BIG SHOES, BIG HEART: GASPARD CHAUSSEGROS DE LÉRY

Gaspard Chaussegros de Léry (1682-1756) is honored in Quebec as its first influential Chief Engineer and Architect. The correspondence of Chaussegros de Léry, king’s architect/engineer in 18th-century Quebec, depicts a man deeply committed to his career, his family, and New France. As literature, Chaussegros’ descriptions mirror and persuasively defend the value and beauty of New France to somewhat disinterested French officials. Culturally, they contain much sociological data about private and political life. Historically, they reveal complex interrelationships and procedures among various components of society: Jesuits, Récollets, Governors, and Intendants. Chaussegros’ letters are similar in impact to 18th-century Quebec as those of Mme de Sévigné to 17th-century France. This article sets the historical context, gives a brief biography of Chaussegros, explains the importance of his correspondence to 18th-century New France, and provides an intermediate/advanced lesson plan for the classroom based on slightly modified excerpts from his actual correspondence.

Eighteenth-century Quebec (called New France at the time) was a struggling French colony. It was perceived by France as a financial drain on its treasury. The fur trade began to wind down in economic importance, and New France was seeking other sources of revenue. New France was also engaged in frequent military skirmishes with the American colonies over the New England boundary. A fairly detailed social structure had emerged. Seigneurs were the New France aristocrats, and their status was based on owning land, not on their genealogical pedigree as in France. The voyageurs were licensed by the French government to trade with the Amerindians for furs, whereas the coureurs de bois were not. Yet both traveled the Canadian forests at will, frequently starting families with Amerindian women and producing mixed race offspring called métis. Certain native tribes were allied with the French, such as the Hurons, the Abenakis, and the Micmacs, but the Iroquois were allied with the British. Indentured servants, the engagés, worked the land for three years in exchange for room and board. Furthermore, a merchant class had also emerged; it was similar to the haute bourgeoisie in France. Many French soldiers had been deployed to New France to keep the peace and to work on creating and maintaining the colony’s infrastructure—projects being implemented by Chaussegros. Finally, there were several groups of religious missionaries: Jesuits, Récollets (affiliated with the Franciscans), and Sulpicians, for example. Despite the numerous components of society and their varied activities, New France was chronically impoverished and quite dependent on the homeland.

Chaussegros de Léry came from a family of distinguished soldiers and military engineers.1 His father designed and built the fortifications of Toulon, France (3). Chaussegros, the son, distinguished himself on the field of battle at the siege of Turin in 1706 where he was wounded (3). In addition, he wrote a massive volume entitled Traité de fortification divisé en huit livres, completed in 1714, consisting of over 400 pages and 132 meticulously hand-drawn illustrations (Traité 1).

When Chaussegros de Léry was sent to Quebec in 1716 as the King’s Engineer and Architect, he was instructed to draw blueprints and maps of the existing fortifications and to propose what remained to be done. He was also to draft a proposal for building a protective stone wall around the perimeter of Montreal (4). He stayed in New France for one year and then returned to France at the end of the summer of 1717 with his drawings and construction plans (4). In order to stay in New France permanently with his Canadian wife, whom he had married in 1717, he used his family ties and the aristocratic power of the Duke of Penthièvre to pressure the court to permit him to do so (4-5). Chaussegros de Léry returned again to New France in the spring of 1719, and he remained there until his death in 1756, functioning as Quebec’s Chief Engineer and Architect (5).

The number of maps that Chaussegros drafted and projects that he proposed or worked on is enormous. According to Pierre-Georges Roy,

Toutes les fortifications militaires, les forts, les édifices publics de la colonie, de 1716 à 1751, furent

This activity is appropriate for advanced-level high school students, especially AP or IB, or for college and university students. It consists of an introduction in English about the life and work of Gaspard de Chaussegros de Léry for the teacher to read and present to the class or for students to read on their own. It includes a lesson plan, notes, and a bibliography. Readings in French and other related materials are located on the AATF Web site [www.frenchteachers.org/bulletin/activities]. - J.B.G.
tions at court because of his supporters’ deaths and, therefore, he no longer had protection. Furthermore, Chaussegros de Léry had lost the confidence of the court due to seemingly endless delays and unfinished projects. Moreover, “On two occasions at least, the minister suspected Chaussegros of collusion with contractors for personal profit […] and ordered investigations, but nothing was proved” (Thorpe, “Chaussegros de Léry” 2). Finally, in 1752, the court sent the engineer Franquet to Quebec to inspect Chaussegros de Léry’s work which was undoubtedly a public humiliation for him (Thorpe, “Chaussegros De Léry” 2).

