
The Hero and the Historians

Alan Gordon

The Hero and the Historians
Historiography and the Uses
of Jacques Cartier



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Acknowledgments

This study began life as an unanswered question posed during the defence of my doctoral dissertation. Asking historians questions they can't answer is a cruel thing to do, and in this case, it led to more than ten years of on-again, off-again work. So, for that initial question, I thank Jim Pritchard. I hope an answer lies somewhere in this book, although in the process of researching and writing, I ended up asking myself a different set of questions. Earlier ideas appeared in the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* for 1999, and the anonymous reviewers of that journal made some excellent suggestions. I also learned a great deal from Viv Nelles and Ron Rudin, who shared a panel with me on hero making at the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) meeting that year. Although he probably doesn't remember the encounter, André Pratte of *La Presse* made some astute observations that helped me rethink how I imagined the interests of my Cartier enthusiasts. More recently, friends and colleagues have offered helpful suggestions, listened to my rants, and encouraged me to finish by setting their own fine examples. I owe particular thanks to Russ Johnston, who offered encouragement during a trip to Quebec City, and to Stuart McCook and Peter Goddard, who shared with me their own insights and made casual comments that had serious effects. Suzanne Zeller read a terrible early version of a chapter – and gently told me where I was going wrong – and Karen Racine lugged a full draft of the manuscript to Tahiti, where she read it, made countless suggestions, and shipped it back to me. At UBC Press, I am grateful to have worked with Melissa Pitts, whose guidance and encouragement, as well as deft skill, steered me through the publication process. And I owe a debt to the anonymous readers for their professional and thoughtful commentary on earlier drafts. But, of course, none of this would have been possible without the love of Adrienne Warren. During the long years of underemployment that followed my PhD, she encouraged me to keep going and gave me the support – especially emotionally – to persevere. In this, as in all things in my life, my greatest debt is to her.

A Note on Translations

This work relies heavily on citations from French-language sources. For the comfort of English-language readers, I have translated the passages I quote into English. I have not always translated word for word, but rather I have provided the sense of the original quotation and adjusted the syntax to flow more freely in English prose. I know there is some debate over these practices among translators, and I hope my approach has not altered any of the meaning in the passages. Readers interested in assessing the original French quotations can find them reproduced in the endnotes. There are a few exceptions to this general rule. In one instance, where the French syntax is important to the discussion, I reversed my practice and placed the English translation in the notes. I have not translated brief passages or institutional names where the meaning should be self-evident. Where possible, I have used existing English translations. For the accounts of Cartier's voyages, I use H.P. Biggar's work. I recognize that there are some problems with Biggar's translations, but I know of no significant disputes around the passages I quote. Finally, I have not attempted to translate poetry and song. I leave that task to scholars of literature and professional translators, whose skills far outweigh my own meagre abilities.

The Hero and the Historians

Introduction

In June 1542, Jacques Cartier set sail for France from Newfoundland's eastern coast. He never again saw the country he had explored at his king's behest, or the great river to Canada that he had followed for nearly a thousand miles into the North American interior. Perhaps, as he left harbour, he cast a glance over the stern of his ship and spent a silent moment reflecting on the failure of his little colony at Charlesbourg-Royal. His departure might well have been bittersweet. Although his hold was packed with "diamonds" and "gold," which eventually proved worthless, his effort at colonization had failed. He had abandoned his tiny fort, nestled beneath the cliffs overlooking today's Cap-Rouge River, a minor tributary of the St. Lawrence, some ten kilometres from today's National Assembly and the modern walls of Old Quebec.¹ The account of his voyage neither mentions nor explains his decision to desert the colony, but the winter had been bitter. This first effort to plant a permanent French presence in North America ended in dismal failure. And Cartier departed for France in defiance of a command to return to Charlesbourg-Royal given by his master on this expedition, the sieur de Roberval.

Jacques Cartier, a sea captain from the Breton town of Saint-Malo, never knew the fame or the success his little ventures later brought his name. He could never have realized that future generations would credit him with the discovery – or even the founding – of a new nation. How could he have guessed? He had no references in his own time. The "founding fathers" of the North American settler societies did not yet exist in the first half of the sixteenth century. Christopher Columbus – recognized, to be sure – was not revered in Spanish Cuba or in Spain as the discoverer of the New World. Nor did the European nations, such as they were understood in the sixteenth century, attribute their origins to great men. Certainly, France could look back upon the great Charlemagne, who had unified the Franks and carved an empire out of western continental Europe, or to Charles Martel and Clothar I before him. But even had France not been a fractured kingdom in

the days of François I, the late-Renaissance French did not think of such things.

Three and a half centuries after Cartier last saw the North American shore, he had reached the height of popularity. The citizens of Saint-Henri, an industrial suburb of Montreal, gathered in a local park to unveil a monument honouring the great explorer as an expression of their gratitude for his heroic deeds. “Cartiermania” swept the St. Lawrence valley during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the residents of Saint-Henri embraced it enthusiastically. On the evening of 14 June 1893, much of the town turned out to witness a lavish ceremony inaugurating a fountain topped with a statue of Cartier. Two stages stood near the fountain: one held the fanfare and the other was jammed with orators and distinguished guests. This was a fairly typical late-Victorian inauguration of a monument, the likes of which were seen across North America around the turn of the century. Many similarly honoured long-dead explorers and military commanders. The only oddity at Saint-Henri was that the ceremony was held at night. The evening setting permitted the event to be celebrated with fireworks, which lit up the sky and cast their flickering glow on the statue of the intrepid sailor.²

Local sculptor Joseph-Arthur Vincent had been commissioned to create this tribute to the man who, probably, had only glimpsed the future site of Saint-Henri from atop Mount Royal three and a half centuries earlier. Vincent was in his early forties in 1893 and had just begun to make his mark on Canada’s artistic scene. Having worked many years in an iron foundry, he was uniquely qualified to cast statues resistant to the harsh Canadian weather. Indeed, for an earlier statue at the Collège des Oblats in Ottawa, he had specially adapted a new technique for outdoor decorations. By the 1890s, he was well established teaching sculpture and casting techniques at the École des arts et métiers de Montréal.³ In the centre of a town with little connection to Jacques Cartier, Vincent created the first public monument to display his sculpted likeness. Set at the top of an overwrought iron fountain, Vincent’s statue captured the dignity characteristic of the mature imagination of Cartier. Dressed in Renaissance clothing, he was depicted as a middle-aged man, a hardy sailor with a distinctive profile and a determined, jutting chin.

Beneath Cartier, fixed to the fountain, a plaque explained the veneration of the Saint-Henri citizens: “To Jacques Cartier, born at Saint-Malo on 31 December 1491, sent by François I to the discovery of Canada on 20 April 1534. Dropping anchor 16 July of the same year by the entrance to the St. Lawrence, he took possession of the whole country in the name of the king his master and called it New France. 1893.”⁴ In their minds, Cartier had claimed Canada for France and thus initiated the history of the French presence in America. He represented the founding of New France and the eventual development of French Canada. Thus, displaying his image in Saint-Henri

was entirely appropriate. Although Saint-Henri briefly boasted the only public sculpture of the explorer, it was just one of many towns to be caught up in Cartiermania. Across Quebec, squares, schools, streets, and even a bank took the name “Jacques Cartier” to symbolize their connection to a certain view of French Canadian history and their place in the French Canadian nation.

There is no obvious explanation for why the residents of this little industrial suburb, or of many other communities, felt driven to honour this long-dead sailor from another country. Cartier was not a Canadian and would never have imagined himself as such. Nor could anyone seriously claim that Cartier, whose three voyages ended abortively, was responsible for the development of modern Canada. He had no children of his own, and his explorations were surpassed by those of Champlain and his successors in the seventeenth century. Any realistic claim of the founding of a French colony in North America would date only from Champlain’s efforts. And yet, people across Quebec created a national fiction that Jacques Cartier was the father of New France and the first hero of their own history. Such national fictions are not merely reflections of ideology, but are components in it. National historical heroes do not, as many students argue, simply mirror the nationalist ideal: they play a fundamental role in defining it. Thus, in inventing Cartier as a national historical hero, nineteenth-century French Canadians were also inventing an identity for themselves. Although the creators of this Cartier cult, and its most prominent guardians, sprang from the ranks of Quebec’s middle-class nationalist intellectuals, Cartiermania’s broad embrace suggests that it resonated with ordinary people. By the 1930s, government agencies, both federal and provincial, were also drawn to adopt Cartier as a symbol of (often competing) national identities.

