

Nicolas Denys: The Chronology and Historiography of an Acadian Hero

Bernard Pothier

Volume 1, Number 1, Autumn 1971

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad1_1art03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pothier, B. (1971). Nicolas Denys: The Chronology and Historiography of an Acadian Hero. *Acadiensis*, 1(1), 54–70.

BERNARD POTHIER

Nicolas Denys: The Chronology and Historiography of an Acadian Hero

The place of honour reserved for Nicolas Denys has been an enviable one. Traditionally, historians of both English-speaking Canada and French-Canada have presented the image, largely, of an honest and virtuous man, steadfast, upright, sincere and tenacious in his determination to secure an honourable livelihood from the Acadian setting he allegedly had come to love. Denys, in short, has been perhaps the most endearing historical figure of Acadia. From the 1950's, however, a large volume of hitherto unknown documents, collateral to his own writings, was brought to light by diligent searchers.¹ Although it became possible from the mid-1950's to reappraise the significance of Denys' career in Acadia, very little in fact was undertaken.

This paper proposes to review the career of Nicolas Denys in the light of recent findings, and to relate his activities to New France in the seventeenth century and the development of French trade and commerce overseas. It is proposed as well to review briefly the historiography of Nicolas Denys which, in many respects, has evolved in a manner less dependant upon the rules of historical scholarship than upon the emotions generated by national and regional pride.

II

Nicolas Denys' origins are obscure. The family was from Tours or that general area where, seemingly, they had been established for several generations.² Nicolas' great-grandfather, Mathurin Denis, was a "capitaine des gardes du

1 Especially noteworthy are the *Papiers Fouquet* which were discovered in 1953 by René Baudry at the *Archives Départementales de l'Ille-et-Vilaine* at Rennes. This collection, comprising thirty or so letters in the hand of Nicolas Denys, constitutes by far the most important single primary source in a study of Denys.

2 There is no evidence to suggest that the Denys were descended from Jehan Denys, the Honfleur fisherman who sailed in North American waters early in the sixteenth century. See the amusing and largely fanciful *Memorial of the Family of Forsyths de Fronsac* (Boston, 1903), p. 7; W. F. Ganong, *Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North American (Acadia)* (Toronto, The Champlain Society, 1908), p. 9 (Henceforth cited as *Description and Natural History*).

Roi"; his grandfather, Jacques Denis, "Capitaine de Roy et commissaire général des vivres des armées du Roi." The latter had apparently met his death at Candie fighting with the Venetians.³ Nicolas' father, also called Jacques, sieur de la Thibaudière, was "conseiller du Roi" and "Lieutenant en l'Election de Tours."⁴ He married Marie Cosnier, the daughter of an Italian, and had at least three sons: Simon, Jacques and Nicolas, all born at Tours.⁵ Nicolas is the only one whose birthdate is reasonably certain: a judicial document dated November 1640 claims he was at that time "agé de trante ung an ou environ."⁶ Denys de la Thibaudière, who died before 1642, saw all three of his known sons become mariners.

In the light of so little information, one readily understands why the Denys family over the years has been the subject of much conjecture. Some historians have suggested Nicolas was of a "family of distinction,"⁷ possibly even related to the Razillys.⁸ Couillard-Després, Charles de La Tour's panegyrist, claimed the family was both wealthy and powerful, and ennobled even in France,⁹ that is, well before Nicolas' brother Simon received his letters-patent of nobility in Québec in 1668. Even Moreau, Menou D'Aulnay's eulogist, and consequently little attracted to either Denys or his testimony in support of La Tour, reluctantly admitted that Denys de La Thibaudière "n'était pas absolument sans fortune."¹⁰ Emile Lauvrière referred to Nicolas as a merchant of Tours,¹¹ but this is not substantiated in the primary sources. Nor is there evidence to corroborate Denys' own casual mention as having been "issu de rasse d'ingénieur."¹²

Denys' own published works, and to an even greater extent his personal correspondence unedited and unrevised, reflect the modest extent of his formal education, to which all historians have agreed. It is obvious that both he and his brothers were well practised in the art of seamanship, for all three

3 "Tableau généalogique de la famille Denis," [n.d.], Anciens fonds français (A.f.f.), Dossiers bleus 29780, fol. 17, Bibliothèque National (BN).

4 Contrat de mariage entre Nicolas Denys et Marguerite Lafitte, 30 septembre 1642, E (Teuleron), reg. 1642, Archives Départementales (AD), Charente-Maritime.

5 There is no primary source evidence of Nicolas' place of birth.

6 Audition cathégorique de N. Denys, 7 novembre 1640, B5656, premier dossier, pièce 4, AD, Charente-Maritime. Tradition has assumed that Nicolas Denys was born "around 1598."

7 J. C. Webster, "The Classics of Acadia," *C.H.A. Report*, 1933, p. 8.

8 S. Marion, *Relations des voyageurs français en Nouvelle-France au dix-septième siècle* (Paris, 1923), p. 82.

9 A. Couillard-Després, *Charles de Saint-Etienne de la Tour, gouverneur, lieutenant-général en Acadie, et son temps, 1653-1666* (Arthabaska, 1930), pp. 231-232.

10 C. Moreau, *Histoire de l'Acadie Française, 1598-1755* (Paris, 1873), p. 122.

11 E. Lauvrière, *Brève histoire tragique du peuple acadien, son martyre, sa résurrection* (Paris, 1947), p. 12.

12 Papiers Fouquet (PAC photocopy), pp. 13-14, E (Fonds de la Bourdonnaye Montluc), AD, Ille-et-Vilaine (Henceforth Papiers Fouquet).

were to hold naval commissions.¹³ No other evidence, however, points to the nature, the extent, or the setting of Nicolas' navigations previous to his coming to Acadia in 1632. Lauvrière, followed by Rumilly, suggests that he navigated, even traded, along the coasts of New France before the 1630's,¹⁴ but again the primary evidence fails to corroborate this. Nor is it known whether he engaged in navigation and trade along the Loire, between Tours and Nantes, or in the coastal trade in the vicinity of Nantes and La Rochelle.

