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Eric, Charles, Gabriel, Hervé et Jean-Francois Bazin, *Etienne Bazin, Oblat de MarieImmaculée: Pionnier des Missions en Pays Inuit*. Dijon: Editions Clea No. 89, 2008. Maps, photos, notes, bibliography. Foreword by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure. \$60.63 (CAD), €35. ISBN 978-291-3835-825.

Review by Willem C. E. Rasing, Radboud University Nijmegen.

The Inuit (or: “Eskimos”) and their ways of life have always fascinated people around the world. Christian missionaries who went to live and work among the Inuit have, likewise, fascinated people, notably in their home-countries. That is why the relatives of the French Oblate Father Etienne Bazin (1903-1972) issued a little booklet in 1974 containing the letters their “uncle Etienne” had sent from his missionary work among the Inuit of northern Canada. Illustrated by a selection of his photo’s, Bazin was made to “speak for himself” in *Les lettres d’Oncle Etienne* (Dijon: SEMCO, 1974).

The present book, a biography of Bazin illustrated by numerous unique historic photo’s, may be seen as a sequel to this family booklet. The book that is only available in French is again largely based on Bazin’s letters, but personal recollections and historical and anthropological studies are used to provide us with a full-fledged portrait of the life and times of Father Bazin. His personality, childhood, education, religious devotion and his missionary endeavours are all elaborated upon. His missionary work is placed within its historical context, as attention is paid to aspects of the culture of the Iglulik Inuit (or: *Iglulingmiut*), the people he came to live with in the 1930s and whose culture his work would affect. The critical assessment of the position of Christianity in present-day Inuit culture that completes the book reveals that we are not dealing with some sort of hagiography. Although there is a certain amount of admiration for their uncle’s work, the book originated far more from the uniqueness of his life and the significance of his missionary work than from the wish to make a saint of him. Although the authors—five of his nephews—have not written a scholarly work as there is, for instance, no theory whatsoever and the source of the quotes from his letters are nowhere specified, the book nevertheless is of relevance to scholars interested in (Canadian) Arctic history and to those interested in French family history and/or the history of Christian missions.

People interested in the history of middle-class Catholic families in French Burgundy in the first half of the twentieth century will find the book of value. We are given a description of the social and economic conditions of the family into which Bazin was born. We learn about his early childhood years, his education and his vocation. This came upon him in 1921, at the age of eighteen years. While looking at a crucifix in his school, Jesus spoke to him: “leave everything behind, your family and friends, and come to Me.” Several weeks later, the Virgin Mary confirmed this message during a pilgrimage Bazin made to Lourdes. He became convinced that becoming a priest was to be his goal. His parents supported his life’s choice; little wonder, as one of his maternal uncles was vicar-general of the Dijon diocese, and his older brother Pierre—whom he would join in 1922 as student at a seminary in Rome—was also on his way to become a priest. Etienne became all the more convinced of his vocation by an occurrence, also in 1921, that would have a lasting impression on him. An eight year-old boy named Guy de Fontgalland was told by Jesus that he would soon be called to Him. Having kept this to himself, this message was repeated by the Virgin Mary in Lourdes, three years later. Soon after, Guy passed away, eleven years

old, invoking Jesus. The semblance of these supernatural events convinced Bazin of his vocation. He took Guy de Fontgalland as spiritual guide, keeping his picture with him the rest of his life. His other spiritual guide was the Virgin Mary, who ordered him during a 1923 pilgrimage to Lourdes to go and join the Oblates' polar mission.