A great deal has been written about nationalism and national identity in recent years. With some exceptions, most current scholars of nationalism would accept that modern nations are social, political, and cultural constructs. Scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Elie Kedourie have connected the rise of nationalism and of the nation-state to modernity. Secularization, capitalism, and increasing technological and institutional sophistication in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reshaped the social relations of “modernizing” societies, particularly in Europe and America. Modernity reordered and expanded social relations in ways that broke down older communal face-to-face associations. In their place, people “imagined” a broader sense of community, with individuals living in a given territory, speaking a similar language, and sharing a common sense of history. In other words, living in the condition of modernity encouraged people to imagine themselves living in a national community.

Heroes fit into the story of modernity and national identity in a number of ways. They aid in forming the bond that citizens need to imagine so as

to identify themselves with the broader national community. Historical heroes served a function similar to that of national ideal types, such as Jean-Baptiste in French Canada, John Bull in England, or Brother Jonathan and Uncle Sam in the United States. These figures were allegorical personifications of the nation, but historical heroes pushed the idea further because they were real people. The celebration of national heroes, then, was a crucial dimension in the construction of national consciousness. It is no coincidence that the nineteenth century saw both the entrenchment of nationalism and the rise of the hero cult across Europe and the Americas. However, hero veneration is also connected to modernity in other ways. Modernity, and its constituent intellectual and cultural trends, played a role in shaping the form of hero celebration. A convergence of intellectual trends helped produce specific ways of thinking about the past in which “great men” were particularly feted. Modernity helped shape social relations in ways that produced audiences for those “histories.” And the lived environment of modernity created anxieties that hero veneration helped to assuage.

French Canada was not alone in generating historical heroes during the nineteenth century. This was the century in which most recognized historical heroes were fashioned for the needs of a society to which they themselves never belonged. Christopher Columbus is perhaps the most famous New World example. In his own time, and immediately following his death, he was a laughingstock, disgraced by his administrative failures, imprisonment, and almost continuous legal difficulties. However, his reputation was rehabilitated by the end of the sixteenth century and he was especially revered by Anglo-American colonists. Still, it was not until the eighteenth century, especially during and after the American Revolution, that the association of Columbus and America took root in the popular imagination. During celebrations to ratify the new American constitution in the 1780s, Columbus began to figure as the founder of a historical process culminating in the achievement of freedom in the New World. By 1792, the Columbus myth had spawned commemorative ceremonies led by New York’s Columbian Society, an organization better known as the corrupt Tammany Society, which ran New York City politics. In the next century, Columbus was elevated as *the* founder of America, an American Moses.⁵

John Cabot, often seen in modern English-speaking Canada as the man who discovered Canada, was another such figure. Although his exact landfall during his 1497 voyage to North America remains disputed, it is generally accepted that he landed somewhere on the eastern coast of what is now Canada. However, Cabot himself was only recently rediscovered. For centuries, his name was obscure, known only to a handful of historians. Even then, he was frequently confused with his son, Sebastian. The fact that a Cabot left Bristol on a transatlantic voyage in 1496, 1497, 1498, or 1503 was not forgotten, but credit for initiating the English presence in North America

usually went to Sebastian. Although the Elizabethan chronicler Richard Hakluyt kept alive some memory of John's achievement, these accomplishments became widely known only in the nineteenth century. Cabot's resurrection accompanied a growing Victorian imperialism and an effort to justify the British possession of North America. Indeed, upon investigating these "myths of discovery" and "inventions of tradition," a recent author has concluded that the Cabot legend is in many ways a fabrication. Numerous competing traditions overlap through the narrative of Cabot's landfall, rendering a definitive claim impossible, despite the 1997 Canadian government-sponsored celebrations of the five hundredth anniversary of the arrival of his ship *Matthew* at Bonavista, Newfoundland.⁶

Taken together, historical explorer-heroes such as Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, and Jacques Cartier are suggestive of how national communities make use of history. First, and perhaps most importantly, they symbolize the arrival of Europeans in the New World and, despite the specious logic inherent in such claims, legitimize the possession of North America by Christian Europeans. For the former European colonies of the New World, these first explorers represent founding fathers. Thus, their history provides a binding social myth. Such a collective emotive experience – an entire society idolizing the same figure or founding event – strengthens the bond of brotherhood that nationals are supposed to feel for one another, so that individual historical figures become surrogates for the collective bond of nationalism. Although such veneration need not function in service of nationalism, it has tended to do so in the modern world. Whether nationalist or not, celebrated individuals lend a sense of purpose and accomplishment to abstract, collective ambitions. For national communities, the first objective is to create a sense of unity. It hardly matters that the hero could never have represented these ambitions in his own day, for they are projected back into the past. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in historical heroes. Scotland, for instance, was long a country divided by clans, geography, language, and ethnicity. However, well before the Mel Gibson film *Braveheart* attempted Scottish myth making, Scottish nationalists read into Scotland's past a national unity and purpose that pitted the common Scot against English overlordship. Scotland's "War of Independence" began in the late thirteenth century as a struggle on the part of some clans to overthrow English occupation. Partly because the Scottish nobility had been discredited, the early resistance was fought by commoners under the leadership of a lesser nobleman, William Wallace. Their effort failed (although Robert the Bruce later succeeded) and Wallace was brutally executed in London. However, as Graeme Morton has demonstrated, Scots saw Wallace's failures as noble resistance that helped define Scotland in opposition to England and, through that, helped graft a national unity onto a fragmented pattern of identities.⁷ Indeed, failed heroes are often more resonant than successful ones. In noble

failure, positive values are more easily constructed: failures become sacrifice. A hero sacrifices himself defending principles that subsequent generations come to value. Thus, in failure, the lesson of right conduct is more readily learned. William Wallace never united Scotland against the English, and he died horribly in defeat, but he became a symbol of Scottish bravery, ingenuity, and independence of spirit. Adapted for American movie audiences in *Braveheart*, he also came to stand for “freedom,” a rallying cry that would have meant little to Wallace himself but that resonated deeply with modern viewers.

Historical heroes also perform another crucial social function for the nation. Although they may be seen to embody *timeless* national characteristics, they give the nation a sense of time. Nations are relatively recent historical constructs. However, nationalists frequently cite an ancient national past in which historical heroes figure prominently. Again, praise of historical heroes is not a nationalist’s innovation: the ancient Greeks canonized such heroes in the works of Homer. But the cult of great men surged in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like the stories of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, these Romantic-era cults focused on men of the distant past and made little distinction between myth and historical fact. Walter Scott, to continue with Caledonian examples, wrote a series of historical novels that reflected his own imagination and a past as he thought his readers wanted it to be. As Anthony D. Smith notes, heroes, such as Scott’s Rob Roy MacGregor, were portrayed as vessels of a national essence, embodying virtues such as martial valour, generosity, temperance, self-sacrifice, endurance, loyalty, and patriotism.⁸ Thus, nationalists make use of a selective reading of history to construct heroes as the embodiment of national virtue.

A reading of Benedict Anderson suggests another important connection to the past that historical heroes provide in modern nations. Anderson notes that humans construct their own identity through private memories and personal narratives. Yet, such individual accounts are insufficient; too much of our personal past relies on outside supporting evidence. Each personal narrative, a story that tells of our continuous development from child to adult, requires the manufacture of “historical” narratives through documents such as photographs and birth certificates. These documents, coupled with the oral traditions passed down to us from older relatives, help complete the task.⁹ The cult of heroes provides a similar record for the nation. Through their martyrdom or success, heroes build a narrative, or a genealogy, of the nation that connects past and present. Like photographs of ourselves as children, heroic stories provide the framework of a narrative that connects or identifies previous people with ourselves. The key is that nations imagine these heroes as part of their community, as part of their families, or as part of themselves. As modernity progressed, this sense of time became more

important. In Canadian historiography, modernity is usually described as some variant of the lived experience of the self and others under the capitalist revolution that transformed North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a lived experience of the unremitting process of rapid social change and its consequences. In brief, modernity is a social environment that anticipates, even orchestrates, change. Under such conditions, reference to a heroic figure who, although existing in the past, can be presented also as a timeless individual, can be a powerful tool of social cohesion.

