

## THE HISTORY

Sam the sham: The myth of Champlain by John Allemang

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When Samuel de Champlain - the Father of Canada, as the grade-school teachers used to say - had to sell the Cardinal de Richelieu on sticking with the floundering colony of Quebec, he dangled the lure of a trade bonanza before France's all-powerful backroom boy.

"These fresh discoveries," he wrote in *The Voyages to Western New France, Called Canada* (1632), "have led to the project of forming there these colonies, which, though at first of little account, nevertheless, in course of time, by means of trade, will equal the states of greatest kings."

Champlain was putting one over on the Cardinal and all the other important and otherwise-engaged decision makers in far-away France. The survival of the bleak habitation that improbably turned into Canada depended on his enthusiastic deception: As a colony and a nation-in-training, Quebec was little short of a disaster.

The true Champlain is a man who's obsessed with finding a route to China by way of the St. Lawrence, with the help of the natives who know the country intimately. But to realize his dream, he has to persuade the uninterested and the disbelieving across France that there's a fortune to be made in the raw materials of the fancy-hat trade, for the Europeans had wiped out their native beavers and had grown used to making their felt with vastly inferior wool.

**It's up to Champlain to make the connection between a luxury trade in Europe and the riches that might well accrue to those bold enough to invest in a marginal settlement on the edge of a remote and savage continent. He's an explorer by temperament, stuck in the day job of a hustler.**

"China was his driving force," says University of British Columbia historian Timothy Brook. "Furs are a great windfall to pay off his backers, a convenient way to finance his project of looking for salt water. Merchants just wanted quick profits, but he was quite brilliant at keeping these people on the hook while carrying out his explorations."

"Champlain was, I think, the first patriot," says Conrad Heidenreich, professor emeritus of geography at York University who is just finishing (with Dr. Janet Ritch) the first volume of a new translation of Champlain's extensive writings. "He was someone who saw the huge potential of Canada and worked very hard to establish a presence here amid much apathy, because Canada did not lend itself to get-rich-quick schemes."

That may have been our salvation as a country, in the end. Gold and silver do bad things to people, as the Spanish and Portuguese had proved in their highly devastating

resource-grabs to the south of Champlain's modest habitation. To the explorers who passed through Canada on sail-by visits prior to Champlain's arrival, the wild country offered little more than cod, whale blubber, animal pelts and a motley collection of B-list minerals including quartz and iron pyrite - "false as a Canadian diamond" was the knowing snub back in the day. The Canadian winter would prove to be a much more demanding test of an explorer's better nature than the tropical heat that enabled so much Spanish and Portuguese inhumanity, and yet more productive of the steady co-operative values that nation-building requires - provided you survived.

"He realized how weak he was," says John Ralston Saul, fresh from a 400th-anniversary conference at the Luxembourg Palace in Paris, where the scholarly talk was all about how 17th-century France had no great interest in Champlain's Canada. "His instructions were to subjugate the native people, but he knew that in order to survive, he had to treat them not just as his equals, but as his superiors."

**So the founding motif of Canada, if you like, and a New World concept if ever there was one, is about figuring out how to coexist - Champlain becomes the Father of Multiculturalism, the man who immediately recognizes that in the chaotic newness of a globalizing world, you can live together better not just despite your differences, but because of them.**

Champlain, as it happens, was considered something of a painter, but what that meant in his milieu was the ability to quickly sketch a likely harbour or an indigenous technique for hunting deer. The classic Champlain creative moment is when he persuades an Ottawa native leader (in the middle of nowhere, by Parisian standards) to draw a map of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay in charcoal on a piece of bark in exchange for an iron axe.

"He was good at describing what he could see," says Prof. Heidenreich. "The physical environment, the material culture of various native groups, sailing directions, the actions of those around him. He was poor at describing anything that depended on language, because he never learned to speak any native languages. Thus, anything he says about native religion, social organization or governance is suspect."

Modern anthropologists would have liked him to be more intellectually discerning, given how willing he was to spend time with the natives, how appreciative he was of their wisdom, and how accepting he was of their prior claims to this country. He was famously encouraging of intermarriage "in order that we be one people," and arranged for a number of his younger settlers like Étienne Brûlé to "go native" as a way of getting a handle on this awesome new continent.

Self-interest? ...True, it was about money, or at least beaver pelts and iron axes. Yet given the way European exploration turned out in so many other places, Champlain's Canadian project looks rather more appealing.

Quebec, as a settlement, didn't amount to much, not in Champlain's time anyway. But as an idea, as an experiment in elevating the multiple-personality syndrome to the national level, it's had a pretty good run over 400 years.

"We must figure out how to live together," intones John Ralston Saul. "Doesn't that sound familiar? Doesn't that sound like your country?"