

## Champlain and the Hudson Valley

When thinking about the many journeys and adventures of Samuel de Champlain, one does not think of the Hudson Valley. Rightfully so, we associate the Hudson Valley with the Dutch exploration of Henry Hudson and later English settlement. Although, Champlain never sailed on the Hudson or even saw its shores, he did play a fundamental role in its history. Upon entering Lake Champlain in July of 1609 Champlain knew that a great river lay beyond it, but on account of his own decision he nullified any opportunity of ever exploring the waterway.

Champlain's first endeavor into modern New York territory occurred on June 7, 1609, when he left Quebec for a trip down the St. Lawrence River to confer with his friend Pontgrave at Tadoussac. Champlain was distraught by news that the Huron and Algonquin tribes, primary clients of the French in the fur trade, were under constant attack from the Iroquois tribe. Champlain discussed with Pontgrave the possibilities of French neutrality in the conflict or arbitrating a peace between the Indian tribes. Realizing that neutrality would be a sign of weakness, and not wanting to turn his friends into enemies Champlain decided to side with the Hurons and Algonquins. Champlain knew that he had to uphold the alliance the French made with those tribes in 1603, promising them aid and protection against the Iroquois.

On July 13, 1609, Champlain and two unnamed Frenchmen accompanied the Huron, Montagnais and Algonquin war party up the Richelieu River. At Rouses Point Champlain first saw the brilliance of the lake which he modestly named after himself. Champlain described the various trees and other flora and marveled at the great abundance of fish and wildlife. He was overwhelmed by the size of the lake and

describes it as "...eighty or a hundred leagues long" which is three times its actual size. In his description of chestnut trees and high mountains on the eastern side of the lake, scholars place Champlain at this point in his journey near present day Burlington, Vermont. As the war party paddled further down the lake the Indians told him of the falls at present day Ticonderoga. They informed him that after the falls they had to cross another lake, present day Lake George, and make their way across land to a second river before coming upon their enemies. The second river was the same waterway that Henry Hudson would explore only two months later in September of 1609.

Champlain and the war party never left Lake Champlain since they spotted Iroquois near present day Ticonderoga on July 29<sup>th</sup>. When Champlain and the war party approached, the Iroquois fled to the shore and barricaded themselves by cutting down trees. After preparing themselves for battle, the Iroquois met with the invading war party. The Huron, Montagnais and Algonquin war party voiced their intentions to fight, but agreed with the Iroquois that it was too dark and they would fight at sunrise the next day. The following day Champlain led the Indians ashore and struck three Indians with the first shot from his musket. Two Iroquois Chiefs and one other Iroquois fell to the ground. In the ensuing battle further musket shots, from Champlain's two Frenchmen, scared the Iroquois who fled the battlefield. Champlain and the war party killed many of the Iroquois and took a dozen prisoners before the battle was over. On the trip home, Champlain described the horrifying torture done to the Iroquois prisoners. He felt sympathy for the Iroquois prisoner and criticizes the Hurons, Montagnais, and Algonquins for their cruel practices.

The actual dates and locations described by Champlain on this journey are cause for debate among historians, who have addressed Champlain's general inaccuracy in logging dates. Champlain often wrote the wrong month and his concept of the time it took to travel seemingly short distances appears exaggerated. Historians are also confused by Champlain's description of where the battle against the Iroquois took place. Although he claims Crown Point was the location where they confronted the Iroquois, his description of the outlet to Lake George and the area around Ticonderoga causes confusion. Most historians have come to accept that the battle with the Iroquois took place at a location near Ticonderoga. Champlain said that he left Lake Champlain three hours after the battle, if this was true he could not have seen the outlet to Lake George. Crown Point sits 16 miles north of the outlet and in those three hours there wasn't enough time to paddle south, view the falls and paddle north again leaving the lake.

The defeat of the Iroquois at Ticonderoga was more a strategic blunder than a sound win for Champlain and his Indian friends. The Iroquois tribe was by no means severely weakened or setback by this small defeat. The Hurons, Montagnais and Algonquins returned victoriously to their homelands with the scalps and body parts of the Iroquois and a sound alliance with the French, but with little more assurance of their own safety. Champlain eventually returned to Quebec feeling confident in his decision to side with the Huron and Algonquin tribes and to attack the Iroquois. Champlain was unaware of the Dutch explorer making his way up the Hudson River or the increasing power of the Iroquois tribe.

