

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

Excerpts from the biography of Samuel de Champlain by Marcel Trudel

REFERENCES

Print: Trudel, Marcel. "Champlain, Samuel de." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. I. University of Toronto Press. First published 1966. Revised 1979.

Online: Trudel, Marcel. "Champlain, Samuel de." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. I. University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/champlain_samuel_de_1E.html.

N.B. When a name appears in **small capitals** in the biography/biography excerpts, that indicates that the person also has a biography in Volume I of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*/*Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*.

When a name has an **asterisk (*)** behind it, that indicates that the person has a biography in another volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*/*Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*.

BASIC FACTS

(to be distributed to all students)

CHAMPLAIN, SAMUEL DE, draftsman, geographer, explorer, founder of Quebec in 1608, lieutenant to Lieutenant-General Pierre **DU GUA** de Monts 1608–12, to Lieutenant-General Bourbon de Soissons in 1612, to Viceroy Bourbon de Condé 1612–20, to Viceroy de Montmorency 1620–25, to Viceroy de Ventadour 1625–27; commandant at Quebec in 1627 and 1628, between de Ventadour's resignation and the creation of the *Compagnie des Cent-Associés*; commander in New France "in the absence of my Lord the Cardinal de Richelieu" 1629–35; member of the *Compagnie des Cent-Associés*; probably b. at Brouage, in Saintonge (Charente-Maritime); d. 25 Dec. 1635 at Quebec.

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

EXCERPT 1: EARLY LIFE

... Nothing is known of the date of Champlain's birth or of his baptism; he may have been born c. 1570, perhaps in 1567, or later, c. 1580....

We do not know whether Champlain was baptized a Roman Catholic or a Protestant; his biblical first name, which in Saintonge was seldom given except in Protestant families, and the fact that Brouage was then a Huguenot town, make it probable that Champlain was born a Protestant.... In any case, when he began his Canadian career in 1603 Champlain was a Catholic; this is proved by the doctrine he expounded at that time to the Tadoussac Indians.

According to his marriage contract, Champlain was the son "of the late Anthoine de Complain, in his lifetime Captain in the Navy, and of Dame Margueritte Le Roy." We know nothing further about his parents....

We have little reliable information about Champlain's pre-Canadian career. He may have practised an art necessary for a geographer, that of painter or draftsman....

He must have begun his sailing early, since he informed the queen in 1613 that the art of navigation had attracted him from his "tender youth." ...

Champlain wrote on two occasions that he had travelled in the West Indies; there is no good reason why one should reject this declaration by a man near the end of his career....

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

EXCERPT 2: VOYAGE OF 1603–1604

... On 15 March 1603, as a private passenger, Champlain went on board the *Bonne-Renommée* at Honfleur. He had no precise function; he was not yet a naval captain.... He sailed in 1603 as a mere observer, and his presence on this voyage would have passed unnoticed had he not published his account; he is, moreover, the only one to give us an account of this voyage.

On 26 May, Gragé Du Pont's ships reached Tadoussac; there Champlain witnessed the "tabagies" (native feasts), during which the Algonkin women danced naked and the Algonkin men took part in races, for which presents were awarded. While the fur-trading was going on, from 26 May to 18 June, Champlain had time to study the natives' customs. He even gave them a course in religion. On 11 June, he went some 12 leagues up the Saguenay; he listened to descriptions of the whole Saguenay basin and its waterways, learned of the existence of a saltwater sea to the north, and without assuming, like all the travellers concerned, that this was the Asian Sea, he concluded with a confidence that surprises us: "It is some gulf of this our sea, which overflows in the north into the midst of the continent." In 1603, seven years before its discovery by the English, Champlain divined in some fashion the existence of Hudson Bay.

When the feasts and trading were over, Gragé, on 18 June, started to go up the St. Lawrence River, which Champlain was still calling, as in the time of **CARTIER**, the "rivière de Canada." Champlain went with him; he discovered nothing.... This 1603 journey did, however, furnish us with a more detailed and clearer description of the river than is to be found in Cartier's accounts.... He was no more fortunate than Cartier, being blocked by the rapids at Hochelaga (Montreal). By questioning the natives, he made an amazing reconstruction of the network of the Great Lakes (including Niagara Falls), with measurements that often corresponded to actual fact, but he allowed himself to be persuaded that the Asian Sea was not far away.

