

A picture is worth a thousand words: A historical look at the New France maps of Nicolas Sanson

By: Ryan Slipetz

McMaster Student Number: 0762247

E-Mail Address: ryan.slipetz@gmail.com

Telephone Number: 416-281-5178

For historians studying New France, primary source documents are plentiful. We have documents from religious officials (the *Jesuit Relations*) to documents from early “anthropologists” who interacted with the Native culture.¹ While these documents are amazing in their own right, I feel they do not tell the whole story. What role, for example, did cartographers have in shaping expectations of the New World? While there is some discussion of what Canada was like in other writings, one of the main things that would have influenced these expectations were maps created by cartographers.² Historians have only recently begun to examine maps for what they can tell us. However, historians must be wary and cautious when using these maps. I intend to show that, through examination of their context, reasons for their creation, and their content, maps can be an integral primary source for historians.

Before I begin discussing maps, I feel that it is necessary to explain the maps I have chosen. Since people continuously travelled from Europe to New France, it is necessary for the sake of my argument to look at maps over a period of time. As a result, I chose three maps from a French cartographer by the name of Nicolas Sanson. The maps are: *Le Canada ou Nouvelle France* (1656 version), *Le Canada ou Nouvelle France* (1667 version), and *Le Canada, ou, Partie de la Nouvelle France* (1697).³ By selecting maps by one cartographer, I feel that it is easier to track the changes and the context of the maps. Furthermore, to help explain Sanson's maps, and why he created the maps the way he did, I plan to compare his maps to other maps that are contemporary to him. By comparing Sanson's maps to those of other cartographers, I hope to cement the idea that Sanson's maps were designed in a specific manner (much like other primary sources, especially documents like the *Jesuit Relations*) and as a result, they can be integral resources to historians who can read these maps.

Sanson's earliest map, *Le Canada ou Nouvelle France* (1656), is quite detailed. Even aside from

1 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995): 88.

2 Ibid., 77.

3 Nicolas Sanson, *Le Canada ou Nouvelle France* (1656); *Le Canada ou Nouvelle France* (1667); *Le Canada, ou, Partie de la Nouvelle France* (1696). All are available at <http://www.digital.library.mcgill.ca/pugsley/>

the areas of New France, Sanson is able to not only place Florida (as they knew in 1656) in its geographical location, but he is also able to list cities and their location to nearby rivers. This kind of information, even if not necessarily a hundred percent accurate, still tells us what Sanson knew of the world. However, including extraneous details such as Florida brings up an interesting question about Sanson: if he is supposed to be creating maps for the French King (as is stated on the cartouche of the map) primarily on the areas occupied by the French in the New World, why include areas such as Florida and the Arctic? The immediate conclusion is that he is attempting to show off his knowledge of the New World and promote himself. However, if this idea is true, then why not include an extravagant cartouche? Rather, Sanson feels content with giving a fairly simple cartouche (compared to his contemporaries). Perhaps this adds to the idea that Jess Edwards puts forth in her article that maps are not only a representation of knowledge, but rather, tools of power and an imagination of power.⁴ By including images of areas such as Florida and the Arctic, perhaps Sanson was attempting to show the French King all of the areas that could possibly be under French control or possibly to suggest that all of the area present on the map can ritually be claimed by the King of France and that the Spanish and English are usurpers.

Continuing with Edwards' argument, by including extremely detailed descriptions on the maps themselves (including rivers, Native tribes and French settlements), Sanson is exhibiting the power of the French.⁵ To a Frenchman who uses this map as an initial view of the New World, the amount of detail would make it seem as though the French knew everything there was to know about the New World. It is interesting to see that by 1656, they could accurately map what Native groups lived where and the French name for each of group. While Natives may not have directly seen some of these maps, they no doubt influenced their creation. Native groups would be invaluable in helping to locate many Native groups as well as the names of the groups.⁶ As we can see with the Sanson map, there were

4 Jess Edwards. "How to Read an Early Modern Map," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9, no.1 (2003): 8.

5 *Ibid.*, 10.

6 Barbara Belyea, "Amerindian Maps: the explorer as translator," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18, no. 3 (1993): 267.

many groups to keep track of and the Native contribution to this cannot be overlooked. Therefore, by using this map as a tool of power for not only the Natives, but for citizens in France, it can be seen how historians can use single maps much like texts to further our understanding of the past and gain an understanding of how Europeans might have viewed the New World.