III

Nicolas Denys' association with Acadia dates from July, 1631,¹⁵ around the time that the Razilly company, a subsidiary of the *Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France*, began its preparations for a major campaign to reclaim Acadia and to lay the foundations for a vigorous new French colonization effort. In July 1632, Denys, in command of one of several vessels of the Razilly expedition, sailed for the New World and in September, arrived at La Hève, the site chosen for the principal settlement.¹⁶

Prior to his leaving France, Denys had concluded with Claude de Razilly and a Breton merchant named Bazille (the latter providing the financial backing) a commercial agreement whereby he was to found in Acadia a settlement "... pour y faire pescherie et aultres chose à leur proffit."¹⁷ To this end, in the spring of 1633, aided by his brother Simon, he launched his first venture into the fishery of the New World, at Port Rossignol, some twenty-five miles Southwest of La Hève (in modern Liverpool Bay), "très bien situé pour la pesche de la molue qui y est en abondance."¹⁸

Unfortunately, Denys has transmitted very little detail on the station. Failing a knowledge of the specifics surrounding the history of the Port Rossignol fishery, it is reasonable to assume that the beginning was modest. Denys probably followed the usual mid-seventeenth century pattern of the French Atlantic dry cod fishery; the vessel he used was in all likelihood the same one he captained in 1632. His most important associate was undoubtedly the Auray merchant Bazille, the principal *bailleur de fonds*. We know nothing of the number of

13 Arbitrage entre Nicolas Denys et H. Camus, 10 décembre 1636, E (Teuleron), reg. 1636-79, AD, Charente-Maritime; *Description géographique et historique des costes de l'Amérique septentrionale* . . . (Paris, 1672), p. 93 (Henceforth *Description*); Cession . . . à N. Denys de L'habitation de Miscou, 25 avril 1645, Minutier central des notaires, Etude XC, art. 208 (Motelet), Archives Nationales (AN).

14 E. Lauvrière, *La Tragédie d'un peuple* (Paris, 1922), I, p. 62; and R. Rumilly, *Histoire des Acadiens* (Montréal, 1955), I, p. 53.

15 E (Teuleron), reg. 1636, 1er dossier, fol. 21v, AD, Charente-Maritime.

16 Commentaire sur la lettre du 16 août 1634, de Razilly à Lescarbot, A.f.f., Manuscrits isolés 13423, fol. 348v-350, BN.

17 Dissolution d'une Société constituée . . . entre Claude de Razilly, Bazille et N. Denys . . . , 11 janvier 1634, Minutier central des notaires, Etude XVI, Art. 68 (Rémond), AN.

18 *Description*, p. 86.

men and *chaloupes* engaged, or of the number and nature of the buildings on the station.

According to Denys' own account, the first season in 1633 ". . . me réussit assez bien . . ."¹⁹ and the cargo of cod he entrusted to his brother Simon found a ready market in Brittany, thanks to the partner Bazille. Indeed, such was the success of this first campaign that a much larger vessel, the *Catherine* of 200 *tonneaux*, was purchased. The second season as well "nous réussit encore fort bien."²⁰ Bazille had ordered the cargo sold at Oporto, Portugal.²¹ There, unfortunately, Simon Denys became the victim of the entanglements which surrounded France's declaration of war against Spain (of which Portugal was then a part) in May 1635. The major portion of his cargo was seized, as was his vessel, and he himself was incarcerated in Madrid for a time.²² The Oporto-Madrid incident constituted a severe setback for Denys, and in 1635 he accordingly was forced to abandon the Port Rossignol enterprise.

Nicolas' brother, Simon, apparently fared better, for Richelieu appointed him to command a king's vessel in return for intelligence carried from the French ambassador in Madrid. Despite the facile assurance Richelieu gave to Simon Denys, neither the *Catherine* nor the value of the greater part of her cargo were recovered. Of this inauspicious incident Nicolas was moved to remark caustically: "Ces belles paroles furent tout le recouvrement que nous en avons fait."²³

Having thus suffered his first in a long series of failures in Acadia, Denys was deprived now of both the collaboration of his brother, and the financial backing of Bazille. In 1635, he shifted his energies away from the fishery, to the exploitation of the Acadian forest. In the spring or summer of 1635, he repaired to a new grant, across the La Hève river from Razilly's fort. "J'avais choisi un . . . endroit," he wrote, "de l'autre côté de la rivière . . . & sur le bord d'une petite rivière qui tombait dans la grande où j'avais fait bâtir un logement."²⁴ The detail Denys gives of the physical aspects of his lumber enterprise on the La Hève is scant. He built a *logement* for himself and the dozen men he employed. "J'avois douze hommes avec moy," he wrote, "les uns labourers, les autres faiseurs de mairrain ou douves pour barriques,²⁵ charpentiers, & d'autres pour la chasse."²⁶ His men cut mostly oak, "qui estoit tout ce que je cherchois."²⁷ The

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

21 It is not without significance that they should seek the South European market, where the bulk of France's yield in dry cod was sold. Green cod, on the other hand, was almost entirely disposed of on the domestic market, notably in Paris.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 87-93. Denys is our sole source for this episode.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

25 That is, barrel-stave makers.

26 *Description*, p. 98.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

timber-cutting interlude was obviously Denys' most gratifying Acadian experience, as may be judged by the effusiveness with which he recalled his life and labours at La Hève nearly forty years after the events:

... J'étois muni de toutes sortes de provisions, nous faisons bonne chere car le gibier ne nous manquoit point, du haut de ma petite rivière traversant quatre ou cinq cens pas dans le bois j'allois en de grands estangs plains de givier où je faisois ma chasse²⁸

Despite his zeal and enthusiasm and Razilly's patronage, however, Denys' lumber scheme was not to outlive even the abortive fishing enterprise at Port Rossignol. Following Razilly's death from unspecified causes in the autumn of 1635, his brother Claude conferred the details of the colony's administration upon Charles d'Aulnay who, like Denys, was an agent of the company who had come out in the founding expedition of 1632.²⁹ D'Aulnay was apparently less than tolerant of any form of individual enterprise that was not his own, and it was not long before Denys was compelled to abandon his New World ambitions. He spent from 1635 to 1642 at La Rochelle, "... gerant et negotiant les affaires [des] assotiez en Le peuplade de la Coste de l'Acadie..."³⁰ In 1642, the year he married Marguerite La Fitte, the daughter of a wealthy Bordeaux merchant, he severed his connections with Acadia altogether; d'Aulnay had acquired the controlling interest in the Razilly company.

