Soldier, geographer, explorer, and tireless promoter Samuel de Champlain remains one of Canada’s most famous yet least well-known historical figures. In *Champlain’s Dream*, David Hackett Fischer accepts the difficult task of confronting the evidentiary shortcomings that have caused this curious paradox. He is successful in many ways, and the elusive Champlain is better understood thanks to Fischer’s efforts. In particular, Fischer explains Champlain’s place in the religious and political quagmire of France during the Wars of Religion, and demonstrates how those forces helped to shape Champlain’s contributions to the French colonial project in North America.

To a large extent, Fischer’s success is based upon his conviction that history ought to be written according to the model established by Herodotus, the father of history. Like Herodotus, Fischer believes that history is “a free and open discipline” (9) and that it is best understood by getting one’s feet on the ground. In large measure, this is a successful book because the author travelled far and wide in order to put himself into Champlain’s footsteps. By doing this, and by grounding his biography firmly in the religious and political contexts of the time, Fischer is able to overcome the paucity of available source material. This bold methodology leads to the most comprehensive and insightful biography of Champlain to date.

Much of the first part of the book is necessarily speculative. Historians have long wondered, for example, about Champlain’s faith and his religion. Records of his birth and baptism have never been uncovered and this has led to the speculation that he was baptized as a Protestant. He may have started life as a Protestant, but, if so, he converted to Catholicism for reasons of strong faith and spirituality. Certainly Champlain provided ample evidence of his strong Catholic faith later in his colonial ventures. In any case, Fischer is
able to resolve the controversy by building a strong case for Protestantism and then conversion. He does this through exhaustive research into the religious strife and political intrigues of the period, and also by examining the parallel situation of King Henri IV. The discussion of Champlain and faith is a carefully crafted argument that shows Fischer at the height of his powers.

Fischer reveals a great deal about Champlain by examining his relationships with various mentors: his father who gave him his love of the sea, King Henri IV who shared his strong faith and his ideal of tolerance, and François Gravé du Pont and Pierre Dugua, seigneur de Mons, who were mentors in his colonial ventures. Champlain’s reticence to discuss the details of his own life is alleviated by this careful examination of these relationships. Similarly, Fischer later describes Champlain’s relations with those whom he led: Jean Niccollet, Nicolas de Vignau, and other explorers and officials. In all of these relationships a more detailed portrait of the man is revealed, one which has not been seen clearly before. Champlain’s love of the sea and of exploration, and his interest in meeting people who are strange to him, are all made more understandable by Fischer’s careful examination of the formative influences in Champlain’s life and of his efforts to pass the lessons of his youth on to the next generation. This is inspired biography.

Another great strength of the book is Fischer’s recognition of Champlain’s role in the establishment of good relations with the First Nations of eastern North America. Champlain was unique in that, unlike other colonizers, he fought inter-tribal rather than inter-racial wars. The alliances he built, first with the Algonquin and Montagnais and later with the Huron and Ottawa, were important foundational elements in Canadian and North American history. The Spanish enslaved the indigenous peoples and forced them to mine silver and gold. The English forced indigenous peoples to move further and further to the west. The French, on the other hand, built a system of alliances, and Fischer quite rightly gives Champlain full credit for this tremendous achievement.
It might be argued that the French need for furs was the primary motive for the alliance system, but Fischer demonstrates quite convincingly that Champlain was a man who valued the “Indians” for themselves. Fischer notes that Champlain “always regarded them as people who were fully equal to Europeans” (380) and that he treated them from the beginning as full partners. Fischer sees this attitude as an extension of Champlain’s spiritual tolerance and as a product of his earlier travels across the Atlantic. Champlain had been horrified during his journey of 1599 to see the ways the Spanish colonizers treated the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean.(90) The good relations that Champlain established with the Huron and Ottawa were his most enduring legacy, and Fischer’s understanding of the importance of them is the book’s greatest contribution.

Unfortunately, any work that is of necessity speculative is sometimes lessened by the author’s inability to contain his ideas within the boundaries of credibility. In a number of places Fischer gives his conjectures a few twists more than strict authority will allow. He goes too far, for example, when he contributes to the wild speculation that Champlain was the bastard son of Henri IV himself. His evidence here appears to be nothing more than the repetition of a baseless North American rumour and reference to the fact that Champlain had great access to the King. It may be true that King Henri IV had a number of mistresses, but nothing is gained and credibility is lost by repeating such far-fetched notions. This kind of conjecture undermines the strength of Fischer’s other arguments and, unfortunately, it is not limited to this one example. Among other flights of fancy in this book, Fischer also claims that the Treaty of Vervins contained a secret clause that nobody bothered to write down.(68)

