

A Different History of America

About: Gilles Havard, *L'Amérique fantôme. Les aventuriers francophones du Nouveau Monde*, Flammarion

By Sébastien Jahan

For four centuries before the west was won, trappers crisscrossed North America. These marginal figures, who often lived with Native Americans, remind us of a lost world that still haunts the continent.

Gilles Havard's book builds on his previous volume, the remarkable *Histoire des coureurs de bois* (A History of the Fur Traders), published in 2016,¹ which explores the world of the fur trade in northern American before the west was conquered. Taking a new look at a historiography that has tended to see the *coureurs des bois* (i.e., fur traders) as adventurers motivated either by a taste for freedom or the quest for profit, Havard proposed a fascinating social and cultural analysis of this atypical milieu, while examining in original ways the question of power in imperial contexts through his study of the ability of authorities to shape the conduct of the most unstable fringes of the European population. The dense and highly successful character of this impressive tome did not portend that the author would return to terrain that had already yielded such valuable fruit.

¹ Gilles Havard, *Histoire des coureurs de bois. Amérique du Nord, 1600-1840*, Paris, Les Indes Savantes, 2016.

Life traces

Havard's new book takes the form of a collection of ten "individual trajectories"—French or French-speaking men who shared an adventurous disposition, in the sense that they chose, often at their own peril, to spend part of their lives in Native American territory. We find, concentrated into biographical narratives, figures already encountered in Havard's last book, such as Radisson, Nicolas Perrot, Truteau, Charbonneau, Provost, and Beauchamp. While most of the travelers considered here had a connection to the fur trade, they may also have become known for other reasons, such as mastery of indigenous languages (like Gambie and Brûlé) or expeditions of "discovery" (such as the La Vérendrye brothers, the first Europeans to reach the Rocky Mountains).

This original standpoint allows Havard to offer the reader a story that is easily accessible, lively, enjoyable, and chock full of anecdotes, without relinquishing any of the interpretive skills for which he is known. Indeed, each of these biographies is situated at the intersection of a stimulating interplay of perspectives, which makes it possible simultaneously to access details that are unavailable to macroscopic analysis (like the meticulous attempt to identify La Vérendrye's two mysterious companions) and to situate these singular itineraries in relation to the norms of the (European, Colonial, and Native American) societies in which they unfolded. Ultimately, this is not that different from the "connected micro-history" that Romain Bertrand has experimented with in other contexts.² The approach is also an homage, in its own way, to the pioneering work of Carlo Ginzburg and other Italian theorists of *microstoria*, when they studied the social world by collecting the traces and "clues" left along seemingly uneventful life paths.

One must, of course, raise the question of sources. If some of these men achieved a degree of notoriety, it was first and foremost because they could write (Radisson, Perrot, Truteau, La Vérendrye) and knew how to make themselves characters in their own travel accounts. Others, who were illiterate, are known only through the testimony of people whose paths they crossed: the hazy picture we have of someone like Etienne Brûlé is largely due to the generally malicious words of Champlain or the missionary Gabriel Sagard. As for the highly colorful figure of Toussaint Charbonneau, he owes his place in American collective memory to his role in the well-

² Romain Bertrand, *Le long remords de la Conquête. Manille-Mexico-Madrid: l'affaire Diego de Avila (1577-1580)*, Paris, Seuil, 2015.

known Lewis and Clark expedition, which crossed the continent from east to west (1804-1806). A modest place, that said, since the French Canadian's young Shoshone wife, Sakakawea (or Sacagawea), steals the spotlight due to her intimate knowledge of the milieus and cultures they journeyed through. If Charbonneau has received the attention of American historians, it is primarily because of his alleged immorality, cowardice, and brutality, which make it possible, by way of contrast, to enhance the virtues of English explorers and pioneers.

The gaps between these biographical snippets, which the sources lay bare, demand to be filled. The life (as well as the death) of Etienne Brûlé among the Hurons is full of gray areas, which Havard manages to illuminate just as Alain Corbin reconstructed the environment of the Norman clogmaker Pinagot,³ by describing what he could have done or experienced, given what we know about Huron customs. Other posthumous fortunes seem even more precarious, such as Pierre Gambie, a rare figure from sixteenth-century France with a verifiable identity, who was assassinated by Timucua Indians in Florida in 1565 in ambiguous circumstances, or Pierre Beauchamp, a North Dakota trapper whose life and close relationship with Native Americans is known to us thanks to a Breton colonel in the American army, one Régis Trobriand, who crossed his path in 1867.

