

Some Reflections on Jean Barman's *French Canadians, Furs and Indigenous Women*

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Abstract

As a coda to Jean Barman's book, Bruce McIntyre Watson proposes extending her wider definitional embrace of French Canadians to include the early Scots in Canada, particularly those who descended from the eighteenth-century Jacobites who, in Scotland, had allied themselves with the French to provide a bulwark against English dominance. He also advances Jean's reasons for marginalization and subsequent amnesia of the early French-Canadian fact west of the Rockies squarely on literacy or lack thereof. Although memory of the French-Canadian fact was retained to some degree by First Nations' oral tradition, he proposes that the early French Canadian/canadien's failure to present a written record to establish a founding narrative became, for the wider community, an agent of amnesia rather than an instrument of memory.

Résumé

En guise de coda à l'ouvrage de Jean Barman, Bruce McIntyre Watson propose d'élargir la définition qu'elle donne des Canadiens français pour y inclure les premiers Écossais en sol canadien, particulièrement les descendants des Jacobites du XVIIIe siècle qui, en Écosse, s'étaient alliés aux Français pour résister à la domination anglaise. Il avance également que les facteurs expliquant la marginalisation de la présence française à l'ouest des Rocheuses – et de la subséquente amnésie à son endroit – se rattachent carrément à littéracie ou, plutôt, à son absence. Bien que la mémoire du fait français fut jusqu'à un certain point conservée dans les traditions orales des Premières Nations, il maintient que l'analphabétisme des premiers Canadiens français, et leur incapacité à rédiger un récit historique fondateur pour l'ensemble de leur communauté, est le véritable agent d'amnésie.

Jean Barman's award winning book has firmly fixed an early French-Canadian presence west of the Rockies.²⁵ Based on her broader definition of French Canadians and her reasons for the

“Disappearance from view” of the French presence west of the Rockies, I would like to posit my own concluding coda by focusing on both of these.²⁶ The first would be to propose an historic ancillary role of French-speaking and French-sympathetic Scots in nurturing the Canadian and *canadien* reality in the area. The second is to advance Jean’s reasons for marginalization and the subsequent amnesia of the historically early overwhelming presence of French Canadians in the Pacific Northwest by examining the written vs. oral tradition of history as an instrument of memory.

First, Jean brought together three groups under the banner of French Canadians: the French Canadians, Métis, and Iroquois. Her reasons were shared Québec paternal ancestral origins, “the French language, adherence to Catholicism, and first and possibly also last names premised on language and religion.”²⁷ I suggest a further sharing of these attributes would be the Scots, spearheaded by the Scottish descendants of the disbanded 78th Fraser Highlanders Regiment of Foot who, thanks to past French sympathies, easily merged into the French-Canadian fabric. Important to the Canadian story were the descendants of these Scottish Jacobite Catholic and Protestant Highlanders and Lowlanders who had been cobbled together after their defeat in 1746 at Culloden Moor, and subsequently served under James Wolfe in his Québec campaign.²⁸

To digress. This group of Scots seemed pre-ordained for Canada as their French sympathies ran deep. Although the original 265-years-old “Auld Alliance” between Scotland and France²⁹ had begun to unravel with the Protestant Reformation and officially ended in 1560, embedded sentiments largely driven by anti-English sentiments, still ran deep a century later when in 1688 the last joint English-Scottish Catholic king, James II, was deposed by the English parliament for being too pro-France, too pro-Catholic and too non-conformist Protestant. He went off to join his cousin Louis XIV in France where he died. Lingering cultural allegiances persuaded his Italy-born grandson, Charles Edward Stuart (aka Bonnie Prince Charlie) to come charging back in 1745 to his ancestral homeland only to be defeated at Culloden Moor³⁰ in April of the following year. In brief, the sub-

sequently dispossessed survivors of the Culloden Highlander fighters, deeply steeped in pro-French sympathies, were perfectly placed to act as a mollifying influence for now British dominance in newly acquired Canada.

Here British imperial designers made a strategic move. Being given the unusual choice of being deployed in North America or returning to the British Isles, almost 20 percent of the 879 often French-speaking Scottish regiment survivors chose to stay in Québec and New York.³¹ Not only did they go on to be key to resurrecting the former French fur trade business as the North West Company, they were an easy fit based on their previous enculturation. Additionally, many partnered with French-Canadian women from Québec. Now, a few examples to further this thread.

