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**[ New France - Pierre Biard's Letter ] Missio Canadensis [in] Annuae Litterae Societatis  
Jesu Anni MDC.XI.**

**Stock#:** 84352  
**Map Maker:** Biard  
**Date:** 1611 circa -1615  
**Place:** Dillingen  
**Color:** Uncolored  
**Condition:** VG  
**Size:** 3.6 x 6.6 inches  
**Price:** \$ 28,500.00



**Description:**

***One of the Definitive Pre-Champlain Accounts of New France in the Form of Reverend Pierre Biard's Letter. Including an Account of the 1610 Settlement of Jean de Biencourt de Poutrincourt.***

This is a foundational account of early French activity in Canada, being the first appearance in print of Biard's description of the first Jesuit mission to New France. Biard's letter also includes one of the very first printed accounts of the 1610 settlement of Jean de Bienoucrt de Poutrincourt, the most successful of



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the early attempts to establish permanent French colonization in North America.

Father Pierre Biard and Father Enemund Massé became the first Jesuit missionaries to New France in 1611, when they accompanied Jean de Poutrincourt on his expedition to found a colony in what became known as Acadia, present-day Nova Scotia. The Jesuits had been pressing Henri IV to send a mission to New France after they were readmitted to the country in 1603. Their request was finally granted only for Henri to die in 1610. Marie de' Medici, Henri's successor as ruler of France, followed in her late husband's footsteps and allowed the mission to proceed. The mission represented the first concerted attempt to proselytize to the Native population, which Biard documents in detail in his letter. The present work constitutes the first European description of the Mikmaq culture. The mission lasted for about two years when, in 1613, it foundered following a raid by Virginians.

In many ways, the present work forms a prologue to the famed *Jesuit Relations*, which commenced publication some 20 years after this book appeared, beginning in 1632 and ending in 1673.

Biard's account constitutes pages 121-143 of this over-800-page collection of Jesuit letters for the year 1611.

**Pierre Biard's Epistola**

Biard's account is exceptionally rich, including lengthy expositions on the physical geography of New France, the Indian tribes and their relationships with the French, as well as his experiences exploring the region with de Poutrincourt.

We borrow extensively from the translation from Latin provided in Reuben Gold Thwaites' 1896 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents Volume II*.

Biard includes a detailed physical description of New France and the peoples that inhabited it:

[...]

*These Irocois are known to the French chiefly for the perpetual warfare which they maintain against the Montagnais and Algonquins, allied and friendly tribes. To the South, however, the coast gradually advances up to the forty-third degree, where once more it is interrupted by a very large bay called French bay. This gulf, advancing far into the interior, and bending toward the North and the gulf of St. Lawrence, forms a sort of Isthmus; and this Isthmus is completed by the St. John, a very long river which, taking its rise almost at the very banks of the great Canadian river, empties*



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*into this French bay. This Isthmus has a circuit of fully five hundred leagues and is occupied by the Soriquois tribe. In this Isthmus is port royal, where we are now sojourning, lying on the parallel of 44° 40'. But this port (to obviate misunderstanding) is not on the Ocean lying eastward, but on that gulf which I have called French bay. To the West and north, from the river of St. John to the river Potugoët, and even to the river Rimbegui, live the Etheminqui. The mouth of this river is in latitude 43° 40'. Not far distant is Chouacoët, which is the other shore or arm embracing French Bay. For to the east lies what we call cape sable, while Chouacoët lies toward the West; both are on the forty-third parallel, though they are separated by an interval of a hundred leagues. From the Rimbegui river to the fortieth parallel the whole country is in the possession of the tribe called the Armouchiquois. Such is the distribution of the territory. The tribes amount to seven in number, differing from each other 71 in language and character: the Excommunicated, the Algonquins, the Montagnais, the Irocois, the Soriquois, the Etheminqui and the Armouchiquois. But of these neither the Excommunicated, nor the Irocois, nor the Armouchiquois are well known to the French. The remaining four tribes appear already to be united in firm friendship and intimacy with them. They stay over night among us; we rove about with them, and hunt with them and live among them without arms and without fear; and, as has thus far appeared, without danger. This intimacy arose partly from association while fishing for Cod, which abound in these waters, and partly from trading in furs. For the Savages, who have neither copper, iron, hemp, wool, vegetables nor manufactured articles of any kind, resort to the French for them, giving in return the only thing of value they have, namely, furs. This whole region is for the most part very cold, owing to various causes. In the first place, the country is a very wet one; for, besides being washed on almost every side by the sea, it abounds in rivers and ponds and large lakes. Islands are so numerous that the whole shore is cut up by a confused procession of them, as it were. Moreover, though a land of frost, it is very windy, the wind being nearly always a cold one. Another cause of cold is the wildness of the country; for, being covered on every side by one continuous forest, it naturally follows that the soil hardly ever becomes really warmed through. A third cause is the mountains, covered with snow and perpetual frost, which are said to wall us in far away to the North and the West.*

[...]

Biard concludes his discussion about the nature of New France by mentioning his creation of a map of the area: "But this is enough, and more than enough, regarding the country and the people, especially as I send an accurate Map of the region, a single glance at which will make clear whatever I have said regarding the geography of land and sea." Regrettably, this map never made it into print, and the original manuscript is apparently lost.



