



The Codex Canadensis and the Writings of Louis Nicolas. The Natural History of the New World/Histoire Naturelle des Indes Occidentales

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Anyone interested in the history of New France, Jesuit missions, seventeenth-century natural history, the natural history and ethnology of early Canada and, not least of all, Canadian art, should rejoice at the publication, at long last,

of Louis Nicolas' *Codex Canadensis* and the Writings of Louis Nicolas. Indeed, it should be a double celebration since McGill-Queen's University Press has issued a magnificent edition with a superbly edited text accompanied by excellent reproductions of Louis Nicolas' beautiful drawings, all printed on fine paper. Even the binding, end papers, and dust jacket are of the first quality. So let me begin by raising a glass to Father Louis Nicolas, in absentia, to François-Marc Gagnon for his erudite, imaginative introduction, Nancy Senior for her lucid translation, Réal Ouellet for modernizing the original seventeenth-century French text, the scientists who assisted in ensuring the accuracy of identifications, and of course, the publisher. This remarkable book deserves recognition as a major Canadian publishing event; as Peter King of the Gilcrease Museum writes, it will make Nicolas' works "better known and appreciated as a true international treasure" (xiii).

This volume analyses and explains the relationship between these two documents, which have been reunited for the first time in approximately three hundred and fifty years. The original drawings, which have come to be known as the *Codex Canadensis*, have been held by the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa Oklahoma (where I examined and fell in love with them about twenty-five years ago), since Thomas Gilcrease purchased them for his museum of the American Indian. Gilcrease was a member of the Muskogee Nation whose oil-rich portion of a sub-divided reserve

allowed him to rise from poverty to plenty and thus fulfill his dream of establishing a museum collection worthy of the traditions of the first Americans. His success was astounding but it also bankrupted him. The museum was saved when a referendum authorized Tulsa to assume his debts in return for ownership. As the oil royalties continued to flow, he repaid the city although the museum remains a city-operated treasure. Where the *Codex* resided in the previous two hundred and fifty years remains a something of a mystery. It may once have been housed in the library of Louis XIV; there is a royal stamp on the leather binding but that may have been added later. Its whereabouts remain murky until a Paris antique bookseller published a facsimile edition of 100 copies in 1930. It was there that the manuscript originally known as “*Les raretés des Indes*” acquired the title of *Codex canadiensis*.¹ It then passed through the hands of various collectors until a wealthy enough buyer, fittingly an American Indian, brought it to Tulsa. A second reproduction was issued by the radical separatist publisher *parti pris* in 1981; confusingly organized and poorly printed, it was erroneously titled *Codex du Nord Américain Québec 1701*.

In those two editions, and at the Gilcrease Museum, the author/artist of the *Codex* was identified as Charles Bécard, Sieur de Grandville, in the belief that Bécard was the only inhabitant of New France in the late seventeenth century capable of drawing the two maps at the beginning of the manuscript. This claim was undermined by, among

others, the historian André Vachon (1974) and the anthropologist Anne-Marie Sioui (1979), who demonstrated that the artist was Father Louis Nicolas, a Jesuit missionary who lived in New France in the mid-1660s. Exhaustive research for this new edition adds important new biographical facts but, unfortunately, details related to his interest in and knowledge of natural history remain meager.

The history of the written manuscript of the “*Histoire naturelle*” is somewhat clearer. The unsigned manuscript was held by a jurist in Lyon until 1689 and then housed in the library of the Congrégation de l’Oratoire until it was transferred to the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris after the Revolution. The Public Archives of Canada made a copy in the mid-twentieth century and began work on a typewritten version. After years of speculation and research concerning the possible relation between the *Codex*, the “*Histoire naturelle*” and Nicolas’ other work, the *grammaire algonquine*, François-Marc Gagnon has been able to demonstrate conclusively that the two natural history documents, despite discrepancies and differences in contents, are the work of the same author. Nevertheless, he cautions against assuming that Nicolas intended that the two be published together and Gagnon offers some thoughtful comments on what “publishing” might have meant in seventeenth-century France. He also observes that the “*Histoire*” may be unfinished since it does not include a separate discussion of the drawings of native people, which are among the most

intriguing in the *Codex*. However, the “*Histoire*” does not completely ignore the native people: Gagnon brings together comments scattered through the text to demonstrate the great ethnological value of the “*Histoire*.” His suggestion that the “*Histoire*” does not discuss the native people separately because they were not judged to be part of nature is questionable. Many other documents of the time treat natives and flora and fauna together as part of natural history, e.g., Nicolas Deny’s *Description and Natural History of Acadia*.

Another remarkable piece of historical detective work is Gagnon’s demonstration that Nicolas was not a proto-impressionist who worked *en plein air*. Instead, he often copied illustrations he found in libraries. His native people, for example, are drawn from images found in François Du Creux’s *History of Canada* (1664). Animals often follow the illustrations in the works of other natural historians including the sixteenth-century Swiss, Konrad Gesner. These sources probably explain the unicorn drawing which Nicolas said was known to live near the Red Sea. Those who denied the creature’s existence, he insisted, had not travelled enough! As for plants and trees, Nicolas could find many new world examples growing in, for example, the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Here Gagnon combines the eye of the art historian with an extraordinary command both of natural history and its history. Who else would know that in the Middle Ages, Albertus Magnus, correctly identified Father Nicolas’ “frogs

with tails” as late stage tadpoles, soon to be roaring bull frogs! It is not surprising that Gagnon knows everything there is to be known about the amazing beaver for he is the author of the erudite *Images du castor canadien XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles* (1994). Nevertheless, he is now able to add Louis Nicolas to those who questioned the belief that Canada’s national animal would castrate himself in order to avoid capture by his enemies.

