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Review: Fruits of Perseverance: The French Presence in the Detroit River Region, 1701-1815 by Guillaume Teasdale

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REVIEW: Teasdale, Guillaume. *Fruits of Perseverance: The French Presence in the Detroit River Region, 1701-1815*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 240 p., paper. ISBN: 9780773555013

In the preface to his *Fruits of Perseverance*, Professor Guillaume Teasdale intimates that the work is not only a result of his own research and that of student research assistants, but it is also a supplement to the efforts of many other researchers, projects, and collections that have made his own research possible. This is an admirable recognition of the many local and regional historians, both professional and independent, who have done the yeoman's work for many years keeping the history of French Detroit from falling into obscurity.

My own interest in this book and the topic it explores is from the perspective of an independent lay researcher and descendant of the early settlers at Detroit. My interest in the surviving French Canadian and Métis culture in the Detroit River Region has led me to explore the history, genealogy, folklore, and oral traditions of the region for the benefit of those who seek to (re)build and reimagine these cultures for the twenty-first century without sacrificing their inherent qualities. This book brings to light how the cultural landscape of early Detroit impacted the real geography of the land and how that continues to reverberate today.

From the book's very beginning, Teasdale closely examines land organization in early Detroit and the aspirations of its founder, Antoine Cadillac, in the context of building a new settlement far from the more established communities of the Saint Lawrence River. Exploring archaic colonial land organization practices, in which self-serving officials had long ago muddied the waters, is a difficult task, but Teasdale admirably presents the confusing world of *seigneuries*, *compagnies*, land grants, and *notaires* in as uncomplicated a way as possible.

There is limited discussion of the presence of indigenous communities and voyageurs around Fort Ponchartrain, which many readers might be seeking, but the chief merit of the book's first two chapters is in laying bare the decades it took for Detroit to coalesce as a community with sound leadership. The question of the status of the settlement left Detroit in a confused state for decades. According to Teasdale, it was the mid-eighteenth century before settlement activity began to increase with the arrival of a new convoy of settlers sponsored by the King.

The middle chapters comprise the conceptual and material heart of the book: a description of land ownership among French Canadians in the region under successive French, British, and American rule. With regime changes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came new policies that had serious impact on the French speakers who had settled on both sides of the Detroit River beginning in 1701. Teasdale examines the administration of land at Detroit by Cadillac himself, by a French governor general and intendant of New France, then under a

seigneurie directe system, where land grants are given to settlers directly on behalf of the French king. It is through this grant system which, according to Teasdale, the *habitants* developed a deep attachment to the land. Later, under British control, the situation of the French Canadians at Detroit entered a period of uncertainty with regard to property rights. However, as their main occupation was farming and the British needed their help in order to supply troops on the frontier, the French Canadians' situation was not as precarious as it otherwise might have been. On the one hand, a significant aspect of local French culture was eliminated with the erasure of traditionally public domains (like Hog Island [*Île aux Cochons*], which would become Belle Isle) but on the other, the *habitants* were ultimately able to retain their private property rights and, in doing so, continue to influence their surroundings in small but meaningful ways.

The tenacity with which the Detroit French retained their sense of ownership and place over the region for many generations left cultural markers both on the map and among their descendants. Teasdale examines one aspect of this in particular: the orchards for which the local French population was long known. Detroit as a locus for fruit growing was observed over two decades prior to the establishment of Fort Pontchartrain, when Recollet missionary Louis Hennepin noted an abundance of wild fruit trees growing on the banks of the river in the 1670s. The French Canadian *habitants* and Jesuits later became associated with the planting of pear and apple trees. The orchards and their products were of great renown and the pear tree came to symbolize the French presence in the region, retaining its association even after 300 years. Recently the Jesuit or French Pear of the region has been added to the Slow Food Movement's "Ark of Taste" thanks to the efforts of French Canadian descendants and cultural activists from the area.

But even beyond the cultural symbolism, for Teasdale the orchards are emblematic of something more essential: the very nature of the Detroit settlement. Teasdale posits that Detroit, rather than being a frontier settlement on the far reaches of empire in which French and Indian relations were prominent, and where the French Canadians lived their own unique blend of French and North American life, was more akin to a Norman village. Teasdale explored this perspective in depth in his dissertation, "The French of Orchard Country: Territory, Landscape and Ethnicity in the Detroit River region, 1680s-1810s." (York University, 2010.) This view, shared by many scholars, might be best encapsulated by Teasdale's statement at the end of Chapter 6 that the popular conception of the Detroit River Region French as the "Muskrat French" is a mistaken cultural identity emanating from derogatory, "imperialist narratives." A debate about the role of fur trading and its cultural impact in the region has led many writers to come to a similar conclusion, asserting generally that Indigenous peoples and French Canadian traders and *habitants* had only

minor relations during the French era, and that the notion of a Métis settlement or cultural characteristics in the area was impossible. Furthermore, these scholars largely rule out the development of a unique local culture, borne of extensive cross-cultural interaction among *habitants*, indigenous people, and voyageurs. Yet the characterization of Detroit as a Norman village, intrinsically similar to other French Canadian villages along the St. Lawrence River and therefore familiar to French travelers from outside the region, is not universally held. Other scholars have published studies that reveal a more robust interaction between the French Canadians and indigenous communities, which influenced the development of the cultural landscape of Detroit and the wider region, the *Pays d'en haut* or Upper Country.

Fruits of Perseverance ends with an examination of the impact of the international border at Detroit. As the author writes, the impact was not felt overnight, however trade and family ties were gradually lessened as more concrete authority was imposed on trade and border crossings. One consequence of this was a more rapid assimilation of the French on the north side of the Detroit River (American Detroit) than occurred on the south side (British Assumption/Windsor). The French influence on the political, economic, and social life of Detroit waned through the first half of the nineteenth century and became largely insignificant in the affairs of the city from that point on.

As many academic monographs tend to be, *Fruits of Perseverance* is of fairly narrow scope, focused largely on settlement patterns and land use and the impact of land management systems on the French Canadians of the area. The perspective employed is one in which Detroit is assumed to be not only an entirely European (Norman) construct, but that its turn-of-the-century culture and legacy rule out any other interpretation. It is an important historical perspective, yet one that is at odds with historical and more contemporary perspectives among historians, as well as among descendants of the original *habitants*, or the descendants of voyageurs, some of whom were Métis. And even though *Fruits of Perseverance* is an easy-reading academic work, it will not be accessible to all readers. Teasdale refrains from extensive academic jargon, but the bulk of the work as a discussion of administrative matters involving land ownership in French Detroit is understandably somewhat dry. Chapters 6 and 7 (“French Orchards” and “Divided by the Border”) may hold more appeal for the general reader. Those readers looking for details of family history will likely be disappointed, but for those whose ancestors appear in the work it will be well worth adding to the family library. Relatively short, the extensive citations and academic imprimatur will undoubtedly make this a monograph that holds its importance in the field of New France history for a long time and will be cited in many forthcoming works. I recommend it for local and academic

libraries, and for those readers who seek a fuller understanding of the history of the Detroit River Region and its original inhabitants.

-James LaForest