In this display of shared national characteristics, figures from the past are reinterpreted so that their own actions become those of a people. Historical heroes are conscripted to the service of nationalist historiography. Anderson argues that nationalism requires an empty, homogeneous, simultaneous time and that national sentiment is formed in the “meanwhile” of historical narrative. A nation’s members live, not only at the same time, but *in* the same time. Yet, they also live in communion with the past. However, a nation’s past is one that escapes the constraints of conventional time: heroes and events are extracted from the past and projected as living memory in the present. No one believes that long-dead figures, such as Jacques Cartier, remain alive in any biological or metaphysical sense. However, because memories of their exploits inform the identities of living people, in a sense some element of the hero continues to exist in collective imaginations. This process involves reinvigorating and repackaging real historical people in order to fit them for the needs of the present in a continuous negotiation between history and politics. The heroes, origins, myths, and struggles of the national past thus live in the present of the imagined community. Nations picture their history as part of their community and imagine their identity with it. The strengths of the past are shared and timeless national characteristics. Their very timelessness is confirmed by the actions of heroes from the distant past. Jacques Cartier could never have become such a figure in his own day – he could never have been interpreted to represent the values of a yet unborn Canadian nation. Even if Cartier was an important man in Saint-Malo during his lifetime, he became more crucial in the imaginations and inventions of nineteenth-century Canadians.

This study uses the example of a single national hero – Jacques Cartier – to examine how certain notions about the past are created and passed on from generation to generation. It investigates the diverse historical meanings that Canadians, both anglophone and francophone, have invented for Jacques Cartier since the nineteenth century and used to embody particular ideas about the world. In many ways, then, Cartier constitutes a point of contact between English and French Canadian nationalisms. However, as this investigation reveals, the nature of the contact between the two was profoundly limited. Each expression of nationalism, although none were static, relied

on its own reading of history. Given this, *The Hero and the Historians* is largely historiographical in its approach to the evidence. It argues that the particular forms of celebration of Jacques Cartier were related to the way in which historical studies developed during the nineteenth century but were also connected to the cultural and political currents of nineteenth-century nationalism. The image of Cartier changed only gradually as long-term ideological changes altered the nature of historical understanding and national identity, and eventually the heroic image fell from favour among Canada's "professionalizing" historians of the mid-twentieth century. Ultimately, a convergence of historical method, culture, and politics, similar to that which created Cartiermania in the nineteenth century, led to its demise in the twentieth.

Historians have long been involved in the manufacture of national identity, as well as in its study. The expression of nationalist sentiment relies on historical narratives and historical memory, and therefore historians figure prominently among the creators and devotees of nationalism. Jules Michelet, the French Romantic historian of the nineteenth century, turned his great studies of the French Revolution into poetic praise for the French nation. Writing from a similar republican tradition, the American John Bancroft derived a providential history of the United States in which the American republic expressed a fulfillment of God's plan. Washington Irving, whose *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* set in place a series of "Columbus myths," presented Columbus as the first "American," a free-thinking individual who overcame the backward superstitions of Europe.¹⁰ Canada has been no exception to this rule. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Canadian historians, both English speaking and French speaking, have been instrumental in furthering diverse ideas of Canadian national identity. Donald Creighton crafted a national narrative centred on the commercial potential of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River that gave a justification to Canada's east-west orientation and its resistance to the continent's north-south pull. W.L. Morton imagined a Canada united by history; the Canadian Centenary Series of monographs was a partial expression of his devotion. Although David Cannadine once dismissed Canada as lacking "national monuments, national myths, national heroes and national traditions," heroes have figured prominently in these nationalist narratives.¹¹ Among francophones, Lionel Groulx was the most famous nationalist historian. A great deal has been written about Groulx, both as a nationalist and a historian, and more darkly as a racist and an anti-Semite. Like many historical figures, Groulx was a complex person whose good and bad should be carefully assessed.¹² If, for the moment, we set aside judgment of the man, Groulx demonstrates the dual role of historians as nationalists. He was foundational in developing a cult around the exploits of the seventeenth-century soldier Adam Dollard des Ormeaux among French Canadian youth

early in the twentieth century. He also played a prominent role in the story of Cartiermania. Historians, then, help to establish a popular memory about the national past.

But historians, both amateur and professional, produce history in more than textbooks and learned articles. History is found in public plaques, in monuments, and in festivals and pageants. History is told in song and in verse. And it appears in the association of places with specific events and heroes. Taken together, these recollections combine with the more formally written history to create a popular historiography, or perhaps even a popular memory, of the past that defies traditional critiques because it is not overtly expressed. What develops out of this memory is a set of assumptions or premises that form the starting place for popular thinking about the past. In the case of Jacques Cartier, the memory begins with his voyage of “discovery” to Canada.

1

The Sixteenth-Century World and Jacques Cartier

Although the heroic figure of Jacques Cartier, as we recognize him today, was forged by relatively recent imagination, the historical Cartier was a product of his own times. His lifespan (1491-1557) was virtually coterminous with the transition from the Renaissance to the early modern period of Western civilization. He lived on the fringes of northwestern Europe during the first half of the sixteenth century, as religious discord, commercial revolution, imperial rivalry, war, and the gradual consolidation of royal power altered the contexts of European life. A cultured European of his century would have read the works of Thomas More, Erasmus, and Rabelais, and known of the art of Michelangelo and Raphael. The exploration of the New World came as Martin Luther and John Calvin proselytized a new Christian faith, and the Catholic Church, no longer unifying western Europe, struck back with the Counter-Reformation. In Italy, such politicians as Machiavelli began to grasp the importance of the new alignment of power. Cartier himself played a small role in the geopolitical struggles of a developing states system, especially the rivalry between the Habsburg emperor Charles V and his own king, François I. And, of course, he fit into a line of great navigators, beginning with the disciples of Henry the Navigator and extending through Vasco da Gama, Columbus, Cabot, Ferdinand Magellan, and into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet, the so-called Age of Discovery was more importantly a period of imperial rivalry, beginning as a Christian struggle against the maritime commercial hegemony of the Muslims and their control of the Holy Land.

In the decades before Cartier was born, Christians pushed Muslims out of the Iberian peninsula, and Muslims finally conquered the vestiges of the Eastern Roman Empire. The impact of the fall of Constantinople, today's Turkish Istanbul, on the history of the northern Atlantic is not well known. The capture of the old imperial capital by the Ottoman Turks on 29 May 1453 signalled more than the final collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire. Nor was its influence on the Christian West confined to the migration of

classical scholars and the establishment of a permanent European enemy for the Catholic Church. The taking of Constantinople effectively shut off the land route to India and Asia opened by Marco Polo only a few years earlier and forced the West to seek new routes to the riches of the East. True, goods continued to flow into Europe via Arab and Venetian merchants. But, as the Turks advanced into the Levant, Turkish customs duties had made the Arab trade more costly. According to myth, the Portuguese prince Henry the Navigator therefore opened Europe's first school of navigation in the hopes of some day circumventing the Arab stranglehold on trade in Oriental spices and finery. Throughout the fifteenth century, Portuguese sailors established commercial and slave trade relationships with western African tribes. By 1487, they had rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa and glimpsed the hope of a sea route to the Orient.

With the Portuguese controlling the African route, other navigators considered their alternatives. One option was to reach the east by sailing west. In the 1490s, the Genoese mariner Christopher Columbus convinced the Spanish court of Ferdinand and Isabella to fund his expedition across the western sea. On 12 October 1492, Columbus landed at the island he named San Salvador, which he thought to be on the fringes of Asia, and thus demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction that one actually could sail around the world. Of course, no educated European thought that the world was flat. Nicolaus Copernicus invented this "belief" in the sixteenth century to satirize his opponents. Even the simplest sailor could not long have subscribed to it against the experience of life at sea. Some uneducated Europeans may have believed in a flat earth before 1300, but the true shape of the earth was well known as far back as the time of St. Augustine of Hippo, who learned of it from the Greeks. After all, Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology, effectively church dogma after 1250, was built on a system of concentric *spheres* with the earth at the centre. In actuality, Columbus' campaign to disprove the flat earth theory was invented by Washington Irving. What Columbus actually had to overcome was the widespread belief that the globe was much too large to circumnavigate. In a series of possibly deliberate miscalculations, he devised an estimate of its circumference that was a scant 20 percent of its actual size, and he put together an impressive lobby at the Spanish court to convince Ferdinand and Isabella of its accuracy.¹

Columbus' "discovery" (he insisted he had reached the edge of Asia itself) initiated a frenzy of seafaring activity. Serving first the court of Spain, and then that of Portugal, the Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci sailed the coast of South America in 1499 and 1501. Columbus himself returned to the Indies three more times, and his adopted countrymen carried the flag of the Spanish Habsburgs deeper into the New World. In 1513, Vasco Núñez Balboa reached the Pacific Ocean by crossing the Isthmus of Panama; in 1519, Hernando Cortés advanced on the Aztec Empire in central Mexico,

crushing it in three years of bloody war. His countryman Francisco Pizarro repeated the feat among the Incas of Peru between 1531 and 1534. Meanwhile, Spain's European rivals joined the excitement. Although Portuguese attention had been directed to the African route to the Orient, around the Cape of Good Hope, Portugal maintained an interest in the New World and a foothold in Brazil. The 1493 papal bull *Inter Caetera* divided the world into Spanish and Portuguese halves, and these two countries confirmed their self-appointed hegemony the following year with the Treaty of Tordesillas. However, England did not long respect the papal position. In 1497, a Genoese captain, John Cabot, reached North America, probably at Newfoundland, searching for an "all-English" route. Some Victorian-era English Canadians suggested that Cabot's landfall might have been in Nova Scotia and that Cabot therefore took precedence over Cartier by being first. Interest in this claim was short-lived. Nevertheless, claims that English-backed voyages to the territory that eventually became Canada predated Cartier's voyages by decades demonstrate the relative lateness of France in venturing into the unknown waters of the Atlantic, or at least in recording it.

