

ALONG A RIVER

THE FIRST
FRENCH-CANADIAN
WOMEN

JAN NOEL

Along a River

The First French-Canadian Women

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ALONG A RIVER

The First French-Canadian Women

French-Canadian explorers, traders, and soldiers feature prominently in this country's storytelling, but little has been written about their female counterparts. In *Along a River*, award-winning historian Jan Noel shines a light on the lives of remarkable French-Canadian women – immigrant brides, nuns, tradeswomen, farmers, governors' wives, and even smugglers – during the period between the settlement of the St Lawrence Lowlands and the Victorian era.

Along a River builds the case that inside the cabins that stretched for miles along the shoreline, most early French-Canadian women retained old fashioned forms of economic production and customary rights over land ownership. Noel demonstrates how this continued even as the world changed around them by comparing their lives with those of their contemporaries in France, England, and New England. Exploring how the daughters and granddaughters of the *filles du roi* adapted to their terrain, turned their hands to trade, and even acquired surprising influence at the French court, *Along a River* is an innovative and engagingly written history.

JAN NOEL is an associate professor in the Department of History at the University of Toronto.

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ALONG A RIVER
The First French-Canadian Women

Introduction

This book is a study in human ecology. It examines the many ways women whose ancestors were born in France responded to conditions in the St Lawrence Valley between the 1630s and the 1830s. We take for our boundaries the densely settled part of New France that lay along the St Lawrence River and its tributaries. That region was commonly called Canada during the period of French rule there, from the early seventeenth century until 1760, subsequently becoming the British colony of Quebec. Our subjects lived in or around the thousand-kilometre river basin that stretched from the Gulf of St Lawrence to Lake Ontario. Back from the river lay the northern forests, just past the thin rows of cleared fields where each family was ordered to put up posts to keep rudimentary trails from disappearing under blankets of snow. Much of this book explores interactions of people with the wide river and its uplands. And yet each ship that arrived in port carried across the Atlantic an infusion of ideational and material culture from the mother country. Since those aspects of life interest us too, our book embraces the interplay of culture *and* nature, particularly in the world of daily work. Readers may wonder why this study covers such an unusually long period of time. It is because, through the many and various changes of two hundred years, there was a surprising continuity in the way gender was perceived and performed among the region's French-Canadian majority.

Though the book spans two centuries, it concentrates mainly on just one sex. While full appreciation of the gender order requires covering the spectrum, there has been very little scholarship relating to masculinity in early French Canada. For that reason this book concentrates on the considerably larger body of gender research that relates to women. Yet the goal is a little broader than a monograph on ways that work-

ing the land transformed women from France. While the book chiefly describes female colonists, their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons do also stride across these pages, since we cannot hope for any deep understanding of a society without examining the basic relationships of life. In particular, male codes of honour among the officer class, about which family histories offer many clues, are explored in some depth. The aim of the book is a synthesis that offers not only specialized material for scholars but other material that will interest students and more general readers. With the goal of creating such a work, my own archival research is frequently supplemented with important findings by others. I have taken particular care to incorporate key French-language scholarship that has been unavailable to English-language readers.

Although this book will take account of metropolitan influences as well as environmental ones, it perhaps tips the balance a bit back towards the environment as a field of analysis. To some extent the purpose is simply to *restore* balance, since the environment received rather short shrift in that impressive body of late-twentieth-century work drawing its inspiration from metropolitan French historiography. As we shall see, the leading Canadian frontier history was written earlier, just before the rise of Women's History, in the 1960s when it was still acceptable to write even a 'social history' of a people that was focused overwhelmingly on its masculine half.¹ Part of our task is to examine environmental influences simply because the last generation of historians to take the environment seriously were poor matchmakers. They paired their larger-than-life fur trader with two dolls – lovely, speechless Pocahontas, and Stay-at-home Wife, minding home fires while the hero donned his buckskins and slipped off in his canoe. Ethnohistorians have already brought the native 'doll' to life. This book strives to do the same for her French-Canadian counterpart. We would like to show that her work involved much more than might have been imagined, as she awaited birchbark missives from Jean-Baptiste. She too traded furs; she manufactured the buckskins and the canoe; often enough she tilled the family fields. She, and even more certainly her daughter, did not remain a French peasant in clogs gazing wistfully down the river towards France: she, like her husband, embraced the woods. She proceeded to reinvent herself as a *canadienne*.

