

Champlain: The Birth of French America Edited by Raymonde Litalien and Denis Vaugeois; translated by Käthe Roth

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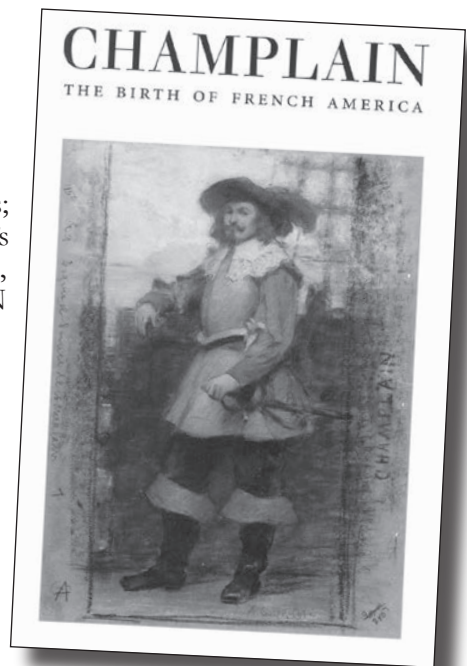
B ook Reviews

Champlain:

The Birth of French America

Edited by Raymonde Litalien and Denis Vaugeois;
translated by Käthe Roth. Quebec: McGill-Queen's
University Press and Les éditions du Septentrion,
2004. 400 pp. Illustrated. \$89.00 hardcover. ISBN
0-7735-2850-4.

Samuel de Champlain is Canada's seminal founding historical figure. Soldier, master mariner, French explorer, author, and tenacious leader, he founded and sustained the settlement of Canada. Though only 150 colonists resided in Canada at the time of his death, even that slim number might not have been present in his absence. This new book, a joint France-Canada publication, deserves a wide audience including many Ontarians. Indeed, if your personal library does not contain a book on early Canadian history, then this one, published to mark the 400th anniversary of the continuous French presence in North America, may be for you. Only during the nineteenth century, more than two hundred years after his death, did Champlain attract the interest of historians. But since then interest in his life and career has never waned. Indeed, controversy surrounds much about him. Because of his diverse activities, his career



lends itself as a starting point for a variety of historical interpretations. His writings exposed little of his personality, which left historians free to write pretty well whatever they wanted about Champlain. This collection of essays reminds us that all has yet to be said about him.

The lavishly illustrated volume brings together thirty historians, ethnologists, archaeologists, and independent scholars from France, Italy, and Canada to revisit Champlain's enormous contributions. Some essays are quite traditional in

approach and interpretation, but several raise new issues, offer new insights, and ask new questions about his place as “Father of New France” in Canada’s history. Thirty-five essays are organized into seven roughly equal sections that treat the context of the times, Champlain’s behaviour in Acadia and in Canada, and questions arising from his unpublished and published works. The essays are intended to allow readers to draw their own conclusions about Champlain’s motives. The subjects are interesting and range very widely. Bernard Allaire’s essay on “The European fur trade and the context of Champlain’s arrival,” Dominique Deslandres’ on “Samuel de Champlain and religion,” and Frank Lestringant’s on “Champlain, or empowerment of the colonial enterprise” deserve wide audiences. Readers of *Ontario History* will appreciate Gaétan Gervais’ “Champlain and Ontario (1603-35).” The danger of singling out these four essays may unintentionally slight several others. I just happen to like these.

Allaire directs readers’ attention to the late sixteenth-century growth of European demand for Canadian furs – a subject that is commonly ignored – as the key to French exploitation of Canada. Allaire argues that Spanish attacks on Antwerp and the Swedish capture of Narva in 1580 and the subsequent blockade of Siberian furs from Western Europe were critically important to the development of the Canadian fur trade. Deslandres shows that while Champlain may have been a convert to Catholicism, his religious attitude evolved from almost complete indifference during most of his life to deliberate involvement in conversion of the natives towards the end. Lestringant’s intriguing view that, as the first American born in France, Champlain opened a window on the future when he found a land without history, is refreshing in today’s academic world too dominated

by political correctness. Though he learned about the Great Lakes region as early as 1603, Champlain traveled through present-day Ontario only twice, in 1613 and again in 1615-16, but the consequences of these journeys and others by younger men in subsequent years shaped the early history of Canada for many decades afterwards.

There are many other essays. John Dickinson’s brief essay entitled “Champlain, Administrator” is a useful corrective to traditional idealizations of the great explorer. Champlain’s cartography is analyzed and summarized in an excellent essay by Conrad Heidenreich and Edward Dahl, and the book’s editors have reproduced for the first time in colour all thirty-two maps attributed to Champlain among other magnificent illustrations. Many of them, including a selection of Champlain’s drawings, have not been published before. Finally, Champlain had his political uses long after his death. Readers of Patrice Groulx’s “In the Shoes of Samuel de Champlain,” which studies the erection of seven bronze statues of Champlain in three Canadian provinces and one American state between 1898 and 1925, may be amused to learn how much is revealed about the rivalries and alliances between elite groups at the turn of the early twentieth century rather than anything about Champlain.

This is a superlative source of information for anyone who wants to understand Canada’s origins and the questions that rise from early French activity in Canada. It is an excellent source book for students as well as general readers. The high quality of the illustrations, many in colour, suggests that every Ontario school library should have a copy. In view of what is offered here the book is not expensive.

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