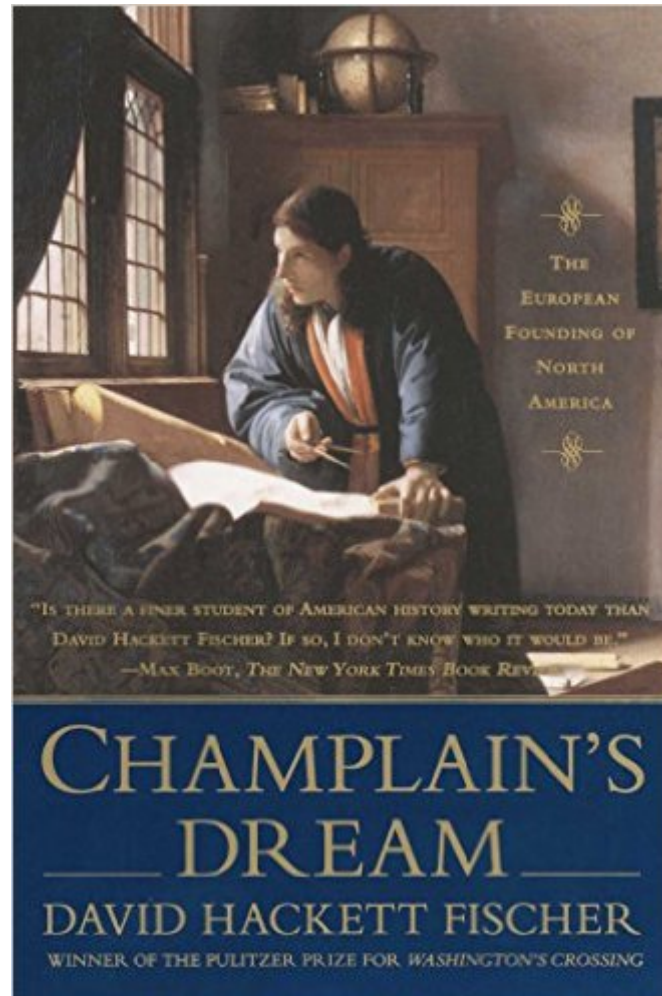


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Champlain's Dream



Synopsis

Winner of the Pritzker Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing In this sweeping, enthralling biography, acclaimed historian David Hackett Fischer brings to life the remarkable Samuel de Champlain—a soldier, spy, master mariner, explorer, cartographer, artist, and Father of New France. Born on France's Atlantic coast, Champlain grew to manhood in a country riven by religious warfare. The historical record is unclear on whether Champlain was baptized Protestant or Catholic, but he fought in France's religious wars for the man who would become Henri IV, one of France's greatest kings, and like Henri, he was religiously tolerant in an age of murderous sectarianism. Champlain was also a brilliant navigator. He went to sea as a boy and over time acquired the skills that allowed him to make twenty-seven Atlantic crossings without losing a ship. But we remember Champlain mainly as a great explorer. On foot and by ship and canoe, he traveled through what are now six Canadian provinces and five American states. Over more than thirty years he founded, colonized, and administered French settlements in North America. Sailing frequently between France and Canada, he maneuvered through court intrigue in Paris and negotiated among more than a dozen Indian nations in North America to establish New France. Champlain had early support from Henri IV and later Louis XIII, but the Queen Regent Marie de Medici and Cardinal Richelieu opposed his efforts. Despite much resistance and many defeats, Champlain, by his astonishing dedication and stamina, finally established France's New World colony. He tried constantly to maintain peace among Indian nations that were sometimes at war with one another, but when he had to, he took up arms and forcefully imposed a new balance of power, proving himself a formidable strategist and warrior. Throughout his three decades in North America, Champlain remained committed to a remarkable vision, a Grand Design for France's colony. He encouraged intermarriage among the French colonists and the natives, and he insisted on tolerance for Protestants. He was a visionary leader, especially when compared to his English and Spanish contemporaries—a man who dreamed of humanity and peace in a world of cruelty and violence. This superb biography, the first in decades, is as dramatic and exciting as the life it portrays. Deeply researched, it is illustrated throughout with many contemporary images and maps, including several drawn by Champlain himself.

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Customer Reviews

This is a biography of epic cultural and geographic sweep. It entwines itself into the histories of France, England and North America, illuminating by countless fascinating details while never losing the thread of its larger narrative. The subject is Samuel de Champlain (~1570 to 1635), soldier, explorer, colonizer, diplomat and leader of men. In recounting the facts and deeds of Champlain's life, Fischer finds a theme in Champlain's humanism, in his strong Christian piety with very little ecclesiology and in his dream of la Nouvelle France as the place where men would grow beyond the wars of religion that devastated the France of Champlain's youth. The facts alone are gripping (Champlain made dozens of voyages to North America, was an intimate of two French kings, fought corporate board battles as well as hostile Mohawks, made a fortune, gave it away, founded the city of Montreal, explored and mapped much of what is now eastern Canada and New England, etc., etc.) and Fischer's thematic thread gives it a very inspirational cast without ever flinching from Champlain's errors and weaknesses. Part of the book's charm is in its incidental illumination of other historical personages (Henri IV of France, for instance, and Cardinal Richelieu). Also delightful is the detail of its minor, surprising episodes; for instance, the account of Champlain's 1609 battle with Montagnais, Huron and Algonquin allies against Mohawk foes, clad in wooden armor and marching in close formation, or Champlain's use of siege engines against an Onandaga fortress in 1615. Fischer's prose is lucid and never distracting. The book is profusely illustrated with maps, sketches, paintings and photographs that together give the reader a very strong sense of having been a witness.

