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Reader Response: Champlain's name needs nuance, not condemnation

🕒 November 20, 2017 👤 Harvey McCue 📁 Campus, Opinion
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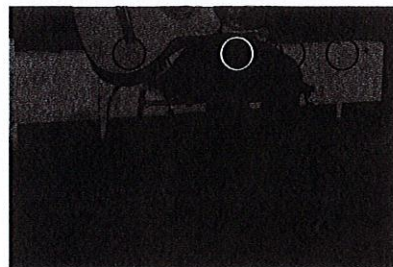


Photo
Essay:
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Champlain college courtyard featuring towers A/B, C/D, and E/F.

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So, the great French humanist, soldier, and explorer who I portrayed in the fall of 1968 in a canoe on the Otonabee river, Samuel de Champlain, **has come under attack** by an *Arthur* writer who argues his name should be removed from the first college borne by Trent on the Nassau campus! Allow me to introduce myself: I'm Harvey McCue, a member of the Anishinabe nation from the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation in Lake Simcoe. My Anishinabe name is Waubageshig, given to me by a Wausauksing elder, Matthew King. I was in the first cohort of men at Trent assigned to Champlain College in 1966 and one of two Indigenous students at Trent at that time.

The 1966 Champlain cohort moved into the Champlain residence in January 1967 and returning to college in the fall some friends and I thought it would both clever and droll if I portrayed the college's namesake and by canoe land on the banks of the mighty Otonabee in front of the college. So one sunny afternoon I sat in a canoe, suitably wigged and garbed, struggling to look as French as I could, ably paddled by two college friends masquerading as Wendat warriors and prepared to meet an amused gathering of cheering and applauding residents and college Dons. Somewhere in the bowels of either the college or Trent, photos gather dust as abandoned chronicles of that auspicious adventure!



Harvey McCue, left, in a classroom. Photo via Trent University News and Events.

I share this piece of nostalgic trivia as a crucial part of a rejoinder to the challenge raised to remove Champlain's name from the college. In addition to "being" Champlain I served as the 3rd president of the Champlain College Student Cabinet, possibly the only Indigenous student ever in that position, two roles that provide me the arguably dubious distinction on which to weigh in on the writer's doughty but unwarranted attempt to bolster political correctness on the Trent campus.

I do not support his challenge to wipe Champlain off the Trent campus. The writer's error-ridden thesis deserves to be ignored and he should be ridiculed for raising so many specious facts in his argument. Where should I begin? Was Champlain a colonizer of Indigenous people? Well, no. There's no evidence that he colonized either the Migmaw or Wendat or Anishinabe people with whom he interacted in the New World. He did establish colonies, first in Port Royal, then Quebec, but these were French settlements and there's no historical evidence that he even considered let alone attempted to impose those feeble efforts onto the resident tribes and nations. At no time during his numerous travels throughout eastern and central Canada did he wrest land from the local Indigenous people, either by force, calumny, or fiat.

As with any observer of a new culture, he held a dim view of certain elements of Indigenous cultures as did the Indigenous

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folks he encountered of French beliefs and behaviour. To wit, the silly buggers' personal hygiene compared to tribal practices was contemptible! Yet, Champlain highly regarded many Indigenous leaders and treated them as equals, so much so that Black Hawk, a Sac war chief in the nineteenth century began his biography with an account of Champlain and his own ancestor Na-Na-Ma-Kee as exemplars of wise and humane leadership. For two centuries, Sac oral history sustained the elevated position in which they held and remembered Champlain!

Champlain did not attempt to conquer any tribes or nations, nor did he ever kidnap any Indigenous people to send them to Europe to die, nor did he enslave anyone. These were practices common to Spanish and other French explorers in the New World during the 17th century. It's true that he fought on the side of the Wendat and the Anishinabe in their enduring opposition to the Haudenosaunee and in so doing, he and his colleagues wounded and killed several Haudenosaunee warriors. But he did this as an ally, not as a conqueror or enslaver. Can he be accused of taking sides? Of course, but in doing so, it is absurd as the writer does to say he acted criminally.

As with most if not all nations in the world, antipathies existed between neighbours, some seemingly forever, some less so. The Wendat and the Haudenosaunee sustained ongoing conflicts, much like the three-century long wars of the nation cities of Italy. Champlain's presence in their dispute won a brief and temporary local victory for the Wendat but it was likely inconsequential to the final outcome that resulted in the Haudenosaunee completely overrunning the Wendat nation in the mid 17th century.

To this day the Wendat remain staunch Champlain supporters. To celebrate the conclusion of 400 years of Champlain in Ontario, last June a delegation of Wendat leaders and performers from Loretteville, Quebec participated in an unveiling ceremony of an Ontario Heritage Trust plaque at Penetang commemorating Champlain's presence in Ontario.

Finally, Champlain did indeed travel through the Kawarthas but not to seek and murder local residents as the writer states, but

to reach a Wendat community near present day Midland in order to live among them peaceably for almost a year.

Switching from his relations with the Indigenous nations, the writer argues Champlain's taking of a 12-year old bride is further reason to dismiss him from campus. Historian Fischer claims that the bride, Helene Boule, didn't exactly take to the idea and in keeping with the practice, the marriage wasn't consummated until two years later. However, as morally indefensible as the practice of child brides is, during the 15th and 16th centuries the European aristocracy maintained the practice through arranged marriages. In England in the Middle Ages, English civil laws made marriages before age 16 commonplace. It's an inadequate reason to expunge Champlain from campus and I'll leave it to others to debate the appropriateness of including a reference to Champlain's child bride in any college literature pertinent to Champlain.

The writer's challenges with historical facts extend to current ones, too – Trent is not the only university to offer a doctoral program in Indigenous Studies as he claims. Both the University of Victoria and University of Alberta offer doctoral programs in Indigenous Studies.

In conclusion, the writer's argument for dismissing Champlain from the Trent campus has little to recommend it. His interpretation of Champlain's intentions and behaviour as they relate to the Indigenous populations is factually wrong and self-serving. To paraphrase another French statesman, vive le College Champlain and vive L'Ordre de bon Temps!

Waubageshig,

Harvey McCue, '66

Editors' Note: Harvey McCue served on the Board of Governors at Trent University and was one of the founders of what is now called the Trent Indigenous Studies Program.

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