In 1503, Binot Poulmier de Gonville, a trader from Honfleur, sailed his 120-ton vessel *L'Espoir* into the Atlantic in the hopes of rounding the Cape of Good Hope and following the Portuguese route to the Spice Islands. However, de Gonville floundered in the ocean for over three months before sighting land at about 26° south. He had been blown off course to South America but so liked what he found that he stayed a year in Brazil, from January 1504 until about the following Christmas. The return trip was nearly as arduous as the outward voyage. After five weeks at sea, de Gonville finally sighted the North Star, the key to sixteenth-century navigation, coming over the northern horizon. Along the way, *L'Espoir* lost its cargo of dyewood and over half of its crew, but news of the voyage and the riches of Brazil spread quickly, aided by the spectacle of de Gonville's prize trophy, the Brazilian Indian Essoméricq. Yet, although de Gonville was credited with being the first French sailor to land in Brazil, Malouins and Dieppois may have been loading up on Brazilian redwoods for some time.² At the very least, French mariners readily braved the waters of the Atlantic for commerce: Breton fishermen had been at Newfoundland by at least 1504. Hardy Breton sailors were so famous that, although the Portuguese brothers Gaspar and Miguel Corte Real may have landed at Newfoundland in as many as four separate voyages between 1500 and 1502, the court of Aragon hired Breton pilots to guide its expedition to the Grand Banks fisheries in 1511.³

The most spectacular of the early French voyages was led by the Florentine Giovanni da Verrazano. In 1524 (some suggest accompanied by a young Jacques Cartier), Verrazano cruised along the coast of North America, looking for a passage through the continental barrier to the riches of the Orient.⁴

At one point, off the present-day Carolina coast, he spotted a stretch of open water behind a narrow swath of mainland. Imagining that he had found the western ocean, he searched in vain for a passage through.⁵ Undaunted by his failure, he continued north as far as New England, or perhaps Newfoundland, before returning to France. But, although Verrazano brought news that the breakthrough to the Pacific Ocean was imminent, France did not capitalize on his voyage. Events on the European continent stifled overseas exploration. The Valois king François I fought his cousin, the emperor Charles V of Spain, for domination in Europe. Verrazano had sailed during a war between the two that ended poorly for France. Captured at the 1526 Battle of Pavia and imprisoned in Madrid, François I was in no position to follow up Verrazano and challenge Spanish hegemony in the New World. And, reliant on income from the church, he could not risk angering the pope by defying *Inter Caetera*. Further French exploration awaited favourable turns of fortune in European diplomacy.

This was the political context of Jacques Cartier's world, and his discoveries seem tame compared to the Spanish and Portuguese advances to the south. Yet, Cartier also helped open a new continent for Europeans. Born in Saint-Malo, probably in 1491, to a wealthy bourgeois family of stature, Cartier took up seafaring as a natural and honourable profession. Saint-Malo, clinging to the rugged Channel coast of Brittany, had long thrived on its fishermen; and generations of French kings looked to the Malouin fishery as the "nursery of the French Navy." Malouin men had been going to sea for generations, helping supply the fish that fed Europe's faithful on the numerous fast days of the Catholic calendar. Little is known of Cartier's early life. Indeed, little is known about him at all. Fragments of his life can be pulled together from court and other legal records; however, the only sustained documentary evidence of the man comes from the various accounts of his voyages, often grouped together and styled his *Relations* as a kind of shorthand. There is little doubt that he first went to sea in his youth. By 1520, he was considered a master mariner; that year, he married Catherine des Granches, the daughter of a local notable. That such a family would accept Cartier suggests he had established considerable stature for himself in Saint-Malo. Henry Percival Biggar, a scholar of Cartier's life, concurred, tracing his prestige through baptismal records in which Cartier was frequently asked to stand as godfather.⁶

The First Voyage, 1534

In 1532, Jean Le Veneur, abbé of Mont St. Michel and bishop of Lisieux, presented Jacques Cartier to the king, who was then on a pilgrimage to Mont St. Michel. Le Veneur offered to pay half the costs of an expedition to the New World should the king consent to it. To add to Cartier's credibility, Le Veneur informed the king that Cartier had already been to Brazil

and Newfoundland, something that seems quite plausible given his knowledge of the Portuguese language and the Malouin trade in redwoods.⁷ The following year, Le Veneur negotiated a favourable papal interpretation of *Inter Caetera* that effectively freed France to explore and claim any “undiscovered” lands. The diplomatic turn of fortune had come in the form of the engagement of the pope’s niece, Catherine de Medici, to the dauphin, the future Henri II. The opportunity to challenge Iberian hegemony had arrived. Le Veneur, patron of Jacques Cartier, advanced his own client and made sure that he received the commission to undertake the first expedition.

Preparations for Cartier’s voyage would not have been easy. Jealous local fishermen, fearing a scarcity of able hands for their vessels, had convinced enough of Saint-Malo’s sailors not to sign on for the mission. Despite a royal commission, the master pilot had to petition local authorities to slap an embargo on the fishing fleet until he had recruited enough hands to man his two ships. At last, on 20 April 1534, Cartier set sail from Saint-Malo with a total complement of 122 men. A scant twenty days later, he made land at Cape Bonavista, Newfoundland. Arriving this early in the northwestern Atlantic carried certain risks. Ice forced the two ships into a small harbour where they laid at rest for another ten days, making repairs and awaiting more favourable sailing conditions. On 21 May (30 May by the present calendar), Cartier put out to sea again, heading north to l’Isle des Ouaiseaulx (Funk Island) where he doubtless knew he could replenish his stores from the flocks of birds that nested there.⁸

At this point, Cartier and his crew were still in known waters, as is made abundantly clear in accounts of the voyage. Even after entering the Strait of Belle Isle, which divides Newfoundland from Labrador, Cartier cannot be accurately described as the first European to visit the region. In his day, the strait was already well sailed; French fishermen had named it the Baie des Chasteaulx for the castle-shaped island that guards today’s Chateau Bay on the Labrador coast. The southern coast of Labrador is studded with rocky islets and reefs hidden beneath dark waters, but Cartier sailed confidently as if he knew his route, naming geographical features and stopping here and there to take on water and wood. Passing the harbour of Blanc Sablon, Cartier entered the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Even now, he was still sailing in known waters: not only was Blanc Sablon already named, but on 12 June, more than a hundred miles from the Atlantic, his little convoy encountered a fishing vessel from La Rochelle. Its crew, Cartier insisted, had become lost. He escorted the errant fishermen into a nearby harbour, which he named Havre de Jacques-Cartier after himself, and observed that it was among the best in the world. Cartier was not generous with this sort of praise. He was not at all complimentary about the land he saw, famously concluding that it must be “the land God gave to Cain.”⁹ Perhaps this impression influenced his decision to reverse course, returning to a well-used harbour near the

western entrance to the strait. At this point, on 14 June, Cartier made a right turn and sailed due south to explore the west side of Newfoundland. Only at this point did he pass from the known world into the unknown.

