

The Lost World of Wood Runners

About: Gilles Havard, *Histoire des coureurs de bois : Amérique du Nord, 1600-1840*, Les Indes Savantes

by Paul Mapp

“Wood runners” is the name given to travelling fur traders in the age of pioneers. Focusing on two centuries of their risky adventures and on their relationship with Amerindian populations allows Gilles Havard to write a monumental multicultural history of the early North American West.

Gilles Havard, author of major works of North American history such as *L'Empire et métissages. Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660-1715*¹, is also one of the few people I know of to comment on the puzzling absence of the French Western. Francophone personages were present throughout the North American West. Innumerable and intriguing stories have grown up around them. The French film industry—able and accomplished though it is—might profit from a little western air and sunshine. Yet French Westerns are few. Popular entertainment, as Havard points out, has not exhausted the possibilities of the early North American West; nor, as he shows in his monumental cultural history of North America's fur traders, *Histoire des coureurs de bois : Amérique du Nord, 1600-1840*², has scholarly investigation.

In *Coureurs de bois*, Havard shows what a great historian can do with this vast, profuse, and ambivalent topic. The book is no movie. It's a grand scholarly volume in which Havard applies his exacting, capacious, and insightful mind to North American fur trading as a social activity: an enterprise that people, of necessity, did in groups; an undertaking that expressed

¹ Gilles Havard, *L'Empire et métissages. Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660-1715, Septentrion/PUPS*, 2003. Gilles Havard is also Director of Research at the French Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) and of the Centre d'études nord-américaines in Paris.

² Gilles Havard, *Histoire des coureurs de bois : Amérique du Nord, 1600-1840*, Les Indes savantes, 2016.

or challenged ideas about how humans should live together. The sometimes explicit, often implicit question running through the book is what drew men to the trade despite the social disdain, drowning, starving, freezing, and knife wounds that often went with it. Towards the end of the book especially, the question of what drew and drove Indian women to some of these men becomes more and more prominent.

Grand History and Retrospective Anthropology

Havard's fur traders are a big subject, concerning the better part of a continent, three centuries, the French, British, and Spanish empires, and innumerable Indian nations. In 764 pages, Havard works on a scale proportional to the subject. As Havard points out, earlier works have tended to treat parts of the North American peltry trade rather than the whole. They have looked at Canada or Louisiana; the eighteenth-century Southeast or the nineteenth-century Rockies; the Anglophone United States to the exclusion of the Francophone hunters, traders, and boatmen who were busy from Montreal and St. Louis to the Arctic Circle. Havard, in contrast, takes on the whole of the French, British, and Amerindian fur trade from the late sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries; from Newfoundland and Carolina to the fringes of New Mexico and Alaska. Because the Francophone community pushing west from the St. Lawrence was active in the trade from the beginning and across the continent, and because French officials left behind a large body of sources extolling the importance and decrying the perils of the trade, I think it's fair to say that the heart of the book is French. The book's arms, however, embrace not just Frenchmen, but also Britons, Indians, and the mixed peoples that contact among different groups created. Havard has read, as far as I can tell, every French and English-language secondary and published primary source concerning the fur trade, as well as a huge amount of archival material from Europe and America, not to mention an extensive body of anthropological literature bearing on pertinent topics like gift-giving, masculinity, kinship, and warfare.³ Its wide interests and extensive coverage make *Coueurs de bois* a truly continental, multi-imperial, and multicultural history.

Although working on an even grander scale than his grand predecessors, Havard offers not an overarching argument like Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, nor an epic narrative like those of Francis Parkman and Bernard De Voto⁴, nor even the kind of rollicking

³ Governor-General (of New France) Frontenac's 1672 *ordonnance* coining the phrase "coureur de bois"; James Adair's 1775 *History of the American Indians*; Osborne Russell's 1834-1843 *Journal of a Trapper*; Claude Lévi-Strauss's 1991 *Histoire de Lynx (Story of Lynx)*; official reports, laws, diaries, letters, histories, academic monographs: Havard has read them all.

⁴ Turner's thesis, first published in 1893, held that "American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History*, New York, Dover, 1996,

tales we find in Washington Irving's histories, but rather an interpretive analysis. He breaks the periods, peoples, places, and activities of the fur trade into parts and looks at them separately. He makes sense of the human behavior within these parts by looking at the values and beliefs underlying it. The first part of the book focuses on Euro-American traders. Moving chronologically forward, it looks at the *coureurs de bois* and *voyageurs* from New France; traders in the British Southeast; hunters and traders in the Mississippi Valley; and then hunters, traders, and trappers in the Northern Plains and Rockies. The second half focuses on Amerindian men and women and on the mixed descendants of Indians and Europeans. It is organized more like a retrospective anthropological study around topics like masculinity, diet, and marriage.