He returned to Tadoussac on 11 July, and re-embarked with François Gragé Du Pont for Gaspé, where he stayed from 15 to 19 July – days of respite which permitted him to obtain a general notion of the region; he heard about Acadia, where he hoped to find the route to Asia, and the mines that **SARCEL** de Prévert was looking for in that area. These two Acadian possibilities, the route to Asia and the mines, fascinated Champlain in 1603 more than the St. Lawrence....

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

EXCERPT 3: VOYAGES OF 1604–1608

... Champlain embarked once again in March 1604; he still had no official title, but the role he was to play and the completed tasks that he was to leave show that, without having the title, he did perform the duties of a geographer.

In early May 1604, the expedition stopped at Port-au-Mouton, on the east shore of Acadia....

Before the winter, Champlain busied himself with exploration. After looking again for mines in the Baie Française, on 2 September he went back along the coast, in order to seek the ideal site for a permanent abode. He entered the Penobscot River and tried to reach the Kennebec, but he could not get beyond Pemaquid. On this month-long trip he covered some 150 miles, and penetrated as much as 50 miles into the lands adjoining the Penobscot River. Although not the first European to visit this region, he has given us the first precise description of it. He returned somewhat disappointed with what he had seen.

The winter season spent at Sainte-Croix, 1604–5, was disastrous because of scurvy and the exceptional severity of the cold. In the spring, de Monts, having received fresh supplies from Gravé Du Pont, set out again in search of a more favourable district, and with Champlain, on 17 June 1605, took the route southwards once more. On 1 July they entered the Kennebec River and continued towards the south.... After a journey of about 400 miles, he returned to Sainte-Croix without finding the ideal site for a settlement. Gosnold and **WEYMOUTH** had preceded him at some points on this coast, but the geographer Champlain has left us a set of such precise maps that he deserves the title of first cartographer of New England.

While waiting for something better to turn up, de Monts transported his colony to Port-Royal; experience led him to adopt this time the closed quadrilateral dwelling, and they settled in with a certain degree of comfort. For his part Champlain fitted himself up a work-room among the trees, and built a sluice in order to stock his own trout; he took “a particular pleasure” in gardening. At Port-Royal Champlain’s role was still that of a mere observer....

The winter of 1606–7 was a most merry one: pleasant temperature, food and wine in abundance. Champlain added to the high spirits by founding the Order of Good Cheer, a sort of carefree order of chivalry, whose members had to take their turn in providing game for the table and maintaining a joyful humour. In May 1607 it was learned that the trading privilege had been revoked; de Monts gave orders to his colony to return to France....

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

EXCERPT 4: THE FOUNDING OF QUEBEC CITY

... The Acadian venture having been broken off, what was to become of Champlain? In 1603 he had influenced de Monts in the choice of Acadia rather than of the St. Lawrence; and he was the one, it seems, who was responsible for the return to the St. Lawrence in 1608. This time he received the first official function of his Canadian career; he became lieutenant to the Sieur de Monts. On 13 April 1608 he set out a third time for New France; he arrived on 3 June at Tadoussac, where he had not been for five years. It was in a bark, and not on board the *Don-de-Dieu*, that he went up the river to establish a habitation, on 3 July, at the “point of Quebec.” “I at once employed a part of our workmen,” he wrote, “in cutting them [the trees] down to make a site for our settlement, another part in sawing planks, another in digging the cellar and making ditches.” He had built, along with a storehouse for provisions, three main buildings; the whole was surrounded by moats 15 feet wide and by stockades of stakes. Quebec was beginning its history.

A few days later, Champlain escaped a plot led by the locksmith Jean **DUVAL**, who had been with him in Acadia. To try out the soil, Champlain turned his attention to sowing wheat and rye; he planted vines, and made a vegetable garden. Like the first winter season in Acadia, the one at Quebec was marked by a severe onset of scurvy; of the 25 winterers, 16 died, including the surgeon Bonnerme [*see DUVAL*]....

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

EXCERPT 5: ALLIANCES AND WARFARE

... Champlain received fresh supplies from Gravé Du Pont in the spring of 1609, and set out on 28 June to discover the country of the Iroquois; he entered the Rivière des Iroquois (Richelieu) where he had already been in 1603; from the Chambly Rapids, taking with him only two Frenchmen, he pushed upriver with some Algonkin, Huron, and Montagnais Indians, and reached a great lake to which he was to give his name.