No one is sure why Cartier took this departure, but it diverted him from proceeding directly up the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. Instead, he established two facts hitherto unknown about Newfoundland: it was an island and it hid a great inland sea. After sailing through thick Newfoundland fog, Cartier made land at Point Rich on the western coast of the island. From 14 to 24 June, he explored the coast, finding little to spark his interest other than abundant fish. (In an hour, the crew of one of his vessels pulled up more than a hundred cod.) Turning west from today's Cape Anguille, the southwestern point of Newfoundland, the company headed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. After passing small islets and naming today's Brion Island, Cartier deduced the true nature of this inland sea: "I am rather inclined to think, from what I have seen, that there is a passage between Newfoundland and the Breton's land [Cape Breton Island]; if it were so, it would prove a great saving in both time and distance, should any success be met on this voyage."¹⁰ He was correct, of course, but he did not opt to investigate the possibility at the time.

However, his decision to continue west was fortuitous. After passing the Magdalen Islands and exploring the coast of Prince Edward Island (which Cartier believed was a peninsula), the ships reached the mainland near Miramichi Bay. Weather forced them back out to sea, but the company returned to the coast on 3 July, rounded Cape Esperance, and entered Baie des Chaleurs. Certainly, after the ice and fog of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the sunny climate of early July in New Brunswick and the Gaspé Peninsula, not to mention the comparatively warm water of the bay, was a relief to the crew. It must also have raised the crew's spirits, for the descriptions in the *Relations* are much more optimistic here than before. Cartier commemorated the warmth of the season in the name he chose for the bay. And, on 6 July, the French had their first significant encounter with the inhabitants of North America. While the captain and his men explored Baie des Chaleurs in a small boat, two fleets of canoes set upon them, waving furs in an effort to open trade. The French panicked. As the *Relations* describe the encounter, "We did not care to trust to their signs and waved them to go back."¹¹ However, the Natives ignored the signs and quickly surrounded the French so that, to frighten them off, Cartier fired two cannon shots over their heads. Obviously not greatly intimidated, the Natives quickly returned, and the French repeated the threat, this time with greater success. The next day, however, affairs got off more amicably. Nine canoes met the French rowboat, and the two sides conducted a brisk impromptu trade of furs for trinkets. These Natives were most probably the Mi'kmaq, with whom French explorers and settlers enjoyed good relations for the following centuries.

Subsequent interactions with the Mi'kmaq were equally profitable, but Cartier's most famous encounter with the locals came near the end of July. After exploring the southern and eastern coasts of the Gaspé Peninsula, the French met another group of Natives on a fishing expedition. Some two hundred people in forty canoes approached the French ships at anchor in Gaspé Bay. They seemed as friendly as the Mi'kmaq, so Cartier allowed them close enough to make the usual trade of pelts for trinkets. These Natives, however, differed from the Mi'kmaq, as Cartier quickly noted. He described them as the poorest people imaginable, for they carried virtually no possessions and went about nearly naked. Their heads were neatly shaved, except for a single lock near the crown, which was allowed to grow long and bound tightly with leather strips. The significance of this "scalp lock" was, as yet, beyond French comprehension. Whether these people had already encountered Europeans is unclear, but they seemed at least to have heard of them. Like the Mi'kmaq, they knew how to trade profitably with the sailors, immediately offering their only valuable possessions. They are commonly assumed to have been a branch of the Iroquoian peoples who occupied the temperate zones of northeastern North America. At Cartier's arrival, according to the archaeologist Claude Chapdelaine, the St. Lawrence Iroquois were divided into three main groups. The Hochelagans, who were the most populous of the three, lived farthest west, with their principal village on today's Island of Montreal. The central group lived near Lac Saint-Pierre. Farther east, the Stadaconans congregated around present-day Quebec City. Although they were divided among approximately eleven villages, their major settlement was Stadacona.¹² It was this final group, under the leadership of Donnacona, that met Cartier in Gaspé Bay during the summer of 1534. These peoples had been living in the St. Lawrence valley for centuries, cultivating crops (mostly corn, squash, and beans) and supplementing their diets with game and fish. They typically lived in small, generally unfortified villages of about four hundred inhabitants. In Cartier's time, they seem to have been at war on a number of fronts: versus the "Agouyada" to the west and the Mi'kmaq and the Maliseet to the south and east. Some time between Cartier's explorations and Champlain's arrival, Native peoples abandoned the St. Lawrence valley, leaving it a virtual corridor of no-man's land in the midst of northeastern North America.

On 24 July, as he prepared to leave Gaspé, Cartier had his men erect a wooden cross carved with the words "Vive le Roy de France" and the three fleurs-de-lys of François I's arms. This was not the first cross Cartier had raised during his explorations, but it has certainly become the most famous and the subject of the most significant Cartier commemoration. Fraught with controversy during the twentieth century, the cross was no less controversial in the sixteenth. Donnacona immediately raised an objection: he came to Cartier's ship and conveyed, by signs, that this country was his and

that Cartier might not raise such a totem without his consent. But Cartier managed to quiet him with gifts and the unlikely reassurance that the cross was a simple beacon to help the French find their way back. Emboldened, Cartier decided to snatch two young men and take them back to France with him. As the canoes of the Stadaconans came alongside the French vessels, Domagaya and Taignoagny, possibly Donnacona's own sons, were pulled on board and spirited away below decks.¹³ Of course, Cartier promised to return the youths on his next voyage, but Donnacona was understandably upset that the French violated Iroquoian custom by failing to exchange some of their own party for Domagaya and Taignoagny. Nonetheless, he acquiesced to the situation, probably for political reasons. He needed a powerful ally against his enemies and no doubt thought that Cartier fit the bill. In any case, the French were determined to have their way and set sail with the two Stadaconans on deck.

From Gaspé, the fleet headed north, exploring much of the coast of Anticosti Island, and thus Cartier again missed his chance to find the St. Lawrence River by himself. From there, the passage home to Saint-Malo was almost direct. One can only speculate regarding what Domagaya and Taignoagny thought when they first saw Europe. No doubt they were startled to discover the many technological wonders of European civilization. But did they, like Essoméricq before them, hide their surprise as a matter of pride? Certainly, coming from an egalitarian and permissive society, they would have found little in European social relations or child rearing to impress them. However, their thoughts can be inferred only from their actions during Cartier's second voyage. As for Cartier himself, the first trip greatly enhanced his status, and the stories that he, his men, and his captives told enabled him to quickly raise support for a second one.

The Second Voyage, 1535-36

Although the names of the ships and crewmembers from Cartier's first voyage are unknown, we know more regarding the preparations for his second trip because we have a more detailed record. Cartier set sail with three vessels (the *Grande Hermine*, the *Petite Hermine*, and the little *Émerillon*) and, according to one roll, 112 officers and men. A few months passed between the date of this roll and the mission's departure. No doubt some sailors signed on but found other pursuits in the meantime. Two names in particular have sparked controversy among historians: Dom Anthoine and Dom Guillaume Le Breton may or may not have been priests, and they may or may not have accompanied Cartier later that spring. At least this time, Cartier's objectives were stated more clearly: he was to explore beyond Newfoundland and discover "certain" countries. Apparently, Domagaya and Taignoagny had described their homeland to the French. But, as Samuel E. Morison points out, the absence of instructions to bring back gold or gems suggests that,

perhaps deliberately, the two boys had not mentioned the fabled Kingdom of the Saguenay, rich in mineral wealth and thought to lie north of the St. Lawrence. Nor, for that matter, did Cartier's commission contain any suggestion of missionary activity.¹⁴ Despite the assumptions of some later historians, neither Cartier nor his king considered conversion and proselytization to be of much value.

The fleet left Saint-Malo on 19 May 1535, but this time the Atlantic crossing was difficult. Foul weather tossed the ships for a full month and separated them from each other. It is a testament to the skill of the Breton mariners that, after more than two months at sea, all three ships survived to reunite at Blanc Sablon on 26 July. Only then, in the late summer of 1535, did Cartier again don the cap of the explorer. The westward voyage was relatively uneventful; however, on 10 August, Cartier entered a small bay on the coast opposite Anticosti Island, which he named for St. Lawrence, whose feast day it was. This was the first appearance of the name St. Lawrence in Cartier's toponymy. A few days later, after realizing that Anticosti was an island after all, Cartier consulted Taïnoagny and Domagaya, who assured him that the great river (at the western end of Anticosti, the St. Lawrence is hardly recognizable as such) was the river of Hochelaga and the way to Canada. Within about a week, a third historic name entered the European vocabulary: Domagaya and Taïnoagny began to tell Cartier of the great Kingdom of the Saguenay lying somewhere to the north and west of them.

