

MARCEL TRUDEL, *Canada's Forgotten Slaves: Two Hundred Years of Bondage*, Transl. George Tombs (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2013), 323 pp.

George Tombs's 2013 English translation of Marcel Trudel's *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec* (2009) was fifty years overdue. Trudel's *magnum opus* first appeared in 1960 under the title *L'esclavage au Canada français* and only first saw new editions in French in 2004 and again in 2009. Tombs has based his translation on this last version (13) which contains the 2009 text, Trudel's preface and an introduction by the translator. However, both texts from 2009 and 2013 are by no means revised editions, as Trudel would still have it (13), but mere reprints of the original 1960s text, as Brett Rushforth has pointed out in his review (2005).<sup>1</sup> The translator does not hesitate to insert both Trudel's work and his own in the vein of Canada's "long denied" (7) history of black people. Indeed, the resistance to Trudel's book was great when it first appeared in 1960. His insertion of slavery as both an established and encouraged fact from the beginnings of the settlement of what we call Canada today unveiled an inconvenient truth for nationalist historians at the time while at the same time challenging the powerful hegemonic narrative of a white settler society in New France. This revelation may well represent one of the reasons why the monograph has since become the authoritative source on slavery in New France and Quebec. In turn, this has also meant that its obvious shortcomings as well as most problematic assertions have been ignored and/or downplayed.

On the one hand, there are strong points to be made in favor of Trudel for which he should be commended: His comprehensive and ambitious study of slavery between some of the First Nations, Blacks, and European settlers, and the presence of black people in New France is certainly the first of its kind. Given that Robin Winks's equally famous monograph from 1971 attempted to cover the whole of Canada, Trudel remains the sole authority on New France and Quebec, although Frank Mackey has recently published works on the history of slavery and black people in Montreal (2004; 2010). Trudel's work was thus

remarkable given the context of the beginning Quiet Revolution in Quebec, not only because the book established slavery as a fact that was heavily supported and maintained by religious elites, among others. Even today, to some extent, it explicitly and provocatively challenges the belief in a whitewashed history of the province by openly addressing métissage as a still "irritating problem" for many Québécois (230) and by directly linking common Québécois family names to slavery and interracial marriage (287-88). One might also mention here Trudel's useful *Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leurs propriétaires au Canada français* (1990), which accompanied the 2004 version, but was not, however, part of the 2009 edition nor of the translation. What is more, Trudel is responsible for important groundwork in the uncovering of sources that give information on slaves and slavery, such as birth, marriage, death certificates, and archives for the study of Canada's diverse black populations, thereby questioning the monopoly of the church, which had kept its records safe and was often reluctant to share them. This underlined Trudel's assessment that Quebec had deliberately chosen to ignore the historical presence of black people (268-69). Finally, the book's explicit addressees include a non-academic audience; following Trudel's goal (and that of the translator) to distribute his findings among all those interested (see 8).

On the other hand, *Canada's Forgotten Slaves*, as a translation, does not rid itself of the major issues of Trudel's work that so far have not been widely insisted upon. We might call them 'anachronistic' at best (see Rushforth 373), but they in fact seriously hamper Trudel's credibility and impinge on the book's overall value. For one, Trudel's interpretation of his sources is highly problematic. From someone who is allegedly, in his translator's words, concerned with "facts" and "statistical and documentary evidence" (8), Trudel instead sells a distorted benign-slavery-in-New-France-story to his readers. This is the image that emerges from his idealized, yet contradictory, descriptions of harmonious 'master'-slave relationships (ch. six and seven, especially). Trudel here ignores the fundamental imbalance in power relations and the brutality of the system of slavery, which he merely alludes to in the case of Marie-Josèphe Angélique and the burning of Montréal in 1734, a "spectacular crime" (174) that he casts as an exception. Angélique's torture and execution run counter to

<sup>1</sup> Brett Rushforth, "Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec," *The Canadian Historical Review* 86.2 (2005): 373-75.

his view of the peaceful contact between ‘masters’ and their “adopted children” (122). Paired with a sometimes inappropriate language that the translator seems anxious to soften—for example with regard to Trudel’s comments on interracial marriage (226)—the book presents readers with serious challenges.

While the translation fulfills its goal to be loyal to Trudel’s “original intention” (10), it misses the opportunity of contextualizing Trudel’s work. Tombs’s preface reads, aside from remarks on his work as a translator, as a subscription to the idealization of Trudel not only as one of Quebec’s most popular historians, but also as a dedicated people’s historian

(see 7, 8, especially). Trudel here becomes a type of truth-bearer and the beacon of light in the line of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians that had willfully written slavery out of Quebec’s history (7). The translation, and most of its reviews, mock Trudel’s tone and use of language (9), but mostly excuses them as an “archaic” (10) part of a 1960s academic jargon. What is missing to date is a critical edition and open reconsideration of Trudel’s book as a standard reference in light of the growing body of scholarship on the history of black people in Canada.

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