In order to further this idea that maps are constructed, I feel it is necessary to compare Sanson's map to that of a contemporary of his. The map I have chosen for this comparison is Jan Jansson's map entitled *Mar del Nort*.⁷ Jansson's map was created six years prior to Sanson's first map. Therefore, it can be assumed that Sanson would have had knowledge of this map. Jansson's map covers a much larger area than Sanson's, as it includes the northwestern portion of Africa and Europe as well as the Caribbean islands. Even though these maps technically depict two different areas of the world, Jansson still manages to give a detailed map of New France and the east coast of North America. Looking at how detailed Jansson's map was, a question could be asked. Why did Sanson choose not to include at least France or other French territories? If, as Edwards puts it, these maps are actually not about French power or “hopeful” French power, then what could they be about? I believe this answer lies in the political context of these maps. Sanson created his maps for the French king as evidenced by the dedication in the cartouche. Furthermore, Sanson was also given the title of “geographie ordinaire du Roy” (Ordinary Cartographer of the King) during the period he worked.⁸ Jansson, on the other hand, did not have this kind of affiliation with any King, but rather created maps for profit, considering he opened up his own publishing house in 1612 and would use this business to publish his maps.⁹ So, in the case of Sanson and his map, the reasons for the specifics of his map begin to become understood. A cartographer creating a map for a specific person is like the commissioning of a painting. You follow the orders your sponsor gives you. Although this map may originally have been ordered by the French King, it was likely to be used by other people such as merchants as once this map was published,

7 Jan Jansson. *Mar del Nort*. 1650. <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/pugsley/IMAGES/2%20-%2072%20DPI%20JPGs/Pugs05.jpg>

8 Josephine French, ed., *Tooley's Dictionary of Mapmakers: Revised Edition Q-Z* (England: Map Collector Publications).

9 Josephine French, ed. *Tooley's Dictionary of Mapmakers: Revised Edition E-J* (England: Map Collector Publications).

anyone could have access to it. To a king who is beginning to invest in settling the area of New France, it makes sense to ignore land already settled and become more interested in the lands you want to settle, which could be why Sanson decided to not include France or any other territories in this map.

By analyzing not only the map for information, but the creation process as well, historians can use a map as one would use a document. For example, for Sanson's map, we can see a political reason behind the creation of his maps. From this conclusion, we can begin to mine these maps for information. The inclusion of Florida and British occupied lands can perhaps add to the idea that the King might have wanted to know how close enemies were, or in the case of the many native groups, what allies they had and where they were situated. Now that we know who Sanson was and his background, we can use alterations in subsequent maps to reflect some of the changes that were occurring in the world.

The next Sanson map that I will examine is entitled *Le Canada ou Nouvelle France* (1667). Seeing as how this map shares the same name as his first map, one can assume that they would be quite similar. While they both show New France, these maps do have dramatic differences. The first change is in the cartouche. In the 1656 map, the cartouche was fairly simple. It had a plain, recurring pattern. The cartouche in the 1667 map goes through a dramatic change. It is now a bright red colour, with large ribbon flairs on the corners of the cartouche. Even the message inside the cartouche shrinks, going from a few sentences down to simply a location and names. This appears to be a fairly dramatic change, as it appears Sanson begins to adapt his style to look more like his contemporaries. Using the bright red colour, it attracts the eye. I believe that this idea of attracting people to the maps and New France has to deal with the push by the King to colonize Canada, which began in 1663.¹⁰ Considering the Government of New France just recently had a census to establish how many people were in the colony, it makes sense that the Sanson would create maps that reflect this push towards colonization.¹¹

10 J. Boshier, "The Imperial Environment of French Trade with Canada, 1660-1685," *The English Historical Review* 108, no. 426 (1993): 50.

11 Canadian Department of Agriculture. *Censuses of Canada, 1665-1871*. (Ottawa: I.B. Taylor, 1876), 2.

Other changes also reflect this push towards colonization. One of the changes that has been made since the 1656 map is that there are now mountains separating Florida from New France. This kind of change is extremely telling. One of the most important thing to settlers was safety. By drawing mountains separating New France from the Spanish, Sanson cultivates a sense of security in someone who sees his map. Whether or not those mountains were there, a citizen will probably never know unless they arrive in New France. To go along with this same idea, the British territories north of New France have been cut in size. This goes along the same idea with the mountains. The smaller an enemy is, the safer you are. By shrinking the size of their enemies and promoting their own territories, Sanson effectively created a propaganda poster by emphasizing that the French had the majority of power in the area. This would go along with the intense promotion of New France by the King started three years prior to Sanson's map. Despite having none of the propaganda written on the map itself, a little investigation can be a huge help for historians who can use maps as another tool to find out about the past.

