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Film Review / Recensions de film

Henry de Puyjalon: Lone Wolf of the North Shore.* By Jean-François Monette. (Toronto: White Pine Pictures, 2000. 22 minutes. \$29.95). French title: *Henry de Puyjalon: Solitaire de la Côte Nord.

In the context of a growing interest in science as a panacea for resource depletion in late nineteenth-century Canada, the count Henry de Puyjalon (1839-1905), could easily be called an extraordinary figure. A member of the French aristocracy, he immigrated to Canada in 1872. Initially settling in Montreal, within a few years he had married a daughter of a former Quebec prime minister, and set off to start a family in a remote part of the North Shore. Over time, he established himself as an expert in the natural history, the flora and fauna and the diverse societies of the region. Furthermore, he became an outspoken advocate for state-sponsored management of natural resources. Detailed accounts of his work were often published in the provincial ministerial reports, yet many of his suggestions were so novel and visionary that they went largely unappreciated by contemporaries. Even more lamentable has been a lack of interest by historians in documenting his life or integrating his writings into the history of science in Canada. Thankfully, Jean-François Monette's documentary has finally shed light on an individual too long unexamined.

In keeping with the theme of the larger series, *A Scattering of Seeds: The Creation of Canada*, Monette tells Henry de Puyjalon's story primarily in an oral-history format. He uses two narrators, Guy de Puyjalon, a grandson of Henry, and Guy Côté of the National Parks Service—a good choice as both are passionate storytellers, very knowledgeable about de Puyjalon's life and writings and Quebec's North Shore region. Together the narrators highlight the principal points of de Puyjalon's career, including his works of natural history, and his role as an explorer and special agent for the provincial government. Complemented by contemporary photographs and sketches, and historical reenactments that keep the documentary moving at a lively pace, the narrators succeed in drawing out of the historical record a colourful and remarkable individual. The most captivating features of the documentary are Monette's recognition of geography as an agent in the story and his weaving of his subject's life experiences into modern footage of the inimitable landscape in which he lived and worked. Similarly, he does a good job of juxtaposing his biographical sketch of the life of de Puyjalon with the cultural conditions of France and Canada in the second half of nineteenth-century.



Henry de Puyjalon

(Source: Potvin, Puyjalon, title page.)

The documentary is only a brief vignette and there is arguably little room to develop the story in much detail. Consequently, any criticism stems, perhaps unfairly, from a desire to be told more about the subject. While creating a curiosity to learn more is certainly a positive aspect of an educational documentary, this film would benefit from a more generous exploitation of primary and secondary sources. For example, much of the information given by the narrators in regard to de Puyjalon's motivations for coming to Canada, and for later settling in the remote North Shore, is speculative. Primary sources, such as Damase Potvin's book *Puyjalon, le solitaire de l'Île-à-la-Chasse* (Quebec: 1938) provide some important information that would help paint a more detailed and less obscure portrait of this fascinating personality.

In addition, setting his life in a broader context within available secondary sources on the history of science would better frame de Puyjalon's interest in natural history—clearly one of the most important elements in the documentary. After all, Paris was the epicenter of Western science in de Puyjalon's formative years. The Emperor Napoleon III spent lavish sums to implicate the state in scientific endeavors intended to advance the imperial cause. Science would have been omnipresent in de Puyjalon's life, from his training as a military officer, which would have included the fundamentals of science and

natural history, to his privileged social life that, according to Alexis de Tocqueville, would have called upon its principles to “furnish gratification of the mind.” (Cf. Henry Blumenthal, *American and French Culture, 1800-1900*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975: 361).

Even more importantly, a broader context would permit a better understanding of de Puyjalon’s keen interest and promotion of the wise stewardship of nature. Much of the rhetoric in the Parisian salons dealt with the changing dynamic between the human and non-human species. Many noblemen spent their idle hours engaged in writing natural histories, from small treatises and handbooks to lofty multi-volume tomes. Of particular interest were the methods and manners of animal reproduction and experiments to control them and adapt them to industrial processes. Such efforts, in the 1850s, made France the world leader in the science of pisciculture. De Puyjalon’s interest in lobster breeding habits and his desire to create artificial breeding grounds certainly came from a familiarity with such topics in Paris. They also helped him see potential problems with the exploitation of natural resources in his adopted homeland. Considering that the year de Puyjalon set foot in Canada there were 44 lobster canneries in the country and by his death, in 1905, there were close to 900, his alarm seems more than justifiable. (Cf. *Rapports du Commissaire des Terres, Forêts et Pêcheries de la province de Québec, Documents de la Session, 1898-1901*; Richard H. Williams, *Historical Account of the Lobster Canning Industry*, Ottawa: Department of Marine and Fisheries, Fisheries Branch, 1930.)

In such a context, de Puyjalon’s interest in the natural resources of Quebec’s North Shore are even more extraordinary as they reveal a man seeking practical applications for French imperial science in the remote Canadian wilderness. Extremely proud of his heritage, in many ways, de Puyjalon never stopped playing the role of the aristocratic savant. Yet, he managed to promote popular conservation ideals primarily because he came of age in a nation already struggling with profound environmental problems resulting from over-exploitation of resources. He arrived in North America on the cusp of an awakening by the governments of the United States and Canada to the exhaustibility of their natural resources. Even if it did not always lead to action, he increasingly found sympathy from provincial bureaucrats for his concerns. Nevertheless, when he died there would be no similar interest for a generation in many of the kinds of conservation activities that he suggested. De Puyjalon’s efforts were unique and Monette succeeds, above all, in getting that point across.

However desirable it would be to have seen more attention to the political and scientific context of the France of de Puyjalon’s youth, in

the final analysis, the lack of such detail does not diminish the value of this instructive documentary. Monette has provided a succinct, yet illuminating, account of the life of one of Canada's most under-appreciated and little known naturalists responsible for laying the foundation for important programs of environmental conservation. For educators seeking to highlight the social, political and cultural influence of immigrants to Canada in the nineteenth century, while also introducing them to the unique geography of Quebec's North Shore, this documentary is an excellent resource. For historians of science, it is a reminder that scientific exchange did not always take place through formal channels such as societies, institutions, or government initiatives, but sometimes came in the form of individual immigrants who willingly shared the unique knowledge and experience in the "cultural baggage" they brought with them from their countries of origin.

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