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Aino Anto is a Toronto-based freelance illustrator with interests in editorial illustration and children's books. Her first work, Len Gasparini's *A Christmas for Carol*, was published by Seraphim Editions in 2002. More examples of her work can be seen at <www.antostudio.com>.

100 Books portraits by **Wes Tyrell.**

Wes Tyrell is a caricature artist and humorous illustrator. His works can be seen in a variety of publications, including *The Globe and Mail* and *Maclean's*, as well as at <www.westyrell.com>.

Erratum

The final sentence of Germaine Warkentin's essay, "Mapping Wonderland," in the December 2005 issue of the LRC should read: "But I keep in mind what the playwright told an interviewer as long ago as 1987, and now actualizes in the 'family of lawyers' in *Wonderland*, their profane and often desperately funny clients and the sometimes wounded judges before whom they appear: 'Everything I have written about is Toronto, and no matter where I am, in some way everything I write will also be about it.'"

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Another Country

A Canadian writer seeks the remnants of a lost empire.

Mark Lovewell

Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America
Philip Marchand
McClelland and Stewart
444 pages, hardcover
ISBN 077105677X

Can a people's past be completely eradicated from popular memory? Not if we believe commentators such as novelist Peter Carey: "History is like a bloodstain that keeps on showing on the wall," he once noted, "no matter how many new owners take possession, no matter how many times we paint over it." Canadian journalist Philip Marchand is not so confident.

In *Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America*, Marchand looks at the lingering impact of France's imperial ambitions in North America, focusing on the explorer Sieur de La Salle. La Salle's extraordinary 17th-century journey through the Great Lakes and down the Mississippi is one many Canadians will recall, at least vaguely, from their schooldays. In Marchand's case, this early exposure came in an especially romanticized form, through the works of 19th-century historian Francis Parkman. As a third-generation French Canadian growing up in New England, the young Marchand was put off by Parkman's typically Victorian ethnocentrism—as illustrated by the latter's famous statement that "a happier calamity never befell a people than the conquest of Canada by British arms." What made Parkman such a mesmerizing read, however, was his identification with La Salle, in all his quixotic glory. "That's the problem with people who write well," Marchand notes. "They penetrate your brain with their images."

His own agenda is in direct counterpoint to Parkman's outmoded views. Marchand is careful not to depict La Salle one-dimensionally as being among history's larger-than-life underdogs. "There was a real chance, near the end of the seventeenth century, that France might back up the claim," he says of La Salle's dreams of empire. "A few different turnings of history and you, reader, would be reading this book in French and speaking to your children in French. The United States would not exist. Some sort of French, Catholic state would dominate the continent, and the Ojibway, the Sioux, the Shawnee, the Chicksaw nations would have the same political and cultural presence as African-Americans now do." It is true that, at the turn of the 18th century, France was still Europe's pre-eminent political and economic power. If the country had possessed more enlightened leadership, Marchand contends, then New France might not have remained a sparsely populated outpost held back by its meager agricultural output and dependence on the fur trade. Rather, New France, with the help of French arms, might have kept the British hemmed in on the continent's eastern seaboard.

Like all counter-historical thought experiments, this is at best a half-hearted one, especially as Marchand gives at least nodding recognition to the powerful impersonal forces at play within Britain—the enclosure movement and the relentless outbreaks of religious discord being the most important—that drove its settlement and expansion in the New World. One does not need to be bound by the Anglo-Saxon prejudices of a Parkman to see that France's dreams of a continent-spanning North American empire were in all likelihood ill fated from the very start.

