

Montagnais Indians on Their First Encounter with the French, Early 1500s

THE MONTAGNAIS LIVED NORTH OF THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER, on Canada's Atlantic coast. They met Jacques Cartier on his first voyage, in August 1534, as he was heading for home. This is an account of their first meeting with the French, probably French fishermen who came even earlier than Cartier. It was written down in 1633 by a French missionary who got it from a Montagnais man whose grandmother had told it to him.

Pierre Pastedechouan reported to us that his grandmother took pleasure describing the Indians' astonishment when they saw the first French ship arrive. They thought it must be a moving island. They didn't know what to make of the big sails that made it move. Their surprise redoubled when they saw all the men on deck. The women started getting the houses ready, which is what they customarily do when new guests arrive, and four Indian canoes risked going out to meet the ship. They invited the Frenchmen to come to the cabins they had prepared for them, but they could not understand each other. The Frenchmen gave them a barrel of hardtack, but when they took it home and tried it, they didn't like it and threw it into the water.

In other words, theirs was the same astonishment that the king of Calcutta had felt before that when he saw the first European ships approach his shores. He sent messengers to find out who these people were whom the large wood house had brought, and the messengers reported to their master that the people were amazing, frightful men who dressed in iron, ate bones, and drank blood. (They had seen them wearing their cuirasses,¹ eating hardtack, and drinking wine.)

Our Indians said that the French drank blood and ate wood, also referring to wine and hardtack. Since they couldn't understand what nation the French came from, they gave them a name which has referred to the French ever since: *Ouemichtigouchiou*, that is, a man who works with wood, or one who is in a canoe or boat made of wood. They saw that our ship was made of wood, whereas their little canoes are only made of bark.

Translated by John DuVal from Paul le Jeune, "Relation de ce qui c'est passé en la Nouvelle France en l'année 1633, envoyée au R. P. Barth. Jacquinet, Provincial de la Compagnie de Jesus en la province de France," in *Relations des Jésuites, contenant ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans les missions des pères de la compagnie de Jésus dans la Nouvelle-France* (Québec, 1858), 1 (1633 section): 9.

Discussion Questions

1. According to this story, what did the Montagnais think of the French?
2. Enumerate the narrative links between the Montagnais Indians who first met Frenchmen and you, the present reader (in other words, who told this story to whom)? How do these links affect the reliability of the narrative as you receive it?
3. Do you think Pierre Pastedechouan's grandmother was making fun of the French? Of her own ancestors?
4. Is this a better source for sixteenth-century native perspectives than Jacques Cartier's account?

Notes

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**INTERPRETING A
CONTINENT**

Voices from Colonial America

Edited by
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and
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