

Rejecting the 'Noble Savage':
French Officers' Images of North American Aborigines, 1755-1783

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The concept of the noble savage played an important role in Enlightenment thought, but despite the *philosophes'* debates about whether people were good or evil in the state of nature, few of these writers had actually seen the people they were discussing with such passion. However, numerous educated Europeans—over thirteen hundred French army and navy officers—did come in contact with indigenous peoples in North America during the campaigns of the Seven Years' War and the War of American Independence. Although historians have not devoted sufficient attention to officers' observations of Aborigines, and have never compared the two periods to see whether officers' perspectives differed in any way, officers' views are important in illustrating how contemporary educated Europeans perceived native peoples, the concept of the noble savage, and human nature.

In most cases, officers' experiences were limited to observing native warriors and learning about their terrifying methods of waging war. This contact only reinforced the Europeans' popular preconception that Aborigines were ferocious, irrational savages, and it is this image of natives as barbarians that prevailed in the Frenchmen's imaginations, not the concept of the noble savage.

Nevertheless, a much smaller group of officers, often those who had more extensive contact with natives, were partially able to overcome prevalent Eurocentric prejudices, and a few of these men did employ the image of the noble savage in their writings. This idealized conception of native peoples dated back to classical times and, more immediately, to Bartolomé de Las Casas and Michel Eyquem de Montaigne in the sixteenth century. By the time the Marquis de Montcalm's army campaigned in Canada during the 1750s, the theoretical basis of this more positive image of Aboriginal peoples was already well disseminated, at least among better educated members of the public.¹

Not all officers either saw natives as paragons or brutes, however. Influenced by the spirit of toleration characteristic of the Enlightenment and by the application of the scientific method to the study of human beings, a few Frenchmen attempted with varying success to avoid the absolute moral judgments so much a part of their age, describing Aboriginal peoples not in Manichean terms of virtue or depravity but in the language of proto-anthropology. None of them, however, could entirely escape the theory and methodology of eighteenth-century moral philosophy.

We can best capture officers' vivid initial impressions of native peoples by first examining the writings of those men who had the least amount of contact with Aborigines, in this case the officers who served in the War of American Independence as

volunteers in the American forces or in the expeditions of the Comte d'Estaing and the Comte de Rochambeau. With only a few exceptions, these officers were barely aware of the experiences of Montcalm's officers in Canada twenty years earlier; many of them had not even been born when Canada capitulated.

The Comte de Rochambeau's officers, whose experience with natives was almost exclusively limited to a conference with an Iroquois delegation at Newport, Rhode Island, in October 1780, made a very frank display of the cultural baggage which they had brought from Europe. They described the natives in flattering terms as "big", "tall", "robust", "muscular", and "well-made", with copper-coloured skin, but at the same time the warriors' body paint, hair, elongated ears, bear grease insect protection, and sparse clothing repelled them. A shocked army lieutenant, the Comte de Clermont-Crèvecoeur, reported that "These barbarians go naked", and added that "The oil and dye they use on their bodies makes them stink and look disgusting".² The natives' lack of clothing and strange appearance provided the most telling evidence that they were uncivilized. A German captain in the French service, the Freiherr von Closen-Haydenburg, remarked that "one cannot imagine the horrible and singular faces and bizarre manners of these people."³ Closen-Haydenburg, who displayed more tolerance toward European Americans than many of his comrades, made no effort to extend this tolerance to indigenous Americans.⁴ The delegates' war dance also amazed and horrified the French spectators.⁵ At other functions, however, the Iroquois proved to be less irrational and lawless than the officers expected, and Second-Colonel the Comte de Charlus was forced to admit that "these nations were strongly policed [orderly] for savages."⁶ The Frenchmen carefully scrutinized the Aboriginals' table manners, for French officers almost invariably measured average Canadians, Americans, and Aboriginals according to French upper class standards, not the standards of French peasants. The delegates' dexterity with European cutlery won Iroquois culture a few points, but the odds were stacked against the natives. Despite considerable evidence that the Iroquois were perfectly civil human beings, their essentially alien behaviour prevented Rochambeau's companions from developing any real liking for them.⁷ No one attempted to describe the Iroquois as gentle, naive, naked innocents of the golden age; instead, the Aboriginals easily slipped into the category of depraved barbarians.

