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The Jesuit Relations

THEIR VALUE AS HISTORICAL
MATERIAL

BY

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THEIR VALUE AS HISTORICAL MATERIALS.

EUROPEAN colonial policy, during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, presented, as its avowed basis, a rather strange admixture of religious and commercial motives. The two appear conjoined not alone in the writings of the time, but often in the official charters of commercial companies established for the exploitation of the new continent. The colonial policy of France rested especially upon this dual basis, and the colonial authorities of France strove consistently to keep both motives well in the foreground. "The glory of God and the commodity of His people" was the goal sought by the Most Christian King through the extension of French interests in North America.

To harmonize the claims of religion and commerce, of priest and trader, was never easy, and more than one governor of New France wore away his patience and energy in a fruitless effort to reconcile interests which from their very nature were sometimes impossible of complete reconciliation. This conflict of interest and purposes is the most striking feature in the whole history of the old regime; to understand it is to possess the key to a proper estimation of French colonial policy in North America. The two most picturesque figures in New France were the Jesuit and the *coureur-de-bois*; each was the personification of a mighty interest striving for dominance over the other in the administration of the colony.

The personification of the religious propaganda in French America was the Jesuit missionary. Flushed with the spiritual conquest of Paraguay their advance guard arrived at Quebec just as the first quarter of the seventeenth century drew to its close, and before long the outposts of the Church had been out in all directions. Stalwart "black robes" soon made their way among the Montagnais to the North, the Iroquois to the South, the Abenakis to the East, and among the Hurons to the West.

" Behold him on his way ; his breviary
 " Which from his girdle hangs, his only shield.
 " That well-known habit is his panoply,
 " That Cross the only weapon he will wield ;
 " By day he bears it for his staff afield,
 " By night it is the pillow of his bed.
 " No other lodging these wild woods can yield
 " Than Earth's hard lap, and rustling overhead
 " A canopy of deep and tangled boughs far spread."

Once at their posts the missionaries regularly sent down to Quebec full reports of their progress, statements of their difficulties, and forecasts of future success,—all interspersed with interesting descriptions of Indian customs, traditions and life. Not infrequently the reports included opinions, suggestions and comments on the conduct of civil affairs, so that the whole forms a valuable compendium of contemporary information upon various phases of colonial life, both savage and civilized.

Speaking generally, these reports may be grouped into two classes; those which were of a confidential nature and hence not designed for publication, and those which, on the other hand, were written for the purpose of interesting the French people in the work of the missionaries. In the first class one may include personal letters written by missionaries to their friends in France, or to the Superior of the Order at Quebec, or to their brethren at other missions. Although not intended for the public eye, some of these letters found their way into a series of little volumes published in France during the years 1649-1654 under the title "*Annuae Litterae Societatis Jesu: Ad Patres et Fratres ejusdem Societatis.*" But the greater part of them have not been preserved in any form for the historical student; a fact which is much to be regretted, for they must have contained much valuable data which, from its personal nature, could not be incorporated in the reports intended for publication. The other class of reports is that which has come down to us as the *Rélations*. They begin with the *Rélation* of Briard concerning the Acadian missions in 1616, and appeared at irregular intervals down to 1626, when they ceased to appear until 1632. But in this latter year there began the long series of annual *Rélations* which were published

at Paris by Sebastien Cramoisey, and which served in their time to thrill the hearts of Frenchmen with tales of Jesuit heroism in the wilds of America.

This "Cramoisey" series, commencing with the *Rélation* of *Le Jeune* in 1632, contains forty-one volumes in all, thirty-nine of which bear the title "*Rélations*", while two—those of 1654-5 and 1658-9—are entitled "*Lettres*." With the appearance of the forty-first volume in 1672 the series abruptly ended, never to be resumed. This sudden termination, we are told by one whose study of the matter ought to have enabled him to speak with authority,* was "probably due to the influence of Frontenac." True enough, the fact that Frontenac had just arrived in the colony, coupled with the fact that he has come to us as a most uncompromising foe of the Jesuits, might seem to give ground for this probability. But there are several difficulties in the way. One of these is the fact that although the despatches of Frontenac to the home authorities have been preserved,† no one has been able to find even a suggestion that the writings of the Jesuits should be censored. Moreover, Bishop Laval, the chief prop of Jesuit power in New France, was at this very time in France receiving distinct marks of the royal favour. And it must likewise be borne in mind that Frontenac's influence at the French court was obtained and retained largely through his wife, and that it could scarcely have been sufficient to secure any such drastic action against a powerful religious order.