At the moment Champlain made the decision to side with the Hurons and Algonquins there was no other option open for him. Remaining neutral in the conflict

would have only opened the fur trade and French settlement to further attack from both sides. Having hindsight as historians do, scholars believe that a neutral France would have been able to maintain a fair balance between the two sides. Maintaining their neutrality would have opened relations with the Iroquois and possibly allowed Champlain safe passage through the Hudson River he was so eager to explore. Some historians go as far as saying that if Champlain didn't side against the Iroquois he would have beaten Henry Hudson to the region. As we know, the history of the Hudson Valley took a very different course and was settled by the Dutch and English. The Dutch and English supplied weaponry to the Iroquois in their attacks on French settlements. The future decades of Iroquois contempt for the French, such as their opposition to the French during the French and Indian War, was said to stem from Champlain's decision and action against them in July of 1609.

- David Sabatino, Marist '07

### **Bibliographic Note**

In preparation for my research on Samuel de Champlain I searched the Marist Library catalog in hopes of finding some useful sources. Unfortunately my search rendered me with only one source that seemed hardly worth my time to take out of the library. When taking on a research project such as this one on Champlain, it is most practical to find as many quality sources as possible. One would hope that the sources present the same factual accounts or if not, at the very least varying scholarly opinions on why things are inaccurate, unanswerable or peculiar about an aspect of what one is researching. I found that in the case of Samuel de Champlain an abundance of quality sources were not available, and those that were available were sub-par to what research and writing I was being asked to produce.

### **PRINTED PRIMARY SOURCES**

The only primary source I was able to find was Samuel de Champlain's *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain: 1604-1618* (New York, 1907). Champlain's account of his voyages between the years of 1604 and 1618 are contained in this source. The source was most useful in describing Champlain's interactions with Native Americans, the personal goals he wished to achieve through exploration, and the course of events in France involving the New World. The source is extensive and contains Champlain's narrative of one voyage he made to the Caribbean and eight out of the eleven voyages he made to Canada and New England. The historical value of the book is questionable in certain areas because one must take into account the audience the book was written for. Although Champlain was predominantly concerned with finding a Northwest Passage, he was also concerned with exporting the image of Canada to the French back home. Like

any source the bias of the author must be measured. Champlain had more reason to highlight the best qualities of the New World than to take an un-biased approach. The interest of the King and French people back home determined the amount of money invested in his exploration as well as the establishment of New France. Because of this bias, scholars approach some of Champlain's unexplainable findings and reports as exaggeration, but not so much exaggeration that it discredits Champlain's account entirely. Three other publications of Champlain's exist but I was unable to acquire a copy of any of the three.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

My first attempts to locate useful secondary sources led me to children's publications. Apparently Champlain is a popular figure for kids in elementary school and as a result there is an abundance of children's publications about him. Working my way through all the juvenile search hits I came across three secondary sources that I had access to. The first and most useful secondary source I found was *Champlain: The Life of Fortitude* (New York, 1979) by Morris Bishop. Bishop takes most of his information from Champlain's publications and places his and other scholars' interpretations over it. The most useful feature of the book is the way the chapters are divided and named by Champlain's voyages. At the top of each page you can find the year in which the chapter is focused on and at the end of the book Bishop's includes Appendixes explaining some of the ongoing debates concerning Champlain. This source was convenient to use, easy to understand and follow, and provided factual information with intellectual information. The second source I found was *Champlain: The Birth of French America* (Montreal, 2004) by Raymonde Litalien. The information contained in this source was not much

different from Bishop's book but more difficult to use. Litalien's book was not divided by year and voyage like Bishop's book and when reading Litalien I felt like I was reading a novel and not history. For the most part it was too difficult to stay focused and locate information quickly when using Litalien's book. My third source *Champlain* (Toronto, 1963) by N.E. Dionne was the most comprehensive source. Unlike Bishop and Litalien, Dionne did not chronologically go through Champlain's life as an explorer. Instead Dionne chose specific topics and themes, such as Champlain's relations with Native Americans or Champlain's settlement of Quebec, to focus on. This source was most useful when I wanted additional information on a specific topic or theme in Champlain's life. Dionne was quite extensive and focused in his research and writing and as a result his book proved to be a great source for my research and writing. My fourth and final source was *Samuel de Champlain: Father of New France* (Boston, 1972) but since I had to return this book long ago I cannot write about it with the accuracy I would like to.

Although the sources I used provided sufficient information for me to address the five topics I wrote on, I would have liked to have more sources to tackle each topic with. My research on Champlain has showed me that as an historian not everything I research and write about will have an endless pool of sources to choose from.