

Champlain and Native American Relations

When Christopher Columbus mistakenly took the New World for India he labeled the natives of this land as “Indians”. The term may not be politically correct today, but it has been in long use since the day of its birth. The non-western ways of these Indians was a surprise to the European explorers, but did not prevent many economic relationships from arising. Additionally, the Indian’s familiarity with the land and rivers was a source of knowledge tapped by European explorers such as Samuel de Champlain. The opportunity to take advantage of both the economic and knowledgeable situation of the Indians was ripe for European taking.

While most explorers looked for a faster route to the riches of the East, their governments back home were quickly realizing the vast wealth that was potentially available in the New World. The French interest in the fur trade started in the early 16th century, but faced a small market for sale in Europe. An increase in demand in the late 16th century made the profits of the fur trade outweigh the costs. Samuel de Champlain’s first voyage to Tadoussac, in 1603, coincided with the first significant rise in the fur trade. It was on this voyage that Champlain realized that maintaining a strong and healthy relationship among the many Indian tribes was essential to the profitable fur trade. Furthermore, a stable and profitable fur trade allowed for a permanent French settlement in the region.

Champlain understood the importance of the fur trade, but showed little concern for the economic situation. Although his voyages were always made in support and maintenance of the fur trade, Champlain’s own concern was with exploration. The fur

trade was a necessity for Champlain because it funded his exploration. With that in mind Champlain was always conscious of the need for stability in French-Indian relationships. At Tadoussac, in 1603, Champlain was witness to the French-Indian alliance that gave the French permission to settle in the region, in exchange for military assistance to their Indian allies. It was here that Pontgrave, the captain of the voyage, established the ties that would connect Champlain to the Montagnais, Algonquin, Etchemin and Huron tribes in attacks against the Iroquois and further exploration of New France.

Respecting the many alliances the French made with the Indians, Champlain traveled with a Montagnais, Algonquin and Huron war party into the territory of the Iroquois Nation in 1609. The defeat of the Iroquois was essential in maintaining the fur trade and further binding the French to Indian tribes around their areas of interest. Near present day Fort Ticonderoga, Champlain and his war party confronted the Iroquois and easily defeated them. Even though Champlain's forces were outnumbered, the weapons of the few Frenchmen present quickly killed the chief of the Iroquois. The Iroquois were so shocked and distraught by the loss of their Chief, as well as the power of the French weapons, the momentum of the battle quickly moved in favor of Champlain's forces. A second attack on the Iroquois, in 1610, proved disastrous and solidified the position of the Iroquois as France's enemy. In return for his military assistance, the Indians often lead Champlain on explorations in search of a Northwest Passage. Much like Champlain's disinterest in the economics of the situation, Champlain also had no thirst for battle, but once again realized its necessity. The Indians trusted Champlain and thanks to their relationship, conceded to his various requests.

Champlain's early exploration was characterized by his strong desire to find the Northwest Passage. To use his time wisely, Champlain enlisted the assistance of Indians. He listened to their stories of long but treacherous river systems emptying into great bodies of water. He used their reports to construct maps and make estimates as to which areas to explore and which to avoid. Most of all, he utilized the Indians as guides on his explorations. The Hurons trusted and adored Champlain, so much so, that they invited him to explore the rich copper mines and great bodies of water across their land.

Champlain was well aware of how the Indians felt about him, but he never abused the relationship and because of this he was always welcomed in the lands of his Indian allies. As voyage after voyage yielded little signs of a passage, the focus on the fur trade and need for permanent settlements became clearer. In time Champlain's explorative efforts became less vital and instead he became absorbed in establishing successful settlements. Champlain maintained the best relations with the Indians along the St. Lawrence and interior. This was done to ensure the safety and longevity of French settlements in the region.

Unlike many other explorers, Champlain was impressed by the Indians in many ways, but only after years of exposure to them. His first impressions of the Indians were derisive of their clothing, hygiene and way of life. Yet after many years of interaction with the Indians, Champlain described their physical traits, customs and skills without establishing himself, or his common Frenchman, as superior to them. In many ways his curiosity, benevolence and trustworthiness allowed Champlain to form a strong relationship with many Indian tribes. During the winter of 1609, Champlain said, "They [Indians] came to our settlement so thin and emaciated that they looked like skeletons,

most of them being unable to stand.” Champlain gave what he could, even when his own settlement was lacking. In 1610, Champlain took a Huron Indian back with him to France and educated him in the culture of the French. Savignon, the name given to the Huron, became very close to Champlain and escorted him on many voyages. Whether or not Champlain was speaking truthfully about his amiable relations with the Indians or about his motives behind those relations, is solely up to the reader. Only from Champlain’s own written discourse can historians and those interested find primary information on Champlain’s connections with the Indians.

The French relationship with Indians can be seen as economically and politically motivated. The Indians were a means to receive profitable goods, such as furs, and controlling the fur trade resulted in the most profit. Allying themselves with certain tribes gave the French the role of arbitrator between them and thus they achieved further control. Although Champlain was supporting and maintaining many of the economic policies, his concerns were much different than those of his employer, the French King. Champlain’s fairness, concern and cooperation with the Indians took him beyond the economic relations and into a more trustworthy position.

- 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 takeout 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, his 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 a historian not everything I research and write about will have an endless pool of sources to choose from.