Gagnon’s ability to piece together fragmentary evidence about the sources of Nicolas’ art and the relationship of the *Codex* and the “*Histoire*” are just two examples of his brilliance as an historian of early Canada. His analysis of the contents of these two documents demonstrates his scholarship and imaginative understanding of so many aspects of seventeenth-century history and natural history. Gagnon’s overall approach to natural history is taken from Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*). Foucault argues that the seventeenth century witnessed the transformation of natural history from a preoccupation with discovering how nature might serve man to an attempt to view nature objectively and thus to reveal the order of nature. A wonderful example of the earlier, utilitarian view is found in Nicolas’ admiring description of the firefly, which concludes: “If fifteen or twenty of these fireflies are put in a glass bottle, they serve as a candle for a week” (372). Foucault’s *épistémè* is helpful as long as it doesn’t get in the way of the evidence; as Gagnon writes, “Nicolas appears to be

attached to the old approach to natural history even if he was from time to time also attracted by the new” (30).

The *Codex* opens with two detailed maps and three drawings of the symbols of French royalty to whom Nicolas paid homage. (He sent Louis XIV a chipmunk, but failed to find cages large enough to include two bears!) Near the end it includes a representation of one of Jacques Cartier’s ships, and of Cartier and a woman whom some believe was the navigator’s wife. Gagnon suggests that she is a religious figure. In between, Nicolas’ drawings of the natural world follow a system of classification that was, of course, pre-Linnaean. “He starts with analogies and thinks that one has to group similar things together” (54). His natural world was divided into Native people, trees and plants, animals, birds, and fish. Within these categories he ordered his subjects, roughly, from the small to the large (like Pliny rather than Aristotle who reversed the order), alphabetically, and with animals and birds divided between land and water. Gagnon not only explains the classification clearly but in one instance, the longnose gar, he even provides his own drawing.

Nicolas’ drawings are marvelous works of art. Most of them present recognizable species, detailed in a fashion that often emphasizes the unique or special characteristics that are necessary for positive identification. The artist’s imagination reveals a man with a deep and sympathetic vision of nature and the native people. Represented

with their canoes and their fishing gear, several of these figures are coloured, a delicate red being added to the usual brown ink. When the artist calls the native people “*sauvaiges*,” he means little more than poor, this is not a racial designation, a point made more generally of this period by Gagnon and Denise Petel in their *Hommes effarables et bestes sauvages* (1986). Still, Gagnon makes it plain that Nicolas believed that “the Other” was different, inferior in religion and behaviour when he cites remarks such as “the Indians hate what Europeans like” (79) and prefer bear grease to wine!

Nicolas exhibited a special interest in birds, drawing superb tanagers, finches, chickadees, sparrows, swallows, magpies, partridges, owls, various waterfowl, and many more. Most of the translations of Nicolas’ bird nomenclature retain his names, though on Plate LI the barn owl is the *autre chouette* not the *chatuant*. Nor is it clear why “*la nuit*” is dropped from the translation on Plate LII. Surely it is intended to explain that the “Coucoucouou” (probably a Great Grey Owl) calls at night. Finally, the French, and sometimes early English observers, named the Canada Goose an “*outarde*” (a designation still used in Quebec) or bustard – a species that does not exist in North America. It is somewhat confusing that in the translation of the “*Histoire*” “*outarde*” is “bustard” a few times (359, 367, 369) and subsequently left as “*outarde*.” These relatively minor complaints detract

little from Nancy Senior's accurate and readable translation, an achievement that Anglophone readers will appreciate. Francophone readers are equally well served by Réal Ouellet's expertly modernized seventeenth-century text.

A final word about the "*Histoire naturelle*," especially some comments on the animals. It has long been known that the beaver fascinated early European visitors and not just fur traders. It was often was given near-human talents as a builder of houses and dams. Nicolas Denis described the clever animal as a hod carrier. Father Nicolas concurred, but it was the moose, to which he devoted nearly five printed pages, that especially won his favour. Every detail is almost lovingly examined. As usual, the emphasis is placed on the uses man makes of the animal: "All of the flesh of the beast, generally speaking, is good and digests easily" (335), and, "The vanity of even the most curious ladies could be satisfied by buying beautiful bracelets made from the moose's four feet ... Epileptics could also use the bracelet [as a cure]" (337). Most importantly, the moose provides the natives with food and medicine and for merchants "great riches, for they get these rare and beautiful skins, and even the whole animal, from the Indian hunters for almost nothing" (339). Like some other Jesuit missionaries, perhaps Father Nicolas' eye for profitable trade was sharper than his talent for the saving of souls.

Every reader of the *Codex Canadensis* and the *Natural History of the New World* will enjoy the visual

and intellectual pleasures of Louis Nicolas' art and natural history. They will also agree with François-Marc Gagnon's conclusion that "these works are unique for their age (ca. 1675) and for the richness of their content. They are extraordinary early records of new world natural history" (83).

NOTE

- 1 On page 189, I have spelled the title "Codex Canadiensis," but elsewhere I have used the newly adopted title "Codex Canadensis." Both are correct since they refer to two different publications, the one under review and the 1930 facsimile.