Samuel de Champlain
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Information about Samuel de Champlain
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Prince Society’s Edition of Champlain’s works.
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Samuel de Champlain

On Christmas day 1635, [about a year before the foundation of Harvard College,] Samuel de Champlain, soldier, explorer and first Governor of New France, died in the fort of Quebec. The trading post which he had established twenty-three years before had become a mission house, and a black-robed Jesuit pronounced his funeral discourse.

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
that led him to conceive the wild scheme of a voyage to the Spanish West Indies and Mexico, at a time when all but Spaniards were excluded from those countries. In spite of the exclusion, Champlain actually sailed from Cadiz as captain of a ship in the fleet that Spain annually dispatched, and spent three years in visiting Cuba and the other West India islands, the city of Mexico and the isthmus of Panama. A very curious and entertaining account of this voyage, written by Champlain after his return to France, remained in
manuscript for 257 years, and was finally issued by the Hakluyt Society in an English translation. [Vide.]

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
many local maps of bays and harbors, seen 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
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
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 wakefulness 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
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 and 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...
Make navigation difficult and dangerous for the seaman of today. “We had to go at hap-hazard where there seemed to be the most water for our barque, which was at most only four feet, until we found as much as four feet and a half.”

After a stay of more than three years on these coasts, Champlain carried a ship from France to the St. Lawrence; that “Great River of Canada” whose source, the Indians had said, was near salt water, possibly, thought Champlain, a bay of the South Sea. His explorations in the basin of this river, carried on during a period of eight years, exposed him to dangers as great as those which he had
encountered on the coast, though of a different kind. To enable him to pursue his explorations, and to secure the friendship of the Indians who immediately surrounded the trading-post he had established at Quebec, Champlain was obliged to join the latter in their wars against the Iroquois.

The beautiful lake that bears his name was discovered by him on his first journey into the wilderness when the allied Canadian tribes, Algonquins, Montagnais + others, defeated their enemies at Ticonderoga. Here, according to his usual habit, he took observations for latitude and made an estimate of the longitude; but the latter was
so far from correct that on his map Lake Champlain appears in the position of Worcester in this State.

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 and 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
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 forest, 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.
His explorations, covering the Atlantic coast from Cape Cod to Newfoundland, and the basin of the great river of Canada from the sea to Lake Huron + Lake Champlain, were of greater extent, and were recorded with far greater fulness of detail and illustration than were any other explorations in this part of the continent from its discovery by Cabot in 1497 down to the permanent settlement of New England.

The remaining nineteen years of his life were filled with earnest but unsuccessful efforts to plant a strong French colony in the land he had explored and occupied. In spite of his unceasing labors in both old + new
France, it was not until 1628, - eight years after the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth and twenty years after the founding of Quebec – that the first emigrant-bearing fleet, dispatched by the great Richelieu, sailed from Dieppe for New France. At Quebec Champlain + his followers were anxiously awaiting the coming of the fleet, when there arrived instead a summons to surrender the fort to the English admiral Kirk, who was then in the mouth of the River. Although but ill prepared for vigorous resistance Champlain sent back a polite reply in which he declined to surrender; + the English fleet sheered off. Then the summer
and autumn went by, ice formed in the river and the great fleet did not come. The whole squadron of four war-vessels + eighteen transports had been captured by Kirk in the mouth of the Bay.

During the succeeding winter and spring the colonists were face to face with famine; but with the loosening of the ice their courage revived, together with their hope of help from France. That help was on the way but was destined to arrive too late; for, early in July, three English ships sailed up the river, and two hundred English took possession of the fort in the name of His Majesty.
Charles the I. Champlain and his little garrison of sixteen hungry men had surrendered on favorable terms and were on their way down the river as prisoners on an English ship, when the belated ship from France was encountered and after a hot fight captured by the English.

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 and France three months before the day of his surrender.

Quebec was not restored to France for two years, but in 1633 the venerable Champlain,
With a large number of colonists and several Jesuit fathers, returned to his government, where the remaining three years of his life were spent in the company of the fanatical, but devoted priests, and in such quiet as the principal post in a new colony could afford.

In following thus his laborious and self-sacrificing life, we have found Champlain a man of vigorous frame and 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
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 marvelous and 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
call Gongon, and which catches and devours many savages”, and says “I hold this is the dwelling place of some devil that torments them in the above men-
tioned manner.” [Vide] Vol I 289p

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
always desired to see the Lily flourish,
and also the only religion Catholic,
Apostolic and Roman.”