Dominique Deslandres, John Alexander Dickinson, and Ollivier Hubert (Eds.)


In 2007 three historians of the Université de Montréal, Dominique Deslandres, John A. Dickinson, and Ollivier Hubert, edited and authored a 670-page history of Canada’s Society of Saint-Sulpice, a Roman Catholic community of ordained priests. Published in French by Fides, the book was invariably praised by reviewers, one of whom, Jesuit historian Jacques Monet, described it as “a monument not only to Montréal and the Sulpicians but also to its researchers and authors.” The Sulpicians’ presence and significance in French Canada is so well known that it only needs be recounted here in a few words. The earliest members of the community (not a regular order proper) were sent to Montréal in 1657 as priests, seigneurs, and, almost immediately, representatives of the bishop (as vicars general). They remained after the Conquest of 1760, were able to fend off the British Crown’s attempt to get hold of their rather extensive properties, secured their legal rights as a corporation (1840), and went through a period of significant expansion until shortly after World War I. Catastrophic management then plunged the Society into a period of extreme difficulties (1921–1937). This crisis, however, was followed by further expansion, and then, immediately following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), by yet another period of deep crisis, this one of a vocational nature. Throughout their history the Sulpicians of Montréal, who in 1764 had severed their official link with their French mother institution, were priests, educators, teachers of priests, and missionaries to the aboriginal peoples. They were also builders, entrepreneurs, members of the political élite, and main actors in Montréal’s world of learning and culture.

To tell their story on the occasion of the community’s 350th anniversary of their arrival in Montréal, the Province of Canada had asked Deslandres, Dickinson, and Hubert to “produce a scholarly study” (p. 16, also p. 119), one that was to shy away from the notoriously hagiographic style of this kind of celebrations. To make it possible for them to do so the Province opened up its archives (now part of a larger corporation called “Univers Culturel de Saint-Sulpice”) and assured full collaboration (p. 87). The book shows no sign of any control having been exercised by the Province over the writing of their own history, yet most individual authors have been keen in concluding their respective chapters on a favourable and constructive note (see for example pp. 87, 580, 603). For their part, the three editors chose and put to work a selected
group of historians, all based in the Province of Québec, and an impressive number of researchers and research assistants. In the end, the book consisted of 21 chapters authored by fifteen scholars. The editors wrote ten of them. The 2007 Fides book was also beautifully and carefully produced, including 48 full-colour plates and 162 black and white images. Des Rochers was responsible for iconographic research. The corpus of the book was followed by a list of the 650 or so Sulpicians who had been members of the Province, a lengthy bibliography, and a careful index.

Five years later, English-speaking readers are regaled with a 705-page “revised” and “updated” translation of the book, signed by Steven Watt. This appears to be as impressive and as lavish as the original volume. The new publisher has practically followed the Fides edition to the last detail. The translation is indeed very good. Random checks in sentences that were unclear at first glance proved that the occasional awkwardness or inconclusiveness was in the original French, not in its translation. See, for example, the following one: “[T]he city’s Sulpician institutions represented an ideal of ecclesiastical life and action, conceived in France during a rigourist 17th century, developed in Canada in a manner more perfect and more permanent than anywhere else. Historians of Quebec have yet to fully think of the implications of this phenomenon” (p. 414). What implications indeed? One would like to know more about them. Similarly, two “bear witness” in the same page (p. 302) reflect the same verb “témoigner” in the original, as do two misplaced traits d’ unions in John Joseph Connolly and Joseph-Alexandre Baile (pp. 305, 328), and a “Marie” and “Maria” Petit in the same page (p. 339). In most cases, Watt has also made the good choice to keep the French original technical word in the text (curé, papier terrier, lods et ventes, dames de quartier), but to have it followed by its English translation (except for rentes [p. 192]). Unfortunately, proof reading could have been much better. In as many as six occasions, footnotes and main text are merged in smaller font; also, two footnotes are merged with the main text in between (pp. 44–45, 57, 95, 216–217, 336–337, 517). Furthermore, in a number of footnotes and in the bibliography, fonts and punctuation are incorrect (pp. 107, 186, 217, 287, 320, 322, 330, 389, 444, 612, 617). To be sure, none of these mistakes are extant in the original French book. There again, some mistakes that could have been corrected are simply copied from the French version, for example “Civita Cattolica” instead of “Civiltà Cattolica” and “Peter McCleod” instead of “Peter MacLeod” (pp. 72, 371). Finally, the entry ‘Sacred Congregation’ in the index makes no sense (and misses in that way at least one reference, that to p. 406), because it is the result of the merging of several entries in the original French index which instead correctly referred to very different institutions.