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Evident throughout is Havard's scholarly versatility; his use, that is, of the methods and insights of different disciplines and fields of study like social, political, and business history, anthropology, folklore, and linguistic analysis. Good examples of his wide learning and varied technique can be found in his exploration of why seventeenth-century French officials were so unsettled by the movement of young men into the American woods to trade for furs. Going back into European folklore, Havard remarks that the forest was where fairy tales took place, where the devil could be found. Looking at word origins, he recalls that the forest was where human beings, away from farm, village, and city, became uncivilized or "savage," the latter word deriving from the Latin *silva*, forest.

Moving to the level of government policy, Havard observes that one vision of New France was as a controlled colony rationally administered by the state to generate resources for the metropole; to this end, farm-bound *habitants* were more easily surveilled and taxed than elusive fur traders. Turning to the history of how French colonists lived in families and how French officials very much wanted them to do so, Havard notes that marriage was seen as the bedrock of French society, where children were produced, moral behavior was taught, and discipline was exercised. French men marrying and acculturating Indian women could be acceptable in the eyes of a minister like Colbert. On the other hand, French men fornicating in Indian villages could easily threaten the integrity of New France's hearths and homes. Considering the financial and commercial aspects of the fur trade in which the suspect *coureurs* were involved, Havard calculates that a French trader might accumulate enough capital from a few voyages to establish a farm or pay off his debts. He might also use the remoteness of the upper St. Lawrence to escape the control of New France's urban merchants. He might even make enough money to live like someone well born, a threat to the still

1. For Parkman, DeVoto, and Irving, see Francis Parkman, *France and England in North America*, 2 vols. (New York, Library of America, 1983); Bernard DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, Boston, Mariner Books, 1998; Washington Irving, *Three Western Narratives*, New York, Library of America, 2004.

dominant view that people should stay in their station. At the level of national identity, a French man was supposed to be Catholic, clothed, married, a farmer living in a house with a chimney, and a Francophone. The ragged, unmarried, polyglot French trader loafing promiscuously around a fire pit in a churchless Ottawa village seemed to have evaded everything French culture was designed to produce. One could go on, and Havard does so, especially later in the book, looking into traders' journals and observers' comments to discern traders' sense of their virility, bodies, and place within or outside of St. Lawrence society. With his consideration of so many facets of a question like that of why a passel of wood runners might trouble the quill-wielding occupant of a Parisian bureau, Havard leaves the reader with a remarkably wide-ranging set of answers. In fact, these answers provide a fair introduction to the main lines of early modern French cultural history, as well as to the place of one social group within the larger French Atlantic world.

Havard's learning is multi-faceted and his techniques varied; his scholarly rigor is entirely consistent. It's not just his mastery of a huge body of primary sources, but his judicious and transparent use of them to support his claims. When tackling a difficult historical question, Havard will typically present the available evidence, point out its biases and limitations, allow for multiple interpretations, then offer his own shrewd conclusion based on what seems the central tendency of the documentation. Take the vexed question of whether Amerindians, when first coming into contact with Europeans, viewed them as deities of some sort [579-580]. Havard acknowledges the interpretive difficulties. He notes that many historians now dismiss the possibility that Europeans might have seemed anything other than ordinary to the Indians spying them. He remarks the danger that European observers may have misunderstood Indians' reactions and self-interestedly exaggerated the grandeur of the *coureurs de bois* stumbling into Indian towns. On the other hand, Havard points out the large number of sources spread over many years that testify to Indians' astonishment upon first meeting exotic Europeans. He mentions corroborating Indian oral traditions. More tellingly, he remarks that many Indian cultures did not distinguish sharply among different categories of beings—animals, humans, deities—and did not consider the presence of spiritually-enhanced beings a challenge to the nature of things, as a secular twenty-first-century scholar might if he found evidence that George Washington's apotheosis was a real event, and not just a painting in the Rotunda of the United States Capital. Havard allows that Europeans may initially have seemed to Indians somewhat more than ordinarily human. The reader can agree or disagree with Havard, knowing why in either case. Havard offers a model of how to use evidence and how to approach questions both critically and respectfully.

