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The Hero and the Historians: Historiography and the Uses of Jacques Cartier

Alan Gordon

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Historians have long engaged in passionate debate about collective memory and the building of national identities. Alan Gordon focuses on one national hero - Jacques Cartier - to explore how notions about the past have been created and passed on from generation to generation in English- and French-speaking Canada and used to present particular ideas about the world.

The Hero and the Historians traces the evolution of Cartier's image - from his exploration of the St. Lawrence in 1534 to the mid-twentieth century, when hero worship fell from favour among professional historians - and ties it to changing notions of the past. Gordon reveals that nineteenth-century celebrations of Cartier reflected a particular understanding of history, one which accompanied the arrival of modernity in North America. This new sensibility, in turn, shaped the political and cultural currents of identity formation and nation building in Canada. Cartier was a point of contact between English and French Canadian nationalism, but, as Gordon shows, the nature of that contact had profound limitations.

This important work shows how changing notions of the past have shaped identity formation in English-speaking Canada and Quebec. It is necessary reading for anyone interested in the underlying culture of national identity - and national unity - in Canada.

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