As they directed the French up the river, the two guides explained the riches to be had in the Saguenay, a populated place with an abundance of metal wealth. Either by deliberate misinformation or through a misunderstanding, Cartier became convinced of the mineral riches of the country. His excitement is reflected in the account of the second voyage. By the end of August, the fleet had reached the mouth of the Saguenay River, which ran "between lofty mountains of naked rock."¹⁵ However, the Saguenay flows from the north, and Cartier knew that it was not the route to the interior (or possibly to Asia) for which he sought. He continued up the great river and encountered some of Domagaya and Taïnoagny's countrymen within a week. Soon Donnacona himself came aboard the *Grande Hermine* and greeted his two sons and the captain. Taking to the ships' boats, Cartier followed the Stadaconans upstream past the magnificent views of Montmorency Falls and the approach to what would one day be Quebec City, with Cap Diamant standing majestically over the river. He made no comment regarding either. His concern was to get his ships into a good harbour: this he promptly did in a crook of the St. Croix (today's St. Charles) River, which flows into the St. Lawrence below Quebec City. The French had arrived at Stadacona, and Domagaya and Taïnoagny had come home.

However, Cartier was hardly content with his accomplishment. His guides had promised to lead him as far upriver as Hochelaga, but their father proved

reluctant to let him go. Donnacona probably hoped to use his geographical proximity to the French to control their interaction with other Aboriginal peoples and to exert a hegemony over his rivals at Hochelaga. He tried repeatedly to dissuade the French, even resorting to a “warning” from the god Cudouagny. Great dangers lay ahead, Donnacona’s Cudouagny cautioned: the French faced ruin if they proceeded inland. Cartier, good Christian that he was, laughed off such an effort and, claiming to have reassurances from his own priests, decided to press on without local pilots. On 19 September, he set sail in the little *Émerillon* with a company of gentlemen volunteers, leaving behind the crews of the other two vessels. For nearly two weeks, the little company journeyed upriver, encountering more of the country’s inhabitants along the way. At the western end of today’s Lac Saint-Pierre, unsure regarding how to navigate the archipelago that hides the river’s main channel, the company met a group of men, one of whom was so strong that he hoisted Cartier in his arms and carried him ashore with no appreciable effort. After sharing a meal with these Natives, who were kind enough to show the French the way through the islands, Cartier left behind the *Émerillon*, pressing on with his longboats and thirty-four hands. At last, on 2 October 1535, the boats arrived at Hochelaga.

Perhaps a thousand people rushed to the river’s edge to greet the visitors as the longboats drew near the Island of Montreal. There is some dispute as to where Cartier landed and, more to the point, where Hochelaga stood. Perhaps historians have discussed the events of the Hochelaga visit more than any other incident in Cartier’s itinerary. However, the conventional wisdom is that Cartier landed on the southern shore of the island and that Hochelaga stood somewhere on the southern slopes of Mount Royal. All night, these Natives stayed on the riverbanks, dancing and singing by the light of their bonfires. The following morning, dressed appropriately and accompanied by four gentlemen volunteers and twenty sailors, Cartier marched through the forest, past fields of maize, and up to the town itself. Hochelaga was probably a community of fifteen hundred people.¹⁶ Cartier counted fifty longhouses surrounded by a palisade of sorts and further defended by two redoubts of roughly piled stones.

Cartier’s descriptions of Hochelaga and its inhabitants are amply recorded elsewhere in the *Relations*. However, two incidents are of particular note. The first was Cartier’s excursion to the summit of Mount Royal where he and his companions were rewarded with the magnificent view that still brings thousands of Montrealers to gaze over the modern city, the river, and the vast Montreal Plain. Cartier was able to take in the Laurentian mountains to the north, to glimpse the Adirondacks to the south, and to trace the silver strand of the St. Lawrence running west to the distant horizon. However, to his dismay, he saw a set of impenetrable rapids just upriver from where he had beached his longboats. Scholars differ regarding the identity of these

rapids. Some claim that Cartier's route to the interior was blocked by the Lachine Rapids, named years later by René-Robert, Chévalier de La Salle. An alternative hypothesis suggests that Cartier could not have seen the Lachine Rapids from his vantage point on Mount Royal, and so the barrier must have been the Sault-au-Récollet on the Rivière des Prairies. Either way, Cartier could not advance further inland by the river. As he contemplated this new obstacle, a second frequently described incident occurred. Apparently without prompting from the French, the Hochelagans confirmed that a consolation prize of gold and silver was to be found in the Kingdom of the Saguenay. Touching Cartier's silver whistle and a sailor's gilt dagger hilt, they indicated, or more properly the French inferred, that such items were in abundance somewhere to the north and west.

After a whirlwind tour of Hochelaga that occupied only a single autumn day, the French returned to the *Émerillon*. Travelling with the current this time, they reached Stadacona on 11 October and settled in for a winter of suspicion and intrigue. Relations with the Stadaconans had deteriorated in Cartier's absence, and even his return could not maintain the peace. The bitter Laurentian cold shocked the French, whose winters were never so harsh. Their stores of beverages froze in their casks, and, one by one, they developed scurvy; by mid-February, nearly all of Cartier's men had the disease. Suspicious of the Natives, and fearing attack should he reveal his predicament, Cartier and a handful of healthy men made a great show behind their fort's walls, shouting and carrying on to suggest a large number of strong men enjoying themselves in the winter cold. At last their prayers for salvation were answered in the unlikely form of Domagaya. Cartier's erstwhile guide had suffered from scurvy, but suddenly he seemed cured. He had been healed by a tea made from a certain tree, and he gladly showed Cartier how to identify it. Everyone who was brave enough to try the remedy recovered. At spring thaw, the company stood at eighty-five men.

Meanwhile, Cartier and Donnacona continued to play a game of cat and mouse, testing and tricking each other as to their strength. At one point, Cartier became convinced that Donnacona had amassed a force of allies to crush the weakened French. He had indeed brought back reinforcements, but they were political reinforcements. Donnacona faced challenges to his leadership from his own people, and he suggested that Cartier intervene on his behalf. To prove his worth as an ally, Donnacona spun out further tales of the wealth of the Saguenay, even claiming to have been there himself. If these accounts were intended to win Cartier's support and secure his position in Canada, the plan backfired. Cartier decided instead to seize Donnacona and carry him back to France to tell his wondrous stories. That spring, following yet another cross-raising ceremony, Cartier abducted ten Stadaconans, including Donnacona, Taignoagny, and Domagaya, and whisked them to

Europe despite the wailing and crying of the victims and their families. Arriving at Saint-Malo in mid-July 1536, Cartier had lost twenty-five Frenchmen but gained ten Native curiosities to entertain France's social circles. Taignoagny and Domagaya quickly turned to mischief, as Cartier had no doubt expected of them. Donnacona visited the court of François I where he converted to Christianity, received an annual pension, and spent four glorious years spreading the lore of the Kingdom of the Saguenay. One hopes that Cartier thanked him, for Donnacona's tales of gold and diamonds must have helped to deflect the failure of his mission. He had returned from Canada with nothing but the word of his former host to buttress his claims that the Canadian adventure would produce anything of value.

The Third Voyage, 1541-42

By the time Cartier began preparations for another voyage across the Atlantic, all but one of the Stadaconans in France had died. What happened to the last survivor, a young girl, no one knows. Donnacona, at least, was given a Christian burial, but Cartier never fulfilled his promise to return the Stadaconans home "within ten or twelve moons" of their capture.¹⁷ Indeed, as he embarked upon his return trip, Cartier was not in much of a position to promise anything. François I had determined to send a third expedition; Donnacona's well-spun tales had seen to that. But a fresh war with Spain intervened, ending with the Treaty of Nice in 1538. In the meantime, Cartier did very well for himself, living in his Saint-Malo house or at his country cottage in Limoilou. He may also have engaged in some privateering or have played a minor role in an Irish rebellion.¹⁸ Eventually, in October 1540, he secured another commission to return to "Canada and Hochelaga."¹⁹ However, the king intended to exploit the Saguenay from a permanent colony on the banks of the St. Lawrence, an effort that required more than a simple sea captain. Admittedly, Cartier was appointed captain-general of the expedition in the fall of 1540, but shortly thereafter, he was subjected to the command of another – Jean-François de La Rocque, sieur de Roberval, appointed by commission in January 1541 as "lieutenant-general, chief, commander, captain of the said enterprise."²⁰ Approximately ten years younger than Cartier, Roberval was a soldier and a courtier. Although he was a Protestant, the king gave him complete authority over the new lands and every Frenchman, Catholic or Protestant, who went there.