Important Conclusions

Havard's varied and rigorous methods lead not to big answers or a grand generalization about fur traders, but rather to a host of mid-level corrections and conclusions. Consider a few examples. Contrary to one hoary generalization about young Frenchmen's unique eagerness to participate in the fur trade, Havard finds plenty of young Britons as happy to venture into the Appalachians seeking deerskins as their French counterparts were to brave journeys inland. On a different topic, Havard notes that French communities of the eighteenth-century Mississippi Valley were hunting fur-bearing animals for themselves well before the nineteenth-century Rocky Mountain trappers who have often been presented as the initiators of this move away from reliance on Indian hunters [378-381]. Examining the question of Canadian identity, Havard avers that the fur trade helped forge a Canadian provincial character comparable to that of Brittany, Gascony, and Alsace, rather than a Canadian identity distinct from that of France that some writers have posited [183-191]. Most centrally, in asking whether the appeal of fur trading for Europeans was largely a matter of lucre or lifestyle, Havard comes down on the side of wandering ways, Indian cultures, and manly self-realization rather than capital accumulation. Overall, one might say that Havard gives us a general understanding of fur traders at the expense of general statements about the fur trade; from his encyclopedic work, we gain more certitude about more limited claims.

Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the trickiest suggestion of the book has to do with the relationship between Euro-American men and Indian women. Havard argues persuasively that the prospects of transient sex, marriages of convenience, or lasting union with Indian women were major motives for Euro-American men heading west. Societies such as early New France and Carolina often had far more Euro-American men than women. Moreover, it was not unusual for Indian communities to make young women available to traders as a way to demonstrate hospitality, to establish the kinship ties Indian peoples often saw as a necessary part of trading, or to acquire through sexual relations the spiritual power of which European goods were symbols. Young Euro-American men seem to have been driven by lust and looking for love, and they found the latter often enough to make the quest seem worthwhile. The more delicate question Havard touches upon has to do with whether a significant number of Indian women were pursuing their own sexual and romantic agendas. Some, of course, many, in fact, had no choice in the matter. They were given or sold to traders as slaves, or as girls too young to have had much say in the matter. Havard is well aware of this facet of the fur trade. But he also raises at least the possibility that Euro-American traders could, in some cases, be attractive partners. They often brought novel ways and exotic goods—goods a woman might furnish to her extended family. The manly deeds they recounted on winter nights to impress credulous young Quebeckers may have swayed a few young Indian women too. As, moreover, the trade was a social escape for many a young Franco or Anglo-American man, it may also have been one for some Indian women. Indian communities also had social constraints, sexual restrictions, brutish fathers, and prospective spouses made less appealing by their ongoing relationships with other women. Havard does

not overstate an argument about the mutual attractions of Euro-American men and Amerindian women. The evidence is scanty and one-sided, the topic delicate, the historian circumspect. He offers enough material, however, to open the matter for discussion, to present the Métis communities of the Plains as the children of both forced and voluntary unions, the fur trade as an escape and destination for some women as well as men.

Inclusive as it is, and its thoroughness, rigor, and bulk can sometimes overwhelm a reader less stalwart than its author, *Coureurs de bois* talks less about some subjects than a reader might expect. One of these is the commercial aspects of trade. Havard is certainly aware of the pecuniary interests of *voyageurs* and trading companies. He praises the works of earlier scholars on the business of hides and pelts. He does not, however, concentrate on money. Havard does not rule financial motives out, they just don't seem as interesting as the other reasons for human conduct he discusses. This is true also of the Indian side of the material motive question, Havard, in a quite brilliant anthropological fashion, explores why an Indian hunter or leader might want the goods acquired from trading furs to *coureurs de bois*. He suggests the social prestige to be gained from generosity, from annihilating the material self by giving material wealth to others. Perhaps because this interpretation is so sparkling, it seemed to me to partake of a logic different from that of dragging beavers out of ponds and lugging them to market. Theories of the gift can outshine the less elevated desire for a really sturdy pot. Finally, the other topic that is less prominent than might be expected is Indian slavery, especially the relation to the fur trade of the thousands of enslaved Indians who ended up in New France. Havard knows the literature on this topic and mentions Indian slavery many times, but he does not ascribe to Indian slavery in New France the kind of explanatory or categorical importance it sometimes has in other recent works.⁵ Consider Havard's suggestion that a general Plains Indian bellicosity was one reason for the difficulty of extending the fur trade west of Lake Superior [432-435]. Havard is right to mention the importance of warrior culture. It may be though, as recent work suggests, that the anger arising from specific incidents like that of Sioux emissaries seeing Sioux children living as slaves in Montreal in 1742 was a more pointed reason for the ill-feelings that impeded the fur trade's move west of the Great Lakes.⁶ Havard may simply disagree with this argument, or, as with the material motives discussed above, the virtuosity of Havard's cultural interpretations may sometimes overshadow baser explanations grounded in particular instances of rage and resentment.

