

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

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 242 pp.

**Jean-François Lozier**

Canadian Museum of History

The *Relations des Jésuites*, or *Jesuit Relations*, constitute a monumental cornerstone of early Canadian history. Between 1632 and 1673, this yearly chronicle was penned by the missionaries of the Society of Jesus working in New France and printed in Paris. Its readership, spanning centuries, has been broad indeed. Through the *Relations*, historians are allowed a precious glimpse at the encounter between French and Aboriginal peoples. Or, at any rate, they are offered the opportunity to grapple with the ways in which this intercultural encounter was framed in writing.

Micah True considers what he terms “Jesuit mission ethnography” (3) from the literary angle. His *Masters and Students* offers a close analysis, informed by anthropological theory, of the *Jesuit Relations*’ description of Aboriginal customs, practices, and beliefs. While the book does not go so far as to discount altogether the value of the *Relations* as an ethnohistorical source, the author takes historians gently to task for not being sufficiently mindful of how this literary corpus operates as text. His own objective is to understand the ways in which the missionaries’ approach shaped their observations and their description of reality.

The two chapters that follow the introduction situate the emergence of the *Relations* in the context of a struggle for dominance in New France. Here the author argues that Jesuits’ accounts of their own efforts to learn Aboriginal languages were not merely descriptions of the realities of the field, insofar as these descriptions also served to assert the Jesuits’ place within the colonial project and to position their work favourably against that of their Récollet competitors. By presenting themselves as students, the Jesuits deflected criticisms that might be levelled against them

for failing to meet with immediate success at the same time as they broadcast their optimism for the future. Similarly, Jesuits' characterization of Aboriginal languages as simultaneously "poor" and "rich" (55) excused their slow progress, without going so far as to suggest that these languages were unsuitable to the communication of Christianity, which would have undermined the validity of their efforts.

The following two chapters turn to descriptions of specific Aboriginal practices and beliefs. Chapter 4 argues that missionary retellings of Iroquoian and Algonquian ritual violence—tortured executions and cannibalism—were reminiscent of the morality plays popular in Europe at the time. Gruesome scenes were deployed in writing in a way that affirmed that Aboriginal peoples were capable of conversion to Christianity and not only to document actual behaviour. In chapter 5, the author considers missionary descriptions of Montagnais beliefs about creation. In relating stories about the origins of humankind and its surroundings to their French readers, the missionaries were less preoccupied with recording non-Christian narratives and world views than they were with discrediting them or reconciling them with Biblical accounts of creation. The *Relations*' message was that the men of the Society of Jesus and, by extension, Catholic Europe, "already knew all they needed to know about the origin of the Amerindians, and had more to teach on the subject than to learn" (24).

Chapter 6 takes a step back and proposes a "decentred reading" (140) of the Jesuits' writings. The author makes the case that the *Relations* were not the product of a simple flow of information ending in Europe, as is generally assumed, but that they were instead the product of a truly bidirectional circulation of information. Insofar as the published *Relations* were sent back to New France, the Parisian editors' revisions contributed to shaping missionary practice and the writing of subsequent volumes.

Throughout the book, True exhibits a thematic playfulness of the sort that historians, ever fearful of committing the deadly sin of anachronism, tend to shy away from. He opens with an epigraph from Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1998), a science fiction novel set in the middle of the twenty-first century about a Jesuit mission to a newly discovered planet. True later brings his readers along detours through the modern revitalization of the Huron-Wendat language at Wendake, near Quebec City; depictions of torture in Bruce Beresford's film *Black Robe* (1991); and, most tenuously, through the Creation Museum, in Petersburg, Kentucky. Jesuit mission ethnography in seventeenth-century New France, he stresses, can be illuminated by both scholarly writings and popular culture, and has had an enduring influence on both.

Historians who read *Masters and Students* will no doubt feel unfairly caricatured from time to time, for example, when the author states that scenes of violence in the *Relations* are "often taken by modern scholars as an argument for the essential animality of some Amerindians—particularly the Iroquois" (23). (This treatment may have been common fifty years ago, but surely one would be hard-pressed to find any such claims among serious scholars in recent decades). As the author acknowledges in the book's introduction, historians have long recognized that the *Relations* are

*representations*, sources which must be decoded in light of the circumstances of their production. *Masters and Students* thus brings additional nuances to our understanding of this body of work, rather than a wholesale revolution. This is not to say that the nuances are unwelcome. Indeed, we should hope that scholars will heed this invitation for an ever more mindful reading and use of the *Jesuit Relations*.