

BOOK REVIEWS

Adventurers in the New World: The Saga of the Coureurs des Bois, by Georges-Hébert Germain. Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003.

This publication from the Museum of Civilization is a translation from the original French text. It is lavishly illustrated by Francis Back, written with simplicity, and conceived as a series of semi-independent chapters which overlap somewhat. All this makes it suitable reading for a general audience as well as for high school students.

In a slightly romantic vein which gives the *coureurs des bois* an aura of "men of the Wind" (p. 11), this book is a detailed description of early French penetration into the North American hinterland by people such as Jean Nicolle; it also highlights the decline of this continent's primeval environment and Aboriginal population in the past 400 years.

The complexities of the fur trade, so central to the French movement westward, are well depicted over three consecutive chapters as the mechanisms of a sweeping spread out of New France, with irreversible environmental and cultural disruption. Impressionistic vignettes give informative accounts of *coureurs des bois*, *voyageurs*, and their women (Indian and white). The *coureur des bois* in particular is portrayed as the product of this westward expansion: a cultural broker, something of an outlaw on the run from civil and religious authority. As for the *voyageur*, he is rightly described as holding "the first typically North American profession" (p. 70). Very much to the point also is the author's emphasis on pre-contact trade and exchanges (p. 24): Aboriginal peoples had for a long time contacted each other, and goods travelled a great deal before the arrival of the Europeans. I would take exception, however, with the assertion that "North American Indians were much more ethnically homogeneous than the Europeans" (p. 22), as the former exhibited cultural and linguistic characteristics at least as diverse as the latter.

The book's last two chapters introduce gradually the end product of this Western adventure: the Métis. Born out of alliances made necessary by the fur trade, Métis ethnicity is appropriately described as taking shape in the semi-nomadic atmosphere of the Red River settlement and as aspiring to the building of a genuine democratic nation, unique in North America. This impossible dream, based on the assumption that a frontier culture could endure indefinitely, was crushed with the execution of Louis Riel; and there the whole adventure ended. The Epilogue of this book is thus a kind of afterthought, a sad comment on the failure of an experiment which the author views—somewhat naively—as "unique in the long history of humanity" (p. 159).

Overall, *Adventurers in the New World* is a lively chronicle of population movements, replete with ethnographic detail and focused on the French experience. Personalized anecdotes depict the rigours of the climate and the vagaries of cultural contact, starting with the rites of passage undergone by the "walking dead," prisoners who were expected to suffer and bleed their way into adoption by an Eastern Indian tribe; the description of the attendant humiliations and gory "caressings" leading to formal adoption, or to death followed by cannibalism, is graphic and perhaps more trendily relativistic than one might humanely wish (pp. 52-53).

From the *donnés* (servants to the Jesuits) to the *coureurs des bois*, *voyageurs* and Métis, this book runs the whole gamut of cultural adaptation and innovation. We learn for instance about the "coat beaver," the most prized fur made from "robes that the Indians wore day and night during the cold season" (p. 37). There is also a chapter (pp. 42-43) on the birchbark canoe; in this respect the interested reader can profitably consult Taylor (1980), a technical description of traditional Eastern Cree canoe building techniques. Another chapter is devoted to the noisy but ingenious Red River cart, the perfect prairie vehicle which replaced the Indian travois and, being made without any metal but from locally available materials, stood as an adequate symbol for a self-sufficient semi-nomadic people (pp. 150-51).

Written from a French perspective, this book documents the French presence in North America. Although the settlements were scanty, alliances with Indian tribes were far-reaching and maintained an elusive frontier spirit which eventually, through lack of political vision, turned out to be a poor contender for the British pragmatism of the Hudson's Bay Company and of Ottawa. The impact of these alliances and of this trade is well summed up in a few figures showing the evolution of Aboriginal demands: from trinkets to cooking kettles to textiles and guns (p. 101). Particularly enlightening for the lay reader is the map of New France (pp. 110-11), which places this region in the centre of North American operations and encourages us to see the British Colonies of the eastern seaboard, Russian America, and the viceroyalty of New Spain from a colonial French perspective.

Another perspective that is kept in fair balance throughout the book is that of gender roles, and several chapters describe the realities surrounding the "country wife" or the Métis wife. Indian societies are portrayed as rather egalitarian in this respect. However, a few contradictory statements occur here and there, as on p. 115: "A Cree chief once told a North West Company representative that fathers often wanted their daughters to marry white men so that they would be better treated"; we are not told whether this attitude was widespread, or how early it arose after European contact. In any case we should remember that at least on the prairies—as in many places in the wider world—women were more severely punished than men for adultery, and rape was the normal treatment for women prisoners (concerning the latter, see e.g., Denig 2000).

The French bias of this book has already been noted and is to be expected considering the nature of its topic. However, it goes beyond sober reality at times, as in the following statement: "For the Ojibwa, Mandan, Sioux, and Hidatsa [France's erstwhile empire], would always be inhabited by the French adventurers who had built it" (p. 109). Such hyperboles are not infrequent: a case in point is the so-called "legendary battle of Chateauguay" (p. 72) which took place in 1812,

ironically the same year as another "legendary" battle, that of Borodino in Russia, which—let's face it—had rather more momentous consequences.

Romantic generalizations also abound—regarding the sexual freedom of Indian women, the social egalitarianism of the frontier, or the lofty ideals of the Métis nation. This romanticism, more amusing than objectionable, is well served by illustrations taken from A.J. Miller's work (pp. 18, 122, etc.). Even modern Canadian multiculturalism receives lip service with the conclusion to Pierre-Esprit Radisson's story: "At the end, he was no longer a Frenchman, or an Englishman, or an Indian, but a new combination of all three—a true inhabitant of the New World" (p. 55). The author would do well to remember that, as Loptson (2001: 223) puts it, "Historical realities almost always seem to be messier and more complicated than ideological lenses see them in retrospect."

Francis Back's illustrations, overall beautiful, are at times a little misleading: as on p. 57, where the sitting woman seems to hail from India; or on pp. 118–19, where after being told that a trapper "typically had a big beard and long hair" we are shown two such individuals as beardless and with shortish hair; A.J. Miller's painting, reproduced on p. 129, must then be considered more realistic. A few other glitches do crop up, such as occasional bad fits between text and illustration (as on pp. 32, 47, 54, or 56). More seriously, an incongruous linguistic generalization is made to the effect that Indian languages "use practically no labials" (p. 30). Indeed.

It is also surprising that the author has not deemed it relevant to quote Montaigne's description of his meeting with three Amerindians in the port of Rouen in 1562 (Montaigne 1969: 239–40): in it the essayist confesses how favourably impressed he was by the Indians' demeanour, by the sounds of their language (which he compared to ancient Greek), and by their negative reactions to the social conditions they observed in 16th-century France.

But these are minor criticisms. *Adventurers in the New World* is clearly written, beautifully illustrated, and well edited. It is both an informative document and a coffee-table book; as such it should appeal to a wide readership interested in the moving frontiers of the Canada of old.

Related Reading

Denig, E.T. 2000 (1930). *The Assiniboine*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center.

Loptson, P. 2001. *Theories of Human Nature*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

Montaigne, M. de. 1969 (1588). *Essais*. Paris: Club Français du Livre.

Taylor, J.G. 1980. *Canoe Construction in a Cree Cultural Tradition*. Ottawa: Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 64.

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A Thousand Miles of Prairie: The Manitoba Historical Society and the History of Western Canada, edited by Jim Blanchard. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002.

Perhaps it is part of our Roman inheritance, or of our Judaeo-Christian traditions. Whatever the source there is something in the Euro-Canadian mind which