In spite of his voluntary withdrawal from the affairs of the company, Denys' enthusiasm for New France continued. In 1645, he leased the trading privilege of the Miscou company, another subsidiary of the *Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France*, for a period of nine years.³¹ At the company's station, situated at the northern end of Shippegan Island, just to the left of the present Miscou Island ferry wharf, Denys attempted a return to the dry fishery. His own brief account, however, is misleading in that the emphasis he places on his crops has long given historians the impression his main concern at Miscou was agriculture rather than the fishery.³² In the absence of any specific reference to fishing, French-Canadians, enraptured as they have been in the past by the mystique of agri-

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

29 Commentaire . . . [1634], A.f.f., Manuscrits isolés 13423, fol. 348v-50, BN. Although, as far as I have been able to gather, it has never been reported in our secondary writings to date, the interim in Acadia was assured, not by D'Aulnay, but by "... monsieur de Poincy commandant à présent en ce fort et habitation Sainte-Marie-de-Grâce à la Hève selon l'intention de feu mondit sieur le Commandeur de Razilly déclaré par ces derniers volontés," Inventaire . . . d'Isaac de Razilly, [1635], E (David), AD, Indre-et-Loire.

30 Obligation entre N. Denys et J. Loyau, 9 mai 1636, E (Juppén), reg. 1635-36, fol. 251v-252, AD, Charente-Maritime.

31 Cession . . . à N. Denys de l'habitation de Miscou, 25 avril 1645, Minutier central des notaires, Etude XC, Art. 208 (Motelet), AN.

32 *Description*, p. 192.

cultural pursuits, have interpreted Denys' situation at Miscou as one of bucolic comfort, even elegance.³³ It is not likely, however, that his adventures in agriculture attempted anything beyond stocking his own table in the summer of 1646, the only season he himself came out to Miscou. This was the general practice of the fishing captains who sought in this way to supplement an otherwise insipid and unhealthy diet.

Denys' Miscou endeavor was to suffer a fate similar to his previous ones. In February 1647, the crown, in indisputable contradiction with the charter issued twenty years previously to the *Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France*, awarded d'Aulnay the governorship of all the territory which extended from the Saint-Lawrence to Virginia, along with the exclusive rights to the fur trade therein. Accordingly, in September, d'Aulnay dispatched a boat to Miscou and Denys' lieutenant was forced to relinquish both the station and its effects, valued together at more than 8,000 *livres*.³⁴ Later, as he recalled the Miscou misadventure, and his previous ones as well, Denys observed bitterly that "tant qu'il n'y aura point d'ordre & que l'on ne sera point assuré de la jouissance de ses concessions, le pais ne se peuplera jamais & sera toujours à l'abandon des Ennemis de la France."³⁵ Recurring misfortune notwithstanding (and herein lies his well-deserved reputation for endurance), Nicolas Denys in 1650 arranged to lease Cape Breton Island. He was able to persuade his brother Simon once more to join him in his newest adventure, and once back in Acadia, he learned of the unexpected but propitious demise by drowning of his rival d'Aulnay in May. The 1650 season was devoted to restoring the abandoned stations at Saint-Pierre (modern Saint Peter's) and Sainte-Anne (modern Englishtown).³⁶

It was not long, however, before Denys became embroiled in a new set of adverse circumstances, at the hands this time of the La Rochelle merchant, Emmanuel Leborgne, d'Aulnay's principal creditor, and a man whose astuteness in matters of trade infinitely surpassed that of Denys. As at Miscou four years previously, Denys was attacked by Leborgne, at Cape Breton in 1651. Both he and Simon were sent to Québec in October aboard a frigate belonging to the Jesuits.³⁷ For Simon, this was the last enterprise in Acadia. He settled immediately in Québec where he acquired several land grants over a period of years. He served the *Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France* as "procureur fiscal et receveur général," was appointed to the *Conseil souverain* and, finally, received from the King letters-patent of nobility in 1668. In 1679 he was reported as having become blind.³⁸

33 Couillard-Després, *LaTour*, p. 388; and A. Bernard, *Le drame Acadien* (Montréal, 1936), p. 104.

34 *Description*, pp. 192-193.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

36 Chartre-partie entre N. Denys et S. Denys, et J. Gaudoin, 20 juin 1650, Minutes Moreau, reg. 1650, ms. 1840, fol. 150v-51, Archives Maritimes et de Bibliothèques, Bibliothèque de la Rochelle.

37 C. H. Laverdière et H. R. Casgrain, eds., *Le Journal des jésuites* (Québec, 1871), p. 162.

38 On Simon Denys, see the inadequate biography in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, 1966), I, pp. 261-62. On his blindness, see *Collection de manuscrits . . .* (Québec, 1883), I, p. 273.

