Few, Uncooperative, and Endangered: The Troubled Activity of the Roman Catholic Missionaries in Acadia, 1610-1710

by Matteo Binasco

Many historians have studied missionary activity in early Canada, generating an extensive scholarship on the arrival of Christianity and the development of Roman Catholic Church in North America. Few researchers, however, have specifically analyzed the activity of the Capuchins, Jesuits, and Recollets in Acadia from 1610 till 1710. The absence of scholarship on these groups and that era is noteworthy, because these three orders, from the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), held a key position in missionary expansion around the world. We seek to fill that gap in this paper with an account of the missionary process in Acadia, the impact it had on the Aboriginal population, and offering an assessment of its overall results. A key factor in how the missionary process played out was the Anglo-French conflict in the territory. The time frame for the analysis that follows is from 1610, when the first missionary arrived, to 1710, when the British conquered Port-Royal for what proved to be the final time.

One consequence of the Council of Trent was that the Roman Catholic Church sought to recover its centrality and unity; two qualities called into question by the Protestant Reformation. However, it needs to be understood that the bases of the 16th and 17th centuries missionary expansion beyond Europe were laid before the Council of Trent. The papal bull *Orthodoxa fidei propagationem* issued by Pope Innocent VIII on 13 December 1486 and *Inter cetera*, issued by Alexander VI on 3 and 4 May 1493 clearly defined the duties of the Roman Catholic Church vis-à-vis the new geographical discoveries. The common denominator of both bulls was the desire to reinforce the Catholic religion throughout the world and to convert the inhabitants of the newly discovered “barbarous nations.” Thus authorized by the Vatican, Roman Catholic missionaries would play important roles in the ambitious colonial projects of the French, Portuguese, and Spanish empires. The missionary revival enjoyed the support of the French crown which backed and encouraged the presence of Roman Catholic priests in the discovery explorations. The earliest endeavours of missionary enterprises in the North-Atlantic area began in 1535, when Guillaume Le Breton and Anthoine, possibly two Benedictine monks, joined Jacques Cartier’s second expedition to Canada. From the mid-six-

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The first attempt at evangelization in Acadia occurred when the French estab-
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That missionary process started in 1610 when Jesse Fléché, a secular priest recruited by Poutrincourt with the specific task of preaching and converting the Mi’kmag, reached Port-Royal. His arrival was also an occasion for the Holy See to assert its spiritual jurisdiction over the native people of North America. Fléché had been granted his authority to minister to the Aboriginal peoples by Roberto Ubaldini, bishop of Montepulciano and papal nuncio in France.

The apostolate of Fléché and that of his followers proceeded on the assumption that the Aboriginal peoples of Acadia, indeed all North America, were not only “primitive” but also eager to be converted. In one year Fléché succeeded in baptizing 80 Mi’kmag, even though the priest was not able to understand or to speak their language nor they his.

The large number of converts, given the language difficulties, placed Fléché in a poor light in the eyes of some French religious figures. As an emerging colony rely-
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already had missions in India, China, and Japan. In 1631, Pierre Biard and Ennemond Massé, the two missionaries selected for the Acadian mission, arrived at Port-Royal. Notwithstanding Pourtourencourt's expectations, Biard and Massé refused to cooperate with Fléché. Rather, they openly criticized his accomplishments, specifically his having converted the natives without any instruction in the doctrine of baptism. Yet such mass conversions were not known to the Jesuits, for others of their order had done much the same in India and Japan. Apparently, Biard and Massé were holding a higher standard for Fléché, a secular priest, than for their Jesuit counterparts in other missions.

Fléché's conversions of Micmacs were not the only subject area where there were differences of opinion between him and the Jesuits. In contrast with the Jesuit missions in Asia, which were set within the context of ancient and sophisticated cultures, the Jesuits at Port-Royal appeared to have little interest in the culture of the Aboriginal people of Acadia. They criticized the nomadism and customs of the Micmac, whose society was organized on seasonal cycles. According to Biard, "The nation is savage, wandering, and full of bad habits; the people are few and isolated. They are, I say, savage, hunting the woods, ignorant, lawless and rude." The reality of seasonal movements by the Micmac meant that the Jesuits would find it difficult to establish a sedentary mission.