On the evening of 29 July, at Ticonderoga (Crown Point, N.Y.), his party encountered the Iroquois, and the next day the battle began; as the two sides clashed, the allies opened their ranks, Champlain advanced, fired with his arquebus, and killed two enemy chiefs; a shot fired into the woods by a companion produced panic among the Iroquois. Champlain was taking part for the first time in military operations in New France: although he was not responsible for the long Franco-Iroquois conflict, since the French had contracted an offensive alliance before 1603, he consolidated the prestige of the French....

After his victory, Champlain left the command of Quebec to **PIERRE CHAUVIN DE LA PIERRE**, and returned to France with Gravé Du Pont.... After a false start and a month of illness, Champlain re-embarked with some artisans on 8 April 1610, and reappeared at Quebec 28 April, after an unusually rapid voyage.

The allies were awaiting Champlain, to start another expedition against the Iroquois. They had agreed upon a rendezvous at the mouth of the Richelieu; the Iroquois were already there, and well stockaded. Champlain led the attack, although wounded by an arrow which “split the tip of my ear and pierced my neck”; the assault was launched and the Iroquois fled. It was Champlain’s last triumph over this enemy. Following this combat, Champlain entrusted to the chief **IROQUET** a young man, Étienne **BRÛLÉ**, who wanted to learn the Algonkin language; as a hostage he accepted the Huron **SAVIGNON**, who wanted to see France....

...Champlain then decided to extend his exploration into the Huron country; with an Indian guide and four men (among them the Nicolas de **VIGNAU**, who in 1612 in Paris had boasted that he had seen Hudson Bay by going up the Ottawa River), Champlain set out on 27 May. He was the first European to give us a description of this “rivière des Outaouais” (Ottawa), which for two centuries was to be the main trade route to the Canadian west....

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

EXCERPT 6: POLITICAL CAREER AT QUEBEC TO 1629

... Without making any allusion to it in his writings, Champlain took an important step at the beginning of the winter; on 27 Dec. 1610, at about 40 years of age, he signed a marriage contract with a twelve-year-old girl, **HÉLÈNE BOULLÉ**. Because of the future bride's youthfulness, it was stipulated that the marriage would not be put into effect for two years. The betrothal took place two days later, and on 30 December the marriage was celebrated in the church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois in Paris. Of the promised dowry (6,000 *livres*), Champlain received 4,500 *livres* the day before the ceremony, which was a valuable contribution to his undertaking...

The autumn of 1612 had thus brought Champlain an important advancement. Since 1608, the year that marked his first access to an official position, he had been only the lieutenant to a lieutenant-general who possessed relatively little influence, the Sieur de Monts; in October 1612 he became the lieutenant of an important personage, the Comte de Soissons, who at that period, it is true, seems to have borne only the title of lieutenant-general; but the following November Champlain became lieutenant to a viceroy, the Prince de Condé. Moreover, he obtained the real powers of a governor, without however having either the title or the commission.

Shortly after, he added to his reputation by publishing his *Voyages* (an account that goes from 1604 to 1612)....

In February 1618, he attempted a major move by addressing two reports, one to the king and the other to the Chamber of Commerce, outlining his whole programme. He wrote to the king that by way of New France one could easily reach "the Kingdom of China and the East Indies, whence great riches could be drawn"; the customs duties that would be collected at Quebec on all goods coming from or proceeding to Asia "would surpass in value at least ten times all those levied in France"; the French would be masters of a country "nearly eighteen hundred leagues in length, watered by the fairest rivers in the world," and the Christian faith would be established among countless numbers of souls. To place New France on a solid footing, Champlain proposed that there be established at Quebec, in the valley of the St. Charles River, "a town almost as large as St. Denis..." ... To the country would be brought 15 Recollets, 300 families of 4 persons, and 300 soldiers; the king would send someone from his council to "establish and ordain fundamental laws of the State" and a free system of justice.