With perhaps better reason the historian Faillon declares that the suppression was due to the influence of Governor Courcelle, Frontenac's predecessor in office.‡ Faillon cites in support of his statement a *Mémoire* prepared by M. D'Allet, the secretary of M. Queylus, who shortly before this had held the position of Vicar-General, with headquarters at Montreal. But Queylus was an open enemy of the Jesuits, and the attitude of the master may have influenced the secretary to regard the

*Mr. Reuben Gold Thwaites, "The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents," Vol. I, Introduction, p. 4.

†Canadian Archives, *Correspondance Générale*, Vols. III and IV.

‡Faillon, *Histoire de la Colonie française*, 1 p. 290-291.

cessation of the *Rélations* as a set-back for the Order. At any rate the despatches of Courcelle in the *Correspondance Générale* give no evidence in support of Faillon's statement, and a careful investigator has searched the French archives without finding corroboratory evidence of any kind.*

The real reason for the cessation can, it seems, be found in the history of the Jesuit Order itself, and not in the annals of political discord in New France. The Jesuits, Franciscans, Sulpitians and other orders had their missions in Asia as well as in America, and in the East as in the West the intercourse was not always harmonious. Through the various published reports of the different missionaries the details of these inter-Order squabbles were reaching the ears of the faithful in Europe, much to the annoyance of the Papal authorities. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that, on April 6th, 1673, Pope Clement X issued a Bull which prohibited any further publication of what was going on at the outposts of the Church, unless with the special permission of the Propaganda.† This Bull forbade the publication not alone of the *Rélations* of the Jesuits in North America, but all reports relating to the work of missionaries of any Order in any part of the world. And as this decree left the Vatican in April it must have reached the Provincial of the Jesuits in France in adequate time to stay the publication of what would have formed the "*Relation* of 1673."

At any rate the Cramoisy's ceased in 1672, and from this time on there appeared only occasional letters published in the official organs of the Jesuit Order. These very probably had special license. Reports evidently continued to be made, but the failure to preserve them in printed form has caused most of them to be lost forever to the student of colonial history.

*Harrisse, *Notes pour servir l'histoire de la Nouvelle-France*, p. 60.

†The text of this Bull is as follows: "Nos his aliisque gravibus causis adducti, de memoratum Cardinalium concilio, auctoritate Apostolica, tenore presentium iterum prohibemus ne quis cujuscumque status, gradus, conditionis, etiam Regularis cujusvis ordinis, congregationis, instituti, et Societatis etiam Jesu, licet is esset, de quo specifica et individua mentio facienda foret, sine licentia in scriptis Congregationis eorundem cardinalium, quam in operis initio imprimere teneamur libros et scripta, in quibus de missionibus vel de rebus ad missiones pertinentibus agitur, per se vel per alium edat."

(*Juris pontificii de Propaganda fide*, Pt. I, p. 417, No. 1.)
Cf. De Rochemontie, *Les Jesuites*, (Paris: 1895). Vol. I, p. 47.

For almost a century after the close of French dominion in Canada, very little attention was paid to the *Rélations* by those who undertook to study and to write upon the history of New France. But during the fifties of the nineteenth century attention was called to their value, and at once a spirited search began to be made for the little duodecimo volumes. In the course of time some copies of each year's edition were brought to light, and soon reprints of various portions began to appear. All of these reprints were, however, incomplete; most of them were in the original Latin or French; while their limited number soon rendered even the reprints difficult of access to the ordinary student. It is only within the last few years that a comprehensive republication of all the *Rélations* and allied documents has been successfully undertaken, thus placing the enormous mass of data, in English, at our disposal.

These, then, are what the *Rélations* are; it may be worth while, now that they have become accessible, to point out some features which ought to be borne in mind in any attempt to arrive at a proper estimation of their value as historical materials. For the danger of over-estimation is by no means slight in a generation when historical writers feel that they must buttress their conclusions with evidence drawn from "contemporaries", and too often forget that the "sources", if used without careful discrimination may serve only to mislead. In general, the value of "contemporary" writings will depend upon the character and trustworthiness of the writers; their attitude towards the conditions they describe; the circumstances under which they write, and the purpose which the writings are intended to serve.