Both Biard and Massé were thus highly critical of the missionary work carried on by their secular counterpart, Fléché. To underline his influence, the Jesuits deprived Port-Royal of its canonical status. Then, in 1612 Biard and Massé decided to found a new settlement at Saint-Saveur (in today's Maine), where they established their own mission. However, the Jesuits soon found out that no missions were safe along the coasts of Acadia. The region was of strategic importance to both the French and the English, and thus an easy target for seaborne raids by one power or the other. In 1613, an expedition, led by an English colonizer based in Virginia, Samuel Argall, attacked and destroyed the settlements of Port-Royal and Saint-Saveur. The Jesuits' mission, their first Acadian experience, came to an end.

The fate of the religious mission in Acadia was inevitably linked to the fate of the colony. Until 1627, the year the Compagnie des Cent-Associés was formed, Acadia had a very small population which depended heavily on the yearly supplies sent from France. This precarious state of affairs prevented any regular order from sending new missionaries to what was a fledgling colony. Some efforts for maintaining the evangelization process among the Micmac were made, although only through short-term missions. The gap created when the Jesuits left was filled by four Recollects, a branch of the Franciscan order, who were active in Acadia between 1620 and 1624. Little is known about their mission due to major gaps in their accounts and relations.

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by the superiors of these two orders for special faculties and permissions. A new stage of missionary activity began in 1622 when Pope Gregory XV founded the Sacred Congregation “de Propaganda Fide.” The establishment of the Propaganda represented the climax of the process by which the Holy See reorganized its structure according to Tridentine principles. The Congregation's tasks were to spread the Catholic religion among people perceived to be infidels, to defend Catholics living in Protestant countries, and to achieve the reunion of the Catholic Church with the Orthodox Church. The Propaganda was to accomplish these goals by coordinating worldwide missionary activity.

Acadia was the region that drew the first efforts and missionary strategies of the Roman agency. Indeed, in 1630, the Propaganda, warned of the growing migration of Puritans to New England, conceived the idea of founding a mission that would counterbalance the expansion of English Protestantism in North America. In 1631 it charged the French Capuchins, another branch of the Franciscan order, with this task. The Roman agency picked that order because since its foundation, the Propaganda had enjoyed smooth relations with the Capuchins. From 1632 to 1635, and from 1639 to 1656, the Capuchins pursued a mission in Atlantic Canada which, like that of the Jesuits, yielded poor results in terms of converting the Miꞌkmaq and preventing the Puritan expansion in New England. According to the available records, few Capuchins lived and operated among the natives and the seasonal movements of the Aboriginal population represented a definite impediment to the evangelization process. Due to an inability or unwillingness to live with and move with the natives, the majority of the missionaries in Acadia operated close to or within the French settlements. Like the Recollets, the Capuchins were apparently unable to organize well-developed missionary activity outside the areas occupied by the Acadians.

Capuchin cooperation with other orders active in New France was almost nonexistent because of an ill-defined missionary jurisdiction, which heightened pre-existing rivalries. To illustrate, the lack of definition over where Acadian ended and the Canadian (or Québec) region began led to disputes over who had the right to operate amongst the natives in that vast area. In 1647, the Jesuits, who for almost nine months preached among the Abenaki of the Kennebec River, were forced to leave the mission because of the Capuchin claims. According to the Capuchins, the area around the Kennebec was part of their jurisdiction. Another problem for the Capuchins apostolate was a shortage of missionaries in Acadia. According to a census of 1650, the Acadian mission counted fifteen members of the Capuchin order plus two others who probably operated in today's state of Maine. This number is modest when compared with the size of the order in Europe, where, in the same year there were forty-seven provinces, containing 1,428 convents housing a total of 21,840 Capuchins.

