



Radisson, Pierre-Esprit. The Collected Writings, Volume 1: The Voyages

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Radisson, Pierre-Esprit.

The Collected Writings, Volume 1: The Voyages. Ed. Germaine Warkentin. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press / Toronto: The Champlain Society, 2012. Pp. xvii, 357 + 7 ill, 5 maps. ISBN 978-0-7735-40828 (hardcover) \$65.

The first volume of Germaine Warkentin's edition of the writings of Pierre-Esprit Radisson is as close to a perfect scholarly edition as I have read. Blending fascinating ethnographic information with capture and escapes, exploration and intercultural interaction, Radisson has always been exciting to read. Yet the title of this work understates what Warkentin brings to Radisson's writings; the strengths of this work reside in the editor's ability to balance an attention to the wealth of information contained in the text with fascinating insights into the personality of the author himself.

However good contextualizing essays and introductions may be, likely the main reason that people will read Warkentin's edition is for the writings of Radisson himself. The first volume reviewed here is devoted to a single text, Radisson's *Voyages*. Written in 1668 while the author resided in London and

was attempting to obtain the support of English investors to establish a fur trade in Hudson Bay, the *Voyages* will be largely familiar to scholars of New France. Together they relate the story of the author as he began his adventures into the borderlands of colonial French North America, from his experience as a captive in an Iroquoian community to his explorations of the Great Lakes and, possibly, Hudson Bay.

The four books of the *Voyages* remain indispensable sources on the reorganization of the fur trade and westward expansion of French influence into the *pays d'en haut* in the era after the fall of Huronia. Their value to scholars is considerably expanded through excellent annotation provided in footnotes, of which there are frequently as many as five or six per page. Often these are merely clarifying, as where we learn that “hodpot” refers to a “hot-pot, hod-pot; stew” (119). Examinations of the language of Radisson seem to provide hints of both the character of the author and the cultural context in which he wrote, illuminating the use of words such as “waynage” (188), or phrases such as “where the hare layed” (256). At other points, however, Warkentin’s references to ethnographic literature substantially complement the perspective on cross-cultural interaction provided by Radisson. This seems particularly important for an author who, as Warkentin explains in her introduction, remained “a naïve writer” with “little if any conception of himself as an author” (47). Heidi Bohaker also contributes substantially with a closing essay on the Aboriginal world in which Radisson lived much of his life.

The importance of Radisson’s insights seems uncontroversial and yet the manner in which they were told by Radisson himself and by historians since has made appreciating his significance difficult. His story was one that seems to have been retold and repackaged depending on his audience and upon Radisson’s own needs at the time of its telling. Written in both French and English by an undeniably self-interested author who switched allegiances readily, Radisson’s work has frequently been overlooked for those of his contemporaries, be they Jesuits, colonial promoters, or explorers. From would-be adoptee in an Iroquoian community in his youth to a supposedly faithful servant of the English crown in old age, it has been difficult to accept the word of an author who so readily exchanged allegiances, languages, and cultures. Radisson has been, writes Warkentin, “a Historical Problem” (6).

If he was a problem, Warkentin’s remarkable exploration of Radisson as both a historical figure and author must be seen as having largely solved

him. The editor herself downplays her contributions, even if the personality that leaps from the page of her introduction is clearly more than a “fairly-well articulated skeleton” (104). Her goal, she writes, is “to see the explorer whole” (6). Yet the major success of this volume is the extent to which the multiplicity of Radisson is captured. In the centuries since his adventures, interpretations of his life and work have varied according to the disciplinary, linguistic, and national backgrounds of his readers. While examining Radisson as writer, discoverer, adoptee, explorer, trader, and diplomat, this reviewer found those sections where the ambivalence of the author himself takes centre stage the most interesting. Tracing the transition between “the two elements of his life—Mohawk and trader” (49), for example, Warkentin’s study offers a fascinating perspective on the process—and limits—of *métissage* (living between cultures) in New France and the seventeenth-century Atlantic World.

Setting down to write his life story in 1668, Radisson could not help but reveal the ongoing complexities of a man who was simultaneously a captive and colonizer, *coureur de bois* and courtier. As such, the Radisson who emerges from these texts—both those edited by Warkentin and those she wrote—seems vital for the sort of research driving scholars of early North American, Native American, and Atlantic history. Warkentin has accomplished no mean feat in maintaining, and in fact highlighting, the messiness of Radisson’s life and personality and, as such, has done great service to those interested in early American borderlands and ethnogenesis in the early modern Atlantic World. I expect to see copies of *The Collected Writings, Volume 1* on the bookshelves of many of my friends and colleagues, and Radisson granted the scholarly attention he so clearly deserves.

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