

Troublesome Trials: How a Parisian Legal Practitioner Disrupted the Order of New France
By Alexandra Havrylyshyn

In 1740, at Quebec's highest court, a Native woman openly challenged the authority of her alleged master. Such direct challenges to hierarchy were rare in New France, but not for the individual who represented the plaintiff, Jacques Nouette de la Poufellerie. He hailed from a family of advocates in the Parlement of Paris, an important counterweight institution to monarchical power in France. During a brief but action-packed stay in the colony, Nouette represented more than one hundred parties before Intendant Gilles Hocquart ordered Nouette's departure in 1743. Even when he did not win his cases, Nouette disrupted the colonial order through his practice of law. Employing ardent oral argument, Nouette questioned two important social institutions: slavery and marriage. His growing clientage cluster, furthermore, threatened the colony's hierarchical order. In his outspoken approach toward both military and ecclesiastical authorities, Nouette was distinct from the colony's other legal representatives. Unlike their counterparts in other early modern settings, Quebec's professional legal representatives did not emerge as spokespeople for the public until the nineteenth century. The exceptional case of troublesome Nouette illuminates a paternalistic approach to law and power in New France.