These are three Christian mottos, the first two taken from the Gospels, the third an old hymn that was popular until the 1960s, but often seen thereafter as politically incorrect. In this volume about women’s military history, we consider countless groups that range from army and nursing corps and assorted camp followers found in war zones to munitions workers and patriotic organizations on home fronts. To add to the tally, some surprising activity has appeared in a quarter one might expect to be removed from action: the convent. Joining a cloistered order that extricated her from the world, the nun is the last person one might expect to participate in war. Since a convent is an unfortified institution full of single women, it can be a red flag to enemy troops; sisters seem likely to appear as victims in the annals of war if they appear at all.

My theme, however, is just the opposite: convents have been islands of feminine strength and solidarity in a patriarchal world, and their denizens have provided a creative range of responses to warfare. From behind the veil of the “angel of mercy” might emerge a spy, a resistance fighter, or an unblinking imperialist. In studying convents along the St. Lawrence River standing at a crossroads of conflict three centuries ago, I do not intend to whitewash the sisters met there. Clear analysis of how religious women became an integral part of military history can throw light on the topic of women’s military history in general. A group on the front lines, whether a battalion, an air squadron, or a nursing corps, earns its keep if the high command can look to it for sustainable services. Its viability is increased if it also has reliable connections, particularly with those in charge of state decisions. My study examines the responses of religious women in Canada to attacks by three different enemy forces between 1640 and 1775. It shows
how their solid base allowed them to assume Christian guises that could range from loving neighbor all the way to unscrupulous partisan.

“Holy War” and the Haudenousaunee

When historians before 1960 recounted Canada’s founding, they told of a brave band of colonists cruelly tormented by cunning savages lurking in the woods. In the decades that followed, the combined impact of aboriginal rights movements and the evolution of scholarly horizons beyond the European standpoint transformed the narrative. It became understood that the Iroquois (Haudenosauenee) were fighting for their survival; that their methods of torture, while not pretty, had cultural significance; that in terms of casualties, forest warfare was less lethal than European equivalents. Proselytizing by Jesuit missionaries was recast from heroic altruism to the deadly sowing of internal dissension among their Huron (Wendat) allies. Blackrobes were also pilloried as purveyors of European obsessions with female chastity and wifely submission (Trigger 2007; Anderson 1991). Following this revisionism came another wave of more nuanced scholarship that explored religious syncretism and other creative strategies that First Nations developed to deal with new colonial realities (Greer 2004; Sleeper-Smith 2001). Scholars, including a growing number of aboriginal ones (Dickason 2002; Mann 2000, Sioui 1999) continue to reassess the meaning of aboriginal race and gender in colonial history.

It is time to revisit the female missionaries who marched with the other “Christian soldiers.” Accounts of devout female founders have begun to incorporate questions about the value of their work among aboriginal girls and women, and to examine post-Tridentine Catholic attitudes to feminine activism (Gourdeau 1994; Davis 1995; Rapley 1995; Deslandres 2003). The present study provides fresh perspective by positioning religious women within a military framework. Among the “Church Militant” were Ursuline and Augustinian Hospital sisters who were the first nuns to arrive in New France in 1639; three years later, other women ventured deep into the woods, the very heart of enemy territory, where they founded a controversial settlement to convert First Nations. Initially named Ville Marie after the Virgin Mary, Montreal (today the second largest predominantly French-speaking city in the world) has been singled out as a rare example of a city founded for religious purposes. Two of the best-known founders started projects that gave rise to convents. Jeanne Mance is regarded, along with