This programme of civilization was of a kind that would please the king. Champlain would interest the big speculators by enumerating the wealth that could be extracted from the

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

country; this “great and permanent trade” would comprise the following items: fisheries of cod, salmon, sturgeon, eel, and herring; whale-oil and whale-wattles; timber “of marvellous height”; gum, ashes, tar; dye roots, hemp; mines of silver, iron, and lead; coarse cloths, pelts, gems, vines, livestock; finally, profits to be obtained from the “short route to China,” via the St. Lawrence.... It is in the year 1618 that we find outlined for the first time a great colonizing policy.

The Chamber of Commerce was immediately convinced by it: on 9 Feb. 1618 it submitted to the king a request that Champlain be given the means to establish 300 families a year in New France, and that the partners be assured the monopoly of the trade in furs; on 12 March 1618 the king instructed the partners to assist Champlain “with things requisite and necessary” for the execution of the command that he had received, and to “carry on all work that he shall judge necessary for establishing the colonies that we wish to found in the said country.” ...

... On 7 May 1620, Louis XIII wrote to Champlain to enjoin him to maintain the country “in obedience to me, making the people who are there live as closely in conformity with the laws of my kingdom as you can.” From that moment Champlain was to devote himself exclusively to the administration of the country; he was to undertake no further great voyages of discovery; his career as an explorer had ended.

In this spring of 1620 Champlain set out again for New France, this time with his wife (aged c. 22 years), whose first ocean journey it was; unfortunately it was a “rough passage.” Arriving at Quebec in July, he had his commission read in public, and took possession of the country in the name of the viceroy de Montmorency. He undertook repairs: rain was coming into the Habitation and the storehouse was falling to pieces; despite the partners’ aversion, he had a start made on Fort Saint-Louis, on the south cliff of the Cap aux Diamants. The construction lasted all autumn and all winter....

It was in 1627 ... that Cardinal Richelieu ... took New France under his immediate supervision. He established the Compagnie des Cent-Associés, of which Champlain at once became a member. This new régime brought advancement to Champlain; since 1612 he had been lieutenant to a viceroy who, despite his rank, did not have the supreme control of the affairs of France. But on 21 March 1629 Champlain became the lieutenant and representative of Richelieu himself; the texts of this period refer to him as commander of New France “in the absence of my Lord the Cardinal de Richelieu.” He had thus reached the height of his career. Yet though Champlain did exercise the functions of a governor, and though the *Relations* gave him this title, yet he never received a governor’s commission....

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

EXCERPT 7: QUEBEC OCCUPIED BY THE ENGLISH

... The setting up of the Compagnie des Cent-Associés encouraged Champlain to hope for unqualified success, but meanwhile the colony continued to eke out its existence. At the beginning of 1628, Champlain noted an event of some importance. He tells us that on 27 April the land was “broken by the plough drawn by oxen,” a labour which previously had had to be carried out by human strength. This advance took place a year after Louis Hébert’s death. As the annual assistance was slow in coming, and a shortage of food was making itself felt, Champlain had a bark made ready to take some of the settlers to Gaspé. It was discovered early in July that the English had pillaged the Cap Tourmente habitation; then, on the tenth, some Basques brought Champlain a summons from the **KIRKE** brothers. Quebec was in a very bad way; each person was restricted to seven ounces of peas a day, and there remained only 50 pounds of gunpowder. Certain that help would shortly arrive, Champlain made a show of bravado, saying that one must “put on a bold countenance,” and replied to the Kirkes that he was well provided for: “We are now waiting from hour to hour to receive you.” The Kirkes did not press the point, but made arrangements to cut off all relief...

As help still did not arrive in the spring of 1629, Champlain sent more people to Gaspé in order to have fewer mouths to feed, and those remaining turned to cultivation so as to have enough to exist on the following winter. Now, on 19 July, English ships appeared behind Pointe-Lévy, and a sloop came to present a summons from the Kirkes. This time Champlain could not put up a false front. He was forced to hand over Quebec, after obtaining the best terms of capitulation he could. On 24 July he left Quebec....