Jacques Cartier does not seem to have suffered this humiliation well, but he soldiered on under his king's orders. The king emptied his prisons of both men and women to stock the colony, and Roberval and Cartier recruited a few nobleman volunteers. (No doubt this eased Spanish and Portuguese concerns. A Spanish spy in Saint-Malo took a very dim view of the potential success of the venture.)²¹ On 23 May 1541, the fleet of five vessels, led by

Cartier as Roberval was not yet ready to depart, set sail for Canada. Again they had a rough crossing, which, in hindsight, was not a good omen. The first ship reached Newfoundland after a month at sea; the others, which had become separated, trickled in one by one. Not until 23 August, three months after setting sail from Saint-Malo, did the fleet reach Stadacona. The inhabitants greeted the French with the usual joy and did not seem too put off by Cartier's explanation for the continued absence of the ten abductees. They were all living as lords in France, the captain-general lied, and did not wish to return home. Perhaps not trusting his hosts to believe him, Cartier continued upriver a few more miles to plant his settlement at the site of the modern suburb of Cap-Rouge. There he put his cast of colonists to work building a fortified settlement called Charlesbourg-Royal and a second small fort on the heights above it for extra protection.

With the work under way, Cartier left Charlesbourg-Royal on a second visit to Hochelaga. There, he explored the Lachine Rapids and learned that the route to Saguenay was blocked by yet another set of rapids much further upstream. His objective of learning the route accomplished, Cartier returned to Charlesbourg-Royal no nearer to the Saguenay riches than he had been seven years earlier. To make matters worse, he discovered that relations with Stadacona had taken a foul turn. The Natives no longer made friendly visits to the French settlement, and the colonists expected a sinister plot. The surviving narrative of the voyage ends at this point, but some of that harsh winter's tale can be pieced together from fragments of gossip told in the ports of France. The Stadaconans attacked the French, probably during the traditional Iroquoian war season of November, killing as many as thirty-five colonists.²² Scurvy broke out, as expected, but was quickly cured. It was a miserable season. Roberval never appeared and Cartier, convinced that he lacked the manpower to remain, broke camp in June 1542 and set sail for France. He carried off all he could (including eleven barrels of "gold," seven barrels of "silver," and a basket of "precious stones"), leaving behind the empty hulk of Charlesbourg-Royal.

However, for Cartier and the colonists, the ordeal had not ended. Reaching St. John's Harbour, Newfoundland, at the end of June, they discovered that Roberval had not been lost at sea. He met them there with three ships full of reinforcements, nearly four hundred men in all. He had taken the better part of a year to set off after Cartier left, biding his time with a bit of piracy and profiteering in the English Channel. He had left France only in April 1542, piloted by Jean Alfonse. He had reached Newfoundland just as Cartier and his advance party were breaking camp and was in no mood to turn back, as Cartier advised. As Cartier's legal commander, he ordered a return to Canada, but that night, Cartier and his vessels disobeyed the order, stealing away under cover of darkness. No doubt the urging of the remaining colonists weighed on this decision; it is unlikely that any relished the thought of

another winter in Canada, especially after a return to France had been promised. Roberval linked Cartier's decision with a desire to cash in on his New World diamonds. In any event, Cartier's reputation at home remained unsullied. François I agreed to pay any outstanding debts and consulted Cartier on naval matters. He was never elevated to the nobility, but the king did make a present of the *Grande Hermine* and the *Émerillon* for his pilot. The silver, gold, and diamonds turned out to be worthless. Despite this failure, and his insubordination, Cartier returned to find respect and some wealth. He appears to have spent the rest of his days at Limoilou, his estate. He continued to appear at baptisms and as a court witness in Saint-Malo until his death in 1557.

Cartier never returned to Canada, but Roberval carried on. His story, although peripheral to that of the development of Jacques Cartier as a national hero, completes the tale. Alfonse piloted the fleet up the St. Lawrence toward Stadacona. However, along the way, one of the saddest love stories never to become a major motion picture unfolded. A cousin of Roberval's, a young woman named Marguerite de La Rocque de Roberval, had taken a lover from among the colonists. Roberval's Calvinist morals were outraged, and he marooned the poor woman, along with her maid, on an island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence with a few provisions and two arquebuses. As the ships sailed away, Marguerite's young lover leaped overboard and swam for the island to join his beloved. At first, the little group managed well enough. The young man built a cabin and the three survived on fish and fowl. But that winter, things took a turn for the worse. The man died and, unable to dig a grave in the frozen earth, Marguerite guarded his body from the wild animals until spring. No sooner had she laid him to rest than her child was born. It, too, died. The following winter, the maid died and poor Marguerite was left alone. Amazingly, she survived. Defending herself against bears and impending insanity, she persevered until the spring of 1544 when a passing fishing vessel discovered her and brought her home to France. André Thevet recorded the story in his *Cosmographie universelle* of 1575, but it was also cleaned up and transformed into a respectable fable about fidelity and devotion to God by Marguerite de Navarre, sister of François I, in *nouvelle* 67 of *The Heptameron*.²³

Roberval, meanwhile, had continued to Cartier's camp and rebuilt a settlement on the heights of Cap-Rouge, which he called France-Roy.²⁴ Winter set in, cruel and cold as always. About fifty settlers died of scurvy; the food stores were stretched thin. Roberval maintained strict discipline, clapping people in irons and flogging for transgressions. But at least the Stadaconans did not attack. France-Roy was far better fortified than Charlesbourg-Royal. In the spring, the company made a renewed effort to reach the riches of the Saguenay through the two known routes. Roberval travelled up the St. Lawrence and dispatched Jean Alfonse to the Saguenay River. Neither attempt

proved fruitful, and, some time in the summer, Roberval decided to return to France. With that, the excursions of the Valois French into Canada came to an end. The dream of New World riches to rival Spanish wealth also died.

Discovery, Invention, Common Sense

Cartier helped initiate the “Age of Discovery” that propelled European interlopers around the globe in search of riches, profit, and commercial and religious expansion. Few European explorers “discovered” much of anything, if we take that word as referring to the first human to set foot on a given territory. It is estimated that, at the time of European contact, some 90 million people lived in North and South America combined. About 10 million lived in what is today the continental United States and Canada. Evidence suggests that these peoples first began migrating into the western hemisphere between 50,000 and 30,000 BC, or possibly earlier. Archaeological evidence also indicates that the first migrants reached the St. Lawrence valley by about 9,000 BC.²⁵ Nonetheless, from the European perspective, such lands and peoples were unknown. The admittedly Eurocentric title of “discoverer” is thus a relative description of the human encounters that constituted the first contacts between European and American peoples.

Of course, discovery is as much a political act as a geographical one. Originally, the word had a legal sense of “making known” certain facts, a sense that is still used in criminal law. In this sense, it implies not the first to know but the act of making knowledge public.²⁶ In the nineteenth century, the term began to be applied to geographical discoveries in a manner that suggested finding lands hitherto uninhabited. In this modern guise, the notion of discovery is more difficult to reconcile with Cartier’s accomplishments. He was not the first European, or even the first Frenchman, to visit the shores of northern North America. Nor was he likely to have been the first into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Perhaps, then, his claim to the discovery of Canada rests on his reconnoitring of the coasts of Prince Edward Island and Canada’s founding provinces New Brunswick and Quebec. And yet, some scholars express nagging doubts about even this “discovery.” Had Cartier been first, one would then need to explain why the Mi’kmaq and Stadaconans already seemed to know how to deal with Europeans, holding up furs to show they had things of value for trade. Perhaps, then, Cartier was the discoverer of Canada not in 1534 but in 1535 when he sailed up the St. Lawrence to the land originally known as “Canada.” Yet doubts arise here as well. Some scholars, such as the nineteenth-century American Francis Parkman, have made claims for a French discovery of the St. Lawrence by 1506.²⁷ And there is some evidence to suggest Portuguese penetration of the Gulf of St. Lawrence before 1534 by João Alvarez Fagundes, Miguel and Gaspar Corte Real, or even their father twenty years before Columbus sailed. Portuguese tradition holds that the Corte Real brothers reached the “River of Canada” some thirty

years before Cartier. Certainly, Gaspar Corte Real reached Newfoundland in 1500; his brother, Miguel, followed suit in 1501. The following year, Miguel disappeared while searching for his missing brother, and, though the hypothesis is unlikely, both may have been wrecked in the St. Lawrence River. At the very least, Henry Percival Biggar established that Portugal attempted to set up a small colony in Newfoundland around 1520.²⁸ Indeed, historians still know surprisingly little about the navigations of sixteenth-century Europeans. Some historians of Portuguese exploration have even suggested that their sailors, not the Genoese Columbus and his crew of Spaniards, discovered the Americas in a series of secret voyages. The Portuguese clearly reached the New World early, but any documentation of the secret voyages, if ever kept, was apparently lost in the catastrophic Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Although it is unlikely, Basque whalers and fishers may have been in the St. Lawrence before the arrival of Columbus, but any such voyages were not recorded in Europe's courts.²⁹ Given current historical sources, it is not possible to establish conclusively who first landed in Canada or the New World. The question descends from evidential shortcomings to epistemological labyrinths and semantic squabbles. In light of the political baggage hung on the debate, it is best simply to acknowledge what is problematic about the word "discoverer."