Mapping Transatlantic Women's History

Before we narrow our lens to the 'Laurentian' colony (proximate to the St Lawrence River), it is important to understand something about

the history of women in France, England, and the American colonies. Our first section, 'Mapping Transatlantic Women's History,' serves that function. France and England were, of course, the colony's two successive mother countries, as they in turn assumed control of lands that had already been inhabited for thousands of years by aboriginal peoples. After Samuel de Champlain established his outpost at Quebec in 1608, French settlers began to concentrate along the north and south shores of the St Lawrence River and its tributaries. After Britain conquered the colony in 1760, she proceeded to rule over the French majority and did so until a much-expanded 'Canada' emerged as a dominion in 1867. Thus, the histories of women in France and Britain are obvious points of reference for understanding *canadiennes*. The book begins with a sketch of relevant themes in their history that allow us to situate the Canadian story within its crucial transatlantic context.

The bordering American colonies are the third reference point. They were at numerous times between 1608 and 1840 characterized as 'the enemy,' although during much of the period they were also trading partners who welcomed illegal furs that were spirited across the border from New France to New York and New England. In both England's colonies to the south and France's colony to the north, immigrants encountered a novel environment. Besides sharing the New World's rich resources and social possibilities, both Canada and the adjacent English colonies experienced 'heroic' beginnings (less glorious from a native standpoint) as religious experiments directed by small bands of Catholic or Protestant zealots. Did the fresh start bestow opportunities and liberties on women that echoed those that some men experienced? Or did women encounter exclusions more like those facing the non-white minorities of both regions? On this and other questions, the Americans are there for comparison, and they help us identify what was distinctive about their French-speaking neighbours. With its rapidly growing population and vigorous urban and commercial development, Anglo-America always seemed more dynamic than French America, save in one regard: the frail northern colony made a remarkable thrust into the interior of the continent, forming military and trading alliances that allowed France to lay claim to three-quarters of the continent by the early eighteenth century. Appreciating the vast geographic reach of the Franco-American network is essential to understanding women's occupations in the colony.

To advance our goal of situating Canada's colonial women within the broader history of women on both sides of the Atlantic, chapters 1 and

5 will present relevant information about economic, political, and legal developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth century 'pacesetter' jurisdictions of France, England, and the northern American colonies. Aware of trends there, we can discern what was distinctive about Canada. The comparison allows us to perceive that the colony retained *ancien régime* (old order) gender practices for an unusually long time. Our *tour d'horizon* of the history of women in France, England, and America reviews the period 1600 to 1800. If it stops short of 1840, the terminal date for our study of Canada, this is because the situations that transformed *ancien régime* gender codes had already occurred in the three other jurisdictions by 1800. By then the three great eighteenth-century revolutions – American, French, and Industrial – had all made their mark, and the new gender values that attended them were clearly in evidence. Gender historians have identified these new values as 'fraternal' ones replacing older 'patriarchal' ones; and many have followed Joan Landes, Lynn Hunt, and James McMillan in seeing such a development as a largely negative one for women.² Only slowly would that new gender order, with its decidedly mixed blessings for women, permeate the Laurentian colony. In many ways (as our concluding chapter 8 will indicate) Lower Canada would remain an *ancien régime* colony as late as 1830, forty years after the old order had been toppled in France and a full seventy years after the British Conquest. Our comparison of French, English, American, and Canadian political trajectories and legal codes will indicate how tardy the growing gender restrictiveness in the other jurisdictions was in reaching Canada. Thus the chapters devoted to the history of women in other jurisdictions serve to situate the Canadian case in transatlantic perspective.

Most of the book deals more exclusively with Canada. Part Two, 'Along a River,' introduces the female missionaries and immigrants who first came to live in the looming forests and their interactions with the First Nations who had lived there for centuries. Then it looks at various ways the colonists and their descendants made a living from the New World's resources, focusing on those engaged in trade. Part Three, 'Transatlantic Codes,' moves on to the legal and social frameworks that did so much to shape the economic activities of noblewomen in the manors and in the convents that stood out from the humbler houses along the river. Two underlying themes will guide us whenever our discussion turns to Canada. The first is the way in which the Canadian environment shaped the lives of the female colonists. The second is the influence exerted by hierarchical French social values that continued to exert a pull, espe-

cially on the upper classes. Let us look more closely at these twin themes that are central to the book.

