

Olive Patricia Dickason. The Myth of the Savage And
the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas.
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Olive Dickason presents a searching overview of the many frontiers on which Native Americans and Europeans first met. At one level, the study assesses the social dynamics which channeled the encounter. At another, it details the developing economic, political, and legal rationale for colonization. Still more, Dickason frames her three sections and thirteen chapters with a fresh reexamination of the cross-cultural sources of what soon became the "Indian problem". This study works.

In the first section, Dickason grounds the problem in the impressionistic anthropology of the sixteenth century. She locates its formation in the Christian view of man as sinful by nature and urbane in culture. French culture, Dickason shows, was firmly rooted in an aristocratic and occupational stratification which duplicated the complex chain of being separating man and God. From first contact, the French associated Native Americans with their traditional ambivalent symbol of nature: L'Homme Sauvage, the wild man of the woods.

Section two concentrates on the preconceptions and rationalizations which operated on both sides of the early contact frontier. She reconstructs the relationship in fishing, trading, and diplomatic situations. Three aspects of these meetings especially stand out. Dickason thoroughly examines the legal justifications for France's developing colonial policy in the light of European diplomatic rivalries, provides a provocative account of the critical American Indian reactions while visiting Europe, and freshly exposes the social values which informed both Indian and European responses.

In a final section, Dickason examines the economic, political, and religious foundations of New France. Here, as throughout, her command of the ethnological record generates

many new insights. Her view of the development of the colony is particularly well balanced because she draws on an understanding of cross-cultural economics. For example, Dickason demonstrates that American Indian redistributive economies were far more compatible to French commerce than is usually appreciated. Similarly, she not only relates French commercial pragmatism to equally important missionary motivations, she also shows that American Indian sensibilities contributed much to the ideological agreement which grounded the religious alliance.

If much of this seems familiar, Dickason tells the story with revealing detail and comprehensive documentation. As importantly, the book reproduces many illustrations from contemporary sources which are, in themselves, invaluable for comprehending the encounter. All told this is a major contribution.

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