Falling victim to another stereotypical idea about "savages", the officers assumed that their native guests were somewhat wanting in intelligence, and took the messages in the Iroquois delegation's addresses at face value, not suspecting that the Aboriginals were sophisticated enough to engage in subtle diplomatic manoeuvres.⁸ The Jesuit-educated Catholic Mohawk chief Akiatonharónkwen or Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Louis Cook did most of the translating, and his pronounced Francophile and anti-British attitudes may have created the impression that the natives as a whole followed their emotions rather than careful political calculation. In addition, the Frenchmen usually assumed that the Iroquois were hunters, apparently not expecting that "savages" might practice agriculture.⁹ Most officers with Rochambeau, including the expedition's normally tolerant chaplain Abbé Robin, believed that the natives were treacherous, capricious, and bloodthirsty, behaving like the irrational savages they were supposed to be.¹⁰

Not all officers with Rochambeau saw Aboriginals this way, however. A liberal-minded officer with Rochambeau, Second-Colonel the Comte de Ségur, stressed the supposed wild, romantic nature of the native peoples, claiming that Aboriginals "have a horror" of civilization and enjoyed "the charms of a stormy liberty and a wandering life

that they prefer to all others."¹¹ To Ségur, an admirer of Rousseau, this supposed unrestrained liberty of the noble savage was a largely positive characteristic. Author and major-general the Chevalier de Chastellux and his aide-de-camp the Baron de Montesquieu, grandson of the *philosophe*, took the trouble to actually visit a Mohawk village near Schenectady in order to investigate the question of the noble savage. Although the young Montesquieu wrote to his tutor that the Aborigines "seemed to me to perfectly resemble the portraits one has made of them, as much in morals as in physique", his elder colleague concluded that the natives were brutes, not paragons of virtue, and confirmed his own view that European idealizations of Aborigines and Quakers were not based on fact.¹² In his book *De la félicité publique* he had strongly advocated the idea that despite major setbacks, during the course of history humans gradually progress from savagery to a higher level of civilization.¹³ To his credit, Chastellux was attempting to approach the question of the noble savage from a pragmatic scientific viewpoint, and concluded that the Aborigines were normal, fallible human beings in need of the accumulated wisdom of civilization. Although he did not completely escape the prevailing tendency to describe cultures in terms of virtue and immorality, at least he went beyond the simplistic analysis of most of his military colleagues.¹⁴

Montcalm's officers, who were in North America twenty years earlier than Rochambeau's, arrived on the continent with similar preconceived notions about Aborigines. Lieutenant Jean-Baptiste d'Aleynac reported that "The savages of Canada are very different from the idea which we commonly have of them in France", explaining that they were not in fact covered in hair, but had less than Europeans, lacking beards and plucking whatever body hair did appear.¹⁵ Evidently, many Frenchmen saw the Aboriginal as synonymous with the wild man of the woods of European legend.¹⁶ Montcalm's officers had more contact with natives than Rochambeau's, and although they observed more warriors than civilians, they frequently visited native settlements and hunting camps, providing themselves with a more rounded view of native cultures. They were also introduced to natives by Canadians, who tended to have respect for their traditional allies and often had a working knowledge of their languages. In addition, French officers in the Seven Years' War knew that the natives were important military allies who had to be treated with respect, a factor that was less significant during the subsequent conflict.

When in the field, Montcalm's officers had almost daily contact with Aboriginal warriors, who did reconnaissance work and carried out raids on the American frontier. They observed first hand native military customs such as the killing of soldiers and civilians without distinction, massacres of prisoners of war, scalping, torture, and in the case of the Ottawa nation, cannibalism.¹⁷ Ironically, they also complained that the natives were insufficiently disciplined to engage in the bloody mass destruction characteristic of European warfare.¹⁸ Montcalm and his senior aide-de-camp Colonel Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, the recent author of an important book on integral calculus, were both horrified by the torture and consumption of prisoners so close to their headquarters, and regretted the necessity of using these ferocious allies.¹⁹ For all Europeans, of course, cannibalism was the ultimate sign of savagery. However, Montcalm himself attested to the fact that while the Aborigines were brutal in war, they led peaceful home lives, had morals, and never produced monsters like the demented assassins who attacked Henri IV and Louis XV.²⁰ Various officers also discussed incidents of severe alcohol abuse among the natives, although they rarely tried to explain the cause of this abuse; the visitors

