A set of rascally priests

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The first Spiritan arrived in Canada in 1732, twenty three years after the death of Poullart des Places. Francois de la Mothe worked among the Miqmaq First Nations people west of Quebec City, taught in the Quebec Seminary and eventually became a chaplain at Fort Duquesne (Pittsburgh). Pierre Mailllard arrived in 1735 and Jean Le Loutre in 1737. By 1750 the majority of the staff at the Grand Seminaire in Quebec City were Spiritans. At least a dozen others worked with the Miqmaq people in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Cape Breton and the Magdalen Islands.

The aftermath of the French Revolution in 1789 stemmed the flow of new missionaries and the last French Spiritan died in 1805.

These East Coast beginnings gave the Paris-based Congregation of the Holy Ghost the opportunity and the challenge to become overseas missionaries.

Pierre Maillard

On Sundays, and when the sick or the dying required his attention, the first priest to come among the Miqmaq people left his tent, attended to them and shut himself up again. He continued this all winter until Easter. He then sent word that if the people would assemble he would preach to them. They came and to their astonishment he spoke Miqmaq as fluently as any of them.

Pierre Maillard was convinced that, if he were to work among the indigenous people of Cape Breton, he would have to be able to speak to them in their own language. He spent years learning Miqmaq idioms and developed a pictorial script for the people to use. This hieroglyphic script contained more than 5700 different picture letters that spoke to their imagination. In addition, he wrote the first Miqmaq grammar and dictionary, and also produced religious handbooks containing prayers, hymns, sermons and rituals for celebrating baptisms, weddings and funerals.

In 1745, ten years after his arrival, Pierre Maillard, then Vicar General of Cape Breton, was among the Catholic priests arrested by the British, deported to Boston and then back to France. Four years later, this determined Breton was back in Cape Breton, living and working in Bras d’Or.

After the British captured Louisbourg in 1758 and deported the Acadians in crowded boats to France, Fr. Maillard led his Miqmaq people to Miramichi, New Brunswick, where they joined the Acadians who had gone into hiding rather than face deportation.

Two years later he persuaded both Acadians and Miqmaqs to accept the terms of a peace offer from the
Acadians

Once upon a time Acadia signified all of Nova Scotia. The famous Evangeline Trail along the Bay of Fundy was the heart of Acadia. Later, Acadia came to mean all the land between Maine and the St. Lawrence River. Acadia National Park is situated south of Bar Harbour, Maine.

After Champlain “discovered” this territory for France in 1604, French settlers (Acadians) arrived in this part of the New World. In the 1700s and 1800s they cultivated the rich soil of the tidal marshes of the Bay of Fundy. They built large dikes to keep out the notoriously high tides of the bay and preserved the land for agriculture. Add abundant orchards and vegetable to the grain and hay fields and you arrive at a garden paradise.

But their land became a battlefield in the wars between England and France for control of North America. They refused to take up arms against the French and Miqmaqs. In fact, they often intermarried with the Miqmaqs.

In 1713 when the French withdrew to small settlements in Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island, the Acadians developed a profitable trade with the new French colony of Louisbourg. Then in the early 1750s they built a strong fortification called Beausejour at the northeast end of the Bay of Fundy. In 1755 the Governor of New England sent 500 troops from Boston to capture Beausejour. Out of a population of 10,000 more than 6,000 were deported on ships bound for the British colonies along the eastern seaboard from Massachusetts to Georgia and further south to Louisiana and the West Indies.

The Acadians who remained went into hiding in the forests. Many died of starvation. Spiritan Fr. Francois Leguerne became known as “the chaplain of the hunted.”
British. He was convinced that holding out against them would be no good.

He then moved to Halifax and lived there for two years. His health was deteriorating and in 1762 he died there — the last Catholic priest allowed to remain in Nova Scotia. He was given an Anglican funeral and buried in the Protestant cemetery.

Pierre Maillard identified with the Miqmaq people. He lived with them, spoke their language, shared their joys and endured their hardships. According to a Miqmaq legend, after his death bushes bearing beautiful flowers sprang up over his grave.

Jean Le Loutre

These 18th century Spiritan missionaries were “a set of rascally priests” according to the historians, officers and politicians who opposed them. The most ‘rascally’ of all was undoubtedly Jean Le Loutre.

“Unquestionably religious, but a fanatic … The missionary most devoted to the cause of justice that Acadia ever had … Greatly renowned for his sanctity … The Author and Adviser of all the disturbances the Indians had made in the Province … an accomplice to murder … a price of 6000 livres on his head … had helped set fire to a newly constructed church … spent three months in prison in England … was captured at sea and spent eight years in jail on the Channel Islands”.

Jean Le Loutre arrived in Louisbourg in 1737. Pierre Maillard told him that he would be working among the Miqmaqs and so he had to learn their language. Maillard himself would be his teacher. After ten months Maillard considered Le Loutre sufficiently fluent to begin his pastoral work. He appointed him to Shubenacadie, between Truro and Halifax.

The British Lieutenant Governor wrote to him: “The esteem I have for you leaves no room to doubt that you will be disposed to help maintain peace, law and justice.” Le Loutre did this for four years, then handed over the care of the Acadians to another Spiritan in order to work full-time among the Miqmaqs. As their missionary he did not feel in any way subject to the government. As far as he was concerned, they were a free and independent people.

Accused by the British of leading a combined French-Miqmaq attack against Port Royal (Annapolis) in 1744, he thought it better to set out for Halifax to meet the French fleet and return to France. But only a remnant of their badly organized, disease-ridden ships made it to France.

On a return voyage he was captured at sea by the British. He pretended to be the ship’s chaplain. It didn’t work: he spent three months in an English jail.

A year later he was at sea again — with the same result, except that this time he received a one-month sentence.

A peace treaty between France and England in 1784 gave Louisbourg back into French control and Jean Le Loutre was free to return to Acadia. Many Acadians had resettled along the shore of the Bay of Fundy and he rallied both them and the Miqmaqs to rebuild the Louisbourg fortifications and dikes as well as to construct a new church.

In 1755 the Governor of New England sent 500 soldiers from Boston to attack Beausejour. Le Loutre escaped before the town surrendered, after having agreed with the defenders’ decision to set fire to their newly built church rather than have it fall into English (Protestant!) hands.

One more transatlantic sea journey — once again captured. This time he was sentenced to eight years in jail in Jersey. Then, free at last, he spent the final nine years of his life ministering to the Acadians who had survived the fall of Beausejour and now lived in and around St. Malo, Brittany.

After he died, the Chairman of the French Navy Board wrote: “He has neither goods nor income because he has spent his entire personal inheritance for the welfare of the missions and for the benefit the poor.”

Late in life Le Loutre had the last word: “By making a nuisance of myself, I hope to succeed.”

Saint-Pierre & Miquelon

The first Spiritans sent to Saint-Pierre & Miquelon in 1765 came from Poullart des Places’ seminary. The Acadians expelled from Nova Scotia had sought refuge on these islands. They were then deported back to France, but returned and were granted the right to stay there.

The two 1765 Spiritans had worked with the Acadians before they too were expelled from Atlantic Canada. Undaunted, they returned to Canada, but with an interesting detour: their ship was blown off course some 5000 kilometres away to Martinique in the Caribbean.