

Claire Gourdeau — *Les délices de nos coeurs : Marie de l'Incarnation et ses pensionnaires amérindiennes, 1639–1672*, Sillery, Les éditions de Septentrion, 1994, 130 p.

In the vast enterprise of colonization and Christianization which France undertook in North America, the space occupied by the Ursuline monastery of Québec was extremely small. Almost as soon as they arrived, the Ursulines withdrew into their cloister, which — whether it was the small house by the dock or the later, larger premises — remained for the future their physical boundary (p. 90). There was nothing small, however, about their ambition: “instruire les petites filles sauvages de la nouvelle france en la connoissance [*sic*] de la religion catholicque apostholique [*sic*] et Romaine” (p. 53).

This book is about the difference between initial hope and ultimate realization. Marie de l'Incarnation and her companions came to New France in 1639 with a double mission, to convert Amerindian girls to Catholicism and to acculturate them: “afin d'en faire de vraies petites Françaises capables d'épouser des colons, de s'installer dans des maisons et de peupler la colonie, selon la politique coloniale tracée par la France” (p. 99). By the time of Marie's death in 1672, while the first objective remained constant, the second had been considerably modified. The following years saw a deeper compromise. By 1720, the Ursulines of Québec had officially ended their mission to the Amerindians. The word “shortfall” would certainly not be too strong a term, but would not do justice to the learning process which took place in the intervening years. During this time, “deux univers féminins complètement opposés” (p. 13) — the French nuns on one hand, their native students on the other — met, mingled, and influenced each other in different ways. It is this interaction of the two cultures, at the very dawn of the French colonial period, that is the subject of the book.

Claire Gourdeau would obviously love — as would we all — to be able to measure this interaction in terms of long-range consequences for both Amerindians and Europeans. But she warns us that, as regards the former, the evidence does not, and never will, exist. Without written documents and given the rapid disappearance of these native groups from around Québec, the historical record of their brief encounter with French religious culture remains blank. As for the Ursulines of Québec, though it is possible that their archives will yield evidence of long-term effects of the Amerindian experience on the community, such evidence is not yet available. Thus all that she has to work with are the references in journals and letters written during the 33 years of Marie de l'Incarnation's life in Québec, a mere moment in the history of Canada, as circumscribed in time as the Ursuline colony was circumscribed in space.

Thus everything about this study — its venue, its time frame, the volume of source material — is small. This does not, however, mean that it is insignificant. Gourdeau's book is a fine little cameo, created with careful precision. Every mention in Marie's writings about her Amerindian contacts is treated as precious evidence, examined from every angle, subjected to careful analysis. A wide range of authorities informs the author's analysis: by my own count, the bibliography

contains as many titles as the text does pages. With the understanding created by this extensive reading, Gourdeau takes us through the minutiae of daily life: the foods that the nuns ate and shared with their "seminarians", the hygienic practices and dress code that they imposed, the lessons that they taught, and the religious practices that they required of them. She gives these things meaning, without presuming too much on her sources; her conclusions are always well grounded.

Marie's writings reveal an interesting balance between intolerance and tolerance. She kept paganism at arm's length, to the degree that she did not even recognize her charges officially until they received Christian names in baptism. "Aux yeux de cette fervente catholique, les petites 'sauvagesses' vivaient dans les limbes avant leur conversion" (p. 78). Yet in their treatment of the Amerindians she and her companions showed considerable sensitivity. They learned their languages (Marie took great pains to learn Algonquin, Montagnais, and Huron and to draw up dictionaries and catechisms in these languages), they accepted some of their tastes, customs, and habits, as for instance their form of dancing, in which even Madame de Peltrie shared at recreation (p. 74). Perhaps more surprisingly, considering the mentality of cloistered nuns, they allowed them a freedom, which would have been unheard of in France, to come and go from the monastery. "Nous les laissons libres en ce point", wrote Marie, "car on les gagne plutôt par ce moyen, que de les retenir par contrainte ou par prières" (p. 60). Yet she recognized that this same need for space made her charges unfit for the full demands of religious life; she was never able to make nuns of them, as she had initially hoped (p. 91).

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the work, for this reader, is what it tells us about the missionary mentality of the period. Gourdeau makes her case: the French Catholic culture of the Ursulines, while it remained dominant within the monastery walls, nevertheless underwent subtle transformation in its encounter with native ways.

Other readers will find other points of interest. All in all, anyone concerned with the Catholic Reformation, or Amerindian history, or the history of New France, or that of women, would do well to read this laudable little study of a small encounter between a few not-very-important people, which took place within a tiny space and during a brief moment of historical time. I should add, also, that students looking for an example of how good scholarship makes the most of limited evidence will find this a very useful and instructive book.

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Allan Everett Marble — *Surgeons, Smallpox and the Poor: A History of Medicine and Social Conditions in Nova Scotia, 1749–1799*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993. Pp. xiv, 356.

This book at times seems more like a mine of historical information about physicians and surgeons than a social history of the medical profession and the poor