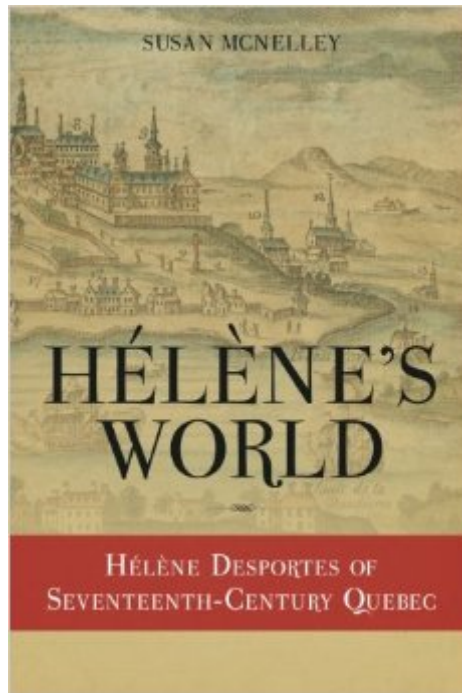


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Hélène's World: Hélène Desportes Of Seventeenth-Century Quebec



Synopsis

Hélène Desportes, born in 1620, was the first child of French parents to be born in Quebec and to survive. For nine years, she lived in Samuel de Champlain's Habitation. In 1629, the little settlement was captured by the English. Hélène, along with the majority of the other French settlers, was put on an English ship and taken to France. She returned to Quebec in 1634 and spent the remainder of her life in the little colony. She was married twice, had fifteen children, and seventy grandchildren. No portrait of Hélène exists. There are no memoirs, no diaries, nor any letters to guide the biographer. Nevertheless, there are public records and other primary sources from which we are able to piece together her life. This, then, is her remarkable story, set against the backdrop of France's efforts to establish a colony in the New World along the banks of the St. Lawrence River.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book will appeal to French Canadians researching their family trees because almost everyone has Hélène Desportes in their lineage. General readers who enjoy history will enjoy this book because it clearly presents the founding of Québec. It was so easy to imagine how difficult life was in the New World for Europeans, many who came from urban environments. That there are so many Franco-Americans today is a testimony to their perseverance. The book is well cited, and Susan McNelley also provided a synopsis of what happened to Hélène's children.

I was so glad to find and purchase Helene's World by Susan McNelley. The book, tracing the likely life story of Helene Desportes in early New France, was enlightening, enjoyably written, well

documented and of special interest to me as a student of history and genealogy. The book filled in and tied together many of the bare facts of history, giving them a narrative and a context. For me, it answered many questions about the pioneer experience, with insights on women, religion, the native population, the situation in France, and conditions of those who survived the first years in New France. Without fanfare, McNelley gives Helene her due for enduring and contributing to the establishment of the colony. I am also a descendent of Helene's, through her daughter Francoise Hebert and her son Alphonse Morin. French Canadians are fortunate to have so much of our ancestry documented, but the actual story remains quite unknown. McNelley has done an impressive job to illuminate the lives and people of early Canada, who lived at such a precarious and yet fascinating time.

As I make my way through this book I am impressed with the plethora of details that the author provides about the daily life of early French settlers. It gives the genealogist a vivid picture of the challenges that ancestors overcame. Those who remained in Canada must have been of sturdy mind and body in order to survive in a harsh climate where nothing could be taken for granted. They must have been somewhat open-minded when living alongside native peoples since there was such a great divide between native and European cultures.

Being of French ancestry, via Canada, I found this book to be of great interest. I gained much insight into the trials and tribulations of the pioneer settlers in North America's "New France." Although she and others like her pre-ceeded my French-Canadian ancestors, I felt very connected because many of the early French settlers (habitants) sailed from La Rochelle which became my family surname before leaving Canada and settling in the U.S.

It has a lot of interesting facts about life in the days of the early colonists of Canada, which is really intriguing to me. However, I kept wishing that she could write like Erik Larson (author of "The Devil in the White City" and "Dead Wake." It takes a special talent to not only do the research but whip it into an exciting, riveting page-turner. "Helene's World" seemed more like a college textbook that you have to read for class.

This engaging introduction into the world of the first French colonists of Quebec, invites the reader to enter the everyday world of the colonists, the challenges and the triumphs of surviving and flourishing in this new and alien environment. Written from the perspective of the life of the first girl

born in the new colony, it makes the adventure of establishing and adapting European culture to the "new world" very accessible to modern readers. Important, but often neglected aspects of the lives of the colonists, namely securing sufficient food, and, extended family relationships and social bonds, are clearly brought out. Since most histories of New France focus on the missionary efforts of the Jesuits among the Amerind population, the fur trade, or the military/strategic aspects of French colonial rule, this is a fresh approach, comparable to a "family history", at the same time introducing the important aspects of Amerind relations, missionary and other religious aspects of 17th century Colonial life, as well as the effects of the fur trade, relations with the Mother Country, and the characters of Colonial administration. I think that "Helene's World" should be required reading in all secondary and collegiate-level Introduction to American History classes. And, as is the case in all really well-written introductions, the reader is drawn to the bibliography and the desire to learn more!

A little disappointed that it didn't have much history about Helene directly, but it was very informative regarding the history of Quebec. Excellent book - highly recommend.

I enjoyed this book very much. Helene Desportes is my 9th Great Grandmother, so to find such specific information about her and some of my other ancestors is fascinating. It also helped me to understand what life was really like back in the day. I wish when I was in school that Canadian history was presented in this fashion then maybe I would have been bitten by the history bug much sooner. Two thumbs up!

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