Travelling on board an English ship, Champlain reached London on 29 October. He went immediately to the French ambassador and pointed out to him that the capture of Quebec had taken place two months after the signing of peace; he presented the original of the capitulation, some reports, and a map of Canada (this map has not been traced). At the beginning of December he was back in France, after an absence of three and a half years. He met the members of the company, Richelieu, and the king himself, and urged them to hasten the restitution of New France. In 1630, he submitted an appeal to the king which restated the arguments of 1618: the importance of a vast country; its usefulness “both for trade outside it and for the comforts of life inside it;” the “great and wonderful commerce” that would be carried on if the way to China were found; the “infinite number of savage peoples” to be converted. He enumerated the wide

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

variety of resources in New France, and after his experience of the years 1628 and 1629 he added a new idea: to oblige the French “to cultivate the land, before all things, in order to have the basic foodstuffs on the spot, without being obliged to bring them from France.” As early as April 1630, Louis XIII decided to demand the restitution of the country, but the negotiations were to drag on, in fact until the treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1632. But, when everything was settled, it was Émery de Caën who, 4 March 1632, was provisionally appointed commandant of Quebec, and on 20 April following Isaac de Razilly was offered the lieutenancy of New France. He refused because he considered Champlain more competent, and finally, 1 March 1633, Champlain was again instructed to take over command of New France in Richelieu’s absence....

Champlain reappeared at Quebec 22 May 1633, after an absence of nearly four years....

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

8. DEATH AND LEGACY

... In 1635 his health declined rapidly...

Attended until his last moments by the Jesuit **CHARLES LALEMANT**, Champlain died on 25 Dec. 1635 or rather, according to Father Paul Le Jeune's colourful expression, "was reborn in Heaven." ... Champlain was then buried temporarily in an unmarked grave, to be transferred later (probably in 1636, after Montmagny had enlarged the church) to a chapel built as an annex to the church, and called first the chapel of Monsieur le Gouverneur, and afterwards the chapel of Champlain. It was destroyed by a fire in 1640, at the same time as the church and residence of the Jesuits, and was immediately rebuilt, but nothing more was heard of it after 1664, and apparently in 1674 it no longer existed. The supposition is that the bodies interred beneath it were moved and placed beneath the new parish church (today Notre-Dame de Québec). As a consequence of the work done on the basement in 1877, any further possibility of tracing the remains of Champlain seems to have vanished....

From his written work we can deduce some dominant characteristics. First, a physical trait: a healthy, robust, resilient nature. He seems never to have suffered from scurvy, either in Acadia or at Quebec; the long sea voyages (from 1603 on, he crossed the Atlantic 21 times), the hazardous expeditions, the sojourns among the natives do not appear to have affected him at all; he was indomitable, and ran any kind of risk to win prestige for himself (for example, he shot the Lachine Rapids in a canoe). His health and energy were reflected in his moral qualities. Eager to see everything, to know everything, he was always out to make discoveries, whether it was a matter of examining a harbour, studying a type of soil or a tribe, or looking for a mine. He was observant; it was while stalking a strange bird that he lost his way in the forests of the Huron country. He moved doggedly towards his goal; when de Monts withdrew, it was Champlain who, despite the most odious vexations, resisted those merchants who opposed every attempt at colonization. It was moreover in this conflict that the whole drama of Champlain's career lay. One would consequently expect to find in him an unbending man, hard towards others. On the contrary, he was jovial, a lover of good food and drink, the founder of the Order of Good Cheer. He behaved towards the natives with the greatest amiability, making them laugh continually, forgiving their offences in circumstances which surprise us....

Champlain was a man of ever-reviving plans: in Acadia, he hoped to discover several mines and the route to Asia; in the St. Lawrence, he wanted also to find the route to Asia,

Exploring the Explorers

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

and to set up at Quebec a customs post between Europe and China; he had planned to build a habitation at Montreal; he wanted to move the Algonkins of Allumette Island and even the Hurons into the St. Lawrence valley; one item of his 1618 programme was the establishing of a great city, Ludovica, on the banks of the St. Charles River. He did not carry out these projects, but to him belongs the much greater merit of having established New France. If, despite the indifference of the authorities, he had not persisted in maintaining the presence of the French in the St. Lawrence region, one may suppose that foreigners would have filled the vacuum, so that there would not have been a New France. Furthermore, it was he who built up the great fur-trading organization, and who ensured the French hold on the Montagnais, Algonkin, and Huron tribes. Undoubtedly, when he died, the St. Lawrence colony was of little consequence (150 settlers, whereas Boston, five years old, already had 2,000), but thanks to Champlain the foundations were laid. At the starting-point of the uninterrupted history of Canada, we find Champlain. He is at its origin by his own choice and because of the principles in which he believed. In him we must salute the founder of Canada.

We know of no authentic portrait of Champlain....