



Samuel de Champlain
April 1882
A.A. Waterman, Cambridge

Information about
Samuel de Champlain
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References are to Otis's translation.
Prince Society's Edition of Champlain's works.

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Read by C.E. to Champlain Society, May 19th, 1882.

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Champlain was born in a sea-coast town near La Rochelle about 1567, - in the middle of the religious wars. At the

age of twenty-five he was made quarter-master in the army of Henry IV, and he served with distinction in Brittany until the close of the war against the League.

The soldier's life, however, was not his choice. In a letter addressed to the Queen Regent he says of the art of navigation, "This is the art which from my earliest years has won my love and induced me to expose myself all my life to the impetuous waves of the ocean." An irresistible love of adventure and discovery was one of his most striking characteristics. It was this

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The journals of his later explorations in New France were published at intervals in Paris, the last edition appearing in 1632, only three years before his death. In these straight-forward, clear and concise narratives we find accurate descriptions of the topography of the lands and coasts visited, and remarks on soil and climate, trees and fruits, animals, birds and fishes, and on the manners and customs of the aborigines. Beside the great map of New France there are in these books

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many local maps of bays and harbors, such as those of le Beau Port (Gloucester) and Port Saint Louis (Plymouth) in this State.

Here, too, we may read of all manner of dangers and hardships encountered on land and sea, — Indian fights, shipwrecks, and struggles with cold, scurvy, and famine. In the first winter which Champlain spent in this country — the winter of 1604-5 spent with De Mont's colony on the St Croix — thirty-five men out of seventy-nine died of scurvy, and in the first winter at Quebec twenty out of twenty-eight. This formidable disease had never been seen by any of the company, not even by their

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surgeon, who died of it; but after that dreadful winter at Quebec the observant and judicious Champlain wrote in his journal "I am confident that with good bread and fresh meat a person would not be liable to the disease."

In the exploration of the coast of Nova Scotia and New England Champlain was a pioneer. Starting from De Mont's establishment on the St. Croix, he coasted in one direction as far as the Gut of Canso, & in the other as far as Martha's Vineyard. He cruised among the numberless islands, rocks, and sunken reefs that fringe the ragged and fog-haunted coast of Maine, ventured into

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many of its land-locked harbors, and ascended the Penobscot and Kennebec rivers. His little vessel got many hard knocks, and had many hairbreadth escapes, - for the coast is one that even at this day of charts, buoys & lighthouses requires the greatest watchfulness on the part of the native sailors who frequent it.

One day his boat ran ashore near Mt. Desert. He had no adequate means of repairing the craft, and savages in whom he had no confidence infested the land, yet all he has to say about this perilous adventure is this: "We just escaped being lost on a little rock on a level with

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Following the coast westward he rounded the rocky headland now called Cape Ann, sailed among the wooded islands of Boston Bay, entered Plymouth Harbor fifteen years before the Pilgrims, and doubled Cape Cod. Off the south east point of the Cape, a league and a half from land, the water suddenly shoaled to the depth of a fathom & a half; "which alarmed us," says Champlain, "since we saw the sea breaking all around." Unawares his vessel had run among the dreaded Nantucket shoals, where shifting sand bars and swift tidal currents

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Of all his explorations in the interior that of 1615 was the most remarkable. Including the winter passed with the Hurons, it occupied more than a year, and extended from Montreal to the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron by way of the Ottawa & other rivers, thence to Oneida Lake in New York State, and back to the Huron Country; - a journey of more than a thousand miles through a wilderness of forests, lakes and broken streams. In a battle near Oneida Lake Champlain was so

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severely wounded in the leg that he could not walk, & was carried by his Indian friends from the scene of the fight to their canoes on Lake Ontario, a distance of fully seventy-five miles. The Indians then spent a month or more near the shores of the lake, engaged in hunting & fishing, so that Champlain had time to recover from his wounds before the party, in December, started for their homes near the Georgian Bay. This return journey through bogs and forests, snow slush & mud, at the most inclement season of the year, was a severe test of Champlain's indomitable courage & endurance. His labors as an explorer were now completed.

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Champlain was carried prisoner to England, and there learned that the capture of his fort would, in the end, be of no avail to its captors, for peace had been declared between England & France three months before the day of his surrender.

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In following thus his laborious and self-sacrificing life, we have found Champlain a man of vigorous frame & active mind, courageous and persistent in the highest degree, but at the same time patient and self-controlled. He was humane and gentle, as when he saved

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Iroquois prisoners from the horrible Indian torture; he was prompt and severe on occasion, as when at Quebec he ordered the hanging of the leader of a deadly conspiracy.

Although greatly superior to his companions he was not in advance of his time, but was deeply interested in all that was told him of the marvellous & romantic. He repeats a Mexican story about a harmless dragon of the size of a sheep, with the head of an eagle, wings like a bat's, and a scaly tail. He describes a terrible monster living near the Bay of Chaleur "which the Indians

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Although his noble master, Henry IV had given him a pension to enable him to live at ease near the royal person, Champlain was so fired with enthusiasm for adventurous discovery & with unquenchable zeal "for the glory of France and the Church" that he spent the best years of his life, and finally drew his last breath in that wild land where, as he wrote, "he had

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