The book is also relevant to those interested in the structure, organization and practice of the Catholic missionary movement, in particular the Order of the Oblate Fathers or the Oblats of Maria Immaculate (O.M.I.). The order was founded in 1816 in Aix-en-Provence by Eugène de Mazenod, later bishop of Marseille, and became 'specialized' in what Pope Pius XI in 1938 called "difficult missions", reaching out to such regions as Ceylon, Asia, Africa and, after 1841, the northern parts of Canada. Becoming an Oblate Father requires years of study, demands that one takes the vows of poverty, obedience and chastity three times, that one demonstrates ongoing stamina to proceed on the road of one's vocation and display obedience to the rules and regulations of the order. Bazin's study and career are exemplary. He was not a brilliant student at the seminaries he attended in Rome, Turin and Liège, with philosophy and theology as serious intellectual obstacles. But his determination to reach his goal, a polar mission, did not go unnoticed: "mediocre student, excellent virtue, very modest and reliable: very much Oblate", one of his superiors noted. In November 1925, Bazin took the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, renewing them in November 1927 and November 1928. His "Oblation" took place on January 25, 1929. He was ordered to join the Oblates' Hudson's Bay Vicariate in March. On September 2, 1929, he arrived in Pond Inlet in the Canadian North. The strictness of the Oblates is also illustrated by the story of Bazin's life. For instance, he was denied permission to attend the ordination of his brother Pierre in Dijon, 1926. In March 1948, he was ordered to leave his mission right away (not even given time to say goodbye to his parishioners), to return to France and become a priest in the parish of Corgoloin, Burgundy. He stayed there until his death in 1972.

Bazin's almost thirty years of missionary work in the Canadian north (from 1929 to 1948, with the year 1946-1947 spent in France), consisted of preaching God's word to the Inuit of Pond Inlet (1929-1931), Repulse Bay (1945-1946) and Igloolik (1931-1948). The latter mission originated entirely from Bazin's initiative. He alone decided to move to the Igloolik area in northern Foxe Basin to establish a church there. His superior, Mgr. Turquetil, could do nothing but approve of the mission well after it had been established. Obviously, this was not in line with the regulations of the Oblate mission but very much in line with the zeal and character of Etienne Bazin.[1]

The book's most significant aspects, obviously, are Bazin's inside view of the missionary work, the difficulties he encountered, the presence of shamans representing old spiritual or religious views, the creation of a new Catholic mission, the rivalry with the Anglicans, the relationships with other Whites in the north (traders, policemen), the problems of travelling and communicating with others within the vicariate and/or the outside world. Crucial are the views he gives us of the Inuit culture of the 1930s and 40s which, as time would tell, stood on the verge of an entirely new era. Bazin's decision to move some 400 kilometres south to Foxe Basin, based on the estimation that more souls could be won there than in Pond Inlet where the Anglican mission was more "successful", was timely and significant. He arrived there ten years after a crude form of Anglican-Christianity had been introduced to the Inuit of this region by Umiq and Nuqallaq, his son. Umiq presented himself as a reincarnation of God and his son as a reincarnation of Jesus, obviously inspired by the Anglican missionaries who had been bringing the word of God to the Inuit of south, east and north Baffin Island in the preceding decades. They had a copy of a bible in the syllabic writing that the Anglican missionaries had developed. But the two men were also on the run after Nuqallaq had killed the free trader Robert Janes in 1920 on north Baffin Island. At the same time, however, other Inuit families in the Igloolik area had picked up Catholic prayers and songs through contacts with people or their relatives to the south; here the Oblate Fathers had meanwhile established missions in Repulse Bay, Coral Harbour and Chesterfield Inlet. In May 1930, Bazin met one of these families, who had come to Pond Inlet to trade. Shortly afterwards, Bazin

decided to go to the Igloolik area because he was convinced that they were ready for the catholic faith.[2]