Nicolas, meanwhile, remained the winter of 1651-52 in Québec seeking redress. Though nothing is known of the extent of the satisfaction Denys obtained, his sojourn in Québec must have been encouraging, for in May 1652, as determined and irreducible as ever, he returned to Acadia³⁹ and founded a new station at Nepisiquit (modern Bathurst, N. B.).⁴⁰ Possibly, he hoped that he might be less vulnerable, being some further distance from the heart of Acadia. The following spring he returned to Saint-Pierre "avec commission de messieurs de la Compagnie pour la faire habiter."⁴¹ His latest commission notwithstanding, Leborgne attacked him anew, destroying the fort, pillaging his supplies, and confining Denys to irons in the Port Royal dungeon. After some time, the latter returned to France, "pour faire mes plaintes" as he put it.⁴² There he obtained from the *Compagnie* an outright grant to the vast Gulf territory from Cap Desrosiers to Cap Canceaux. Early in 1654 he was appointed by the Crown governor of the same territory.⁴³

Denys, of course, would have preferred, to the empty rhetoric which so characterized the politics of the Fronde at this time, adequate material compensation for his losses. However disappointed he may have been, he sought out nevertheless fresh sources of capital in anticipation of a return to Acadia. It was at this time that he met Jacob Duquesne of the famed naval family, who was to provide the occasion for the financial support for this phase of his career. Through Duquesne he met as well Christophe Fouquet de Châlin, a cousin of the infamous Nicolas Fouquet, the French *surintendant des finances*, who was soon to be disgraced, and succeeded by Colbert. The association with Duquesne and Fouquet inaugurated a long and bitter partnership which was ultimately to destroy irremediably Denys' hopes for a profit in New France.

His gravest obstacle remained Leborgne's fondness for litigation; Denys was to prove particularly inept in the face of the legal gymnastics of this shrewd and well-connected antagonist. Nor was he helped by his new-found patrons; impressed by the fact that so much litigation was bad for business, Duquesne and Fouquet pressed continually for an accommodation with Leborgne which was decidedly prejudicial to Denys' interests.⁴⁴ Indeed, had it not been for pressure from Leborgne and the questionable support of his backers, it is possible that Denys actually might have gained some success from this, the final phase of his active life in Acadia.

39 *Journal des jésuites*, p. 167.

40 *Description*, p. 210.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

43 Concession de la compagnie de la Nouvelle-France en faveur de N. Denys, 3 décembre 1653, Col., C11 D1, fol. 93-94v, AN; Provisions pour N. Denys de Gouverneur et lieutenant-général en Canada, 30 janvier 1654, *ibid.*, E 119 (Dossier N. Denys). Denys' previous arrangements were leases from the *Compagnie de la Nouvelle France*, or its subsidiaries.

44 Denys à Fouquet, 20 janvier 1657, *Papiers Fouquet*, pp. 3-4; Denys à Fouquet, 14 avril 1657, *ibid.*, pp. 21-22; Transaction finale réglant le différend Denys-Leborgne, [4 july] 1657, *ibid.*

Duquesne and Fouquet put up the money for four of Denys' campaigns: in 1654, 1656, 1657 and 1658, and with each new outfit, he fell deeper, ultimately hopelessly into debt. That his financial plight should become more precarious with each succeeding year illustrates perfectly what Marcel Delafosse describes as "les traits communs aux entreprises liant marchands rochelais et entrepreneurs canadiens"⁴⁵ as the seventeenth century wore on, it was with increasing difficulty that the high cost of financing vessels, merchandise and manpower (not to mention interest on borrowed capital at 30%, plus 15% on the unpaid balance) could be met by the relatively unrewarding returns in fish and fur.⁴⁶ Fur in particular decreased steadily in value as the home market became glutted and the demand declined in the wake of the vagaries of changing fashions on the continent. As an essential corollary to his increasing debt, Denys could not hope to extricate himself by simply remaining idle. He was forced to carry on, relying on the increasingly remote possibility of a boom year, and realizing, apparently for the first time, the bitter reality of small-scale commercial enterprise in New France: "La peche sédentaire n'a aucun avantage . . . car le pais n'est pas capable de nory nombre de monde comme je lay creu . . . Le peu de blay qu'il y a . . . , gibier et viande rare . . . , mouches et maringouins ne donnent de repos jour et nuit."⁴⁷

From 1658 Nicolas Denys remained in Acadia, daring not to return to France to face the wrath of his creditors who, more irascible than ever, threatened to send an armed vessel to Saint-Pierre to seize his holdings outright. Nothing illustrates more clearly the consistency with which Nicolas Denys, seemingly, courted material difficulty than does his abrupt decision in 1660 to transfer his operation to Chedabouctou in peninsular Acadia.⁴⁸ His motivation for this action was to create a solid agricultural base for the fishery for which, he felt, Chedabouctou was better suited than Saint-Pierre.⁴⁹ Pushing his rashness further, he expressed his intention to dabble for a time in the extraction of fish oils before returning to the fishery.⁵⁰ This rash diversification first into agriculture, then into the extraction of fish oils, at the expense of his already precarious mainstay, the fishery, made his complete ruin inevitable.

It was not long before Denys was drawn into a territorial dispute which hastened his final ruin. In 1660 Charles de Conigan, marquis de Cangé, who had earlier been granted valid rights to the territory slightly beyond Cape Canso, claimed unfairly that Chedabouctou as well lay within the bounds of

45 M. Delafosse, "La Rochelle au Canada au XVIIe siècle," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique française* (1951-52), p. 483.

46 This was the case as well for La Tour and d'Aulnay. The former died heavily mortgaged to Edward Gibbon of Boston, while d'Aulnay died inextricably indebted to Leborgne.

47 Denys à Fouquet, 8 août 1664, *Papiers Fouquet*, pp. 44-47.

48 Denys à Abraham Duquesne, 15 août 1660, *Papiers Fouquet*, pp. 38-39.

49 Denys' bent for agriculture in this instance was directed to curbing the high cost of purchasing foodstuffs in France and shipping them to Acadia. Never before had he gone beyond the modest production of fresh vegetables for his own personal requirements.

