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Bush Runner: The Adventures of Pierre-Esprit Radisson by Mark Bourrie

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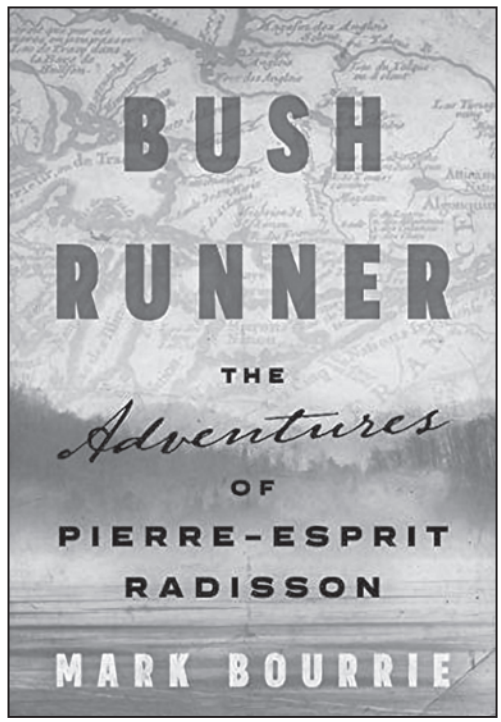
Bush Runner

The Adventures of Pierre-Esprit Radisson

by Mark Bourrie

Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2019, 271 pages. $22.95. Softcover. ISBN 978-1-77196-237-7 (biblioasis.com)



Pierre-Esprit Radisson (ca. 1636-1710) was a survivor. Whether traversing the interiors of North America or soliciting the favour of royal courts, Radisson's ambitious nature, linguistic skills (he was known to speak eight languages) and adaptability led to a life less ordinary and one, by all understanding, that should have been much shorter than it actually was. As a teenager, he survived life in the tiny French trading post of Trois-Rivières as well as capture (and recapture) by Mohawk (Haudenosaunee) warriors. As a younger man, Radisson survived a series of physically grueling, mentally exhausting and dangerous trading expeditions from the colony of New France into what is now New York, Ontario, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. As an adult, Radisson survived capture by Dutch pirates, royal intrigue in the courts of England and France, the Great Fire of London (at the time, he lived in one of the few neighbourhoods not burned down), a French military expedition to the Caribbean, and being shipwrecked off the coast of Venezuela. Truly, it is the theme of survival that dominates Radisson's life and is the beating heart of Mark Bourrie's biography, *Bush Runner: The Adventures of Pierre-Esprit Radisson*.

Drawing primarily from Radisson's own journals (written ca. 1665 and again ca. 1687 and re-published in their entirety by The Champlain Society in 2012 and 2014), Bourrie approaches his subject as an object of curiosity and fascination. Here was an opportunistic, skilled and exploitative man who encountered his fair share of both good fortune and bad luck, great timing and poor decision-making, and success and failure. A journalist and historian, Bourrie recognizes a good story when he sees one, writing at one point, "Here, on paper, was the life of a man who survived over and over when most other men would have not" (200). In his hands, the life of Radisson plays out like some kind of early Canadian tragi-comedy. Consistently on the precipice of something "big," Radisson almost always finds a way to bungle things up due to his impatience, selfishness, arrogance or simply because he backs the wrong horse. Bourrie presents Radisson's story not as a morality tale per se but rather a treatise on the fallibility of human nature. Radisson strives for greatness (again and again), only to be felled (more often than not) by his own ambition, the Icarus of New France. But therein

lies the beauty and humanity of Radisson's story and Bourrie's masterful telling of it. Radisson's deliberate attempts to get ahead in life, if not his actual lived experiences, are somewhat relatable (and understandable), especially so in an era famously characterized by his contemporary Thomas Hobbes as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Notably for readers of *Ontario History* and for the study of the history of the Great Lakes region in general, Bourrie devotes ample space in *Bush Runner* to showcasing and explaining the intricacies, complexities, and diversity of Indigenous life in seventeenth-century North America. This is, after all, the world in which Radisson operated, a world in which Indigenous peoples were very much regional power brokers and the survival of the colony of New France was certainly not guaranteed. Bourrie's vivid and detailed descriptions of (among other things) Indigenous social norms and behaviour, worldview, political organization and the role of women, ritual and spirituality, concepts of law and justice and notions of war, the division of labour, and agricultural affairs are a most welcome and valuable resource and contribute to scholarship in this area.

Make no mistake about it, Radisson cuts a flawed figure. Bourrie himself describes Radisson as a con man (147) and a liar (158) and his treatment of Indigenous peoples, of whom many were allies and family, is deplorable at times. Despite finding himself present at pivotal moments in North American and European history and actively attempting to influence related outcomes (the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670 being one such example), in the end, his value as an observer and documentarian overshadows the weight or lasting impact of any direct actions taken. That may be an unfair opinion but Radisson always seemed to miss the mark, his repetitive attempts at achieving financial security, securing royal patronage or improving social status landing a degree or two from the bullseye. Always close but never quite on the money (literally). Without a doubt, Radisson is one of the more intriguing characters of seventeenth-century North America and by association, Canadian history. His boldness (or is that impulsiveness?) is simultaneously shocking and impressive and his adventures make for great storytelling.

Chris Sanagan, Archivist
Writer and co-creator of Group of 7 Comics

Daughters of Aataentsic

Life Stories from Seven Generations

by Kathryn Magee Labelle, in collaboration with the
We^{n}dat/Wa^{n}dat Women's Advisory Council

Montreal and Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 210 pages. $34.60 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-2280-0529-2 (cloth). (mqup.ca)

A number of years ago Peter Clancy and I wrote a book on seven foresters from Nova Scotia. All except one were alive at the time so we had the opportunity to speak to them and to put their lives into context from archival and secondary sources. Kathryn Magee Labelle has done something much more impressive. She has