

Masters and Students: Jesuit Mission Ethnography in Seventeenth-Century New France. Micah True.

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Jesuit missionaries generated vast amounts of information about non-European peoples in the early modern world. A paradigmatic example of seventeenth-century information gathering is the *Relation de ce qui s'est passé en Nouvelle-France*, published annually from 1632 to 1673. Widely available in France, these short books described the peoples among whom the Jesuits labored; they advertised Jesuit techniques of conversion, and highlighted the courage and self-sacrifice of the society in its faraway mission.

Fifty years after Margaret Hogden's *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1964) made clear the missionary sources of knowledge of the non-European, skepticism abounds concerning the scientific character of these texts. Instead, we identify the religious program as well as the political imperative for an order whose place in Catholic Europe, and especially France, was frequently precarious. While ethnohistorians continue to mine the *Relations* to reconstruct indigenous experience at the point of contact and colonialization, the didactic, epideictic, and propagandistic qualities of these sources are usually acknowledged. At the same time, the value of Jesuit observations as baseline observations of societies on the brink of enormous transformation remains clear. While not challenging this consensus, Micah True opens some new lines of inquiry. One describes the process whereby Jesuits acquired knowledge of these New World peoples as "students" of language and recorders of myth and ritual; a second, their efforts to appear as "masters" of this exotic and challenging mission; and a third, the ways in which Jesuit information was shaped by editors and other interested parties in France.

A vast linguistic gap separated Amerindian peoples from the Jesuit newcomers. Language acquisition was a priority for Jesuits and the subject of continuous investigation. Jesuit missionaries in New France were struck by the complexity of Iroquoian and Algonquian languages. True shows two sides of the Jesuit efforts to construct these languages in textual form. They guarded this linguistic hoard: assiduous vocabulary collection and compilation of dictionaries was little mentioned in the *Relations*. Jesuits knew that language was key to influence (to paraphrase Antonio de Nerja) and they sought to preserve this advantage. Second, the Jesuit capture of Amerindian languages served, centuries later, in efforts to restore these languages and reintroduce them to the indigenous. Here Jesuits are less ethnographers than salvage archaeologists.

True demonstrates that Jesuit characterization of indigenous traditional spirituality in some ways anticipates a current anthropological understanding. He acknowledges the anachronism involved in identifying Jesuits as ethnographers, but nonetheless proceeds to credit them with "precocious ethnographic instincts" (150) or "proto-ethnographic" perspective (92). Of course, seventeenth-century Jesuits did not see themselves as anthropologists or any other kind of scientist — the term *scientist* would not be invented until 1844 — so they cannot be accused of social science. They brought to New World mission fields remarkable humanistic tools to understand alterity; they also grasped the opportunity to relate their New World to a French reading public. All of this *Ad maiorem Dei Gloria*: however much mission partook of exploration and discovery, it remained, centrally, grounds of sacrifice, martyrdom, and prime opportunity for these *homines pro aliis* (men for others).

True also investigates ways in which Jesuits in Québec shaped their accounts according to "feedback from readers" (150) and "editorial process" (141). This latter process remains opaque, as True has not consulted studies of printing, including Henri-Jean Martin's *Histoire de l'édition française* (1982), which investigates production of texts

and editorial practices for this period. True nonetheless notes pressures exerted by their market-oriented and devout publisher, Sébastien Cramoisy, who saw the appeal of the “living picture of hell” (101) in *sauvage* brutality. True identifies a tension between the Jesuit effort to assert the humanity of the Amerindians and the editorial impulse to depict the barbarian in its full horror.

Masters and Students engages the reader. True happily compares his seventeenth-century proto-ethnological subjects with modern or science-fiction characters, and undertakes other digressions into popular culture. At the same time, he succeeds in demonstrating the emergence of a body of knowledge through a kind of field work that has shaped the way these indigenous peoples are understood, and understand themselves, in the present.

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