

A Manuscript Overlooked

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RESEARCH NOTE

A Manuscript Overlooked

FREDERICK J. THORPE

FROM 1897 TO 1969 FOUR EMINENT scholars¹ wrote about Claude-Charles Le Roy de Bacqueville de la Potherie and his four-volume work, *Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale*, editions of which were published in 1722, 1723 and 1753. As far as they knew, a manuscript of 1702 which was not published until 1716, once the War of the Spanish Succession had been over for three years, had appeared as the *Nouveau voyage du Canada, ou de la Nouvelle-France et les guerres des Français avec les Anglais et les originaires du pays*, and was a precursor of part of the *Histoire*. To their knowledge, both the manuscript and the earlier book had disappeared. Yet it is quite evident that another manuscript, which was extant during their time and still is, provided material for part of the first chapter of Volume One, and for most of the second and third chapters.² Although one of La Potherie's titles at Quebec from 1698 to 1701 was Comptroller of Fortifications, there was no search for contributions by him to the archival series known as *Dépôt des Fortifications des Colonies*.³ This is hardly surprising for, despite his title, he bequeathed to posterity little of note in the domain of fortifications.⁴

It is now time to look carefully at the manuscript. If we consider its original title and a later addition in a different hand,⁵ we learn that it began as "a memorial on Newfoundland and the places where the fishery could be carried on; a description of Plaisance (Placentia), its fishery, its inhabitants and its condition" and "an account of what happened between the French and the English in 1696 when the English colony of Newfoundland was destroyed by the French." That paper, some

unnamed official tells us, "is historical, political and commercial in nature, and may be useful under all those headings." Added, without being announced in the original title, was a memorial on the Hudson Strait, "which is interesting to read because of the description of the strait, of the islands to be found there, of the accidents to which one may be exposed because of the ice, the polar bears and so forth; and also because of the Eskimos, with whom trade could be conducted fairly easily."

The manuscript, ninety-one pages⁶ long, unsigned and undated, is no.80 in carton 2 of the sub-series Amérique septentrionale [North America]; it is referred to below as DFC/AS/80. The first section (ff.1-18v), a description and discussion of the French colony in southern Newfoundland, is an elaboration of Brisacier's report.⁷ Brisacier, an official of the French marine department at Rochefort, and a subordinate of the Intendant Michel Bégon, had been instructed to investigate the state of the colony and to recommend improvements. When the two documents are compared, his authorship is evident and, if his report appeared first, DFC/AS/80 could have been finished no earlier than 1699. Part of the first chapter of Volume One of the *Histoire*, 16-21, deals more briefly with the same subject-matter and copies from DFC/AS/80, *verbatim*, a paragraph⁸ and parts of sentences.⁹

The second section (ff.20-33) is an account of Iberville's campaign against the English ports of Newfoundland and a discussion of those ports, including, at the end, tables of figures on the volume of the fishery. The evidence is second-hand; for the author, presumably La Potherie, admitted that his narrative was largely a compendium of several eye-witness accounts of the campaign.¹⁰ As he wrote, "J'ai fait en cela comme l'abeille qui va de fleur en fleur en sucer le suc pour faire son miel." The text was incorporated, with spelling and stylistic changes, into the second chapter of Volume One of the *Histoire*, as a comparison with pages 23-55 of the volume clearly shows.

The third section (ff.34-46v), much of it in the first person, is a first-hand account of Iberville's 1697 expedition through Hudson Strait by La Potherie, who participated in it as commissary. It contains a few classical quotations, some from the Latin version of Homer's *Odyssey*. In the published version of the text (*Histoire*, Volume One, 57-88), the first three headings in the chapter title are the same but, in the fourth, the reputed "cruelty" of Labrador Eskimos, who had been crossing the Strait of Belle Isle since the early seventeenth century and attacking the fishermen of St. Malo and neighbouring ports of France, could hardly be applied to people who traded cheerfully with the French. Thus, "Nouvelle alliance faite avec les Esquimaux, nation cruelle" becomes "Nouvelle alliance avec les Esquimaux du Cap de Digue, au 62 degré 45 minutes latitude Nord." A fifth heading was added: "Combat du Profond dans les glaces, contre les Anglais."