'Frontier' and Metropolis in the History of New France

The impact of the Canadian environment, as well as interaction with First Nations who held first claim to the land and its resources, is a major part of the analysis here. How did the presence of aboriginal peoples, as well as the extensive waterways and rich natural resources of their land, affect the history of colonial women? The question requires us to review a classic scholarly debate about the impact of the environment and the aboriginal peoples on the colony's development. We turn first to key proponents of the 'frontier' thesis, then to the opposing 'metropolitan' school of thought.

The 'frontierists' made some choice observations about women, both aboriginal and French: 'The attraction of the fur trade for so many inhabitants is not easily explained.... Perhaps the complete independence which a man found in the forest, not to mention the charms of willing Indian girls, was compensation enough for many discomforts. Canadians ... were men of broad horizons ... were a wife to nag too constantly, some of them at least could hire out as voyageurs for the west.'³

Anyone who has navigated boiling rapids or slept under northern lights cannot help but admire those men. More open than any other group we know to what First Nations had to teach, they shook the peasant dirt from their feet, savoured maple and tobacco, and ventured thousands of kilometres in frail vessels and on foot. As a French observer recorded in the 1750s, *canadiens* were the best possible guardians of the colony. They were not crippled by the cold as French troops were. Indeed, 'they alone can go in canoes in summer, on snowshoes in winter, subsist on a bit of flour, lard and suet, make forced marches through the woods for three to six months at time, withstanding the rigours of winter, living from the mouth of their musket, that is to say by hunting and fishing alone.'⁴

It is not the goal of this book to diminish this iconic figure in any way. Without cramping his style, we would still like to know a little more about this travelling man's 'significant others.' Did they too transform themselves in response to the bracing New World and wide open spaces? Fortunately historians of fur trade marriages have already shown the complex motivations of Indian 'girls' who formed alliances with fur traders for a variety of reasons, economic and otherwise.⁵ However, histo-

rians have tended to leave the French-Canadian wife out in the cold. If there is *any* popular image of her, it is perhaps the one C.W. Jeffreys sketched, standing on the banks of the St Lawrence in clogs and Breton headdress, staring down the river towards France – an essentially ‘metropolitan’ interpretation. Her relation to the ‘frontier’ escaped scrutiny because gender became a major category of historical analysis at precisely the time frontier interpretations were going out of fashion, when in the 1970s Canadian ‘frontierists’ W.J. Eccles and R.C. Harris acknowledged they had somewhat overestimated the New World influences on New France. Nonetheless, some of their constructs were of enduring value. Because readers will encounter at several points in this book the argument that the natural environment and the First Nations peoples profoundly shaped the history of colonial women, let us briefly revisit the subject of the frontier in New France.

It is not necessary to accept nineteenth-century American historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s full-blown thesis about the creation of a new man on an egalitarian frontier to realize that wilderness conditions affected any who settled there. The forest and its peoples occupied an enormous place in the history of New France. Between 1604 and 1760, France laid claim to vast tracts that would extend from the east coast of today’s Canada to the Saskatchewan River system on the western prairies, and down the Mississippi valley to New Orleans. The most thoroughly colonized part of this sweeping domain lay along the St Lawrence River and its tributaries. This heartland of New France was then known as Canada – the name that would one day be applied to a whole nation. That was fitting, for woodsmen from the strip farms of the little riverside Canada of the seventeenth century were no strangers to expansion. Coming from a small cluster of population surrounded on all sides by forests, they seemed (as successive officials from France complained) much freer than the more sedentary, heavily taxed peasants of France. It was because of colonists who ranged so far into the woods and forged such close alliances with the native peoples that several mid-twentieth-century Canadian historians decided to adapt the American frontier thesis to New France. The numerous young men who headed to the woods and lived beyond the rule of law among the Indians seemed to qualify for what Turner had identified as the new man who left eastern institutions behind to forge a less-constrained, more democratic society farther west.⁶ Eccles and Harris used this model to explain the men of New France who pushed ever westward, emulated the freedom of the natives, and escaped authorities’ attempts to regulate their lives and their trade.