Nevertheless, Cartier has long been credited with the discovery of Canada. Today, this claim is difficult to reconcile with John Cabot's probable Newfoundland landfall at about the time Cartier was born. Yet, even if we assume that Cabot did disembark in Newfoundland (a point that has been hotly contested by partisans of a Cape Breton Island landing), he did not actually "discover Canada" until 1949. Newfoundland's history, though closely tied to that of mainland Canada, is nonetheless that of an independent dominion in the British Empire. Newfoundland joined the Canadian Confederation in 1949 (by the slimmest of margins in a referendum), so Cabot became the discoverer of Canada some 450 years after his death. This perhaps more semantic aspect of the question began to arise only in the 1890s and is treated in greater detail in Chapter 5. Nevertheless, semantics and antiquarian trivia have the potential to divert attention from the greater question: what did Cartier discover?

Doubtless, in 1534, Jacques Cartier was not the first European to reach the coast of what would become Canada. It has even been suggested that Cartier himself first saw Canadian shores ten years earlier. The twentieth-century historian Gustave Lanctôt argued that Cartier learned of North America by accompanying Verrazano in the *Dauphin* in 1524 and again in 1528.³⁰ According to Lanctôt, Cartier had probably been to Brazil. Verrazano's second voyage reached Brazil in 1528 and returned to France in March 1529, although Verrazano himself did not survive it, having been eaten by cannibals, probably at Guadeloupe.³¹ But Cartier compared North American

maize to Brazilian millet corn and likely spoke Portuguese. Although the proper place to discuss Lanctôt's assertions is in Chapter 7, the basis of his claim should be clarified. Lanctôt's hypothesis rests on Cartier's absence from Malouin birth registers and marriage certificates during the very dates that Verrazano was at sea, as well as his reading of the letters of the seventeenth-century Jesuit Père Pierre Biard, who wrote in 1614 that "Canada ... was discovered principally by Jacques Cartier in 1524, and then in a second voyage ten years afterwards in 1534."³² However, Biard wrote his account from memory, which explains why he dated Verrazano's voyage to 1523 and gave 1524 for Cartier's first voyage on only two of five occasions.³³ Moreover, Cartier was frequently absent from the Malouin registers during the seafaring months, a fact which reflected the nature of his profession. He may have been to Brazil, and he appeared to know Newfoundland well, but Lanctôt's evidence is insufficient to provide anything more than conjecture.³⁴

None of this should diminish Cartier's rightful place in Canadian history. Whether or not he was the first European to visit Canadian lands, he was the first to capitalize on the potential for further exploration offered by the Gulf of St. Lawrence. And he was certainly the first to exploit the potential of the great axis of penetration into the continental interior that the St. Lawrence River affords. Moreover, his exploration upriver as far as the Island of Montreal added significantly to European geographical knowledge. Cartier blazed a trail followed by European explorers and settlers for centuries, and his river dominated Canadian commercial history from his day to the twentieth century. Despite its failure, Cartier's little colony at Charlesbourg-Royal was the first substantially documented European attempt to settle in northern North America. He initiated French contact with and claims on this part of the New World. And although Cartier's gold and diamonds proved worthless, subsequent explorers, such as Champlain, who followed in his footsteps found other wealth in the land. In this sense, Jacques Cartier discovered Canada. Canada, as we know it today, might not have existed without the leadership of an intrepid Breton mariner in the service of the king of France.

Jacques Cartier, then, is clearly a recovered historical hero. Forgotten to all but a few erudite scholars for over two hundred years, he was resurrected and reinvented during the nineteenth century. The traditions that surround Cartier, in this light, must be seen as "invented." The English historian Eric Hobsbawm has developed the notion of "invented tradition" as a means to understand the sudden appearance of appeals to the past in justification of nationalism and national policies. Following the 1983 publication of his path-breaking collection of essays under the title *The Invention of Tradition*, historians latched onto the concept as a key explanatory theme. Invented traditions have since been flushed out of their hiding places in popular culture and exposed as bourgeois constructions. For Hobsbawm, as for his legion of

followers, such traditions are novel responses to novel situations, which take the form of reference to the past. An invented tradition is one whose origins can be dated in a relatively short period of time and whose inventors can be identified by historians.³⁵ However, as many recent critics have pointed out, the category of *invented* traditions implicitly sets up a paradigm of invented versus authentic traditions. Hobsbawm never investigated the opposite pole; nor did he seem to have contemplated that some national traditions may well have spontaneously sprung from the authentic sentiments of a people. All traditions are invented at some point, and invented traditions evolve to suit the needs of those who keep them. To offer an invented tradition, or an invented historical hero, as a static reflection of a narrow class interest, as a reading of Hobsbawm suggests, is to deny both a historicity of past cultures and an agency for present people. This is not to imply that Hobsbawm's model is useless or that such distinctions are unimportant. However, the exaltation of a hero such as Jacques Cartier, although he was invented, opens one route to an understanding of changing national sentiments. And it presents a case for the authenticity and persistency of many brands of nationalism, even in Canada's brief history.

Perhaps a more constructive approach to the perseverance of such inventions would examine not simply their moment of creation and dispersal but the roots of their reception by ordinary people. Ideas and beliefs may have been invented, but dating their genesis offers little insight into their influence in a culture. People experience invented traditions as authentic; this simple fact is more important in understanding human history than is knowing that the traditions are invented. What is crucial in explaining the actions of individuals and groups is understanding what they believed to be true. Many people argue that Columbus was motivated by a desire to disprove a common myth that the world was flat. For Jeffrey Russell, this claim reveals much more about nineteenth-century Americans than it does about fifteenth-century Europeans, who did not insist on a flat earth.³⁶ Nineteenth-century Americans genuinely believed that earlier peoples clung superstitiously to the idea of a flat earth. Indeed, this tradition became a matter of common sense despite being incorrect. In part, this common sense belief underlined a religious prejudice in which Protestantism – the faith of American patricians – was superior to the Catholicism of much of Europe (and many recent immigrants to America). Nevertheless, common sense traditions are experienced as, and believed to be, authentic or real; as such, they help guide people's perceptions of the world around them. This study aims to uncover how certain "facts" about the past are discovered and presented to the public, and how they enter into common sense knowledge.

Common sense is unlike other forms of human knowledge. Following Antonio Gramsci, some scholars represent it as the ability of the dominant

class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as natural. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the population, it becomes part of what is generally called “common sense” so that the philosophy, culture, and morality of a particular elite come to appear as the natural order of things. Such scholars, following Gramsci, stress that this process involves the active consent of the subordinate.³⁷ Common sense is the way through which a subordinate class lives its subordination. But, for the common sense of national identity, it is still more subtle. Here, common sense is akin to what Michael Billig has termed “banal nationalism.” Billig argues that “our” nationalism is forgotten as a sort of common sense world view, whereas that of others – in the Balkans, for instance – is portrayed as dangerously irrational.³⁸ Yet nationalism, even when explicitly and openly conceived as such, involves a necessary consensus on the meaning of key symbols and an unspoken agreement about natural laws of human societies. Common sense, then, is an unsystematized set of values that affects all classes, although it may advantage some. Yet, it is not rigid and immobile. It is continually transforming itself. The creation of new aspects of common sense knowledge, such as the “facts” of Cartier’s “discovery of Canada” requires a system of ideas to permeate throughout society. An entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, and morality that has the effect of supporting specific relationships of power and identity is wrapped up in the elevation, celebration, and veneration of historical heroes. The story of Jacques Cartier’s rise to the status of historical hero, of the transformation of the political meaning of his image across time, and of the audiences to which his life was presented is one that illustrates how diverse elements of societies compete to enshrine common sense, a specific way of looking at the world that is accepted as the natural order.