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The insufficient number of missionaries in Acadia was undoubtedly influenced by the instability of the colony, which was again menaced by military action between 1652 and 1654. Such warfare deeply hampered the missionary framework, which had already been affected by the death in 1635 of Isaac de Razilly, the governor of Acadia and patron of the Capuchins. After Razilly died, the Acadian territory was contested by Charles de Menou d'Aulnay and Charles de Saint-Étienne de La Tour. The situation for the Capuchins worsened after 1650, when d'Aulnay died. Like Razilly, d'Aulnay had supported the Capuchins. This enabled Emmanuel Le Borgne, a Protestant trader from La Rochelle and the main creditor of d'Aulnay, to claim his rights in Acadia. Consequently, in 1652 Le Borgne sent a military expedition that seized the southern part of Acadia. The attack had repercussions on the missionary activity because two Capuchins were imprisoned, and afterwards expelled from Port-Royal, six others decided to return to France.

Two years later, in 1654, the English expedition led by Robert Sedgwick had an equally devastating effect on the Capuchin presence in Acadia. Sedgwick seized Port-Royal. According to one of the clauses of the treaty capitulation of Port-Royal, the Capuchins could remain in Acadia, but they had to leave the settlement and reside nine to thirteen kilometres away from Port-Royal.

Both the Le Borgne and Sedgwick expeditions opened a complex period that lasted until 1670, during which time, both the English and the French tried to assert their claims to Acadia. The Anglo-Acadian relationship remained peaceful, and Acadian life saw little change. But relations between the missionaries and the English soon deteriorated. In the second half of 1654, the English killed Léonard de Chartres, the Capuchins’ superior in Acadia, and, ignoring the clause of the treaty that allowed the missionaries to remain in the colony, decided to expel three of his confrères from Port-Royal. Between 1654 and 1655 another Capuchin was expelled while four more voluntarily decided to leave the Acadian mission to return to France.

The events of 1655 essentially ended the Capuchin experience in Acadia. The conquest and the scant interest shown by French authorities in the fate of Acadia were decisive elements in the Capuchins’ departure from the territory. According to the missionaries, the survival of the mission depended on the survival of the colony itself. The precarious state of Acadia clashed with the contemporaneous growth in the French settlement of the Antilles. Moreover, few at the French court showed much interest in Acadia. Perhaps surprisingly, the Propaganda in Rome was also little concerned about the relative failure of their missions in that part of the world, given that 25 years earlier, in 1630, it was the Roman Congregation that had conceived the idea of founding a Capuchin mission in North America to counterbalance the Puritans’ activity. By 1656 only two missionaries were active in Acadia, but a lack of further evidence suggests that the Capuchins could remain in Acadia, but they had to leave the settlement and reside nine to thirteen kilometres away from Port-Royal.

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dence makes it difficult to know how long these missionaries stayed or when they died. The missionary vacuum in Acadia brought no reaction from the Propaganda. Its priority was by then shifting from the conversion of Aboriginal peoples to the needs of the European Catholic population of New France.

Nonetheless, missionary initiatives among the Aboriginal peoples of Atlantic Canada did not cease. Small and isolated groups of missionaries kept up their evangelization efforts. Between 1659 and 1662, the northern part of Acadia saw three Jesuit missionaries. Like the Capuchins, the ratio between missionaries and territory was small in comparison with the size of the order in Europe. The half of the seventeenth century the Jesuits had 15,544 priests. In light of how few were sent to Acadia, it was a mission that appeared to be of little importance. This is not surprising, because at the time the missions in New France were less important than those in Europe, where the fight against the Protestants was the priority.

Besides being few in number, the Jesuits in northern Acadia found their work was also affected by the death of missionaries and lack of resources. The mission began in 1659 with three Jesuits, who were poorly supported and not replaced by new missionaries. In the summer of 1659 one Jesuit left the mission for Quebec while in 1661 another died. Nonetheless, the Jesuit missionaries were able to baptize almost 200 natives. Did these converts fully understand the Christianity they were embracing? Or were they in much the same spiritual situation as the converts Jessé Fléché welcomed in 1610? It is impossible to say. Moreover, the lack of Mi'kmag sources prevents us from knowing what the natives really thought of the missionaries. It is likely that some conversions were prompted by a desire to find in Christianity a new source of spiritual strength that could protect them from the epidemics caused by contact with Europeans. On the other hand, some natives conscientiously accepted Christianity, and blended it with their own spirituality and the structures of their traditional faith.