Chaussegros de Léry married Marie-Renée Le Gardeur de Beavais on October 13, 1717 (6). They had eleven children and, thus, became the progenitors of a virtual Canadian dynasty. Their second child, Joseph-Gaspard (1721–1797) was the son who continued his father’s legacy (7). Joseph-Gaspard was named sous-ingénieur under his father from 1739 until 1749. He also distinguished himself several times on the battlefield, including during combat in the Louisiana Colony in 1739.

In the end, Gaspard Chaussegros de Léry passed away in 1756, just three years before New France’s capitulation to the British in 1759 on the Plains of Abraham. At this critical moment in Canadian history, the fortifications were still not finished. Even so, since other engineers had begun building the fortifications before him, not all the blame for the Conquest can be laid at Chaussegros’s feet.

Chaussegros’s 18th-century correspondence mirrors the importance of Mme de Sévigné’s 17th-century letters in the following ways, to list just a few:

1. Both writers enjoyed high positions in the French court—both were aristocrats.
2. Both revealed sociological or cultural information in their respective societies. For example, Mme de Sévigné wrote of an encounter with Louis XIV, of the arrest and trial of Fouquet, and of many details of the inner workings of the Sun King’s court. Chaussegros’ correspondence also reveals how the government functioned in New France—specifically, the Governor General’s and the Intendant’s roles in how the money was spent, the military structure, the unreasonable demands sometimes made by religious orders, and more.
3. Both suffered unfavorable written portraits painted by contemporaries.
4. Both were skilled, articulate writers.

Virginia R. Donovan

University of Wisconsin-Superior [vdonovan@uwsuper.edu]

LESSON PLAN

OBJECTIVES:
1. Students will recognize and practice using the subjunctive. Addresses communication standard.
2. Students will become acquainted with Chaussegros, an important historical figure, the “Father of Quebec Urban Design.” Addresses culture standard.
3. Students will be able to explain multiple perspectives of Quebec history and culture. Addresses comparisons standard.

METHOD:
1. Divide students into pairs. Give each student a copy of the subjunctive grammar explanation sheet. Explain the formation of the subjunctive. Do activities together in class to reinforce the use of the subjunctive.
2. Make a brief presentation on Chaussegros’ biography and historical/cultural circumstances in Quebec during the 18th century.
3. Pass out copies of the Chaussegros excerpts to three groups of students. Have students work together in partners to write the correct subjunctive form in the blanks. Ask each pair to spell their verbs to the class. Write the subjunctive verbs on board.
4. Ask students to identify new vocabulary words and look up the definitions on in-class computers. This component of the lesson plan could be assigned as homework the night before.
5. With students still in three groups, pass out Chaussegros questions to students—all members of a group receive questions which match their excerpts. Read excerpts in class in groups. Have students report the content of their excerpt of Chaussegros’s correspondence. To help students understand the content, assign students to answer the questions and to report the answers to their classmates in class. Have students point out anything surprising or any irony they may have found in their excerpt.
6. Engage class in a discussion of the Questions générales to provide relevance and reinforce connections and comparisons.

Note: Readings, activities, and supplementary material for the classroom can be found on the AATF Web site at [www.frenchteachers.org/bulletin/activities].

NOTES
1. The biographical narrative is adapted from the doctoral dissertation of Virginia R. Donovan. Used with permission. Unless otherwise noted, the historical facts are taken from Pierre-Georges Roy’s, La Famille Chaussegros de Léry to which the page numbers refer. Roy was the chief archivist for decades at the Archives of Quebec.
3. Charles de Boische, Marquis De Beauharnois, Governor from 1726–1747.
4. Roland-M. Barrin, Count De La Galissonnière, Governor from 1748–1749.
6. Ange Duquesne, Marquis De Menneville, Governor from 1752–1755.
7. Michel Bégon, Intendant from 1712–1726.
10. François Bigot, Intendant from 1745–1760.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

