

Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America By Philip Marchand

Stephen Kenny

Volume 98, Number 1, Spring 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065845ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065845ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kenny, S. (2006). Review of [*Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America* By Philip Marchand]. *Ontario History*, 98(1), 120–122.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065845ar>

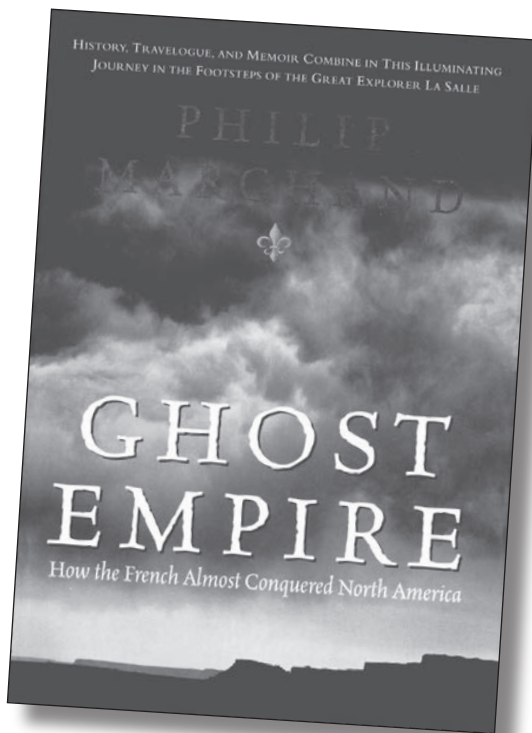
Ghost Empire

How the French Almost Conquered North America

By Philip Marchand. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2005. xvii+ 444 pp. Maps. \$37.99 hardcover. ISBN 0-7710-5677-X.

Philip Marchand's touching and personal pilgrimage to the dim past of the French in North America reminded me of my own encounter with that increasingly vague and little appreciated epoch. Twenty-five years ago, while teaching Canadian history at the University of Vermont and raising two toddlers, I recall walking along Church Street in Burlington. Hearing my wife and me speaking in French to the children, senior citizens of grandparent age stopped to do likewise. More than once I saw tears well up in their eyes as they explained that for their own grandchildren the language was gone. For their part students with names like Aubuchon, Paquet and Tremblay found their way to my classes, wondering about their origins and reminding me that their own grandparents still spoke a smattering of French. Imagine my surprise to discover a French speaking Santa Claus at Gaynes Department Store up by the I-89. Such bilingualism was not for the benefit of native Franco-Americans; rather it was for the droves of pre-Christmas Montreal bargain hunters. After all, the store's important Québécois clientele required some sensitivity!

Is Vermont the rule, Quebec the exception? When one thinks of the condition of the French language and heritage in North America one can only note how they have faded. Philip Marchand is yet another witness to this sense of their



imminent disappearance. Of course he is neither the first nor will he be the last to perceive such decline. René Lévesque once referred dismissively to French speakers beyond Quebec as dead ducks and novelist Yves Beauchemin described them callously as *cadavres encore chauds* (still warm cadavers). Indeed, according to Beauchemin Canada was a fatal disease for the French language and those who spoke it. If this country had such a negative effect one can only imagine what Beauchemin might conclude about the impact of the United States.

As a means to enter the story of the French in North America, Philip Marchand focuses on the travels, adventures and tragedy of the life of René-Robert Cavalier de La Salle. The controversial discoverer of the mouth of the Mississippi River was born at Rouen in 1643 and murdered by his own men somewhere

in Texas in 1687. La Salle visited a vast swath of the uncharted continent, traveling from the St. Lawrence valley all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. He stopped and traded at many places in what is now the province of Ontario. His journeys provide the theme for Marchand's own exploration of what he poetically characterizes as a 'ghost empire.' Like a guide, La Salle's wanderings provide a map of places to which Marchand travels and upon which he reflects in these pages.

By standard criteria Marchand's work cannot be defined as a serious historical investigation. The usual expectations of any professional historian reading this material will not be met. The book contains no index. Authors are cited without use of footnotes. There is an eclectic and admittedly intriguing bibliographical base. Antiquarian, literary, local and historical, the sources are of very mixed and highly unequal value. Moreover, the author refers to numerous titles which he does not include in his bibliography. More recent and serious studies by scholars such as Gerard Brault and Yves Roby are either missed or disregarded. Unfortunately, the timeworn insight of the Boston Brahman, Francis Parkman, hovers over this text like a malign phantom. It is no surprise that Marchand is seized by the sense of ghostliness.