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Biard describes his attempts to convert the local tribes as being substantially impeded by language and misunderstanding. He is bothered by the Natives' lack of empathy for the gravely ill, and, in a touching scene, takes it upon himself to nurse and baptize a dying nine-year-old girl.

*We try to persuade the savages to bring their babes to us for baptism; and this, with God's blessing, they are beginning to do. We have baptized two boys, and a girl about nine years old. This girl was wasting away as much from hunger and neglect as from sickness; for this people very readily despair of relief in sickness, and, as previously stated, soon abandon those whose recovery is deemed hopeless. Thus, when this girl was given up by her relatives, we asked that she be given us for baptism. They very willingly gave her to us, not only for baptism but to dispose of at our pleasure as being, they said, no longer of more value than a dead dog. But we, to show them an example of Christian piety, carried her to a separate cabin and there fed her and cared for her; and, after teaching her as much as was necessary for one struggling with death, we cleansed her with the saving waters. On her death, nine days later, we entertained the glad hope that our labor had found some favor in heaven.*

[...]

*I said that this slaughtering of dogs was wrong, as well as this abandonment of the sick man for whom they were mourning; I added that these dances and death-songs, in the very presence of the sick man displeased me, though I permitted them to hold their tabagie elsewhere, as well as to visit the dying man and learn his last wishes.*

Biard spends much of the letter relating his interactions with Chief Membertou, the first Native leader to be baptized by the French. These interactions largely consist of Biard seeking to convince Membertou to abandon his traditional religious practices in favor of Christian ones, especially in the context of severe illness and death among the Natives.

He then proceeds to a brief mention of the exploration away from the colony, before returning to more discussion of his efforts in the spiritual realm.

*Such are the things achieved at home; let us now consider what has been done elsewhere. I have explored with Sieur Biencourt a large part of this whole region—all that portion, namely, which the old geographers called Norumbega, including the principal rivers. The result is that not only have we come to know the country, but also to be known ourselves, and the savages, who had never before seen a Priest or the rites of our Religion, have begun to learn something concerning it.*



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The complete translation can be found [here](#).

#### **The Dillingen Biard Letter in the Context of Other Early Accounts**

Thwaites' *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* provides context for comparing the present work with others published between 1610 and 1615, during the first real wave of French colonization, as opposed to exploration.

- Lescarbot's *La Conversion des Sauvages* (1610). Only record in RBH: Lathrop Harper, 1945, \$750.
- *Lettre Missive, Touchant La Conversion et Laptisme du grand Sagamos de la nouvelle France...* (1610). No records in RBH.
- *Missio Canadensis* [in] *Annuae Litterae Societatis Jesu* Anni MDC.XI. (1611-1615?). The present work. See "Rarity" section below.
- Lescarbot's *Relation derniere de ce qui s'est passe au voyage du Sieur de Poutrincourt et la Nouvelle France* (1612). Only record in RBH: Sotheby's London, 1988, 26,400 GBP (i.e., ~\$50,000)

Champlain's 1613 *Les Voyages du Sieur de Champlain Xaintongeois* overshadowed much of what came before, but the earliest history of permanent French settlement in France produced several important and exceptionally rare texts, including the present.

#### **Dating the Work**

Biard's account repeatedly suggests that it was made in 1611, however, Thwaites calls this into question saying: "Although, the end of the letter reads: the last day of January, 1611,—either there is an error in the year, or Father Biard wrote according to the old style, for the year ought to be 1612... It is internally evident that the letter was commenced January 22nd, and finished "ultimo die Januarij." In Father Martin's MS. (translated) copy, preserved in the Library of Parliament, at Ottawa, he wrote upon it the former date, and it is so calendared in the catalogue of that library. Carayon first applied to it the latter date. This of itself has led to some bibliographical confusion."

The *Annuae Litterae Societatis Jesu* book itself was almost certainly published in the years following the 1611 date appearing on the title page. The British Museum speculated that it was published in 1615.

#### **Rarity**

OCLC records 4 institutional examples: the University of Toronto; Mount Angel Abbey Library; Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Bogota; and the National Library of Poland. Thwaites says there is an example at



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the British Library. It seems likely that other examples will exist in larger sets of the *Annuae Litterae Societatis Jesu*. See Thwaites' comment: "O'Callaghan obtained the originals of some of his reprints from the *Annuae Litterae Societatis Jesu*, of which there are incomplete files in the libraries of John Carter Brown; Harvard College; St. John's, College, Fordham, N. Y.; St. Francis Xavier, New York City; the Jesuit colleges at Woodstock, Md., and Georgetown, D. C.; and St. Mary's College, Montreal. The Brown Library has the richest collection."

We record the following appearances at auction: Swann, 1995; Henry C. Murphy Sale (N. Y., 1884), no. 2960; O'Callaghan Sale (N. Y., 1882), nos. 178, 1205, 1250.

"According to a letter written by Father Carrère (June 17, 1890) to Father Jones, of Montreal, the original MS. of this letter was then in the archives of Roder, France." - Thwaites

**Detailed Condition:**

Octavo. 18th-century(?) vellum, lettered in ink on the spine: "Litterae Societatis De Anno. 1611." [3], 606, 517 [i.e., 617]-869, [9] pages in Latin. Complete. (Repaired loss to the right edge of title page.)