

ABSTRACT

A Missionary Less Well Known:

Fr. Jean-Baptiste Allain in French Canada from 1786 to 1812

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Father Jean-Baptiste Allain was a French Catholic missionary in North America, but perhaps the least known of those called *Réfractaire* who arrived in North America following the French Revolution. Allain appeared in America in 1786 in the French colony of St. Pierre-Miquelon, the last colony of France in North America. He was a missionary for the Congregation of the Holy Spirit of Paris to the islands, before settling in “Acadie” (Acadia). His flight from St. Pierre-Miquelon was the result of a threat to his life and the effects of the Revolution in France that altered the colony in 1792, making it impossible to remain.

This article aims to illustrate some aspects of missionary life in Acadia in the late 18th century; a severe life on the coasts of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia and the islands of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, including the Madeleine Islands and what is today eastern Prince Edward Island. The letters between the mission priest and his bishop at Québec between 1792 and 1812 are here presented which are a rich source of details of life, locations, Acadian people and the Catholic faith found in the region at the end of the 18th century among a people rejected because of their faith and language. In these letters, his life, his thoughts, and his difficulties are illustrated. In particular, they illustrate the poverty of his mission and the relationship between Jean-Baptiste Allain and parishioners.

The life and works of Father Allain are not simply a background of a busy missionary life far from France set against an 18th and 19th century linguistic and cultural conflict, but in reality, it is an excellent illustration of the life given totally to the people of the Gulf of St. Lawrence region. In his letters is the evidence of how he served the Catholic Church and his flock and demonstrated the commitment of this priest in their lives. The settlements of the Acadians were found among English-speaking settlers who were often hostile to them because of religion and language. Even the people he attempted to serve and yet who treated him the worst are mentioned in the frankness of his letters. The difficulties of his mission and his perseverance, speaks to his love for the work and apostolate he was given, which continued until the very end of his life. The mission that Jean-Baptiste Allain completed was one of the longest and one of the most inspiring in the region.

Through the letters, there is a discovery of his humanity, and his work provides an example of what is possible even during the hardest years of settler lives following deportations and relegation to obscurity for many of the Acadian villages he served. The care Jean-Baptiste Allain provided improved the lives of French speaking Acadian settlers through support throughout the western shores of the Gulf of St Lawrence; a service to the Catholic Church that allowed the Acadians to continue in their faith far from the cultural centers found in the region.