Still, the scenario of a modern-day North America that could have been French speaking, Catholic and a cooperative social enterprise between Natives and non-Natives is more than just armchair speculation. As Marchand takes the reader on a modern journey in La Salle's footsteps, he shows what impact even doomed dreams can exert. For francophone Quebeckers, the most emblematic of founding myths is arguably that of Adam Dollard, who with his small band of French and Huron followers faced certain death to hold off an Iroquois attack on Montreal in 1660. This celebrated tale of heroism, drummed into the heads of generations of children, contains an inner message that resonates with Quebeckers still, says Marchand:

> The Protestant New Englanders, in their Indian wars, invoked the God of Battles who marched with the Israelites into Canaan. They could taste their victory before they won it. The Catholic French, on the other hand, remembered Dollard, whose example told them that they would lose, they would always lose, but in embracing suffering and death they would turn defeat into something darkly beautiful, they would find a new sympathy with God Himself who had suffered as none of His creatures had ever suffered.

This spectral embrace of suffering was an ever-present feature of life in French North America—most memorably in the actions of the Jesuit fathers in their outlying wilderness missions, but also at the colony's centre, where luminaries such as Quebec's first bishop, François Montmorency de Laval, provided a model of self-mortifying zeal with his regular consumption of rancid meat and insistence on sleeping on a flea-ridden mattress. To modern eyes, such practices sometimes border on the ludicrous and, in light of the liberal, secular-minded Quebec of today, this mentality may seem even more distant. But the province's past still exerts an indirect hold on New France's descendants, as Marchand eloquently describes. Not only do the early cultural icons provide the mythic fabric for an inchoate nationhood that still drives Quebec's sovereignty movement, but the continuing celebration of these icons' memory also helps ensure that francophone Quebeckers will never feel fully at ease within anglophone-dominated Canada.

Although La Salle was no great fan of the Jesuits (whom he continually blamed for various setbacks in his plans), he, too, had a prodigious streak of self-mortifying stoicism about him—in his case probably propelled more by personal demons than religious fervour. Marchand does not mince words with his own theory. "It is not unthinkable," he notes, after citing evidence provided by contemporaries, "that La Salle was what we now term a closet case … Part of La Salle's problems with depression and paranoia might have stemmed from his recognition that he harbored an inner enemy, a set of impulses he could not accept."

If so, it is no wonder that he preferred the rough liberties of the wilderness to the artificial civility of colonial society. And it should come as no surprise to contemporary readers that similar sexuality-based theories are now being circulated by revisionists about other French explorers—Samuel de Champlain in particular.

As Marchand follows La Salle's path through the interior of the continent, the reader comes to share in admiration for his ever-ambitious, but obviously deeply flawed, protagonist, whose party contended with a myriad of perils, including a horrific Iroquois attack, while making its way south toward the Gulf of Mexico. Marchand also makes clear how La Salle's insufferable egocentrism led to his murder by his own men—an event that occurred in Texas on an expedition whose goal was returning by sea to the mouth of the Mississippi.

La Salle's discoveries may not have spawned a lasting empire, but they did lead to the establishment of a far-flung collection of settlements in what are now the American states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Arkansas and, of course, Louisiana. Visiting each of these sites today, Marchand shows the extent to which the one-time French presence has been obliterated by assimilation, marked by nothing more than a few folk memories, culinary traditions and bits of heavily restored architecture. Only in Louisiana does an identifiable community still exist, and even there the Cajuns' use of the French language is quickly dwindling.

Marchand concludes that, at least south of the 49th parallel, virtually all remnants of this French past will probably be forgotten by all but a small group of historians. Once this happens, Quebec and a few isolated pockets in other parts of Canada will provide the only remaining legacy of French rule in North America. For Marchand, with his own Franco-American roots, this is an especially grim prospect. He laments: "such brave, resolute, resourceful people. But their minds were shadowed by an awareness no other European arrival to North America had to contend with; namely, that they had come here and built a nation and an empire and then seen it overwhelmed by invaders and lost to them … Something in them, as a result, was resistant to the American Dream, something made them keep their heads down and fade into the landscape like hobbits."

For someone speaking of his own forebears, this is a tragic insight indeed.

Mark Lovewell is the Director of Arts and Contemporary Studies at Ryerson University. He is the co-publisher of the LRC.