

Alan Gordon. *The Hero and the Historians: Historiography and the Uses of Jacques Cartier.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010. 248 pp. \$35.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7748-1742-4.



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Cartiermania and the Meaning of History

The lead-up to and aftermath of the four hundredth anniversary celebrations of Québec (City) in 2008 provided scholars of French Canada with a richly textured series of commemorative events to examine. Much of this work focused on the singular figure of Samuel de Champlain, long anointed as the father of French Canada. In fact, perusing through any number of bookstores in Québec City during the Québec four hundred celebrations in 2008 one could find a plethora of studies of Champlain, many by prominent Québec historians. As an avid reader of Québec's national history, the question of how such heroes as Jacques Cartier, François de Laval, Jean de Brébeuf, Adam Dollard-des-Ormeaux, and Champlain rose to prominence at different historical periods has always dogged my intellectual curiosity. Enter Alan Gordon's latest contribution to the understanding of Québec's past, a thoroughly analytical study that sheds light on the processes of meaning making in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French Canada. Through his examination of the ideological underpinnings involved in the making of a national hero (Cartier),

Gordon forcefully challenges historians to question their own scholarly work, including the recent fascination with the figure of Champlain.

In *The Hero and the Historians*, Gordon covers an impressive amount of ground, from Cartier's rise to prominence on the wave of nationalist fervor in the first half of the nineteenth century, to the eventual climax of what he calls "Cartiermania" following the astronomical rise in literacy levels among the French-Canadian population in Lower Canada at the very end of the nineteenth century, to the utter failure of the 450th anniversary celebrations of Cartier's landfall in Québec City in 1984. Through it all, Gordon leads the reader through a compelling analysis of the rise and fall of the figure of Cartier.

Some of the most significant work in Gordon's study lies in his impressive theoretical rigor. His understanding of nationalism, following the work of Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Elie Kedourie, helps to situate his historical account of the (un)making of a national hero as an important component in build-

ing national consciousness in French Canada (and later, Qu bec). In fact, one of the strengths of Gordon s analysis is his commitment to uncovering how various forms of nationalism help to locate French Canadian historiography within emerging modern currents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his estimation, one of the central components of modern approaches to history that emerge in the nineteenth century is the connection between historical development and individual heroes. His study of Cartiermania nicely ties the former to the latter, convincingly pointing to the subsequent construction of nationalist bonds. As Gordon explains,   An entire society idolizing the same figure or founding event ... strengthens the bond of brotherhood that nationals are supposed to feel for one another, so that individual historical figures become surrogates for the collective bond of nationalism   (p. 5). Gordon s fine analytical skill shines through on many occasions throughout the pages of this book, none more apparent than in chapter 3,   The Invention of a Hero,   in which he underlines Cartier s rather stunning rise to national fame.

In addition to his deft handling of theories of nationalism throughout his study, Gordon also introduces a pseudo-Gramscian understanding of   common sense   to underline his historical analysis of the making and eventual popularization of Cartier s image in the nineteenth century. With his analytical foray into Gramscian theory, Gordon encourages historians to question the politics of history writing, a claim he makes most clear at the very end of his study. He writes that professional historians   need to acknowledge more fully how much their interpretations of the past, and more precisely their methods, reflect the common sense of their own times. They must investigate more directly the politics of history writing   (p. 189). As an example of these analytics in this study, he introduces the newfound zest for all-things-Cartier by the mid-nineteenth century in the following terms, borrowing liberally from his previous discussion of Gramsci s work:   In other words, Cartiermania, a sudden and massive outpouring of representations of Jacques Cartier, carried with it certain ideological assumptions hidden in the historical   facts   surrounding the great figure. Extracted from history by men who had come of age before the rebellions, Cartier was transformed into a national hero by subsequent generations   (p. 72). This passage and subsequent analysis are among the many in which Gordon showcases his astute historical eye for analysis, one that in many ways brings the conflicts of the past to light.

While I do welcome his attempts to question the politics of history writing, Gordon s study could have benefited from a more sustained use of the analytical framework that he develops. For instance, in his detailed discussion of the making and unmaking of Cartier as a national hero in chapters 5 (  Common Sense  ) and 6 (  The Many Meanings of Jacques Cartier  ), Gordon presents a wealth of archival and historiographic evidence for his claims about the construction of a   commonsense   Cartier along shifting nationalist lines. The many different uses of Cartier by competing French and English Canadian historians in the early twentieth century, whether as a symbol of (French) Catholic piety, as a Canadian version of a secular Christopher Columbus, or any number of other competing representations of Cartier, situate his arguments about the making of historical   facts   on firm ground. Yet Gordon makes very little use of the Gramscian framework that he introduces at the very beginning and end of the book to explicate the data at hand. In this regard, Gordon could have more fully and convincingly teased out, what in this case are, the ideological underpinnings of the making of a nationalist common sense. Given the overwhelmingly masculine cast of characters in his study  whether heroes or historians  one way to approach the question of nationalist ideology would be to examine the gendered dimensions of such processes of history making.

One of the most fascinating segments of this book is when Gordon tackles Cartier s definitive fall from grace in the late twentieth century in chapter 7 (  Decline and Dispersal  ). Reviewing the two dominant schools of thought in Qu bec history in the 1960s (i.e., the Montr al and Laval schools), Gordon explains how the   old common sense surrounding Cartier no longer fit with the emerging Qu b cois nationalism characteristic of the Quiet Revolution   (p. 176). Given that Cartier s place in the hierarchy of Qu bec national heroes has largely been taken over by none other than Champlain, Gordon s study, in the aftermath of the post-2008 Champlain hangover in Qu bec, could not be any more timely. In this regard, *The Hero and the Historians* stands out as an important contribution to the study of Qu bec, to the study of commemoration, and perhaps most important, to studies in the making of history itself. None of us are immune to the politics of history writing, and Gordon has succeeded in offering a very astute and nuanced empirical study that situates history writing in its larger social and political contexts.

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