50 Denys à Abraham Duquesne, 15 août 1660, *Papiers Fouquet*, pp. 38-39.

his grant. In consequence thereof, his lieutenant, La Girodière, besieged Denys' new settlement and though the latter stood his ground, the action cost him 15,000 *écus*, for which, of course, he was not compensated.⁵¹ The irony of Denys' entire luckless career is perhaps no more manifest than in his own account of the incident: in one breath he explains with obvious pride that the *Compagnie* "me rétablissait dans tous mes droits," and in the next he is forced to conclude that the incident nevertheless "rompit toutes mes mesures, en telle sorte que je n'ay pû m'y rétablir."⁵²

Even after this, his last and his most inglorious endeavor, Nicolas Denys returned to Saint-Pierre in 1662. Very little is known henceforth of his movements. Alone now with his family and a handful of domestics, he subsisted virtually off the wilderness, his livelihood supplemented by the meagre returns of the fur trade. This was his condition in the winter of 1668-69 when he suffered his final humiliation, the total destruction of Saint-Pierre by fire. Following this latest tragedy, the Denys made their way through the forests in winter to the totally inadequate shelter of the outpost founded seventeen years previously at Nepisiquit.⁵³ Nicolas himself remained there a little more than a year before returning to France in the course of 1670. It was the last time he was to see Acadia.

IV

After Nicolas Denys returned to France in 1670, irrevocably discredited in business circles, he set to placing on record the experiences of his forty years in Acadia. However difficult it is to ascertain the motives which compelled Denys to undertake his two-volume work,⁵⁴ there probably is a significant relationship between this new endeavor and the association he had inaugurated some years earlier with Esprit Cabart de Villermont.⁵⁵ Nicolas Denys was not

51 *Description*, p. 13.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

54 Ganong, in particular, ascribed various motives to Denys, notably the compulsion to explain and justify his failures as the machinations of his enemies. It is plausible that Denys hoped, at the same time, to preserve his life from oblivion, and to recoup some part of his shattered fortunes (cf. *Description and Natural History*, pp. 26-27). It is highly unlikely, on the other hand, that, already past sixty years of age, Denys should devote much more of his energy to attracting public notice in the form of settlers, capital and government protection to Acadia.

55 Cabart de Villermont (1617-1707) had served as governor of the Iles d'Hyères, off the Riviera coast, and as *Lieutenant de Roi* at Cayenne, in America. Proficient in languages, and keenly interested in geography, he reputedly had amassed a splendid library on the subject of voyages of discovery in America. His friends and correspondents included influential court figures, scholars and explorers such as the Maréchal de Noailles, the two de l'Isles, the abbés Bernou, Dangeau and Renaudot, Nicolas Thoynard, Claude Perrault, Michel Bégon, Tonty and Le Moyne d'Iberville (*Dictionnaire de biographie française*, VIII, p. 758; M. Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française* (Paris, 1953), I, pp. 10-19; Y. Bézard, *Fonctionnaires maritimes et coloniaux sous Louis XIV: les Bégon* (Paris, 1932), p. 174).

a scholar, as he himself was quick to admit: "Vous excuserez un pescheur; si j'avois autant employé de temps à l'étude que j'ai fait à m'instruire & à rechercher les moyens de suivre la molue . . . , je vous aurais donné plus de satisfaction en tout ce recit que je n'ay fait."⁵⁶ When Denys wrote "je me suis enfin rendu à la prière de quelques-uns de mes amis, & que j'ay accordé à leur curiosité la Description que je vous donne,"⁵⁷ it is not unlikely that he had Cabart principally in mind.

Denys completed the manuscript of the *Description* and *Histoire Naturelle* in September 1671,⁵⁸ and the following year, two separate in-octavo editions in two volumes were published in Paris by the bookseller-publishers Claude Barbin and Louis Billaine. In its presentation, the first volume, the *Description*, was conceived somewhat as a journey from the Penobscot, in the south, to the Saint Lawrence, in the north. Denys' observations on navigation, the presence and characteristics of rivers, coves, safe harbours, and similar natural features are interspersed with the mention of noteworthy events, and the occasional anecdote associated with various places and events. For the second volume, the *Histoire Naturelle*, Denys adopted a thematic approach; he expounded upon the climate, the fishery, the peculiarities of the North American flora and fauna, and finally upon the Indians.

Insofar as Denys' style of writing is concerned, he himself apologized profusely in his "Avertissement au lecteur" for what he termed:

[le] peu d'application que J'ay eu toute ma vie à la symmetrie des mots ou à leur arrangement: En effet il auroit esté à souhaiter pour la satisfaction du lecteur, que cet Ouvrage eust esté écrit d'un stile differend de celui qu'il y a cinquante ans je pratique, sans que mes occupations maritimes & une fréquentations de près de quarante annes avec des sauvages m'aient jamais pû donner le loisir de la changer.⁵⁹

Ganong, a part of whose introduction to the *Description and Natural History* constitutes the best critical commentary on the subject, agrees:

As to literary merit, the book has none; nor has it, properly speaking, any style Our author's diction is monotonous and inelastic, unrelieved by imagination, and almost unenlivened by humour He is often ungrammatical, sometimes ambiguous, and occasionally unintelligible⁶⁰

As it is, Denys was obviously assisted in his task by his editors, or possibly by Cabart de Villermont. A comparison of his manuscript correspondence in

⁵⁶ *Histoire Naturelle*, pp. 231-232.

⁵⁷ *Description*, p. viii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁶⁰ *Description and Natural History*, pp. 25-26.

the Fouquet Papers and his published work unequivocally suggests that syntax, grammar and especially spelling were cleaned up for the printer. Furthermore, the dedication "Au Roy," destined as it was, hopefully, for the king's eyes, was in all likelihood entirely ghostwritten, complete with appropriate flattery and hyperbole of a type which Denys himself was most certainly unsuited to write.

