

**Black Robe (1991)**

**Screen play:** Brian Moore, based on his novel of the same name.

**Director:** Bruce Beresford

**MAIN CHARACTERS:**

**Chomina** (August Schellenberg): A chief of the Algonquin Tribe

**Father Laforgue** (Lothaire Bluteau): "Black Robe"; French Jesuit priest traveling to the Huron mission; a "soldier of heaven"

**Daniel** (Aden Young): Young Canadian-born Frenchman

**Annuka** (Sandrine Holt): Chomina's daughter

**Chomina's wife** (Tantoo Cardinal)

**Mestigoit** (Yvan Labelle): Spiritual leader of the Algonquins

**Historical figure, Samuel Champlain** (1567-1635, played by Jean Brousseau). His fame is principally due to his activities in Quebec where he worked with the infant European settlement from 1608 until, on December 25th, 1635, he died. He is considered a "Father of Canada" and Lake Champlain is named after him.

**GENRE:** Historical fiction. The events depicted are loosely based on historical events. The movie's plot (sequence of events) should not be understood as historically accurate or as a fact-based account. The theme (main idea) develops from motifs (recurring images) that illustrate how differences in language, religion, technology, and cultural practice create new conflicts and exacerbate old enmities.

**SETTING:**

**Time:** 1634 c.e. Champlain will be dead a year after these events.

**Place(s):** Saguenay Region, Quebec and Rouen, France; St. Lawrence River, Quebec

**Seasons:** Fall and winter

**Algonquin History:** Algonquin is the language for which the Algonquian language family is named. The Algonquin Indians were victims of unfortunate European politics. The banding together of the Iroquois Confederacy had driven the Algonquins from lands that were once theirs, and when the French arrived trading firearms for furs, the Algonquins jumped at the deal. Though the French were good friends to the Algonquins, they did not make such good allies. The powerful Iroquois, aided first by the Dutch and later by the English, defeated the French and Algonquins alike. Though the Algonquins were defeated, they were never destroyed, and the Algonquin Indian culture lives on in pockets of their once-vast territory. The name refers to a semi-nomadic patriarchal tribe as well as referring to a language group. Algonquin means "at the place of spearing fishes and eels." The Algonquin Indians call themselves "Anishnabe" or "Anishnabek" (the original people) in their own language, but use the word "Algonquin" to differentiate themselves from other politically independent tribes. They were among the first North American Natives to make alliances with the French, who adopted Algonquin methods of travel and who started using terms like "canoe" and "toboggan". Currently, 8,000 Algonquin live in Canada, organized into ten separate First Nations, nine in Quebec and one in Ontario.

**Medicine:** The shaman held a powerful place in Algonquin society. He healed the sick and communicated with the Manitou: the great mystery of the supernatural order, that which is beyond human grasp (Kitchi-Manitou), lesser spirits in control of the elements, evil spirits at the root of illness and misfortune, and benevolent spirits bringing fortune and good health. The shaman also interpreted dreams. The Algonquin believed in an afterlife where the spirits of dead men chased the spirits of dead animals. They were also firm believers in witchcraft and were very reluctant reveal their real names in fear that enemies with spiritual powers would use them with evil intention.

**Naming:** The Naming Ceremony remembers the sacrifices of Original Man in naming everything. The father and mother ask a shaman to seek a name for their child. At a gathering the medicine person burns tobacco as an offering and pronounces the new name to each of the four directions and

everyone present repeats the name when it is called out. The Spirit World then accepts and can recognize the face of the child as a living thing for the first time. The Spirit World and ancestors then guard the child and prepare a place for him or her when life ends.

**Manitou:** A supernatural being and force that imbues all nature, common in the belief systems of the Algonquin language group. Mestigoit says, "I am spirit. I am manitouwih."

**Dreams:** Every person seeks a dream or vision within the expanse of his or her soul-spirit and then bring it into fulfillment and reality.

**Iroquois History:** Iroquoian Language Group. The Iroquois were one of the most powerful and influential Indian nations in America and played an instrumental role in the development of New France, the English colonies and the final resolution of the French-English struggle. When Cartier arrived in the early 1500's the Iroquois occupied the St Lawrence river valley and were the natives that he met at Stadacona and Hochelaga. When Champlain returned in 1608 the Algonquins had replaced the Iroquois along the St Lawrence river. The Iroquois were a sophisticated people who planted corn and obtained food from both agriculture and hunting. In 1570 the Iroquois confederacy was formed in an effort to end the incessant warfare between the various nations of the Iroquois. The prophet Deganawidah was the force that brought the Iroquois together and as a symbol of their unity the long house was chosen. The five nations were the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas and in the eighteenth century the Tuscaroras joined.

Samuel de Champlain and the Algonquins attacked the Iroquois in 1609 and the bitter rivalry was begun which led to raiding and wars on and off for the next 150 years. The Iroquois were fearless fighters and throughout the entire existence of New France they were like a dagger aimed at the throat of the French colonies. The Iroquois became allies of the English due to the rivalry they both had with the French. In 1650 the Iroquois attacked and dispersed the Hurons throughout Ontario. The Hurons were no longer a player in the colonial wars or politics after that and the fear of the Iroquois by the French was greatly magnified.

**Huron History:** Ouendake (called Huronia by the French) was the original homeland of the Huron occupying a fairly compact area of central Ontario between the southern end of Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe. The Hurons are part of the Iroquoian Language Group, but were enemies of the Iroquois Nation. Huron territory once spanned from the Niagara River on the east, to the St. Claire River and lake to the west, and Lake Erie on the south. The population in 1535 numbered between 30,000-45,000. Around 1560 the Arendahronin and the Tahonaenrat joined them. The council members met regularly to work out disputes among the member tribes. Their life long enemies, the Iroquois were, however, the exception. After European contact, the Huron population loss was dramatic. By 1640 epidemic and war reduced them to less than 10,000. After their dispersal in 1649 by the Iroquois, only 300 Huron were able to relocate safely at Lorette near Quebec. Another 1,000, mixed with Tionontati and Neutrals, escaped to the western Great Lakes to become the Wyandot. The Huron lived in communal dwellings consisting of large log style homes. The longest log house ever found measured 125m and was found in New York. The Huron had a system of justice reminiscent of Biblical justice. It was customary for a convicted murderer to be tied to the corpse of his victim and allowed to starve to death.

**Writing:** Writing developed independently a few times in world history. But writing with a phonetic alphabet only developed once, in the Middle East, and writing with vowels only developed once, in Greece. This system of writing has two great advantages: it is easy to learn and it can be used to communicate abstract ideas. Technological advances are limited without a way to pass them on. Written language enhances possibilities for waging successful warfare and subsequently obliterating a strictly oral cultural tradition over time. The history of North America, and its native peoples, was written by the European conquerors.