After 1970, frontier historians of Canada began to be reined in by the 'metropolitans.' They suggested it was time to trash the frontier stage-set. This group, well schooled in *Annales* renditions of the history of France, offered cogent reasons for regarding the colony along the St Lawrence not so much as a new society but, on the contrary, a microcosm of the old country. Metropolitan historians pointed out that the colony never developed the egalitarian society that was supposed to appear on frontiers. Instead, it rather faithfully reproduced the French hierarchy of nobles, clergy, bourgeoisie, artisans, labourers, and farm folk (the last known in Canada as *habitants*). Elites jealously guarded various ceremonial privileges, and they usually intermarried with their own group. People carefully dressed to show their status (nobles in feathered hats and richly coloured fabrics trimmed with gold, embroidery, and lace; business-minded bourgeoisie in black; commoners in caps and garments of homespun or deerskin). Further countering any notion of frontier egalitarianism, some historians of the metropolitan school also portrayed a Canadian peasantry exploited by overlords in ways reminiscent of the situation in France. Though they did not have to face the same crushing taxes levied in France, *habitants* often disputed the modest feudal dues claimed by priest and seigneur, which suggests they found them burdensome.⁷

Moreover, as the metropolitan school pointed out, Canadians never abandoned traditional institutions the way frontiersmen are supposed to do. The colony adhered to the Custom of Paris as its legal code. Government positions and councils were modelled on those of French provinces. Parish institutions, schools, hospitals, poor relief, apprenticeship systems, and ecclesiastical and military bureaucracies were all based on French models. The way pioneers in the clearings lobbied (sometimes even rioted) to have a church and school nearby suggests that getting away from traditional institutions was the furthest thing from their minds. At Quebec where the uncongealing river allowed French ships to arrive each May, the wealthy faithfully followed Parisian fashions, necessarily one season behind since there was a kind of news white-out between November and April. Visitors commented that Canadian towns looked like those in northern France. Far from glorying in the great quantities of land available, most colonists settled closely together. The metropolitan historians explained why: the forest was not a gateway to freedom but a daunting barrier, full of trees so gigantic it was exhausting to clear even one. Clearly the colony did not develop on entirely original lines. In fact, well into the nineteenth century European visitors continued to exclaim how much it reminded them of old, pre-Revolutionary France.

Trade and war also obeyed the dictates of France, rather than imperatives of the frontier. Frontierist notions of the fur trade as a way young men could escape the toils of settled life met with evidence that by the eighteenth century, as the trade moved ever farther west, it fell into the hands of family companies that kept a supply of trained men in their regular employ. Although covert trading makes precise counts impossible, it seems clear that running off to the woods to trade was an opportunity open to an ever-shrinking percentage of the expanding population. In addition, as Louise Dechene observed, most of the profits accrued to enterprises that were centred on the ports of La Rochelle and Bordeaux, not to the colonists themselves. France's long arm not only snatched back profits but also dictated key policies, such as that of keeping unprofitable posts open for purely imperial ends. Indeed Dale Miquelon, even W.J. Eccles himself,⁸ uncovered an array of evidence that French economic and military goals closely shaped colonial existence. When France went to war, the colony went to war. Far from having a frontier independence, the colony was like a puppet on a string, Little France controlled by Big France. With all this evidence in hand, the 'metropolitan' historians were able to challenge interpretations based on the frontier and the continental interior. They turned their faces to the Atlantic, presenting the ocean as a connector rather than a chasm, and recasting the habitants as run-of-the mill French peasants. Scrutinizing the colony through *Annales* binoculars, they invited us to perceive the endless woods looming at the edge of every clearing not as a golden opportunity for adventurous spirits but rather as a barrier that gave conventional peasants extra work to do.

One does wonder, though, just how far to go in regarding early Canada as Little-France-on-the-St-Lawrence. France in 1700 was a densely populated country of twenty million people. It had a diverse economy where sumptuous wealth contrasted with desperate poverty (and thousands roamed in search of work). There were varied fields and vineyards that had been cultivated in customary ways for centuries, ancient market towns and villages connected by well-travelled roads. Canada in 1700 was a settlement of twenty thousand (1 per cent of that of France), with two small towns (Quebec and Montreal), a village (Trois-Rivières), and so few roads that the river remained the best highway. Even that was blocked by freeze-up nearly half of every year, cutting off communication with France. Summer did permit a voyage from Quebec down to the sea of six hundred kilometres, and then thousands more across to France; but only a fraction of the populace ever made the trip. Except

for those living near the two towns, the tiny French population until the 1740s had fairly limited contact with domestic markets. Many families had a large degree of self-sufficiency in food, clothing, shelter, furniture, tools, and transport. The colony was surrounded by vast tracts of forest, its people heavily outnumbered by First Nations. One cannot ignore these physical facts.