To further emphasize these changes, I feel it is necessary to compare Sanson's 1667 map to another contemporary. To continue the trend I established with the first map, I have decided to look at another Jansson map entitled *America septentrionalis*.¹² Again, this map does not necessarily reflect the same area that Sanson mapped, but I feel the process and context of this map are more important to my argument. Jansson attempted to expand the knowledge of the world, by including intricate maps of northern South America, but he also included the supposed in-land sea and the island of California. Although we know there is no such sea, Jansson was perhaps representing the most current knowledge of his time. Since Jansson created maps as a commercial business, having the latest information would put his maps above his competition. Much like Sanson, who is content with “problems” of omission, Jansson appears content with his to suffer from “problems” of inclusion. (By no means are these problems to Sanson or Jansson, but to a historian, these kind of things can complicate work as they

¹² Jan Jansson. *America Septentrionalis*. 1666. <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/pugsley/IMAGES/2%20-%2072%20DPI%20JPGs/Pugs10.jpg>

don't always reflect exactly what they knew about the world). Despite taking two different paths, I believe that Sanson and Jansson were both going for the same end. Sanson, as discussed earlier, was trying to acquire glory for himself and the King by portraying New France as a strong, safe area for settlers. The best way for Sanson to accomplish this? Ensure the surrounding enemies seem small and New France seems large. Jansson, who was not writing for a King, was more interested in money and fame. For Jansson, the best way to do this was to use the latest information and even controversial information, regardless whether it was proven. Through this comparison, I feel I have shown that despite differences between Sanson and Jansson, both of these men had particular reasons for creating these maps and that these reasons were likely always on the mind of these men. Not only do the reasons for the creation of the map help to explain the map itself, but it also helps historians show the view these cartographers wanted to display about the New World.

The final map of Sanson's I will look at is entitled *Le Canada, ou, Partie de la Nouvelle France* (1696). To start, this map was published approximately twenty-nine years after Sanson's death. This puts into question whether or not this map was actually created by Sanson or if someone else used Sanson's name. For the purpose of my paper, I will use this map as if it was created by Sanson, and was not published during his lifetime for whatever reason.

For a variety of reasons, this map proves to be the odd one out. To start, this map was not published through the French King, but rather, by a Dutch person by the name of Pierre Mortier (as found on the map). As a result, there are a few fairly drastic changes. First off, the extravagant cartouche has disappeared. Rather, there is only a small scale in the corner with another box giving thanks to Mortier. This is out of character not only for Sanson, but also for maps in general, as every map I have looked at has a large portion of the map devoted to the cartouche. We may never know why the cartouche was suddenly removed, but combined with the subsequent changes, I feel that it was an important decision by Sanson to remove the extravagant cartouche.

Likewise, for the first time, Sanson included small descriptions on his map. In conjunction with

this, Native groups and names have also been removed. Seeing as how there is a close to forty year gap between this map and his 1656 map, there are a few reasons that may account for the removal of the Native names: Sanson may have lost track of some of the Native groups if he chose to move to Amsterdam as the map “cartouche” states, the map may never have been actually been completed during Sanson's lifetime (and was published by someone else at a later time) or perhaps he felt that Native groups were not important to this map. Furthermore, the small descriptions Sanson has included appear to discuss the creation of certain settlements or the movement of settlements. These little descriptions are not new for cartographers, but they are new for Sanson. What makes these descriptions even more odd, is that they all appear to discuss British settlements but the descriptions themselves are in French. So, we have a French cartographer commissioned by a Dutch person to create a map with descriptions of British settlements, all to be written in French.

The removal of the cartouche and the oddities of the British aspects of the map all lend towards the idea that this was a new kind of map for Sanson. I believe that Sanson was attempting to create a map for merchants. Seeing as how the Dutch were the major merchants during this period, Sanson's map appears to make sense as a merchant map. As I stated earlier, the removal of the cartouche is important. Considering that extravagant cartouches were bursting with colour, it would mean more money and time to craft each map. So, if Sanson wanted to create a modern map for merchants, he would have to ensure he could print them fast. By removing the cartouche, it would decrease the time between the creation of each map. The “oddities” of the map also helps to explain this shift to a merchant map. Since this entire area was the haven for fur trading, it would make sense for Sanson to expand into British territory.

