

THE FRENCH REGIME IN THE GREAT LAKES COUNTRY¹

It must be remembered that the existence of the Great Lakes was a phenomenon to which Europeans were unwonted. No such great bodies of fresh water exist in any continent with which the early explorers of America were familiar. When the French, who discovered the St. Lawrence River in the first half of the sixteenth century, heard from the Indians of these vast interior seas they conceived them either as bays of the western ocean or as reservoirs with outlets to the long-sought South Sea. Thus the hints that reached explorers and the occasional attempts by geographers to portray the Great Lakes on the maps of the sixteenth century were very misleading.

It was not until after the French government under the leadership of Samuel de Champlain founded in 1608 a colony on the shores of the St. Lawrence that any systematic attempt was made to discover the sources of that river. The natural order for the discovery would have been by mounting the St. Lawrence to Lake Ontario, and thence passing into Lakes Erie, Huron, Superior, and Michigan. Because of Indian alliances as well as the difficulties of water travel, however, the lakes were first seen by the French in the following order: Huron, Ontario, Superior, Michigan, and Erie. Champlain is the discoverer to whom we owe our first real knowledge of these inland seas. In 1615 he started from Montreal, ascended the Ottawa River, carried his canoe over to the waters that flow into Georgian Bay, and pushed out thence into the great expanse of Lake Huron, which he called *La Mer Douce*, the "Sweet Sea." From the lower end of Georgian Bay he accompanied a party of Huron Indians overland to the waters of

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Lake Ontario, which he recognized as the source of the river that flows past Quebec. Champlain planned to explore the northern shores of Lake Huron and he might in that case have seen the two farthest lakes, but a wound received in an Indian skirmish forced him to return to Canada by the route over which he had gone out.²

Champlain himself was never able to undertake a western voyage again, but the discovery and exploration of the remaining Great Lakes was a project that absorbed his interest and he ordered his subordinates, living in the Indian country, to bring him all the information they could obtain thereon. On a map of New France, which he prepared and published in 1632, he showed *La Mer Douce*, Lake Ontario (without a name), and west of the former a large body of water, which he called *Grand Lac* and which discharged its waters through the *Sault de Gaston*, a name given for the brother of the young king, Louis XIII.³ This was the first attempt to represent Lake Superior on any map, and the information concerning its existence is thought to have been taken to Champlain by Etienne Brulé, a French interpreter living among the Hurons. Brulé and Grenoble are believed, from some hints in contemporary documents, to have visited Lake Superior about 1622. They took thence samples of copper ore and a description that would fit no other body of water as well as it does Lake Superior.

Lake Michigan was first seen by one of Champlain's emissaries, Jean Nicolet, who in 1634 ascended the Ottawa to the Huron country and with a party of those tribesmen pushed west through the straits of Mackinac and canoed along Lake Michigan's northern shore, entering its great western extension, Green Bay, then called *Baye des Puans*. This was the last of the Great Lakes to be found during the lifetime of Champlain,

² Louise P. Kellogg, *The French Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest*, 54-58 (Madison, 1925).

³ Champlain's map is reproduced in Kellogg, *French Régime*, 62.

who died in the winter of the year that Nicolet returned. Five years later some Jesuit missionaries from Huronia first visited the northern shore of Lake Erie, and the fifth of the sisterhood of the Great Lakes was placed upon the map of the New World.⁴

The nomenclature of the earliest representations of the Great Lakes is worthy of note. The *Grand Lac* of Champlain's map became *Lac Supérieur*, the upper lake, on a map of 1650,⁵ while *Sault de Gaston* was changed by a party of Jesuits who visited there in 1641 to the holy name of *Sault de Ste. Marie*, which has persisted ever since. Later explorers attempted to name the several lakes in honor of noted Frenchmen. Father Alouez, who went thither in 1665, entitled the northernmost of the Great Lakes *Lac de Tracy* in honor of the Marquis de Tracy, then governor of New France.⁶ Father Hennepin, who sailed upon all the Great Lakes except Lake Superior, placed new names for them on his map of 1683. Ontario he named Frontenac for the great Canadian governor of that day; Superior he entitled *Lac de Condé* for the warrior prince of Louis XIV; Erie was *Lac de Conty* for Condé's brother; Huron was *Lac d'Orleans* for the king's brother; Michigan, *Lac Dauphin* for the king's son. None of these names persisted, although some of them appear sporadically on later maps.