Ganong's opinion that Denys' writing was largely humourless contradicts what many historians have long held. Candide de Nant, for instance, remarked: "Il y a beaucoup de Rabelais dans ce Tourangeux, génie à part."⁶¹ Without embracing the ebullience of Candide, Denys admittedly does share the occasional *gauloiserie* with his reader. Although he was dominated for the most part by the memory of a lifetime of frustration and defeat, there are occasions when his narrative betrays a glint in the eye. Perhaps noteworthy is the story of the old capucin missionary — "agé de soixante ans & plus" — whom Denys' first patron, Isaac de Razilly, challenged to go out to a certain island in Lunenburg Bay whose shrubbery, the Indians claimed, would burst into flames and emasculate those who dared trespass upon it. One readily imagines the roaring guffaws of both Denys and Razilly as the priest adamantly refused the latter's mischievous plea "d'y aller pour desabuser ses gens-là [i.e. the Indians] de leurs erreurs."⁶²

Of much greater import to the historian than the presentation of our author's material, his writing style or his sense of humour, is the content of his work. Fortunately, Denys, in bringing before the public his reminiscences of forty years' involvement in Acadia, had something to communicate. Perhaps the most valuable feature of his writing is that it frequently relates incidents not elsewhere recorded, or not readily verifiable in sources of a more general nature.

To focus attention on Denys as an indispensable source of Acadian history is not to pretend that his testimony is flawless. His constant exaggeration of climate and natural resources reminds us of a nineteenth-century emigrants' manual (or, more current, of a twentieth-century tourist handbook) rather than of a reliable authority. Similarly, the obvious bias which Denys consciously brings to interpreting the history of his times also casts doubts on his credibility.⁶³ Indeed, the blame for the celebrated "querelle de savants," which for well over a century has divided the commentators on Acadian history into pro-d'Aulnay and pro-La Tour factions, derives largely from Denys.⁶⁴ In general

61 Candide de Nant, *Pages glorieuses de l'épopée canadienne* (Paris, 1927), p. 130.

62 *Description*, pp. 106-107.

63 Denys' credibility is especially suspect when he narrates incidents in which he himself was a victim. The absence of collateral sources makes the task of testing his credibility particularly painstaking.

64 As a perennial victim of both d'Aulnay and Leborgne, Denys depicts his rivals as all but unredeemable; conversely, La Tour and his second wife, whose defense of her husband's fort at the mouth of the Saint-John Denys movingly describes, appear as heroic, even saintly.

however, and in spite of Denys' propensity for hyperbole and his obvious prejudices, the *Description* and the *Histoire Naturelle* are of the utmost value to the historian. There are areas of his narrative where only the generalities can be checked in other sources. Denys transmitted a wealth of detail which has accounted for a state of historical knowledge far surpassing what might have been possible without his testimony⁶⁵

V

In the years which followed the publication of the *Description* and *Histoire Naturelle*, Nicolas Denys saw even the legal structure upon which he had founded his dream give way. He had, of course, been totally unable to honour the stipulations of his 1653 grant, and as early as 1661, his vast territory was threatened by legislation which provided for the revocation of land grants whose development remained in abeyance.⁶⁶ In 1663, the *Compagnie* regranted the Ile de La Madeleine and Ile Saint-Jean to another party, in the first of a series of changes in the original 1653 grant.⁶⁷

Despite this, in 1667 (and it is fairly remarkable in the light of Denys' record as a colonizer), he was able to secure confirmation of his entire grant from the new West India Company.⁶⁸ Two years later Colbert sounded his ominous threat: "il faut penser à exclure ceux qui en ont la propriété [de l'Acadie] jusques à présent faute d'y avoir fait passer le nombre d'hommes auquel ils estoient obligés..."⁶⁹ Denys' own powers of persuasion continued to serve him in good stead, as did probably his acquaintance with Cabart, and the latter's fascination with America. Within a decade, however, the West India Company was similarly dissolved, and in June 1675 the crown issued a new ordinance reducing outsized grants, and authorizing their being regranted to others.⁷⁰ From 1676 the enormous Denys grant was forfeit in fact (though not yet entirely in form), and henceforth the protests of Nicolas, and those of his son and successor, Richard, fell largely on deaf ears.

Very little is known of Nicolas Denys' final years. The evidence with respect to the time and place of his death has long remained inconclusive. The most positive reference is the mention by his son, Richard, in 1689, of "mon père décédé l'année dernière."⁷¹ Because we know on the one hand that Richard

65 Such as his account of the technique of the cod fishery and of the behaviour and customs of the Micmacs.

66 Arrêt du conseil d'Etat et lettres-patents . . . , 16 août 1661, Marine A1, liasse 6, fol. 53-58, AN.

67 Concession . . . au sieur Doublet, 19 janvier 1663, Col., E 136 (Dossier Doublet), fol. 5-5v, AN.

68 Confirmation des concessions de Denys, 9 novembre 1667, *ibid.*, Cⁿ D1, fol. 122-122v.

69 Colbert à Colbert du Terron, 29 juillet 1669, A.f.f., Manuscrits isolés 8027, fol. 41-41v, BN.

70 Edits, ordonnances royaux, déclarations et arrêts du conseil d'Etat du Roi concernant le Canada . . . (Québec, 1854), I, p. 81.

71 R. Denys à Seignelay, [1689], the best copy, Collection Clairambault 1016, fol. 625, BN. The date "1689" is appended to copies in Cⁿ D and Collection Margry. The historian might well accept this date without reservation, for Richard Denys mentions having served as his father's lieutenant in Acadia for eighteen years. We are reasonably certain that the elder Denys left his son in charge as he departed Acadia for the last time in the autumn of 1670.

Denys was in Acadia when he learned of his father's death,⁷² and on the other that he had returned to France by the autumn of 1688,⁷³ we may thus assume that the senior Denys died before July 1688, in time for his son to learn the news in Acadia, and return to France to see to the affairs of the succession.