⁵ See Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France*, Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2012.

⁶ Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance*, 193-196.

A Lost World Regained?

The fur traders Havard treats, with the North American continent as the spectacular backdrop for their cultural multifariousness, outsized personalities, and outlandish adventures, were certainly cinematic. They toiled in a world almost lost to us, one not as God made it, but not as yet unmade by modern extraction, engineering, and ever-multiplying millions. Power lines, interstates, and Grand Coulee Dam were nowhere to be seen. Beavers, buffalo, and bears the size of Volkswagens abounded.

Crucially for modern scholars, moreover, the written records of the fur trade afford a glimpse of swathes of North America still dominated by indigenous peoples from whom, for the most part, *coureurs de bois* acquired the furs they wanted, and with whom they generally had to be on passable terms if they wished to trade safely and profitably. Indians and Euro-Americans trucked, drank, and fought. They respected and despised one another, and came together in lust, love, and literal and metaphorical intercourse to create a new *métis* people. Evidence from the fur trade offers glimpses of a North America in which Europeans were merely an ingredient, pointing to what the continent was and what it might, had history unfolded differently, have become.

If this distant world attracts the reader, it also repels, with its greed and brutality, with its muskets, microbes, liquor, and saw-toothed traps. Wood runners beheld a continent in many ways still unspoiled; despoiling it was their livelihood. Trading furs depended on the slaughter of mammals—lots of them. The relatively few traders moving west and living on Indian terms were harbingers of more numerous Euro-American migrants who would establish terms of their own that left only pockets, place names, and plaques to suggest what once had been. Part of what makes the fur trade so fascinating is the tension between the allure and horror of the subject, between its human richness and appalling destruction.

Havard's succession of precise, smart, and varied interpretations add up to form a remarkably comprehensive view of fur traders and the essentially dissonance enterprise they were engaged in. The book's achievement is evident. What, then, about the significance of the enterprise described? Havard and his sources talk about the importance of the trade, but I think it is fair to say that this importance is more an assumption of the book than its argument. It is a premise that could use justifying since, as Havard acknowledges, fur traders have often been rather peripheral figures. Many very good books have been written about fur traders and the fur trade. Nonetheless, in Quebec historiography and identity, Havard suggests, the *voyageur* has given way to the cultivator of the St. Lawrence Valley. In Anglophone historiography of the United States and Canada, the fur trade is often a colorful prelude to the real story of national development. When Frederick Jackson Turner invited readers to stand in the Cumberland Gap and South Pass and watch the historical stages go by, the fur trader walked after the buffalo and the Indian, and before the rancher and farmer. For Turner, I think, the trader fit better with the almost gone than the still around. Has

Havard written a substantial book about a subject too evanescent to bear the weight? I don't think so. The literary appeal of cultural encounters amidst spectacular landscapes and the scholarly value of Havard's inexhaustible erudition justify the tome. And there's more.

With his lengthy treatment of the lost world of the fur trade, Havard may be scenting a twenty-first-century change in the air. That lost world may not be as lost as many once thought. Scholars today are seeing more descendants of America's original inhabitants—human and animal—than Turner saw in 1893 or probably would have expected anyone to see in 2018. There have been rumors of intrepid beavers trying to colonize collegiate ponds within yards of my office in Williamsburg, Virginia—and thus within yards of a reconstructed symbol of the imposition of European urbanity on the American landscape. Within miles of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia Indian peoples devastated by European colonizers in the seventeenth century are receiving tribal recognition from the United States government in the twenty-first. The fur trade isn't coming back, but, despite the depredations of five centuries, descendants of the indigenous peoples and animals it involved are. Indeed, the ravages from which they are recovering may shed light on that oddball film question that began this review. Maybe the fur trade generated few Western films because the appropriate genre for treating the blood-splattered fur trade is not the Western, but the horror film. And if the fur trade was a horror film, maybe it was one in which, after a long night of rue and gore, the sun rises at the end.

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