The chapter opens, on pages 56-7, with a florid introduction of some 250 words, in the form of a letter to a distinguished intendant.¹¹ Then it plunges directly into the text from the manuscript, making changes in spelling, occasional changes in word order, several changes in the choice of words and phrases, and a few

omissions. There were also five or six additions, some of paragraph length. Otherwise, the text was taken *verbatim* from DFC/AS/80, in which the last sentence reads: "Je ne crois pas que l'on peut aller plus loin dans l'Amérique Septentrionale, à moins que de vouloir s'exposer à chercher un des bouts du monde, ou d'entrer dans le Ouest du détroit de David, qui a communication à ce que l'on prétend au Japon."¹² The concluding remarks, on the grave dangers of the northern seas, replete with more classical references and Latin quotations, are an addition.

Robert Le Blant wrote in 1948 that La Potherie had taken part in all the events portrayed in the first nine chapters of Volume One of his *Histoire*,¹³ a statement echoed in 1969 by Father Adrien Pouliot.¹⁴ On the contrary, an examination of the manuscript DFC/AS/80 reveals that, of the first three chapters of Volume One, only the third can claim to be based on first-hand knowledge.

Notes

¹J.E. Roy, "Claude-Charles Le Roy de la Potherie," *Royal Society of Canada Transactions*, 2nd series, III (1897), sect. 1, 3-44; L.P. Desrosiers, "La Potherie," *Centenaire de l'Histoire du Canada de François-Xavier Garneau* (Montreal, 1945), 291-308; Robert Le Blant, *Histoire de la Nouvelle France: les sources narratives du début du XVIII^e siècle et le Recueil de Gédéon de Catalogne* (Dax, France [1948]), 73-83; and Adrien Pouliot, S.J., "Le Roy de la Potherie," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, II (Toronto, 1969), 421-3.

²The chapters are called "letters", a device of the author.

³The originals were housed for many years in the archives of the Ministère de la France d'Outre-Mer. That repository became the Centre d'Archives d'Outre-Mer, which was formerly in the rue Oudinot in Paris, and is now located at Aix-en-Provence. There are copies on microfilm at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa.

⁴His commission (Archives nationales, Colonies B 20, ff.60-61, 1 May 1698) called for him to keep the accounts of the fortifications, specifically by means of a register of receipts and disbursements. He was one of the signatories of expenditure authorizations (J.E. Roy, "Le Roy de la Potherie," 9). In 1700 and 1701 he was told his performance was satisfactory (AN Cols. B 22, ff.127v, 5 May 1700 and 234v, 31 May 1701.) He is not mentioned in such a monumental study as *Quebec, the Fortified City, from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century*, by Charbonneau, Desloges and Lafrance (Ottawa & Quebec, 1982).

⁵Prior to the first folio.

⁶The folios are numbered 1-46v, but the nineteenth is unnumbered and has no *verso*.

⁷Brisacier's report, dated 2 December 1698, is to be found in AN, Cols. C^{11C}, ff.176-180v

⁸Cf. the description of the salter, ff.7-7v of the manuscript and the *Histoire*, Vol. 1, 17-18.

⁹See, for example, "Plaisance est dans un pays plat ..." f.4 and p.16; "... la morue fait toute la richesse de Terre-Neuve ..."

“... de quelle manière elle se prepare ... les soins et les peines qu'il y faut apporter ...” f.7 and p.17.

¹⁰The two most thorough accounts are Iberville's letter to the minister of marine dated 24 September 1696 in AN, Cols. C^{11A} 14, ff.237-245; and the Abbé Baudoin's journal, written between 26 June 1696 and 27 May 1697, in AN, Cols. C^{11D} 3, ff.27-40, published by Auguste Gosselin as *Les Normands au Canada: Journal d'une expédition de d'Iberville* (Évreux, 1900). La Potherie implied also that he used minor reports, which may not have survived.

¹¹“... vous portez seul le poids de deux Intendances considérables...”

¹²*Histoire*, Vol. 1, 87.

¹³Le Blant, *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, 77.

¹⁴Pouliot, *DCB* II, 423.