Bazin had to wait another year for a good opportunity to travel. On May 12, 1931, he left Pond Inlet by dog team and arrived in Igloolik on June 29, the first white man who ever came to reside there. He settled on the neighbouring island of "Avvajjaq", living in a tent and later in a "qarmaq", a semi-interred construction of stone, mud and whalebone that the Inuit used as their dwelling during the fall. All the requisites to say mass and the picture of Guy de Fontgalland were kept in a small suitcase. Bazin's life was simple and hard. The letters from this period are a stunning and fascinating read. He was all alone most of the time because the Inuit roamed the region, hunting for survival. Bazin spent most of his time fishing and hunting—although he also received food from Inuit families—and visited the Inuit in their camps to assist them in whatever way he could (often providing basic medical care) and bring God's word. Slowly but steadily, Bazin could baptize more and more Inuit. They came to bear Christian names, usually the names of his relatives (Emile, Hervé, François, Louise, Rose...). But on July 25, 1933, his house-chapel burnt to the ground, accidentally lighted by a candle. Bazin was left destitute, with nothing more than the clothes he was wearing, three consecrated hosts, a book of prayers and the picture of Guy de Fontgalland that had miraculously survived the blaze. The next day, Inuit who had seen the clouds of smoke at some fifteen kilometres distance came to his rescue. Bazin wrote a letter to bishop Turquetil, informing him of his ordeal, but instead of complaining he asked God to forgive him and to "save the Inuit." His faith and his determination to succeed were not shaken. Deeply rooted in his vocation and his own Catholic upbringing in rural France, he was convinced of the righteousness of his mission.[3] Late August, he returned to Avvajjaq, built himself a new house-annex-chapel from stones, crates, driftwood, lumps of peat and a walrus-skin as a roof and resumed his hunting, fishing and preaching life. In 1934, three years after its establishment, Mgr. Turquetil, bishop of the Hudson's Bay Vicariate, approved of Bazin's mission, officially naming it 'Saint-Etienne'.

In 1937, Bazin moved to Igloolik island. Here, a new post was built from wood delivered by the O.M.I.-ship M.F. Thérèse. The mission, near the shore of the island's horseshoe-formed bay, would become the start of the new and permanent settlement of Igloolik, in 2009 counting over 1500 souls. Not all of them are Catholic, though. In 1959, an Anglican Inuk minister settled in Igloolik. As head of a large extended family, he was powerful and became a successful and strong leader in the growing community. Within the many changes that the shift from a nomadic to a sedentary life implied, including the end of pure subsistence-hunting, the replacement of Inuit socialization by formal education, the introduction of a money-economy, wage labour, new means of transport (snowmobiles, airplanes) and communication (radio, television, computers) which all contributed to a fundamental transformation of values and norms, the animosity between the Anglicans and Catholics in Igloolik did little good in helping people in the transition decades of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.[4] But by that time Bazin had already left the north and spent his days in France. Only his spirit was still felt.

Some young and critical Inuit blame the missionaries for their role in affecting Inuit culture which led to a social, economic and psychic malaise in Inuit society today, expressed in high rates of school drop-outs, widespread unemployment, large-scale dependency on the transfer of welfare payments, massive drug and alcohol abuse, overrepresentation of Inuit in crime- and incarceration-statistics and alarming numbers of suicides. It is clear that missionaries like Bazin played a major role in such processes, but this book amply demonstrates that these are unintended consequences of the missionary endeavour. It also reveals that traders, missionaries and policemen were instrumental in bringing about change, but that they were not in league doing so; there was no front of western influences attacking Inuit culture as was sometimes suggested by scholars (cf. Brody 1975). This book, in fact, illustrates the recent seminal study by Laugrand (2002) of the missionary work among the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic which assesses that many Inuit were receptive of Christianity rather than opposed to it.

The present book—and that by Laugrand—should be made available in an English translation to generate a more realistic picture of the missionary activities and their effects on Inuit culture and society in recent history.

#### NOTES and REFERENCES

[1] Bishop Turquetil was informed about the Igloolik mission two years later during a visit to Pond Inlet on September 9, 1933; Father Girard ran the mission there and told him that Bazin had already left for Igloolik in 1931.

[2] The Inuit themselves had developed a new ritual called “siqqituq” during which they transgressed from their old spiritual worldview to Christianity. The quintessence of this ritual involved a formal breaking of old taboos. Cf. Laugrand 2002: 447.

[3] Understanding the life and work of Bazin illustrates what C. Wright Mills (1959: 6) saw as “task and promise” of social analysis, that is “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society.” Biographical aspects must be related to specific historical aspects of Inuit culture to reach an adequate sociological understanding of the nature and importance of Bazin’s missionary work.

[4] The tensions between the two denominations ameliorated in the course of the 1980s; cf. Rasing 1994 for a detailed analysis of these processes of change; cf. also Damas 2002. Bazin, Eric-Marie-Etienne, *Les Lettres d’Oncle Etienne*. (Dijon : SEMCO, 1974)

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