

*The Myth of the Savage: and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas.* Olive Patricia Dickason. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984. xvii, 372 pp, ill. ISBN 0-88864-036-6.

What manner of men are they? Where did they come from? Why is their skin of a colour different from ours? What do they eat, how do they survive, do they have a king, laws, order . . . are they human or beast, innocent or degenerate, noble or ignoble? These were some of the questions which raged throughout the intellectual circles of Europe once contact had been made with the nations which we presently know as the Indians of North and South America. Indeed, queries of a similar nature were undoubtedly the subject of council meetings held by the "true people"<sup>1</sup> as they pondered the strangely dressed and behaved, pigmentless newcomers who pulled up onto their shores. The intellectual and theological debates regarding the nature of the Indians and their impact upon the evolution of French colonial policy during the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth centuries are the major subjects of Olive Dickason's *The Myth of the Savage*.

Originally written as a doctoral dissertation, this publication is a significant complementary volume to Cornelius Jaenen's *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1976). Consistent with revisionist scholarship regarding French colonial relations in the Americas,

Dickason explores the roots of French attitudes towards indigenous nations contacted in eastern Canada, Florida, and Brazil. While many of the key concepts and subject matter have been dealt with in several other colonial studies, Dickason has expanded our knowledge of the intellectual climate of the period through her exhaustive examination of contemporaneous printed works and her succinct treatment of the multifaceted debate revolving around the concept of "l'homme sauvage."

The reader is guided through the intellectual maze which characterized the emergence of the myth through extensive and highly readable selections of firsthand accounts recorded by explorers, traders, and missionaries. These observations are counterbalanced and reinforced with excerpts from theological and philosophical treatises on the subject. The material manifestations of the interplay between the field observers (those who were in direct contact with the various Indian nations) and the European intellectual are captured through the extensive use of published imagery of the New World and its peoples which bring to life the unfolding of the myth.

*The Myth of the Savage* has been subdivided into three

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major thematically interrelated sections which deal with (i) the evolution of the myth, (ii) the colonial experience with the myth, and (iii) the dismantling or destruction of the myth as a development in colonial policy. In Part I, "American Discoveries and European Images," Dickason traces the origins of the idea of the savage to preconceptions based upon Medieval folklore of "wild men," Spanish documentation of the New World, and contemporary theories regarding the nature of Europe's own historical past (ethnographic parallels with Indians were often drawn from knowledge of classical Greece, and tribal peoples such as the Tartars and Scythians). As Dickason points out, the most important element in the characterization of Indian cultures was the assumption that European Christian "civilization" was superior. Thus, descriptions of the appearance and customs of all other groups were observed and communicated through this ethnocentric filter.

Judged to be societies with "ni fois," "ni roi," "ni loi," Indian cultures were examined, ranked on an evolutionary scale, and ultimately conceptually suspended between a state of bestiality and humanity. According to Dickason, the measurements used to quantify humanness included the mode of subsistence (hunting-gathering versus horticulture), dietary practices, housing, "the use of reason", nudity, language and the lack of writing (as it was perceived by the European observer), the lack of political structure, and the practice of cannibalism. Despite observations which confirmed the varied nature of Indian nations, by the third quarter of the sixteenth century, *all* Indians were referred to by the term "savage." That the savage was deemed to be human and capable of achieving an even fuller state of humanity is evident from the phrase "humanizer" which was used by the French in reference to their conviction that Indian populations could be transformed through Christian evangelization and teaching. The Christian cross came to symbolize this process.