assumed that Aboriginals, as savages, had less self-control than Europeans.²¹ Only one officer, engineer Captain Pierre Pouchot, who had extensive dealings with numerous native peoples while he was stationed at Fort Niagara, provided a plausible explanation for their behaviour as a release from the habitual self-control imperative in societies in which harmony was valued above all else.²² Pouchot was one of a small number of French officers who were able to surmount stereotypical images of native peoples and come to know and appreciate them as human beings. He declined to idealize Aboriginals, discussing what he considered their faults, but he praised the calm harmony of their domestic lives, their hospitality, and other virtues with the familiarity of a person who saw these people every day. D'Aleynac and Bougainville, who were adopted by Aboriginal nations, both formed personal friendships with natives.²³ Aboriginal warriors reminded Bougainville of the heroes of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but he appreciated them without idealizing them.²⁴ He showed a similar attitude when he visited Tahiti with the French navy in the late 1760's, praising many aspects of Polynesian culture but not hiding the fact that the Tahitians had the same foibles as other peoples, waging senseless wars and obeying the whims of despotic kings. With some justification, Bougainville prided himself on his scientific approach to cultural issues, and in the preface to his account of his circumnavigation of the world he ridiculed the prevalent *esprit de système* or doctrinaire theorizing and "that class of lazy and vainglorious writers, who, in the darkness of their studies, philosophize without seeing the world and its inhabitants, and imperiously submit nature to their imagination."²⁵ This warning, however, did not prevent Denis Diderot from writing his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, in which he wedded fragments of Bougainville's careful anthropological observations with the outpourings of his own vivid imagination to produce a classic portrait of the noble savage.²⁶

The ideal of the noble savage only clearly influenced one of Montcalm's officers, Lieutenant Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur of the Régiment d'infanterie de La Sarre. Significantly, however, Crèvecoeur had belonged to the Canadian Compagnies franches de la Marine or colonial regulars for several years before obtaining a commission in a line regiment, and spent several seasons among the Aboriginals.²⁷ Crèvecoeur attempted in his fictional stories, written in the American colonies during the 1770's, to provide the Aboriginals with a human face. In several of his accounts he deliberately attempted to undermine the perception of Aboriginals as ferocious savages, portraying them as normal people with different customs but an admirable moral code.²⁸ Despite his reasonably persuasive descriptions of native life, however, he too succumbed to the eighteenth-century literary tendency to see cultures in terms of moral absolutes, for instance, contrasting "good Aboriginals" with small numbers of "bad Aboriginals" who were supposedly corrupted by the semi-barbarous first wave of European settlers.

Crèvecoeur concluded that humans in the state of nature were on the whole happier than those who were not, but he also believed that the spread of civilization was inevitable.²⁹ If the Aboriginals could learn to be peaceful, virtuous Rousseauian farmers like the majority of European Americans, and end their senseless, internecine wars, they could benefit from their new situation.³⁰ Most French officers in both expeditions would have agreed with his final decision in favour of civilization, for despite their different perceptions of Aboriginals, almost all agreed that it was necessary and desirable to "civilize" so-called primitive peoples, preferably by assimilation into the European population.³¹

The vast majority of officers in both wars were highly prejudiced against Aboriginal cultures, and when they attempted to describe Aboriginals, officers tended to call upon the traditional imagery of the wild man of the woods, a subhuman individual ignorant of all civility. Other officers, however, employed a diametrically opposed stereotype, the myth of the noble savage, in order to transmit to readers their impressions of the native peoples. Both groups tended to wield the moral absolutes characteristic of much of Enlightenment literature. However, a handful of officers followed a different methodology. Some of these men, like the mathematician Bougainville and the *philosophe* Chastellux, were highly-educated nobles, but others were of more humble background, like the military engineer Pouchot, son of a merchant, who was trained to record with a high degree of scientific accuracy details about fortifications and topography. They had in common a dedication to the new methods of science and history, which replaced magic and hagiography with careful, non-judgmental description and analysis. None of these officers, of course, could achieve the permanently elusive goal of impartiality, but they succeeded better than most of their contemporaries in understanding cultures that were so radically different from their own.