Ghosts of the “middle ground”

One could, of course, question the need to rehabilitate, somewhat repetitively, a French America that finds itself in “memorial disgrace”—an endeavor that risks awakening nostalgic passion for a French colonial venture that is too frequently caricatured as more “peaceful” and “respectful” than others (an interpretation, it is worth emphasizing, that Havard has never encouraged). Even so, it is hard not to agree with the author when he pleads for a “new genealogy of American history” (p. 503), aimed at readers on the other side of the Atlantic for whom, we hope, this book will soon be translated. In the “sounds familiar” department, it is a shame that the originality of Havard's analyses—for instance, when he deals with issues of gender (the travelers' ideal of virility, perceptions of Native American women, notably their modesty and sexuality)—loses much of its spice when one realizes that one has already

³ Alain Corbin, *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot, sur les traces d'un inconnu, 1798-1876*, Paris, Flammarion, 1998.

encountered them in earlier books. Yet other interrogations emerge. One finds, for example, stimulating reflection on “social confines” (p. 492) and what is commonly referred to as marginality. These men are marginal from the standpoint of the dominant experience of French settlers in America, the “normal” (and most highly valued) trajectory being that of farmer. Yet, as Havard notes, they would not have enjoyed such “historical significance” (p. 494) if they had not occurred in peripheral spaces. It was precisely because they were cultural go-betweens, with one foot in each world and each identity, and because they were endowed with unique know-how, that they became key actors in the imperial enterprise. Inverting an often disparaging image, the sociological paradox of the fur trader, as demonstrated by this collection of case studies, is that these travelers, by seeking freedom and invisibility in Native American spaces, could acquire a kind of social recognition from their compatriots. Conversely, the book also offers some thoughts about the place of these bicultural French people in Native American classifications, which was also a source of tensions in that integration, which is so prized by kinship networks, goes hand-in-hand with constraining social obligations (notably prodigality), which must be respected lest one lose protection and consideration.

L'Amérique fantôme thus consists of a complex blend of social atoms, including not only the ten protagonists of Havard's narrative, but also and especially a host of often anonymous characters that they meet in the course of their journeys. Some show up unexpectedly, out of nowhere, like two members of the La Vérendrye expedition whose names are revealed to posterity, engraved on a slab of lead that, in February 1913, was fortuitously dug up in Fort Pierre, South Dakota. But perhaps the true ghosts are the Native Americans—the friends, partners, informants, enemies, wives, and concubines of these white prairie runners, without mentioning their mixed and Indianized offspring. If ethnonyms—the collective names of Native American nations—have reached us and occupy a non-negligible place in our imagination, the individual names of these indigenous people remain for the most part unknown, and the lives that accompany them obstinately elude any possible biographer. Native Americans, at the time of Havard's characters, were as of yet anything but ghostly: they were made of flesh and blood, reigning as masters of the prairie. They lived in an unsettled period (from the 1560s to the 1840s), when the continent's history still hung in the balance: in this broad “middle ground,”⁴ indigenous cultures and the Europeans cohabited, and, as Havard explains, making his own a remark by Claude Lévi-Strauss,

⁴ *Le Middle-Ground*, brilliantly described by Richard White in *Le Middle-Ground. Indiens, empires et républiques dans la région des Grands Lacs, 1650-1815*, Toulouse, Anacharsis, 2012.

“the fate of the former had yet to be permanently sealed” (p. 12). Today, their ghosts haunt us more than ever, at a moment when we have become conscious of all that humanity lost in the great ethnocidal and ecocidal cataclysm, engulfing once and for all indigenous societies and their way of being in the world.

Gilles Havard, *L'Amérique fantôme. Les aventuriers francophones du Nouveau Monde* (Ghost America : Francophone Adventurers in the New World) Paris, Flammarion, 2019, 654 p., 26 €.

Published in laviedesidees.fr, 22 January 2020.
Translated from the French by Michael Behrent.
Published in booksandideas.net, 2 March 2020.