Overall, this entire map appears to be a first try for Sanson. By having descriptions of British territories, Sanson is able to show merchants all of the ports of the area (not just the French areas, as he was known for), but it could have been useful for Sanson to orient himself with the British. In order to prove this point about Sanson, we can compare his map with that of another Dutch cartographer. For

this, I chose a map by Johannes van Keulen entitled *Pas-Kaart, vande zeekusten van Terra Nova*.¹³

Focused primarily on the area now known as Newfoundland with some of the St. Lawrence Valley, this map can be identified as a merchant map because of the cartouche (which depicts a hunter aiming for an animal) and the scale (which depicts Natives and Europeans skinning animals and shipping them). Now that we can assume we are dealing with another merchant map, the comparisons can begin. Like Sanson, there are small descriptions at certain areas with most of them close to the Hudson Bay. I am unable to read the descriptions, but if we can apply Sanson's use of descriptions, they most likely speak of or discuss nearby ports or Native groups who trade in these furs. Furthermore, both van Keulen's map and Sanson's map have numerous navigation lines throughout, lending to the idea that these two maps were designed with sailors in mind.

Now that we can see similarities between a Dutch merchant map and the merchant map of Sanson, questions need to be asked of Sanson. Why would a cartographer change his whole style of mapping? Many Dutch cartographers were interested in merchants, so what would influence Sanson to abandon the French king to create merchant maps?¹⁴ Well, perhaps the most glaring change between Sanson's 1667 map and this map, is that in 1670, the Royal Charter of the Hudson's Bay Company came into creation.¹⁵ With the Hudson's Bay Company in their early stages at this point, a British merchant would have to know where British settlements were to gather the furs and as a result, Sanson would need to include these places on his new maps. To further this idea, the Dutch prince, William of Orange, had been crowned King of Britain in 1688. It would make sense that William would want to connect his new role as king of Britain with his previous role with the Dutch. Therefore, I feel, that due to the changes, Sanson might have abandoned his secure job with the French King to try and make

13 Johannes van Keulen. *Pas-Kaart, vande zeekusten van Terra Nova*. 1695. <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/pugsley/IMAGES/2%20-%2072%20DPI%20JPGs/Pugs19.jpg>

14 In addition to Jansson and van Keulen, another Dutch cartographer interested in merchant mapping is Frederick de Wit. See: Frederick de Wit. *Terra Nova ac maris tractus circa Novam Franciam*. 1675. <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/pugsley/IMAGES/2%20-%2072%20DPI%20JPGs/Pugs14.jpg>

15 Hudson's Bay Company. "Hudson's Bay Company – Our History." Accessed March 5, 2011. <http://www2.hbc.com/hbcheritage/collections/archival/charter/>

money as a merchant cartographer.

Although it appears that I am all over the place with my research and conclusions drawn from the maps, it is necessary to do this in order to fully flesh out the information of the maps. When looking at a text, you can gather the bias of the author by researching them or figuring out what position they held in a society. This process takes much longer for maps as we have to use different, more unfamiliar tools. It is not so much about the cartographer, but rather, the process the cartographer takes to create the product. I feel I have shown that, when taking into account the process of creating the maps, important historical information can be drawn from them. Obviously looking at maps of something like New France is easier simply because we know the history and have other primary source documents that have already been studied. What I intended to show is that maps can be the equivalent of texts and through the changes of Sanson, I believe that I successfully connected the changes in maps to the changes in the world during this period. Using this kind of historical analysis on maps from other colonial areas where the history is not so clear can help to fill in gaps that we might not have texts for. While maps may be seen as a picture of the cartographers world view, there is so much underneath maps that allow them to be integral to historians and their research.

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Appendix: Images of the Maps

Jansson, Jan. *America Septentrionalis*, 1666.



Jansson, Jan. *Mar del Nort*, 1650.



Sanson, Nicolas. *Le Canada, ou, Partie de la Nouvelle France*, 1696.



de Wit, Frederick. *Terra Nova ac maris tractus circa Novam Franciam*, 1675.