David Hackett Fischer's new full-length biography of Samuel de Champlain is pure nectar to the serious reader of history. Full of life, vivid, entertaining, fascinating and full of insight, this is biography at its best. Painted on the vast canvas of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe and

North America, we see a fully developed portrait of a fascinating and complex individual who played such a key role in the unfolding of North American culture and civilization. This biography is worthy to stand beside the best of our generation: John Adams, *The Path to Power* (The Years of Lyndon Johnson, Volume 1), *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill: Visions of Glory, 1874-1932*. Oddly, it also calls to mind the fictional work of *Quicksilver* (The Baroque Cycle, Vol. 1), *The Confusion* (The Baroque Cycle, Vol. 2) and *The System of the World* (The Baroque Cycle, Vol. 3) by Neal Stephenson with its fascinating scope and historical detail. Among the plethora of insights gleaned from Fischer is his description of the French quality of "prevoyance," which has no exact corollary in English. Prevoyance is not so much the ability to foresee the future as the ability to prepare for the unexpected in a world of danger, complexity and uncertainty. Champlain is the prime example of the quality of "prevoyance," Fischer shows. We follow this prevoyant man from boyhood in the harbor towns of the Gulf of Saintonge in the Bay of Biscay, with its teeming, crowded ports full of people of all nations, where he is exposed to many different economies, cultures and languages. We accompany him later in his years of soldiering and participation in the bloody religious wars of the sixteenth century, then on the quasi-military exploring expeditions to the New World with Frobisher, where Champlain is deeply offended by the atrocities committed upon the native peoples (chronicled, by the way, in a series of remarkable paintings produced by Champlain and included in full color in this beautifully produced volume). Later, we follow Champlain in his adventures in Paris court of Henri IV, where Champlain held the title of "royal geographer" as he worked in the basement of the Louvre. And finally, we return over the Atlantic with Champlain where he takes up his lifework of building New France and founding the great French capitols of the New World. This book amply testifies of the arrival of Fischer in the topmost rung of working biographers not only of our day but perhaps of the last century. He not only has the archivist's mastery of the vast corpus of source documents, but the rare talent to create a man out of the sources. Reading this book is as transporting and joyful an enterprise as reading a great novel. Worthy of five stars, and more!

On the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's founding of the first successful French colonies in North America, historian David Hackett Fischer takes on the sensitive subject of a European's dream for the New World. To create a New French nation that would be a tolerant, productive and improved version of Old France was not just Champlain's dream; it was his obsession. His persistence in the face of near-constant political and environmental obstacles and the degree to which he achieved harmony and integration with the Indian populations are extraordinary. "Champlain's Dream" attempts to reconstruct the life and values of this man who was a soldier,

mariner, explorer, cartographer, writer, painter, ethnographer, naturalist, courtier, and, above all the Father of French Canada. Remarkably, Champlain excelled at most of those things, yet we don't know what he looked like or have more than an inkling of his personal life. He wrote volumes about his voyages and observations of North America, enthusiastically promoting his vision for New France, so we are left to understand the man from what he said about the people and places around him. Fischer's diligence in describing the physical environment of his locations begins with Champlain's home town of Brouage in Saintonge, where he was born around 1570 to a haute bourgeois sea captain. This descriptive prose is a recurring feature, perhaps inspired by Champlain's tendency to do the same. Champlain first visited the New World as an agent of King Henri IV, for whom he gathered information about New Spain. In 1600, he traveled the rivers of what is now Quebec to establish contact with the Indians and document the land, with a mind to establishing a settlement, the first attempt at which would be in Acadia in 1604. A great deal of detail is devoted to the rigors the colonists faced, the carefully-maintained relations with Indian tribes, and Champlain's exploratory voyages. Focus shifts back and forth from those activities in New France and Champlain and his sponsors' tireless efforts to secure trading monopolies and support from three successive monarchs in France: King Henri IV, Queen Regent Marie de Medici, and King Louis XIII. Some readers will find the detail about European politics, Indian politics, and every person or place that Champlain met excessive. I appreciated the information, and I found Champlain's ability to avoid an endless cycle of retaliatory violence with the Indians particularly fascinating. I am more familiar with British-Indian relations, and my tendency has been to consider the European and Indian concepts of justice mutually exclusive, leaving all options either unconscionable or unfeasible when an incident occurs. But Champlain was able to find solutions that were acceptable to both cultures, even as the Europeans held to the concept of trial and punishment and the Indians to law of retribution. To me, this indicates that Champlain understood the Indians and was respected by them. It takes no small amount of intelligence and confidence to mediate such delicate situations, where emotions run high, and consequences can be dire. David Hackett Fischer set out to find a middle path between hagiographers and debunkers with his study of Champlain. I don't think he quite succeeds, because he idolizes Champlain and expresses that too often. But Champlain accomplished a great deal, and "Champlain's Dream" is an information-packed account of his deeds. The man, himself, remains distant, but I suppose that's inevitable. The supplementary material is a treasure trove of information as well. The biography is followed by "Memories of Champlain", which discusses how his many biographers and critics have viewed Champlain through the centuries. There are 16 Appendixes, including an a chronology of

voyages, views of Champlain's writing, viceroys and generals of New France, trading companies, Indian nations, ships and boats, and more. There are 16 pages of color plates and black-and-white illustrations throughout the book.

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