Now the *Rélations* were the work of men whose character and trustworthiness were, in general, beyond reproach. The writings, it is true, contain some absolute mis-statements of fact,* but these must be regarded as due to an excessive zeal in recording the triumphs of the Cross rather than as wilful departure from the paths of truth. It may be noted, at the same

*Mr. Benjamin Sulte has estimated that the *Rélations* mentions a total of over sixty thousand conversions among the Hurons, although this tribe, at the zenith of its power, could not have comprised, at the highest estimate, more than ten thousand persons of all sexes and ages.—Sulte, *Reponse aux Critiques* (1883).

time, that the garb of a religious order is not of itself a guarantee of a chronicler's truthfulness. If proof of this be desired it may be found in the well-known case of Hennepin, who, although he wore the frock and cowl of St. Francis, has been deservedly pilloried by Kingsford as "one of the most shameless liars to be met with in literature."*

But, admitting freely the high character of the Jesuit chroniclers, one is still forced to examine the circumstances under which the *Rélations* were written and published; their object, and, finally, the attitude of the writers towards the men and measures of their time. The *Rélations* were, as is well-known, written under the greatest difficulties. "Jotted down hastily," writes Le Jeune, "now in one place, now in another; sometimes on water, sometimes on land."† Suffocated by smoke within the narrow confines of an Indian hovel, or more often out in the depths of the forest by the light of the moon and stars, the missionaries sought to record the doings of the day. It is little wonder, then, that many of the narratives are incoherent; that repetitions are frequent, and that there is often a lack of arrangement or even of sequence in the presentation of events.

Again, it is well to remember that the *Rélations* were written consciously. They were prepared by the writers knowing that they were to be published, and they were published primarily with the object of securing moral and financial support for the North American missions from the people of France. The opinion expressed by Kingsford that "no newspaper correspondent ever made greater efforts favourably to represent the cause he was advertising",‡ seems to do the missionaries a gross and gratuitous injustice; at the same time the knowledge of the end which the writings were to serve cannot have been without its effect on the Jesuit's mind and, hence, without influence on his work.

What is even more pertinent in this regard, the *Rélations* were consciously edited and re-edited before they reached the

*Kingsford, *History of Canada*, I, 376, note.

†Le Jeune, *Rélation of*, 1636.

‡Kingsford, *op. et loc. cit.*

press. It was the custom of the missionaries to forward their reports to the Superior of the Jesuits at Quebec whenever a favourable opportunity afforded itself; in some cases they came down with the fur flotillas and made oral report. In the former case the Superior revised the written report forwarded to him; in the latter he composed a report from the oral narration given him. Then, having placed all the reports of the year in proper form, he despatched the whole *dossier* to the Provincial of the Order in France. This official, after a further "careful scrutiny and re-editing", gave them to Cramoisy for publication.* How much was added, altered or omitted during this double process of scrutiny and revision we have no means of knowing. It may not be unfair to conjecture, however, that the well-known teachings of the school of Loyola were not without some influence upon the editorial ethics. At any rate, we have the avowal of one of these revising Superiors that he did not attempt to send home a relation of all that went on in the colony, but only of "that which touches the good of the Faith and Religion."† "The *Rélations*", wrote Père Claude Boucher to Père Bagot in 1633, "should not be read with the idea that they tell everything, but only that which is edifying."‡

Nevertheless the *Rélations* do contain much more than a mere narration of religious life and progress, and much concerning the civil administration of the colony which is far from edifying. And it is just for this reason that caution in their use is necessary. For it is well-known that the Jesuits were, during the greater part of the French régime, in antagonism towards the civil authorities on many important points of political, social and economic policy. The Jesuits consistently opposed, for one thing, the system of carrying on the fur trade through the media of posts on the upper lakes for the reason that these too often served as centers for the distribution of brandy among the western redskins. To the civil authorities both the posts and the liquor were essential to the control of the trade; for if the French did not supply the savage with *eau-de-*

*Thwaites, *op. cit.* Introduction.

†Le Jeune, *Relation* of 1638.

‡Rochemontier, *Les Jesuites*, I, p. 16.

vie, the English from Albany would readily seize the opportunity so to do. Again, the missionaries opposed with equal vigour the system of forest trade carried on by the *coureurs-de-bois*, for the reason that the conduct of these latter was not usually in consonance with those principles of sobriety and chastity which the Jesuits emphasized in their work among the savages. At times the influence of the Church prevailed and civil ordinances framed in accordance with their desires were issued. But in the long run the western posts, the liquor trade and the *coureurs-de-bois* remained. In vain Bishop Laval endeavoured to convince the home authorities that the continuance of the whole system meant the ruin of the Church in New France. The practical bent of Colbert's mind led him only to suggest, however, that the Ancient Church had not been ruined by trade and liquor in European lands.