What is sure is that, during this brief apostolate, the Jesuits' perception of the Mi'kmaq had altered somewhat from the harsh comment of Baud in 1611. This was due to a change in the Jesuits' missionary policy. In 1622, the Society of Jesus had adopted, on the Propaganda's recommendation, the Doctrine of Adaptivity, that stated that the missionaries were not allowed to blame or attack the Aboriginal customs, and were to avoid any comparison with those of Europe. The missionaries had to "do your utmost to adapt yourselves to them,"

By 1662 the Jesuit apostolate in Acadia was over. It ended primarily because of a shortage of priests, but there was another factor that placed a part. At the beginning of the 1660s, many Mi'kmag were suffering from the degenerative effects of alcohol supplied to them by merchants. Consequently, many Aboriginal people lost interest in the missionaries' preaching. The Jesuits found no remedies to overcome the situation, and realized that, according to the account of Nicolas Denys, a French explorer, in the missionaries' preaching. The Jesuits found no remedies to overcome the situation, and realized that, according to the account of Nicolas Denys, a French explorer,
that "there was nothing more to be done with these people, whom the frequentation of the ships kept in perpetual drunkenness."

For New France, the years from 1663 to 1690 represented a period of great political and social change, which had effects on the work of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1663, Louis XIV closed the Compagnie des Cent-Associés and asserted direct control of the colony. Hencforth, François de Laval, the first Canadian bishop, became the religious representative of the French crown in New France. More specifically the Church in New France became an extension of the Gallican Church.

In the spring of 1676 the situation in Acadia began to change, with the arrival of the Acadians, and the missionaries, who toiled among the natives.

That same spring, however, did not change. Missionary activity there remained almost non-existent. The only exception occurs from 1668 to 1674, when Laurens Molinier, a Cordelier, operated in the parish of Port-Royal.

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Chrestien Le Clercq, a Recollect priest. His experience can be considered the culmi-
nation of the first phase of Acadia’s missionary history, where the conversion of the 
natives once again became a priority. Between 1676 and 1686, with the exception of 
some brief stays in France, Le Clercq operated in an area that extended from Percé 
Island to the northern part of today’s New Brunswick, as close as possible to the Mi’kmaq camps in order to live among the natives. This was because of the 
need to learn their language, a missionary approach that dated back to the early 
1600s at the time of the Capuchin apostolate.

The end of Le Clercq’s experience in 1687 marked the dividing line between mis-
sionary activity based on specific evangelical aims and that which would develop in the 
1690s and continue during the first half of the eighteenth century. Towards the end of the 1680s the role of the Roman Catholic missionaries underwent a radical 
change due to the increasing tension between English and French in North America 
that altered the religious pattern of Acadia. The support and encouragement of 
French officials, and often funding as well, modified the strategy of the missionaries, 
who began to play an active role against the English, along the borders between the 
southern part of Acadia and New England. The first evidence of this new involve-
ment or relationship comes from 1687, when a Jesuit went, on behalf of the French 
authorities, to an unspecified part of New England to invite the natives belonging to 
the Abenaki nation to join the French against the English.

According to the opinion of Jacques-René de Brusay de Denonville, governor 
of New France from 1685 to 1689, the Jesuits were the best missionaries precisely 
because of the authority and influence they exercised over the native nations. Yet 
the Jesuits were not the only missionaries involved in the French imperial strategies; 
the Recollects also fulfilled the aims of French officials. In 1693 Joseph Robinou de Vil-
lebon, the commandant in Acadia, requested Recollects on the ground that, in his 
opinion, these missionaries “could be distributed throughout Acadia, and these good 
fathers would bring peace to the country which has need of it.” Villebon’s desire for 
peace was notional. The Recollects, like the Jesuits, found themselves carrying on 
their activity in a risk-filled environment.

The missionaries kept the French authorities informed of the English negotia-
tions to promote a peace with Abenaki leaders. However, their role was not limited to 
passing information. Some priests even led Aboriginal-French raids against Eng-
lish forts. To illustrate, in the summer of 1696, when Anglo-French tension was at 
its height the Recollects engaged in some raids and coordinated Aboriginal 
warrors on Villebon’s orders during the expedition to conquer Fort William Henri, at Pemaguid.

