CHAPTER TWO

EUROPE AND THE GIFT ECONOMIES IN NORTH AMERICA

It was surely ironic that after narrowly escaping pirates off the coast of La Rochelle and the good odds of wrecking in the North Atlantic in a voyage of three months and three days, a French boat arriving to New France in 1624 was nearly scuttled by a gift of figs.

The young missionary, Gabriel Sagard, recorded the incident in his *Long Journey to the Country of the Hurons*. The merchant ship on which he and another Recollet priest had taken passage crossed the Atlantic and entered the great Gulf of St. Lawrence near the north shore. Then the crew stopped in at Tadoussac. This served as a typical first landfall at the time. French ships would break goods into smaller boats to continue upriver to the small colony of Quebec. Crews also met at the Saguenay's mouth and traded with Indian bands during the short Canadian summers. By 1624, an impromptu market at Tadoussac usually assembled with hundreds of traders from the Montagnais-Innu of the upper Saguenay, Algonquin (Anissinapeks) from the Ottawa River valley, and even Wandat, or Huron, from their distant agricultural settlements near Georgian Bay on the Great Lakes. Since the late sixteenth century, these Indians met motley assortments of European traders from St. Malo, Brouage, La Rochelle and Rouen. Some were just Basque fishermen and whaling crews with few goods. Others were merchants or their factors representing organized trading ventures.

The crew's misfortunes began soon after touching down, when a Montagnais leader known to the French as La Forière boarded Sagard's ship. The chief already had dealings upriver at Quebec with Samuel de Champlain and evidently considered himself as someone of esteem. The chief's status perhaps explains why mayhem broke out after the ship captain gave La Forière a "small present of figs." The native leader angrily threw the gift into the river and "counselling his savages to come on to our
ship one after another and take and carry off from it all the goods they
needed, and give in exchange as few peltries as they liked, since we had
not given him what satisfied him.\(^3\)

The outnumbered Frenchmen stood by as the “trade” began. All those
aboard knew that poorly armed and outnumbered, their lives hung in the
balance. Resistance would have taken this Native imposition to a violent
next stage. But they might not have feared too much. Even though the
missionary himself recorded the incident as plundering, a careful
re-reading of his description suggests that a very concrete, historical
change was manifesting itself.\(^4\) La Forière seems to have planned the
action as an instructive if terrifying drama, underscoring, in this case very
effectively, the differences between European and Amerindian trade.\(^5\)
After all, the Montagnais were instructed to leave furs under the value of
the European goods they took. This was no typical pillaging, despite what
Sagard implied. Furthermore, La Forière had directed his followers not to
seize goods in whatever fashion they wanted but rather to act “one after
another” and in this respect, he was organizing them to imitate French
traders who arrived individualistically and single-mindedly to trade at
Tadoussac. Sagard, indeed, described the Montagnais boarding the boat
“with such insolent boldness” and in single file, one after the other, “took
out from between decks what they wanted, only giving in furs for it what
they chose, without anyone being able to hinder or resist them.”\(^6\)

The story might have ended there but the Montagnais drama was really
only beginning. Just when the French had lost all hope, their ship barren
and factors bankrupted for the season ahead, La Forière brought his
lesson to a reconstructive dénouement. The band could be seen on
shore, taking council. That Sagard was able to understand the gist of their

\(^3\) Sagard, *The Long Journey to the Country of the Hurons*, p. 45. The original French uses
the phrase, “et d’y prendre et emporter toutes les marchandises qui leur faisoient besoin, et
d’en donner si peu de pelleteries qu’ils voudroient, puis qu’on ne l’avoit pas contenté,” p. 298.

\(^4\) On semiotics of colonial era gifting and evident European misconstruing of aboriginal
gift diplomacy, see David Murray, *Indian Giving: Economies of Power in Indian-White
Exchanges* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), pp. 48–68; also, Antonio
Gómez-Moriana, “Narration and Argumentation in the Chronicles of the New World,” in
97–120; on the way words become “arsenals” for European colonists, see Eric Cheyfitz, *The
Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (Oxford:

\(^5\) The French and English could accuse the other of piracy when they pillaged each
other’s ships. See Biard’s relation of his French ship’s pillaging in 1616, Reuben Gold
Thwaites (ed.), *JRAD* Vol. 5 (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1895), pp. 10–11.