With respect to the place of Denys' death, it is reasonable to suppose that he died in France. Already in 1682 he had recognized "qu'il n'est pas dans un age qu'il luy permettre de se transporter es dits lieux," that is, to Acadia.⁷⁴ The tradition that he lived out his final years in America is of very recent date, suggested first by William Francis Ganong in 1908. Ganong's contention was that "although there is no mention of the place of his death, there can hardly be any doubt that it was at Nepisiquit."⁷⁵ His authority, however, was very meagre: firstly, two separate copies of a letter addressed to Louis XIV, seemingly from Nepisiquit, one of which is dated June 1685, and the other, May 1687; and, secondly, local tradition which "asserts that near the great willow tree now standing close to the site of Denys' old establishment, there are buried some priests 'and a French admiral' "⁷⁶ The admiral, Ganong believed, was Nicolas Denys.

Although the purely evidential value of Ganong's documents appears to be sound,⁷⁷ their authority as to date and place of origin resists very poorly the rigours of external criticism. In the first place, the dates of both are open to question because, had the original been written in either 1685 or 1687, then Nicolas Denys surely would have laid claim, not to a mere forty years experience in Acadia, but to the fifty-five years elapsed since 1632. The historian might honestly doubt as well that the document was composed at Nepisiquit. The only evidence that it was is the inscription "Pisquit, St. Laurence" on one of the Ganong copies.⁷⁸ What is more, the reference to "Pisquit" casts further doubt on the date of the original; Chrestien LeClerc's description of the region confirms that as early as the 1670's Nepisiquit ceased to be a Denys station.⁷⁹ It is known, furthermore, that Nicolas Denys was in France in August 1684⁸⁰ (begging alms for his livelihood, according to the Intendant of New

72 *Ibid.*, fol. 624.

73 As the record of several business transactions in the early months of 1689 attests.

74 Accord entre N. et R. Denys du 21 février 1682, 13 août 1685, Archives judiciaires du district et de la ville de Québec (AJQ), (Genaple), Archives du Québec (AQ).

75 *Description and Natural History*, p. 17.

76 *Ibid.*

77 Ganong knew the following copies: PRO, NS A/6, pp. 95-96 (PAC transcript), 10 May 1687; and *ibid.*, CO 5/9, pp. 90-91 (PAC transcript), 20 June 1685. Each is a separate and independant translation of the original (which, unfortunately, is not extant). Their content is substantially identical, with but a few verbal differences. The tyranny of translation notwithstanding, these copies are probably genuine as to content; the integrity of the first, dated 1687, was attested to by Cyprian Southack, who allegedly captured the original, or a copy thereof, from Richard Denys in 1690.

78 That is, the copy dated 20 June 1685.

79 C. Le Clercq, *Nouvelle relation de la Gaspésie . . .* (Paris, 1691), pp. 199-308.

80 By inference, therefore, he must have wintered in France in 1684-85.

France)⁸¹ in the course of 1685 and during the early months, at least, of 1687.⁸²

Despite the historian's scepticism with respect to the date and place of production of the original document, the actual authorship appears beyond dispute. It is probable that Nicolas Denys did indeed address to the king a letter bearing substantially the same content as the translations discussed by Ganong. This, however, must have been written rather in the early 1670's than in the mid-1680's, and in all likelihood in France, whither he had come in 1670. It is obvious, then, that the historian might not rely on this document to substantiate the presence of Nicolas Denys in Acadia in either or both 1685 and 1687, or indeed at the time of his death, which occurred in 1688 sometime before July. The most plausible theory surrounding his final years is that Denys, at once Acadia's most stalwart and persistent pioneer, and, paradoxically, her most unequivocal failure, died in Paris in miserable circumstances.

VI

The active career of Nicolas Denys spanned nearly forty years, from 1631 to 1670. Although he displayed great ambition, energy and initiative during this period he had known nothing but frustration and disappointment. Denys had experienced neither the luxury nor the consolation of even one positive achievement in Acadia. Yet our traditional history describes his situation as one of constant and dynamic enterprise. We have been misled in part by Denys' own writings, in part by the propensity of the francophone population in the Maritimes to ferret out badly-needed heroes, and in part by the reluctance of historians from the region to look critically at the works of a man who had such pleasant things to say about Maritime geography and resources. We have been accustomed rather to imagine Denys patiently building up his widespread commercial empire. Following his early misfortunes at Port Rossignol, La Hève, and Miscou, Denys has been thought of in terms of extensive farming and fishing at Saint-Pierre and Chedabouctou; a successful return to lumbering, even naval construction, at La Hève; gypsum at Cape Breton and the fur trade at Saint-Pierre and Nepisiquit.

As such, the historiography of Nicolas Denys can be said to have followed rather closely the pattern of Acadian historiography as a whole. For more than a century Acadians have fashioned from their past the foundation stone of their racial, linguistic and religious aspirations. It was in their history, in other words, that they sought the strong traditions of religious and national pride which have been a characteristic of the Acadian community since the 1880's. In the course of this cultural evolution, personalities such as Nicolas Denys have been made to serve as tangible examples of those who have per-

81 De Meulles à Seignelay, 28 septembre 1685, Col., Cⁿ A 7, fol. 143-155, AN.

82 The inference here is that he could not have returned to Acadia in time to write a letter as early as 10 May 1687.

severed in their determination to exact an honourable livelihood in the face of socio-economic disadvantage. Hence, the myth which until our own time has consecrated Denys as “le débonnaire souverain du Canada oriental...,”⁸³ when in fact he achieved in Canada nothing more than unequivocal failure and ruin. What until only recently has escaped the attention of Acadian historians have been the complex social and economic factors which dominated the material evolution of Acadia, her people and her institutions, from the seventeenth century. No one to date, for instance, has suggested that Nicolas Denys failed in Acadia by reason mostly of his own inadequate financial and commercial know-how rather than exclusively by bad luck and the selfish rivalries of others.