¹Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-AmerAboriginal Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 14, 17, 28; Philip P. Boucher, *Les Nouvelles Frances: France in America, 1500 to 1815: An Imperial Perspective* (Providence, R.I.: John Carter Brown Library, 1989), 12-17; Philip P. Boucher, *Cannibal Encounters: European and Island Caribs, 1492-1763* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 108-29; and Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man*, trans. Elizabeth Wentholt (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965).

²Jean-François-Louis de Lesquevin, Comte de Clermont-Crèvecoeur, "Journal of the War in America During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783", in *The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783*, ed. Howard C. Rice and Anne S. K. Brown, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972 and Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1972), 1: 20.

³Hans Christoph Ludwig Friedrich Ignatz, Freiherr (Baron) von Closen-Haydenburg, *The Revolutionary Journal of Baron Ludwig von Closen 1780-1783*, ed. and trans. Evelyn M. Acomb (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), p. 37.

⁴*Ibid.*, 38.

⁵Armand-Charles-Augustin de La Croix de Castries, Comte de Charlus, "Journal de mon voyage en Amérique (7 mai 1780-27 septembre 1780)", Archives Nationales (AN), Paris, Marine B4 183, fols. 220-21. Selections from this journal have been published in Durand Echeverria, "The Iroquois Visit Rochambeau at Newport in 1780: Excerpts From the Unpublished Journal of the Comte de Charlus", *Rhode Island History* 11 (1952): 73-81.

⁶*Ibid.*, fols. 220-21.

⁷See Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, to Saint-Chamans, Newport, R.I., 12 Oct. 1780, in Octave Beuve, "Un petit-fils de Montesquieu, soldat de l'indépendance américaine", *Revue historique de la Révolution française et de l'Empire (RHRFE)* 5 (1914): 242.

⁸Charlus, "Journal", AN Marine B4, fols 220-22. For a contrary view see Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de La Fayette, cited in Olivier Bernier, *Lafayette: Hero of Two Worlds* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1983), 66.

⁹See Louis-François-Bertrand Dupont d'Aubevoye, Comte de Lauberdière, "Journal de l'Armée aux ordres de Monsieur le Comte de Rochambeau pendant les campagnes de 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783 dans l'Amérique Septentrionale", Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, Département des manuscrits, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises (BN N.A.F.) 17691, fol. 18.

¹⁰Abbé Robin, *Nouveau voyage dans l'Amérique septentrionale en l'année 1781; et campagne de l'armée de M. le comte de Rochambeau* (Paris: Chez Moutard, Imprimeur-Libraire de la Reine, de madame, & de madame comtesse d'Artois, 1782), 146. For critical opinions among the volunteers see Pierre-François de Boy, "Mémoire sur les peuples du nord de l'Amérique fait par le Sr. de Boy Major à leur service, et envoyé au Consul français De Caillery en Sardaigne le 10. mai 1780", AN Colonies E50; and Charles-Albert de Moré, Chevalier de Pontgibaud, *A French Volunteer of the War of American Independence*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Douglas (Paris: Charles Carrington, 1898), 48.

¹¹Louis-Philippe, Comte de Ségur, *Mémoires ou souvenirs et anecdotes par M. le comte de Ségur, de l'Académie française, pair de France*, 3 vols., 2d ed. (Paris: Alexis Eymery, 1825), 1: 398-99.

¹²Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, to Latapie, Newport, R.I., 11 Nov. 1780-29 Jan. 1781, in Raymond Céleste, "Un petit-fils de Montesquieu en Amérique (1780-1783)", *Revue philomathique de Bordeaux et du Sud-Ouest (RPBSO)* 5 (1902): 549; and François-Jean de Beauvoir, Chevalier de Chastellux, *Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781 and 1782*, 2 vols., trans. Howard C. Rice (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 1: 207-9.

¹³François-Jean de Beauvoir, Chevalier de Chastellux, *De la félicité publique, ou considérations sur le sort des hommes dans les différentes époques de l'histoire*, 2d ed. (Paris: Antoine-Augustin Renouard, 1776).

¹⁴For an interpretation of native religion as natural law see César-Auguste de Lannoy, "Mémorial de M. de Lannoy (1763-1793): Notes de voyage d'un officier de marine de l'ancien régime", *Carnet de la sabretache: Revue militaire retrospective*, 2d ser. 3 (1904): 754. Significantly, Lannoy picked up this opinion from his prisoner the explorer Samuel Hearne of the Hudson's Bay Company.