The treaty of Ryswick in 1697 put a temporary end to Anglo-French conflict in North America, but close cooperation between missionaries and the French authori-
ties continued. Between 1699 and 1700 the Jesuits kept the governor of New France 

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informed about the English meetings with the Abenaki. Meanwhile in Acadia, after 1699, there were not likely any more Recollects in Acadia, despite the efforts of the Bishop of Quebec to reintroduce some missionaries of that order. The bishop may have managed in the fall of 1699 to arrange for two Recollects to go to Port-Royal, but there is no evidence that these missionaries actually made it to Acadia.

What is certain is that the Jesuits’ presence among the Abenaki represented to the English a growing threat to New England’s government. English officials were aware that as long as the missionaries were living among the Abenaki, the English would have difficulty establishing any relationships with the natives, in 1700. Richard Coote (1636-1701), earl of Bellomont, the New England governor, obliged the New York and Massachusetts assemblies to pass legislation outlawing the Jesuits and other Roman Catholic missionaries in the English territories.

Despite the increasing risks to which they were exposed, the Jesuits succeeded in extending their missionary range, and in continuing to inform the French authorities, who, for their part, kept on using the missionaries to promote their interests amongst the natives. This situation continued until 1710, the year of the British conquest of Port-Royal. That regime change opened a new era, one in which the Roman Catholic missionaries active in Acadia/Nova Scotia progressively became the most effective and at the same time, the most endangered agents of the French imperial strategies in the region.

In conclusion we can affirm that, after Le Clercq, evangelical activity for strictly spiritual reasons amongst the natives of Acadia ceased to be the dominant motive. In 1690s the missions, especially those on mainland Nova Scotia, were no longer places through which, as in the first half of the seventeenth century, the missionaries could establish and subsequently develop relationships with the Aboriginal people. The priorities, pressures and interests of the authorities of New France and France altered the missionary framework. The missions began to be used as headquarters for efforts to regroup native warriors against the British. Regardless of the motivation for missionary activity, strictly spiritual or spiritual combined with political and military overtones, the missionaries failed to make the natives become sedentary throughout the entire period from 1610 to 1710. Furthermore, the disappearance of the Propaganda from the missionary matters of North America reinforced the rivalry and the lack of cooperation among the various orders, each of which tried to assert its own missionary jurisdiction.

After 1670, due to the forced absence of the Roman ministry, all the main decisions relating to the missionary matters of Acadia/Nova Scotia were discussed between Quebec and Paris, often with poor results. Unlike the Propaganda, authorities in New France and France knew little or nothing about missionary strategies, and inevitably tended to place secular interests before spiritual. The overall results of missionary activity in Acadia/Nova Scotia were affected by those factors: the small
populations of French settlers scattered in far-off settlements, the fear as well as the risk of continuous raids, and the inconsistent and insufficient number of missionaries deployed in a territory. What was needed, but not present, was a constant supply of men and resources.

Endnotes


2. The name was originally given by Giovanni da Verazzano to territory where today one finds Maryland and Delaware. By the early 1600s the name had become associated with what are now northern Maine, the southern coast of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.


12. The first settlement of Port Royal was about 10 km from what in the 1630s became a second Port Royal, when in today's town of Annapolis Royal. The earliest Port Royal was past the village of La Pointe, approximately where today stands a reconstruction of the Port Royal Habitation, a national historic site of Canada. L'Acadie de l'ouest, 1605-1777 (Montreal: Editions du Fleuve, 1988), p. 24.


19. For a complete and detailed overview on the historiographical debate around this term and more broadly on the Reformation and Counter-Reformation see the last chapter of O'Malley, O'Malley, p. 191-195.


30. We need to be reminded at the moment of Argall's expedition that the Jesuit mission counted


32. The first settlement of Port Royal was about 10 km from what in the 1630s became a second Port Royal, when in today's town of Annapolis Royal. The earlier Port Royal was past the village of Lower Granville, approximately where today stands a reconstruction of the Port Royal Habitation, a national historic site of Canada. L'Acadie de l'ouest, 1605-1777 (Montreal: Editions du Fleuve, 1988), p. 24.