We can start with the Northwest Company's Simon Mctavish, whose father and brother-in-law had both been in the campaign with the 78th Regiment. He married the daughter of Charles Chaboillez, founder of the gentlemen fur trader's Beaver Club. Mctavish's marriage meant that he was related to 11 important people in the fur trade, several of whom would further the Scottish-French networking.³²

Although lacking a French-Canadian mother, but a Roman Catholic nonetheless, New York born Simon Fraser and his mother retreated to Montréal after the death of Simon's father. There Simon had two uncles, John and Archibald who had fought in the 78th Regiment. The young Simon's subsequent French enculturation served him well taking charge of 14 French speakers, along with three others in New Caledonia.³³

Similarly born (probably in New York) to a deployed 78th Regiment descendant, Alexander McKay moved to Trois-Rivières during the Revolutionary War. After being part of Alexander Mackenzie's 1793 West Coast foray which was 65 percent French-Canadian, he became a North West Company partner. In 1810–1, coming to the coast again but as a full partner of Astor's Pacific Fur Company (PFC), which drew heavily on French Canadians as fur traders, he didn't live past 1811 as he deliberately set off the powder magazine of the besieged PFC vessel *Tonquin*.³⁴

Another French-speaking 78th Regiment descendant (of British and French Canadian descent) who ran the Columbia Department on the Pacific slopes, John B. McLoughlin, was baptized Jean-Baptiste McLoughlin. He even sent one son off to Paris for education, something which had been common in Scotland up to the Napoleonic Wars. Conversations at the dinner table would switch between French and English. And so it goes.³⁵

And now to the second part. In the third section of her book, “Beyond the Fur Economy,” Jean outlined the gradual marginalization of the French Canadians, caused in part by their being coupled with Native wives, and the Indigenous paradigm being frozen in time and hence, invisible.³⁶ Of course, gender, race and ethnicity also played a part in French Canadians becoming lost from view.

But I suggest a further reason for French-Canadian invisibility west of the Rockies in an area of multiple competing language groups. The fur-trading French Canadians were rich in oral tradition, but poor on the written word, the vast majority of them being illiterate. As the modified feudal design of old Québec limited literacy to the upper classes and clergy, and printing presses did not arrive until after the Conquest, there was little need or room for a general literacy. On the other hand, the English in the thirteen colonies for very different reasons began publishing their own narratives almost immediately after their arrival in the 1600s, thus building founding narratives from the start. Without an early first person French-written record in place to return to over the years as a founding narrative, there is little chance to regain it. The French oral tradition, still firmly locked within the Indigenous communities, was not universal enough to allow for a revisit.

To illustrate. The field from the 1790s to 1850s was awash with published narratives in English, but strikingly short of those in French. Two that stick out are La Pérouse’s voyages, published in 1797 and 1798 (in French, then in English), and Camille de Roquefeuil’s 1816–9 logs, in 1823. These were Paris and not Canadian oriented and besides, the maritime fur trade

they discussed was very different from the land-based fur trade. The lone *canadien* narrative on the Pacific Northwest published in 1820, was that of Gabriel Franchère's *Relation d'un voyage à la côte du Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique septentrionale, dans les années 1810, 11, 12, 12 et 14*. It wasn't until 1854 that it was republished, this time in English. Contrast this with many publications and reprints of Mackenzie (1801), Lewis and Clark (1806–14), Daniel Williams Harmon (1820), Ross Cox (1832), David Douglas and Washington Irving (1836–7), John Kirk Townsend (1841), and many more through to 1855. These narratives set the founding narratives in stone.

We can say that oral tradition had served the French Canadians in the short run as they had much more in common with Indigenous people who relied on oral tradition, and thus the two groups got along well. However, in the long run, reliance on oral tradition rather than the written word proved deleterious in preserving the memories of the French Canadians, particularly west of the Rockies.

In short, Jean's work on French Canadians west of the Rockies has allowed us to grow our perspectives on this little recognized aspect of our history.

BRUCE MCINTYRE WATSON is a retired Vancouver Community College English and History instructor who has written and spoken extensively on the fur trade west of the Rockies.

BRUCE MCINTYRE WATSON a enseigné l'anglais et l'histoire avant de prendre sa retraite du Vancouver Community College; il a abondamment écrit et présenté de nombreuses communications sur la traite des fourrures à l'ouest des Rocheuses.