¹⁵Jean-Baptiste d'Aleynac, *Aventures militaires au XVIIIe siècle d'après les mémoires de Jean-Baptiste d'Aleynac*, ed. Charles Coste (Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault, 1935), 36.

¹⁶Olive P. Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984), 63-84.

¹⁷For a discussion of cannibalism among the Ottawas see Ian K. Steele, *Betrayals: Fort William Henry and the "Massacre"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 85.

¹⁸Martin L. Nicolai, "A Different Kind of Courage: The French Military and the Canadian Irregular Soldier during the Seven Years' War", *Canadian Historical Review* 70 (1989): 53-75.

¹⁹See Louis-Joseph, Marquis de Montcalm, to Mme. René Héroult de Séchelles, Montreal, 11 July 1757, BN N.A.F. 9406, fol. 62; Louis-Antoine de Bougainville to Jean-Pierre de Bougainville, Montreal, 2 July 1757, BN N.A.F. 9406, fol. 62; d'Aleynac, *Aventures militaires*, 56-57; and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Adventure in the Wilderness: The American Journals of Louis Antoine de Bougainville, 1756-1760*, ed. and trans. Edward P. Hamilton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 191.

²⁰Montcalm to Mme. René Héroult de Séchelles, 11 July 1757, BN n.A.F. 9406, fol. 63.

²¹Anne-Joseph-Hippolyte de Maurès, Comte de Malartic de La Devèse, *Journal des campagnes au Canada de 1755 à 1760 par le comte de Maurès de Malartic* (Paris: Librairie Plon, ca. 1890), 22-24, 83; Jean-Nicolas Desandrouïns to ?, Montreal, 28 Aug. 1756, in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 10 vols., ed. Edmund B. O'Callaghan (Albany: Weed Parsons, 1853-1887), 10: 465; and d'Aleynac, *Aventures militaires*, 36-37.

²²Pierre Pouchot, *Memoir Upon the Late War in North America Between the French and the English, 1755-60*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Franklin B. Hough (Roxbury, Mass.: W. Elliot Woodward, 1866), 2: 237-39, 254.

²³D'Aleynac, *Aventures militaires*, 42-43, 76-77; René de Kerallain, "Bougainville à l'escadre du cte. d'Estaing: Guerre d'Amérique 1778-1779", *Journal de la Société des américanistes de Paris (JSAP)* 19 (1927): 172; and de Mun, "Notice sur mon frère le Sauvage", BN N.A.F. 9406, fol. 369.

²⁴Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, "Mémoire sur l'état de la Nouvelle-France (1757)", *Rapport de l'archiviste de la province de Québec (RAPQ)* (1923-24): 66. This was not the first time that such a comparison had been made. See Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Aborigines Compared with the Customs of Primitive*

Times, 2 vols., ed. and trans. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974).

²⁵Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde par la frégate du roi "la Boudeuse" et la flûte "l'Étoile", en 1766, 1767, 1768 et 1769*, ed. Jacques Proust (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 46. See also Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1913), 374-82.

²⁶Denis Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville: Publié d'après le manuscrit de Léningrad avec une introduction et des notes par Gilbert Chinard* (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1935).

²⁷For another positive but less romantic account of Aborigines by a Parisian gunner in the Canadian colonial regulars see J. C. B., *Travels in New France*, ed. Sylvester K. Stevens, Donald H. Kent, and Emma E. Woods (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1941). For a portrait of the noble savage by a French officer in the Louisiana colonial regulars see Jean-Bernard Bossu, *Travels in the Interior of North America 1751-1762*, ed. and trans. Seymour Feiler (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964).

²⁸Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1912), 53, 80-81, 226-27; and Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America: More "Letters from an American Farmer"*, ed. Henri L. Bourdin, Ralph H. Gabriel, and Stanley T. Williams (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1925), 133-34.

²⁹Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 171.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 101-2.

³¹Louis Franquet, *Voyages et mémoires sur le Canada* (Montreal: Éditions Élysée, 1974), 59-60, 111, 121; and Pouchot, *Memoir*, 2: 236. For an opinion in favour of simple subjugation see Claude Blanchard, *The Journal of Claude Blanchard*, ed. Thomas W. Balch, trans. William Duane (Albany: J. Munsell, 1876; reprint, New York: New York Times & Arno Press, 1969), 125.