

## TRANSATLANTIC WINDS: BOLD BUT BENIGN

The debate is no longer raging. Yet it lingers on nonetheless. Are outstanding individuals, whether evil or well-intentioned, the primary force that looses history from firm moorings and propels it ahead along uncharted paths? Or is significant change better seen as being energized by a particular person, or a collectivity of the similarly minded, embedded in a context that is itself moving away from contemporary thought and ideals towards a different social and cultural landscape?

In science, modern collaborative efforts have tended to outpace, or even blur, the understandings of great and seemingly lone theoreticians. (1) Modern political change, however, brings the debate into relief again as Europe looks towards America for a contemplative reconsideration of transatlantic ties that might result in an era in which a new, dynamic presidency will act to overcome existent conflicts and engage in a series of multilateral partnerships,

The appearance of David Hackett Fischer's *Champlain's Dream* is timely. (2) The biography strongly suggests that the American Project has always embodied a joint effort that spanned the seas even when their limits were unknown and both coastline and interior were more the content of the contemporary imagination than definite geographic realities. There is little doubt as well that the early 17<sup>th</sup> century French explorer enjoyed a variety of interested supporters, from the French King Henry IV to a close, influential circle of Humanists, and that this support was diverse in intention and outlook, one that ranged from discrete financial backing linked to a desire to find a more efficient way to the East through a fabled northwest passage, to a quest to found a new type of community based on egalitarian principles, and free from the devastation of civil strife and recurrent religious warfare.

Samuel de Champlain seemed up to the task. He is known to have been born near the rocky coasts of western France and was familiar with the mariner's life from an early age, an experience that in all probability helped bring about the 27 transatlantic crossings that he led without losing a single ship. During his travels through several modern Canadian Provinces and 5 American states, he developed into a cartographer who liked to decorate an occasional corner of a map with his own artwork. And he blossomed into a fervent naturalist and an inquisitive, early ethnographer whose sensitive depictions of indigenous peoples made their way across the ocean, and then back again, where they forged a basis for interrelations with French immigrants that still today seem more than encouraging given the comparatively ruthless antagonisms of New Spain.

Moreover, he ultimately became a leading political figure, a Governor of New France. His legacy survives not only in the towns and vast waterways named after him, but also in the combined success of the settlements he founded, each based on differing economic potentials, each tied to a hoped for and necessary collaboration with a variety of indigenous tribes with varying local languages and customs. First, in 1608, came Quebec, a city that grew up from fewer than 100 original settlers. Decades later, in a feverish period of growth during the early 1630's, the small colony of Acadia appeared within today's Maritime Provinces, followed by Trois Rivieres, located in the fertile St. Lawrence Valley. The settlements tended towards self-government, either through commissions of elders, or seigneurial grants which permitted flexible responses to differing environments rather than distant regulatory controls over local affairs.

Shared was a need to adopt survival strategies based on indigenous models. Also shared was the initial threat of population depletion in the wilderness, over 50% of the original settlers returned to France after a brief residence, and an evolving, ultimately successful attempt at attracting further immigration by drawing on regional alliances maintained by original settlers with their home communities. Married settlers set out from France, joining others, often youth seeking a different fortune, who intermarried with the Iroquois. Farmland was cleared, fishing rights established, and finally, artisans began to arrive, thus signaling the emergence of occupational specialization and the onset of settlement sustainability.

There were arguments and fights. Guns were fired at individuals, not only at game. There was relative poverty along with growing wealth, and records indicate that a small number of slaves resided here and

there within the settlements. Champlain's dream was never accompanied by the advent of sainthood. But it did provoke a spirit of cooperation that continues to resonate among the millions of descendants of those who followed, though it did not foresee the much later division of the original American Project into Canada and the US, two national homelands.

If a great deal was written about Champlain's voyages, coastal and inland investigations, maps, and settlements, much, in fact, by himself, very little is known about the explorer. It is clear that he died bedridden of the effects of a severe stroke, but his birth date has yet to be found. He stands out as a loyal Catholic towards the end of his life. Yet his late 16<sup>th</sup> century baptism as a Protestant remains either in dispute or under serious discussion. At one and the same period in his life he was widely recorded as being of modest stature, but his hair was variously described as having been black or brown, red or grey, depending on the commentator. Champlain himself gave the future a gift of the only contemporary picture that has survived, a rather restrained self-portrait which does not really go far towards enriching anyone's insight into his presence since he was almost completely dressed in an otherwise cumbersome, silver suit of armor.

The explorer and founder, in short, remains an enduring mystery despite his obvious energy and achievements, and his insistence that transnational institutions require a cooperative template in order to thrive and advance. Knowledge about him has to be wrenched either from the pragmatic efforts of his day, or from the memories of the many who came after him and who left behind a creative blend of known fact and embellished oral history. As such, this welcome reinvention of Champlain and the North American experience offers us a policy platform but no real conclusion to the continuing debate on the Great Man Theory of history. As the author repeatedly suggests, it will take more than one pen, substituted for a refined chisel, to release the figure from the stone.

(1) Dizikis, Peter, "Twilight Of The Idols." New York Times Online, November 5, 2006. (2) Fischer, David Hackett, Champlain's Dream. New York, Simon and Schuster. (2008)

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