by the beginning of the 17th century. Yet no attention is paid to the manner in which these experiences, which Champlain recounted in his writings, influenced how he thought about the Indians and treated them.

A purely structuralist approach tends to sacrifice variety and complexity in order to produce an elegant formulation. There is also a reluctance to distinguish between the contents of texts and the culturally-conditioned manner in which they are formulated. In the 17th century, most writers no doubt sincerely believed that only Christianity constituted a true religion. Yet, when the Jesuits realized for the first time, in the early 1640s, that the Hurons had a complex set of beliefs and practices that had to be understood and destroyed before true conversion was possible, they were acknowledging that the Indians had a *de facto* religion. Likewise, in matters that did not involve dogma or morality, the Jesuits were prepared to embrace a cultural relativism that noted the differing customs of peoples without attempting to evaluate them in relationship to one another. For their own didactic purposes, the Jesuits also lauded

the generosity of native peoples as exceeding that of Europeans. Gagnon goes too far in claiming that European descriptions of native people reveal much about themselves but little about the people they are describing. Up to a point his argument is valid, but if it were literally true ethnohistorians would not have been able to learn as much as they have about native groups in the 17th century. Their work requires, however, familiarity not only with more recent native cultures but also with the biases of their European sources.

The most disappointing aspect of this book is Gagnon's analysis of Champlain's illustrations. He offers thematic and structural analyses of individual pictures that are interesting but not always convincing. For example, his snowshoed Huron bearing a lance is almost certainly a hunter not a warrior, since Iroquoians did not wage war in the winter. This casts doubt on his assertion that Champlain always had Huron men portrayed as inactive warriors. Gagnon does not draw on his knowledge of European art to elucidate systematically the relationship between Champlain, the engravers of his illustrations, and his printers. It has long been noted that the hammocks, palm trees, and many details of native dress that appear in his books are derived from 16th century illustrations of the Tupinamba of Brazil and the Timucua of Florida. Gagnon relates some of these motifs to the well-known illustrations of Theodore de Bry. Yet he does not analyse these resemblances in detail, nor does he seriously consider why Champlain allowed such inaccuracies to appear in his works—or, indeed, if he had any say in the matter. It is not enough to suggest that the French regarded all Indians as basically similar and hence depictions of them as interchangeable. This hiatus calls into question Gagnon's claim that these engravings accurately document specific aspects of native culture not referred to in Champlain's writings. Nor does Gagnon's analysis of Champlain's painted illustrations of his voyage to the West Indies provide convincing evidence that these works have any independent ethnographic value.

Finally, while it is worthwhile to understand the nature of pejorative stereotypes about native Canadians in the 17th century, it is doubtful that these views, which were shaped by religious beliefs and theories about the effects that history and geography had on human behaviour, do much to explain modern prejudices, which are above all a product of 19th century racist doctrines.

John G. GALATY, Dan ARONSON, Philip Carl SALZMAN, and Amy CHOUINARD (eds.), *The Future of Pastoral Peoples: Proceedings of a Conference Held in Nairobi, Kenya, 4-8 August 1980*, Ottawa, International Development Research Centre. Pub. in Holland: E.J. Brill, 1981. 396 pages, US \$24.

By Daniel Rosenberg
Earlham College

Pastoral peoples today face enormous pressures and challenges in their encounters with powerful political entities and in the transformation of their subsistence and market economies. Their lands are diminishing in size and quality, and their autonomy is eroding as national governments seek to more fully incorporate pastoralists politically and economically. Although pastoral peoples certainly have a future, there is profound disagreement among social scientists, development planners, and pastoralists themselves about what that future will be. At the same time, development schemes for African pastoralists have in general been dismal failures, frequently exacerbating the problems they sought to alleviate. It is clear that greater collaboration is needed among the players in this unfolding human drama, although their interests and goals are widely divergent.

The 1980 conference on which this book is based sought to facilitate communication among all those concerned with African pastoralism (indeed, a more accurate title would have been *The Future of Pastoral Peoples in Africa*). Despite the absence of the voices of pastoralists — a concern repeatedly expressed by conference participants — the resulting volume offers a panorama of perspectives of livestock-raising in Africa, and is essential for anyone interested in pastoral issues.

The twenty-nine papers (in addition to an integrative introduction, and opening addresses) are organized in five sections, each with a short but useful introduction: the role of anthropology in pastoral development, the political economy of pastoralism, the economics of pastoralism, the role of government in pastoral development, and the research process. At the end of each paper is a transcript of the discussion which followed; these highlight divergent perspectives and add significantly to the value of the book and the pleasure of sifting through its contents. These discussion sections provide a model for books resulting from conferences; even papers of lesser quality are often followed by interesting discussion, and these exchanges provide the reader with a guide to more general issues raised by specialized presentations. John Galaty and Dan Aronson have contributed a useful summation of research and