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44. Hollis, A History of the Jesuits, p. 78.


46. JR, vol. 1, pp. 173, 185; Price, The Mi'kmaq, pp. 72-74, 81-82.

47. JR, vol. 1, pp. 173, 185; Price, The Mi'kmaq, pp. 72-74, 81-82.


50. We need to be reminded at the moment of Argall's expedition that the Jesuit mission counted
of four missionaries. Indeed, besides Brand and Massé, there were Gilbert De Tho, a lay-brother, and Jacques Quentin, respectively arrived in 1612 and 1613. De Tho was killed, while Brand and Quentin were imprisoned. Massé was the only one who managed to survive and return in France.

29. The Compagnie des Garçons was officially founded on 29 April 1627 by the Armand Jean Du Plessis, cardinal of Richelieu (1585-1642). This trading association received the dominion, the monopoly of the commerce and the fur-trade. From its part, the Compagnie des Garçons engaged itself to settle, within a period of 15 years, 4000 colonists, who had to be French and Roman Catholics. See Archives des Colonies, Série C11A, Correspondance générale, Canada, vol. 1, fol. 79-84, 25 April 1627; Marcel Trudel, "La seigneurie des Cent-Associés," pp. 162-169; Anna Zenina womens (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), p. 59-56.

30. The Capucins were a branch of the Franciscan Order. They were officially approved by Pope Clement VIII (Giulio de' Medici, 1523-1534) through the bull Religiosi Zelus, dated 3 July 1531. Codignola, to, PF, 28 April 1627; Marcel Trudel, "L'Acadie de 1604 à 1763," pp. 4-5.

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The three missionaries were André Richard, Jacques Frémin, Martin de Lyonne. See JR, XLV, p. 59.

The best surviving account on the Capuchin mission in Acadia is the relation written by Ignace de Paris and added to the Propaganda. See Ignace de Paris, OFM Cap, a Propaganda, [1606]; APE, SOCG, vol. 260, 64, 39v-40v.


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67. Gallicanism was a French conception imposed by the French King Francis I (1515-1547) in 1538 on the Holy See. This vision of the Church is best summarised in the two main statements made by the French lawyer Pierre Poiret at the end of the sixteenth century. "The first is that the Pope cannot command or ordain, either in general or in particular, anything that concerns temporal things in countries and lands under the obedience and sovereignty of the Most Christian King. The second is that if the Pope is recognized as sovereign in spiritual things, his absolute and infinite power has no currency within France, but it is bound and checked by the canons and the rules of the ancient councils of the Church recognized in the kingdom." See Pierre Poirets, Les Lectures des Écritures de l'Église Gallicane (Paris, 1609), p. 251 cited in Alain Tallon, "National Church, State Church and Universal Church: The Gallican Dilemma in Seventeenth-century France," in Luc Razzut and Alex Bye-Ed., Modern Visions in the European Reformation (Adelard, Hor. Ardagani, 2005), foirn. 2, p. 109.

68. Tales: Mi'kmaq Society, 1500-1760,, p. 155.


77. See Codignola, "Competing Networks," pp. 544-545, 557, 572-573, 578.

77. See Codignola, "Competing Networks," pp. 544-545, 557, 572-573, 578.
100. Reid, “1686-1720 Imperial Intrusions,” p. 94.
101. JR, LXV, pp. 95-96.
104. JR, LXV, p. 185; Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil and François de Baunehart de La Chaussy, to, Pontchartrain, 15 November 1703, Québec, AC, C11A, vol. 21, fol. 5-28v; Binasco, “The role and activities,” p. 107.
105. Since this moment we will use the term British instead of English, because of the union, in 1707, of the parliament of England with that of Scotland.
114. Reid, “1686-1720 Imperial Intrusions,” p. 84.
115. JR, LXV, pp. 95-96.
118. JR, LXV, p. 185; Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil and François de Baunehart de La Chaussy, to, Pontchartrain, 15 November 1703, Québec, AC, C11A, vol. 21, fol. 5-28v; Binasco, “The role and activities,” p. 107.
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