There were other differences too. It seems unwise to ignore the repeated letters from colonial officials observing what they clearly perceived – in dozens of dispatches from a variety of different governors, intendants, and others – about the relatively unconstrained behaviour they found in the colony. They attributed it to various factors including indulgent childrearing, the influence of the Indians, and the free life of the fur trade. Though the frontier historians may have stressed such evidence unduly, weight needs to be given to those comments, as well as to *habitant* resistance to living in supervised old-world village structures. And indeed historians by the turn of the twenty-first century did begin to swing back somewhat towards somewhat fuller acknowledgment that both the French models *and* the forest played their part in shaping the distinctive French-Canadian people who emerged by the eighteenth century. As Thomas Wien responded in regard to Louise Dechene's reference to 'medieval' qualities of the fur trade, 'Don't mistake the continent. The immediate ancestor of this system of exchanges is the longstanding aboriginal trade of North-Eastern America.' Wien aptly commented that work in the metropolitan vein stresses what is familiar from a European perspective but sometimes takes for granted the (colonists') adaptation to the new.⁹

Women and Environments in Early French Canada

To understand how colonists adapted, our three-chapter section entitled 'Along a River' will track, first of all, the arrival of female immigrants at the colonial ports. Then it will begin to trace the colony's exportable natural resources down inland waterways and across the ocean to Europe, taking a tour of posts, farms, towns, and ports to identify women who were involved in the commerce of the frontier. Because the term *frontier* is freighted with connotations of egalitarianism and innovation that (the metropolitans have convinced us) are of somewhat limited applicability in an ancien régime colony, our discussion will revolve around a more neutral concept, that of the environment. The environmental historian's concern with the interaction of human beings and nature

brings fresh understanding to many features of colonial life: the ideas of wilderness the first immigrants brought with them, the technology they used to transform natural resources, and the seasonal and weather patterns that determined their routines. (We leave largely for another day how these activities in turn *altered* the environment, though our discussions of missionaries and fur traders briefly note impacts on First Nations and their habitat.) The primary focus is on this question: How did the natural environment affect women's participation in commerce? The term *environment* can be defined as external conditions affecting plant and animal life, and as the area surrounding a place.¹⁰ The first definition – conditions affecting plant and animal life – relates to climate, air, water, and other natural resources. We shall see, in chapter 2, how the external conditions of clean water and air and good growing conditions had a salubrious effect on the *filles du roi* and other immigrants. Those external conditions also included a forested natural environment that would cause furs, timber, birchbark, and other woodland staples to remain a vital part of the populace's economic life throughout the colonial period.

Let us move on to the second definition, 'the area surrounding a place.' In terms of their surroundings, the colonists who dwelt along the banks of the St Lawrence or its tributaries looked out to a vast hinterland. It included the fur-trading country bordering the Upper Great Lakes that was known as the *pays d'en haut*, from which myriad rivers led into ever more distant trade hinterlands. To the south lay the colony of New York, to which Canadians smuggled furs in large number. They also had an eastern hinterland that stretched seaward from their own local markets in villages and towns, on down the river towards the fisheries and ports of Gaspé and Louisbourg, and on across the ocean whose waves eventually lapped the shores of western France. We shall discuss women working in all these locales. Their ventures spanned the fur and timber trades, local manufactures and markets, the fisheries, and the transatlantic trade.

As the book moves beyond its initial historiographic section, the environmental influences come to the fore in chapter 2, when the discussion begins to focus on Canada. The reader will be introduced to key immigrant groups, will learn the attractions of the New World environment for both the female missionaries known as *dévotés* and the immigrant brides known as *filles du roi*. Chapters 3 and 4 in their turn also stress environmental influences. They document the hundreds of women involved in the trade of natural resources that were the colony's essential export