Another weakness of the work concerns Fischer’s apparent lack of awareness of the current historical work in a number of areas. This is particularly odd given the assiduity of the research. Two examples will suffice. In his discussion of Tadoussac, Fischer notes that the “Montagnais functioned as middlemen in a lucrative fur trade” and that this trade was their “leading source of income.”(137) He
also claims that the Nipissing and the Huron were also middle-
men.(137) The middleman notion is one which none of the scholars
working in the field would accept. The concept was first discredited
by W.J. Eccles in his 1981 review of the work of Harold Adams In-
nis, and scholars engaged in First Nations history, such as Richard
White, José Brandao, Carolyn Podruchny, and Gilles Havard, have
likewise rejected the notion. Ideas like “lucrative trade” and sources
of income are European capitalist ideas, not universal ideas. The
Huron and the Nipissing wanted to prevent the movement of Euro-
pean weapons into the interior. This was sometimes confused by
French capitalists as a desire to exclude the French from their trade
routes, but the French eventually understood that the First Nations
had security as their chief motive. Fischer does not seem to have un-
derstood this imperative.

Another example of Fischer’s lack of awareness of current
historical writing concerns his argument that Jean Nicollet went to
Lake Michigan, and not to Lake Superior. The late Canadian histo-
rarian W.J. Eccles solved that mystery years ago to the satisfaction of
the field. Nicollet wrote specifically of following a river out of Lake
Huron into a small lake and then out into another Great Lake. This
small lake is simply a bend where the St. Mary’s River widens. From
a canoe it does indeed look like a small lake. Old arguments that this
“small lake” was the Big Bay de Noc in Northern Lake Michigan are
arrant nonsense. The other evidence for Lake Superior is overwel-
mimg. Nevertheless, Fischer puts his faith in the Lake Michigan argu-
ment and follows this speculation to its false conclusions.(504) This
is surely not a fatal flaw in this fine book, but it is evidence that the
author is not writing with as much authority as he might have done.

The most serious problem with Fischer’s *Champlain’s Dream*
however concerns the author’s failure to follow his own wise advice.
In his introduction, he notes that he has followed the old maxim
“First go there! Do it! Then write it!”(9) For most of this work,
Fischer holds true to this important principle, and his work is well
worth reading because of the useful insights that his own travels have
given him. For example, his beautiful introductory description of
Brouage as more like “a floating island than part of the French mainland” (15) reflects an exact feel for the place. The extended annotations that form the central part of Fischer’s digressive narrative style are endlessly fascinating, and one is immediately excited about reading a book by someone who has paid such careful attention to the importance of detailed description and geography.

Unfortunately, he is not always up to the task. While his descriptions of Brouage, Honfleur, and the Château de Fontainebleau are wonderful, his attempts to discuss the geography of the Ottawa River, the French River, Georgian Bay, and Lake Huron are a bit of a muddle. His re-telling of the 1615 journey to the Huron is confused and awkward. (324-325) Fischer is not too clear about the identities of various Anishinaabe people of the North Channel of Lake Huron. He is not aware that the Amikwa are Ojibwa—he refers to them as Ottawa—and he has little understanding of the Kiskakon Ottawa, whom he calls simply Cheveux Relevés. (325)

His authoritative passages on court diplomacy are not equalled by his rudimentary knowledge of the “Indians.” His outstanding sections on French geography are in direct contrast to his difficulties with the details of Anishinaabe life. One example will suffice to illustrate this problem. In a caption to an illustration from the Codex Canadensis of Anishinaabe fishermen, Fischer mistakenly places the canoe in the St. Lawrence or Acadia and then writes that the men were after “sturgeon, salmon, carp, flounder, mackerel, bass, and shad.” (colourplate B-4) Even if we ignore the fact that carp and salmon are exotics introduced into the Upper Great Lakes by sport fishermen in the nineteenth century and that mackerel and flounder are saltwater species, we can not ignore the word “attikamek” which is written clearly above the fish about to be caught. This is an Anishinaabe word which may be literally translated as caribou of the water, or simply, whitefish. These fish came in great numbers, like herds of caribou, into the shallows of the Straits of Mackinac and the St. Mary’s River in late November every year. Ojibwa and Ottawa fishermen caught them by the thousands. This kind of error is difficult to explain.
It would be a shame to end a review of such a fine work on a negative note, and it must be stressed that Fischer’s work is a great accomplishment. Beautifully illustrated and researched in all of the most relevant primary sources, it offers new and deeper insights into the life of a man whose fame was not before now equalled by our understanding. The appendices are so thorough as to beggar belief. Most impressive of all, however, is the lengthy and thoughtful bibliographic essay which considers the state of what could be called Champlain studies from 1608 to 2008. This element of the book is fair and balanced and offers students an excellent overview of the historiographical as well as the historical problems. Other appendices explain such topics as the state of shipbuilding at the time, the nature of trading companies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the complex system of weights and measures. The appendix on First Nations is not quite as helpful. In the final analysis, however, we owe David Hackett Fischer a debt of gratitude for this fine biography. He has managed to transform a famous figure into a real historical actor with a clear vision or dream, if you will, for a colony that would be in the interests of both the French and of the First Nations of Eastern North America.

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