Thus, early students of Acadian history, relying exclusively on the *Description* and *Histoire Naturelle* for their assessment of the man and his career, conjured up idyllic descriptions of “smiling fields and luxuriant crops.”⁸⁴ In the man himself they saw “un négociant entreprennant et industrieux,”⁸⁵ or “perhaps the most useful of all the settlers of Acadia.”⁸⁶ W. F. Ganong, in his masterful edition and translation of Denys’ works in 1908, was the first to suggest that, in terms of tangible achievements in Acadia, “it is almost as if he had never been.”⁸⁷ One might have expected so important a contribution as Ganong’s to have spurred scholars on to a more refined interpretation of Denys. Ganong’s contribution did not, however, generate any new approaches. *Canada and its Provinces*, for instance, persisted in the vision of Denys enjoying in Acadia the traditional peace, comfort and prosperity.⁸⁸ Only in the 1920’s did English-language writers become more critical in their appraisals; in 1926 D. C. Harvey recognized Denys’ writings as his “one abiding legacy to posterity.”⁸⁹

Unlike historical writing in English, which improved markedly and progressively from the 1920’s, the quality of that of French-Canada grew worse, subservient, as it was increasingly, to the heightened expression of national feeling. Thus, Couillard-Després, less intent on objective scholarship than on incriminating his villain, Menou d’Aulnay, described Denys as seeking naught but “l’espoir de passer de longues années dans le calme et l’aisance sinon dans le luxe et l’abondance.”⁹⁰ Frère Bernard enthusiastically carried the idyll further still.⁹¹

83 Bernard, *Drame Acadien*, p. 104.

84 R. Brown, *A History of the Island of Cape Breton with some Account of the Discovery and Settlement of Canada, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland* (London, 1869), p. 98.

85 E. Rameau de Saint-Père, *Une colonie féodale en Amérique, l’Acadie, 1604-1710* (Paris, 1889), I, p. 69.

86 J. Hannay, “Some prominent Acadians”, *Acadiensis* (1904), pp. 257-264.

87 *Description and Natural History*, p. 19.

88 A. Shortt and A. G. Doughty, eds., *Canada and its Provinces* (Toronto, 1914), XIII, p. 48.

89 *The French Regime in Prince Edward Island* (New Haven, 1926), p. 26.

90 Couillard-Després, *La Tour*, p. 388.

91 Bernard, p. 104.

Thus, in spite of his negligible achievements, Nicolas Denys secured for himself an undying place in the lore of the Atlantic region. By understating his failures and emphasizing instead his tenacity in the face of recurring adversity, historians have traditionally avoided the unequivocal fact that Nicolas Denys' misfortunes resulted as much from his own shortcomings as from bad luck. Admittedly, in the absence of other extensive primary sources, the historian's view of Denys had long depended nearly exclusively on our subject's own testimony. It is only in recent years that remote archives have yielded up valuable primary resources which have allowed historians to piece together a fuller, more objective, and more credible narrative of Denys' career in Acadia.

VII

Nicolas Denys' energy and determination alone were not sufficient to rescue his new world enterprises. Devoid of means, stature and influence, he was destined never to be free from material jeopardy. He was especially vulnerable to the contingencies of high interest rates, French internecine rivalries and the casual manner in which the crown oversaw the development of her American territories generally, and of Acadia in particular.

Though it was the fishery which most interested Nicolas Denys, he was often compelled, in his efforts to overcome recurring misfortune, jealous rivalries, rising costs and irate creditors, to try his hand at other ventures such as the fur trade, lumbering, agriculture, even the extraction of fish oils. These digressions, as it turned out, only served in practice to hasten the final denouement. In all, Nicolas Denys sustained the effects of at least six total and irreversible business failures between 1634 and 1669.

The major contribution of Nicolas Denys to French America is, unmistakably, his poorly written although frequently lively *Description* and *Histoire Naturelle*. Although understandably suspect when he writes of historical events in which he himself was disadvantaged or made to suffer, Denys' works definitely constitute a valuable primary source as they relate in particular to the fishery and the Indians.

This study, it is hoped, will contribute something to the chronology of Denys' career, and to offering some useful commentary on the reputation he has traditionally enjoyed among historians. There is one facet which continues to elude this writer at least: Nicolas Denys appears little less enigmatic at this juncture than he did at the onset of this study. We will perhaps never penetrate his mind sufficiently to know why he was so blindly optimistic about Acadia, why indeed he persisted in not following his brother Simon to Quebec, "travailler là pour lesser quelque chause à mes enfants pour vivre."⁹² We will perhaps never know what really moulded his attitude to the insufficiency of the new world staples, the inclemency of Acadian geography and the implacability of La Rochelle finance.

92 Denys à Fouquet, 30 juillet 1659, Papiers Fouquet, pp. 36-37.

The irony is that had France had any reason to attach strategic importance to Acadia from the 1630's, the 1640's or even the 1650's, Nicolas Denys' career might well have appeared more successful. Because in the 1670's, the 1680's and the 1690's France's strategic and imperial thoughts turned increasingly to the Mississippi basin, the lives of such men as Tonty and Cavelier de La Salle were affected in such a way that otherwise they would surely have remained relatively obscure. One cannot avoid the analogy between Nicolas Denys and La Salle; both were not a little afflicted with the folly of the frontier. The latter, though not a prime mover, most certainly was rescued by the Mississippi adventure, and carried to the middle ground of French involvement in America. Had the crown occasion to be less indifferent to Acadia in Denys' time, it is not impossible that Nicolas Denys also would have been called upon to play a modest but useful role. As it turned out, Denys was as much a victim of the vagaries of the overall imperial context in America as he was of particular circumstances. As such the contingencies of his long involvement in early Acadia do not allow us to consider him a successful, or indeed a useful, colonial entrepreneur. At best Nicolas Denys was a colourful personality whose misadventures shed a good deal of light on seventeenth-century French enterprise overseas.