In the second section of the book, "Early Contacts of Amerindians and Frenchmen," Dickason examines the colonial French experience with the myth in eastern Canada, Florida, and Brazil. The first chapter, which was intended to provide the reader with an ethnohistorical overview of Indian nations in eastern Canada and to confirm the fallacy of the myth (that these societies were without social order), is perhaps the most demanding and the least successful. As in her brief introductory statement in which she attempts to define and contrast the nature of Indian nations with those of Europe, Dickason's objective is undermined by lack of ethnographic context and over-generalization. Part of this deficiency cannot be directly attributed to Dickason's scholarship but rather to the state of colonial ethnohistorical studies in Canada. Consistent with the existing literature on the subject, Dickason focuses

her attention upon the interface between the French and the Iroquoian nations. In addressing the issue of the correlation between the French colonial experience and the ability of particular groups to preserve their cultural and political integrity, Dickason quite correctly suggests that a number of factors must be taken into consideration: the nature of contact (semi-permanent fishing and trading establishments versus permanent agriculturally-based colonies), the need for military alliances, geographical location, climate, and complexity of socio-economic and political integration (semi-nomadic hunting and gathering societies versus more sedentary horticulturalists). Group-specific case studies would be necessary in order to test these hypotheses.

The policy of "la douceur," that is, of "co-operation with indigenous groups," is interpreted by Dickason as a means by which the French facilitated their imperialistic intrusion into the Americas by establishing viable economic bases and ensuring political hegemony through the promotion of Franco-Indian military alliances. Dickason concludes that colonial relations were determined ultimately by the "pragmatic necessities of colonial politics"; and while "la douceur" was the official policy, ". . . armed support" was ". . . never far in the background." (pp. 278, 202). The extent to which the concept of "savagism" was used to rationalize domination and conquest, tribal dislocation, escalation in warfare, the ravages of epidemics and the fall of Huronia remain elusive in Dickason's treatment.

Perhaps one of the more insightful chapters in this section, "Amerindians in Europe" examines the nature of the relationship between French and Indian populations as it evolved through contact experiences on the Continent. First transported as prisoners of war and sold as slaves through the European market, Indian representatives were also coerced or persuaded to travel to Europe for reconnaissance purposes, that is, for the purpose of supplying information regarding the inhabitants of specific regions and their languages in order to facilitate future commercial contacts. Some were exhibited as "living proof" of explorers' claims, or served as exotic human curiosities for the amusement of royal families and their friends. Dickason provides the reader with an astute lesson in cultural relativity when she reconstructs the France which greeted Indian visitors:

The Europe that visiting Amerindians saw was not what Europeans expected them to see. The French concentrated so intensely on the undeniable glories of their civilization that they quite naturally tended to minimize its less attractive side. (pp. 225-226).

Dickason posits to the reader that Indian visitors would have been taken aback by the streets of beggars, the occurrence of daily public executions and the torturing of Heretics, and the general "filth and confusion" of Parisian streets. She reminds the reader that in France the life expectancy was twenty-three years, that epi-

demics were devastating the population, and that crop failures and famine were common. One is led to conclude that not only was "savagism" a myth but that a second myth of equal magnitude existed, that is, the illusion of "civilization." Dickason concludes (p. 229) that "what the Amerindians saw in Europe only confirmed them in the belief that they were at least equal, if not superior, to the French, both as individuals and as a separate civilization despite an admiration for their technology."

In Part III, "Iron Men and True Men in New France," commercial ventures and missionization receive attention. The initial contact with mercantilist capitalism is depicted as mutually beneficial, with the Indians of New France enjoying an economic advantage in trading partnerships. By the early 1600s, the "humanization" of members of the various Indian nations was considered to be a necessary step toward the creation of the colony of New France. After several initial failures, a more systematic program was adopted

to transform the "savage." Missionaries attempted to assert their control by learning indigenous languages, removing children from the influence of their parents, delivering medical services, and providing economic stability by establishing sedentary agriculturally-based Christian villages. The ultimate failure of this assimilative policy and that of "la douceur" is attributed (pp. 273, 277) to the fact that the image of Indians as "living metaphors of antisocial forces" persisted throughout the period and the French never lost ". . .sight of themselves as a civilized nation whose mission it was to lead backward native peoples to a better life."

#### NOTES

1. Many of the names by which we know the various Indian nations are Europeanized terms. Indigenous names usually designated a group as "the people" with qualifiers to indicate geographical location.

Katherine Pettipas,  
Curator of Native Ethnology,  
Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.