At a practical level, this work is written with a degree of insouciance that verges on startling. On one occasion Marchand writes of meeting a certain Gail Moreau, née Schreiner, who he describes as the widowed vice-president of the French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan. A few pages later he writes of seeing her again at a special mass for people of French descent at St. Anne's parish in Detroit, this time in the presence of her fully-alive husband, Monsieur Moreau.

Throughout the book the reader confronts an extraordinary and disconcerting galimatias of disconnected reflections. For example, Marchand stopped to visit a huge Romanesque Roman Catholic church he once happened upon in rural southwestern Michigan. Surprised that the door was open on a weekday, he entered. This simple experience leads to a digression on the pre-Second Vatican Council Catholic devotion of First Fridays. He then proceeds to a discussion of the apostate priest Charles Chiniquy, the philosophy of Marxism and Friedrich Engels' notions of the concept of family. Every chapter is similarly replete with such pensive and disparate ruminations. It is as though the model and expanse of La Salle's incessant travels allow Marchand the latitude to include material on anything that might strike his fancy. Stopping in a church, driving through country fields, drinking a beer in a decrepit bar, conversing with amateur historians or historical enactors, all provide inspiration for Marchand's meditation on a lost French North American empire. But what understanding the reader might draw from all of this is less obvious.

Rather late in the game Marchand acknowledges his own sense of history. He likens his work to "an endless dark house, full of crazy corridors and unexplored rooms." (p. 327) What an apt metaphor! One might strike a match and shed a surprising bit of light but still there is much darkness beyond. To be fully enlightened about the past is quite impossible. No historian would disagree. Marchand's book ought not to be read primarily as history, but as a travelogue and a memoir it is both exotic and compelling. In his perambulations across the continent, the author meets a unique and colourful cast of characters. He also learns in a very

personal way of the quality and richness of his own antecedents. A thoroughly anglicized Franco-American, he was born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He heard his educated, middle-class parents speak French only when they did not want the children to understand. Marchand opines “that it would have seemed vaguely un-American for them to have taught us French at home.” (p. 355) Only during his own meanderings, the recounting of which has resulted in this book, did he actually learn what “tourtière” was. In the Marchand family that dish had long given way to the New England staple of baked beans.

If an important part of true historical sensitivity be memory, then both Marchand’s deeply emotional search for

his past and his profound dismay at its loss should be considered the most admirable and essential contribution of these pages. His book can most certainly be judged a worthy if imperfect enterprise. Read it and weep!

Stephen Kenny
University of Regina

Bibliography:

Brault, Gerard. *The French-Canadian heritage in New England*. Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1986.

Roby, Yves. *The Franco-Americans of New England: dreams and realities*. Translated by Mary Picard. Sillery, Quebec: Septentrion, 2004.

4Square

An introduction to the Sharon Temple National Historic Site, to the Children of Peace who made it, and to their place in the history of Canada before Canada.

By Mark Fram and Albert Schrauwers. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2005. 64 pp. Illustrations. \$10.00 softcover. ISBN 1-55245-164-X.

4*SQUARE* is more than a story about a religious building; it is an account of a religious community and its interaction with place. A collaborative effort, this monograph combines the theoretical expertise of Albert Schrauwers (*Awaiting the Millennium*) and the architectural knowledge of Mark Fram (*Well Preserved*). Both authors’ works are landmarks in their respective fields and I would recommend each as worthy reading. *4SQUARE* outlines the history of the Children of Peace, a Quaker offshoot community, and the temple they built in Sharon, Ontario, south of Lake Simcoe.

The Sharon Temple is now a National Historical Site and one of the most remarkable pre-Confederation structures in Ontario. This book also speaks to the larger societal context in which the community and the Temple existed. As Fram and Schrauwers write, “the Temple sits at the intersection of two axes of history – a commonplace local society of the early nineteenth century in Upper Canada, intersecting a three-thousand-year struggle to recover the myth of a paradise lost, a dream of heaven on earth, a perfect place in an imperfect world.” (p. 5)

Illustrated with many excellent imag-