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Champlain's Dream: The European Founding of North America

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is a personal history that draws the reader into the lives of the corporals, privates, lieutenants, and colonels who grimly made their way across the central Pacific.

As events unfold, Wukovits traces the lives of several Marines as their paths converge on Tarawa. The marriage proposals and strong family ties ominously set the stage for the tragedies that would follow, although the general historical discussion of the war leading up to Tarawa is at times made awkward by the intermixed personal story lines.

The assault on Betio, a strip of sand and coconut trees two miles long and half a mile wide, became a bloody slugfest. There was little room to hide or maneuver on the island, and the frontal assaults by the Marines produced unprecedented casualty ratios. As a battalion commander emphasized to his men, there were two choices: move forward or die. Complicating the operation was the fact that amphibious planners had utilized outdated charts and inadequate tide tables to determine water levels over the island's outer reefs, resulting in numerous groundings and unnecessary exposure to enemy fire. After three days of brutal, hand-to-hand fighting, the Marines subdued the Japanese defenders and claimed a costly victory.

A common theme of the accounts is the incredibly adverse battle conditions. The limited space and high casualties resulted in a layer of death and carnage over the entire island. The equatorial sun and legions of flies added to the misery, but it was the smell of death and decay that lingered in one's mind. "The smell was inescapable," wrote a correspondent; "it evoked instant and

nightmarish memories. . . . Betio was nothing but stink and death."

Besides being a testament to the courageous leadership and fighting spirit of the Marine Corps, the Tarawa operation raised questions in 1943 regarding the degree of force that should be employed in war. The issue has been continually debated following the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan, and it is still argued today in connection with harsh interrogation techniques used on suspected terrorists.

Time reporter Robert Sherrod, who accompanied the Marines during the Betio landing, struggled to reconcile what he saw at Tarawa with the clean, edited version of war presented to the American home front. "Americans," he wrote, "are not prepared psychologically to accept the cruel facts of war." Sherrod's observation makes *One Square Mile of Hell* poignant indeed for Americans today.

While it is noble to memorialize the courage and sacrifice of the Marines at Tarawa, it is equally important to remind ourselves that victory comes at a steep price. Sherrod regarded the carnage of Tarawa as "the most haunting memory of World War II." Indeed, the story of Tarawa should haunt all Americans.

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Fischer, David Hackett. *Champlain's Dream: The European Founding of North America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008. 834pp. \$40

David Hackett Fischer writes of Samuel de Champlain, who founded French

Quebec four hundred years ago, that “[Champlain] wrote thousands of pages about what he did, but only a few words about who he was.” It is well for our own and future generations that Fischer, in his *Champlain’s Dream*, has now splendidly written about both the admirable man and his remarkable deeds. In this, another of his signature and wonderfully readable narrative histories (he is also the author of the majestic 1989 *Albion’s Seed* and the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Washington’s Crossing* of 2004), Fischer presents Champlain as a master mariner, explorer, cartographer, ethnologist, courier, and soldier, but above all as a deeply humane person in a world that was anything but. Fischer writes that Champlain “had a dream of humanity and peace in a world of cruelty and violence. He envisioned a new world as a place where people of different cultures could live together in amity and concord. This became his grand design for North America.”

Champlain pursued this grand design with astounding skill, perseverance, and stamina, crossing the North Atlantic twenty-seven times between 1599 and 1635 without losing a single major ship. In New France (now Canada) he faced cold, isolation, hunger, mutiny, corruption, war, and other hardships almost beyond imagining. Among his many accomplishments, what stands out is perhaps the balanced relationship that Champlain formed with the indigenous people. He had an insatiable curiosity about the complex Indian cultures he encountered and was genuinely interested in what he could learn from them,

an attitude that resulted in numerous long-lasting alliances, respect, and trust.

On the eastern side of the Atlantic, he faced a far different but equally treacherous environment. It took deft and constant lobbying within the French court to maintain royal support for his daring enterprise in the New World.

Champlain did all this, Fischer explains, not for conquest or riches but “to increase the power and prosperity of France, to spread the Christian faith, to learn more about the world, and to bring together its many people in a spirit of humanity.” Fischer is scrupulous in his research and in distinguishing established fact from assertions based on less-certain accounts. His book includes sixteen appendixes addressing such diverse subjects as Champlain’s separate voyages, the essay he wrote on leadership in 1632, his ships and boats, and the Indian nations in Champlain’s world. There are also thirty-six pages of “memories of Champlain” that explore images and interpretations of the man from 1608 to 2008. Fischer concludes his commanding work with 161 pages of notes, bibliography, and credits.

Fischer’s prodigious research persuaded him that Champlain was a dreamer, who imagined “a New World where people lived at peace with others unlike themselves.” In this grand book Fischer superbly tells the story of Champlain the man, who surmounted the challenges he faced with fairness, prudence, and faithfulness to his dream.

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