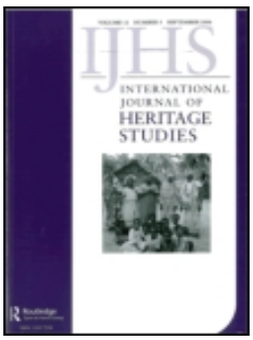

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The hero and the historians: historiography and the uses of Jacques Cartier

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BOOK REVIEW

The hero and the historians: historiography and the uses of Jacques Cartier, by Alan Gordon, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2010, 235 pp., US$29.95 (paperpack), ISBN 978-0-7748-1742-4

Thank heavens for Jacques Cartier. In survey courses of Canadian history, he walks onstage first week of term and plays the fool. While the sixteenth-century explorer did navigate and claim for France the great St Lawrence route into the continent, his eyes glittered with greed. His credulous mind retained tall tales the Iroquois told him about hordes of gold lying upstream and men who flew from tree to tree. Ignoring aboriginal protests, he planted a 30-foot cross to claim their lands for France, and dashed upriver. Was it in retaliation that they withheld their cedar bark cure for scurvy, crippling his colonising efforts? Villainous as well as foolish, Cartier kidnapped their chief and several of his people, lying to cover up their deaths. Lacking the scientific mind and cultural finesse which allowed Samuel de Champlain to establish better relations and a permanent colony in 1608, Cartier provides a cartoonish performance for students arriving with summer tans and hoping the course will not be too dull.

Alan Gordon's book reveals that things were not ever thus. After a brief account of the Saint-Malouin's voyages, the author turns to Cartier's shifting reputation across the centuries. The book shows how mid-nineteenth-century French Canadian conservatives sought and found a hero in the French explorer, a morale-booster after the failed nationalist uprising of 1837, a northern counterpart to Columbus. In transitional times, a slim documentary record and a romantic concept of history allowed Cartier to be portrayed as a hero from 'a simpler time when clear-cut virtues led to glory' (p. 49). Ultramontane bishops and historians elevated two mysterious 'doms' who accompanied Cartier into symbols of a glorious quest for souls rather than gold. Busts and stamps appeared, and markets, streets, ships were renamed. Replicas of the Cartier cross were sprinkled around Quebec to edify Catholic youth.

The book's small canvas (189 pages of text) offers a tantalising overview. While the author's claim of 'Cartiermania' is hyperbolic (never the sole hero of French Canada, never 'on every lip'), the book touches on salient nineteenth-century intellectual currents. It sheds light on such phenomena as the Victorian middle-class fascination for collecting and classifying, which combined personal acquisitiveness with Enlightenment democratisation of knowledge – producing the antiquarian forebears of today's historians. There is insight into the importance of physical imagery to the cult of the hero, Cartier receiving a boost from mid-nineteenth-century discovery of an 'original' portrait. This led to the stirring, widely reprinted image of the square-jawed, astute-looking captain in his renaissance robes, thrusting through swirls of cloud and wave. Purported remnants of Cartier's fort, cannon and ship similarly fed the imagination. The cult reached its apogee around 1890, but lasted through the 1934 tercentenary of the first voyage, a year when 15 books

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about Cartier appeared and tourists sped around in motorcars to ceremonies from Saint-Malo to Montreal. The book's brisk pace reduces the wallowing in committee spats about dimensions, cost and placement of monuments that afflicts some histories of commemoration. While the volume under review lacks the lucid depth of Nelles' (1999) *The Art of Nation-Building*, it provides a clear account of the rise and fall of Cartier as a hero in Quebec, Canada and (especially after Francis Parkman fanned the fire) internationally.

The book also portrays how a 'hero' fared during the rise of the history profession. Scholarship in Britain, France and America around 1870 turned towards greater specialisation and more objective weighing of evidence. Alan Gordon indicates a colonial time-lag, with Canadian amateur/antiquarian librarians and military men rivalling university professionals in prestige into the 1920s. Indeed, collectors such as Dominion Archivist Henry Biggar performed an invaluable service with his early-twentieth-century editions of Cartier documents, for the St Malo originals perished during World War II. Still, understandings of Cartier moved on. Catholic social activists in Quebec ceased clinging to old pieties. The slim evidence supporting the idea of Cartier's missionary goals was discounted amid growing consensus about economic motivation. After 1960, ethnohistorians such as McGill's Bruce Trigger fostered awareness of the aboriginal side of the story, which could cast Cartier in the light of impetuous and grasping imperialist. Yet, since Cartier's mineral discoveries were frauds and his would-be colony failed, he did not even retain centre-stage as a scoundrel, Champlain being the more effective imperialist. For its part, the late-twentieth-century public began to look to entertainment and sports figures – not to history – for its heroes. In the second half of the twentieth century, Gordon concludes, the facts and firsts of Cartier's voyages 'were still routinely cited, but they were stripped of moral, religious and historical meaning' (p. 179).

An intriguing backdrop to the portrayal of Cartier and the historians is the perennial storm cloud of French–English relations in Canada. The Queen, visiting the country in 1984, was studiously not invited to Quebec's Cartier celebrations. Even the small band of French Canadian Cartier scholars were a house divided. Abbé Lionel Groulx, the dean of twentieth-century Catholic nationalist history, who advocated planting Cartier commemoratives around the province to indoctrinate youth, was at pains to exclude Gustave Lanctot from the Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique francaise (which publishes Quebec's leading history journal). Lanctot, who went on to become Dominion Archivist, was an orphan whose brilliant path to Oxford and the Sorbonne was followed by military service in the Great War, a conflict many Quebeckers disowned. Lanctot later scoured the Breton countryside for Cartier relics. It seems the hero's two great acolytes were barely on speaking terms. In contrast, Professor Gordon welcomes today's readers into dialogue about how an explorer's meaning changed as terrains of memory and scholarship shifted underfoot.

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Nelles, H.V., 1999. *The art of nation-building: pageantry and spectacle at Quebec's tercentenary.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

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