Now in view of this bitter opposition to several important features of civil policy in New France as well to the authorities who lent support to the policy, it is not unreasonable to believe that the Jesuits were often over-zealous in their denunciation of those who controlled the political and economic administration of the colony, especially in the western wilderness. Of the on-goings at some of the western trading posts and of the conduct of men like Lamotte-Cadillac, Tonti, Du Luth, La Forêt and others we know very little save what may be gleaned from the Jesuit *Rélations*, *Lettres* and *Journals*. And in these we find little that is to the credit either of the posts or of the men. Cadillac post at Detroit was, according to Jesuit testimony, a drinking-dive and brothel of the most degraded type. One of the missionaries who was most vehement in his denunciation of existing conditions suggests with blunt frankness that "discreet and virtuous persons should be chosen to take charge of all the trade in the western country, and that these persons should be in constant sympathy with the Jesuits."* It is quite within the bounds of possibility that a desire to share in the lucrative profits of the fur traffic may have partly underlain the Jesuit attitude. Parkman has adduced conclusive proof, drawn from the writings of the missionaries themselves, that the

**Carheil à Champigny*, (Aug. 30th, 1702.)

Jesuits did not disdain to take a hand in the trade when the opportunity presented itself.*

The western trader, on the other hand, was not a chronicler; most of these picturesque figures have left us no record of their doings and opinions. But if we attach any importance to the despatches of their friends in high places, the *coureur-de-bois* might readily have met the Jesuit accusations with no dearth of counter-charges. Frontenac did not hesitate, in his despatches to the French Minister, to brand the missionaries as a curse on the colony. "They will not even civilize the Indians," he wrote, "but keep them in perpetual wardship, thinking more of peltry than of souls; their missions are hollow mockeries."† La Salle and others go out of their way to protest against the methods and general attitude of the priests.‡

It is indeed well that the anti-clerical side of the case has, to some extent, come down to us in the preserved despatches, reports and memoirs of the higher civil officials of the colony. Thanks to the enterprise of the Canadian Archives Branch and to the generosity of the Dominion government, these are being transcribed and will soon be at the disposal of the historical student. It is sincerely to be hoped that, before many years have passed, the more important portions of the *Correspondance Générale* will be rendered as accessible as the ecclesiastical writings.

To minimize in any way the religious or literary achievements of the Jesuit missionaries is farthest from my desire or thought. But in these days, when some writers show a disposition implicitly to accept any statement either of reputed fact or opinion which the pages of the *Rélations* contain, to sound a *caveat lector* may not be useless. For, as a discriminating student of the sources has warned us, "the danger of mistaking a partisan or biased work for gospel is both fatal and frequent."§ The seeker for the truth will do very well to remember the circumstances under which the *Rélations* were written; the pur-

*Old Regime in Canada, p. 377, *Correspondance Générale*, Vol. IV.

†Frontenac à Ministre, (Nov. 14th, 1674).

‡La Salle, *Memoire de 1678*.

§Colby, *Selections from the Sources*, p. 24.

pose for which they are written and published ; the fact that they were twice scrutinized and edited before publication ; and, finally, that both writers and editors were uncompromisingly hostile to the civil policy and to the policy of the other religious orders in the colony.

On all matters relating to savage life, customs, language and traditions the student will not probably go grievously astray in accepting the evidence of the *Rélations* without reserve. It is no doubt true that a propensity to sharpen the contrast between the traits of savage and civilized life, and a tendency to read into savage customs philosophical explanations which they will not bear,—tendencies which have marked the writings of most civilized portrayers of savage life ever since the time of Caesar and Tacitus—may not have been absent in the case of the Jesuits. But as regards many more important matters, as, for example, the nature and extent of the western trade, the character and conduct of the traders and their services both in extending French influence and in controlling this trade, the real nature and basis of French civil diplomacy in relation to the Indians, the extent to which the liquor traffic really injured the redskins, the value of the work accomplished by the other religious Orders ; on all these and many similar matters of importance the uncorroborated testimony of the *Rélations* ought to be received only with due reserve.

If the student must thresh out this "storehouse of contemporary information", let him take heed to winnow well, lest he have much chaff among his wheat. The truth will be had, if at all, only through a judicious sifting of both civil and ecclesiastical materials.

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