CHAPTER I

From Sea Monsters and Savages to Sorcerers and Satan: A History of Fear in New France

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In his path-breaking work, *La peur en Occident* (1978), Jean Delumeau called attention to the “climate of fear” in early modern Europe, which had not been given its due by earlier historians.¹ The product of famine, plague, warfare, and religious upheaval, this culture of fear had been repressed, first by the aristocratic ideal of bravery, then by the cult of popular heroism that took shape during the age of democratic revolutions. Delumeau's painstaking inventory of the fears affecting both common and educated folk provided important insights into what was also Europe's first age of Atlantic expansion.

The New World, as Delumeau pointed out, gave rise to eschatological fears among the elite and more prosaic anxieties among the unlettered. Christian missionaries rushed to convert pagan Americans before it was too late, while prospective colonists weighed the potential advantage of starting afresh against their fear of the unknown.² The French, who entered the race for Atlantic empire in the sixteenth century, were no exception in this regard. France's American colonies were frightening places, whether for those who clamored to their shores in anticipation of martyrdom or those who rioted in the streets to prevent the embarkation of neighbors and loved ones.³

² Ibid, 44, 205. Despite this important insight, Delumeau’s “Occident” rarely stretches across the Atlantic. An important aim of this collection is to offer an American sequel or complement to his work.
³ Whether actual or merely rumored, departures for the colonies provoked a number of riots in French towns. Examples include La Flèche in 1659, where townspeople trying to stop three nuns from leaving for Montréal had to be dispersed by force; and Angers in 1662, where a levee of workers for Newfoundland provoked a panic in which more than thirty people were trampled. Despite a 1663 edict of the Parlement of Paris prohibiting kidnapping “by stealth and violence, of girls and boys under the pretext of sending them to America,” riots broke out in the capital in 1720, 1750, and 1769 in response to arrests of vagabonds and beggars, allegedly for shipment to the colonies. See Louise Dechêne, *Le peuple, l’État et la guerre au Canada sous le Régime français* (Montréal: Boréal, 2008), 64–65; Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *Logiques de la foule. L’affaire des enlèvements d’enfants. Paris 1750* (Paris: Hachette, 1988); Jeffry Kaplow,
It stands to reason that the colonists of New France brought their fears with them when they crossed the Atlantic. As Louise Dechêne pointed out, two-thirds of them came from France’s western provinces, “regions regularly perturbed by violence of every sort.” Moreover, the first pioneers came of age at the end of the religious wars and during the wave of popular rebellions, when “la doulce France was put to fire and sword.” The same factors, however, worked in New France as in the metropolis to conceal the extent of fear within the population. A powerful military ethos pervaded the colony’s elite, even – or perhaps especially – those not born to the nobility of the sword. After the British Conquest, heroic values continued to predominate, as nationalist historians crafted a discourse designed to instill pride in origins, thereby assured French-Canadian survivance.

By the twenty-first century, Canadian historians had begun to contest the pious glorification of the French colonial past. Dechêne, in her posthumous study of New France at war, went so far as to foreground the theme of collective fear, among rulers as well the ruled. Likewise, Gregory Kennedy’s 2014 book on Acadia challenged the image of the colony as a “peasant paradise,” presenting it instead as a militarized borderland characterized by fear, deprivation, and violence. No one, however, has systematically examined the full range of fear factors identified by Delumeau in the context of New France. That is the task of this chapter. Like Delumeau, I divide the discussion into two parts, according to social class: the fears of the majority; and the ruling culture of fear.

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4 Dechêne, Le peuple, l’État et la guerre au Canada, 97–98. Since the eighteenth century, the term New France has been used in different ways. In its most restrictive sense, it refers to the Laurentian colony, also known as Canada. In its wider sense, it includes all French colonies north of the Caribbean, from the failed Huguenot settlement in Florida to the French colonies of Acadia, the St. Lawrence Valley, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi. For the purposes of this essay, I adopt an intermediate definition, including Acadia along with the St. Lawrence but excluding the western and southern territories. These are worthy of treatment in their own right, not least because of the rise of a plantation economy in Louisiana.


7 See the forward by Thomas Wien in Dechêne, Le peuple, l’État et la guerre au Canada, 22.