The usual designation on the early maps for each of the Great Lakes was that of the nearest or best-known Indian tribe living on its borders. *La Mer Douce* quickly became *Lac des Hurons*; Michigan *Lac des Illinois*; Erie was the name of a tribe, living on the southern shore of that lake, also known as *Nation des Chats*, "Wild Cats," hence the name *Lac d'Erié ou des Chats*. The northernmost lake frequently became *Lac Supérieur ou des Nadouessioux*; while Ontario retained its Iro-

⁴ Kellogg, *French Régime*, 86.

⁵ Sanson d'Abbeville's map, reproduced in Kellogg, *French Régime*, 92.

⁶ Louise P. Kellogg, ed., *Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634-1699*, 104 (*Original Narratives of Early American History* — New York, 1917).

quois appellation, occasionally becoming Cataraqui for the post of that name on its northern shore.

A curious transposition of names occurred between the two western lakes. Huron, which with Georgian Bay appeared to be the largest of the group, was frequently called by the Algonquian term for "big lake," *Michiganne*. About 1725 geographers began applying this word to the *Lac des Illinois*, when gradually the latter appellation was dropped. Thus before the close of the French régime the names we now use for the Great Lakes had become their established cognomens.

The story of French explorers who traversed the Great Lakes would necessitate a review of the history of the entire upper country during the French régime. It will thus be necessary to confine this recapitulation to the French visitors to Lake Superior. A score of years passed after Champlain's death before we have any record of a visit to the distant Lake Superior region. Then appeared on the upper lake two traders, the account of whose travels has been hotly discussed and has given rise to a voluminous literature. Pierre d'Esprit, sieur de Radisson, who with his brother-in-law, Médard Chouart, sieur des Groseilliers, visited this region in the middle of the seventeenth century, wrote an amazing journal of his voyage many years after the event and in a language foreign to him, English. Where he went and when has been much discussed and with slight success. Of one fact all contestants are assured — that Radisson and Groseilliers did visit Lake Superior. Radisson's narrative is too vivid and circumstantial to be the work of any but an eyewitness. In this quality lies its chief historical value, for he pictures primitive life and conditions in this early period in a truly marvelous way. Take for instance his description of a moose:

He has a muzzle mighty bigge. I have seene some that have the nostrills so bigg that I putt into it my 2 fists att once with ease. . . . He feeds like an ox, and the Orniack so but seldom he galopps.

I have seene some of their hornes that a man could not lift them from of the ground. They are branchy and flatt in the middle.⁷

Could any one mistake the animal he thus describes?

Radisson's account of a famine in an Indian village is so vivid it makes one shudder:

Every one cryes out for hungar; the women become baren, and drie like wood. You men must eate the cord, being you have no more strength to make use of the bow. Children, you must die. . . . Here comes a new family of these poore people dayly to us, halfe dead, for they have but the skin & boans. . . . In the morning the husband looks upon his wife, y^e Brother his sister, the cozen the cozen, the Oncle the newew, that weare for the most part found deade. . . . Good God, have mercy on so many poore innocent people.

Then came a sleet storm and the deer broke through the crust and were easily captured. The village was saved and a great feast ensued.⁸

It would be interesting to cite more of this remarkable journal, revealing as it does a man of great descriptive power, of true sympathy for the natives, of real appreciation of nature's beauties. Too long we have speculated on where Radisson went, too little upon the manner of man he was and the aboriginal conditions he depicts.

Other traders followed quickly in Radisson's footsteps. In 1660 a party of seven went to Lake Superior, one of whom was Adrien Jolliet, older brother of the more famous Louis. With them was the first missionary, René Ménard, who later was lost somewhere in the depths of the Wisconsin forests. Jolliet and his party remained for three years in or about Chequamegon Bay. We catch a picture of their hardships in the following account: "It was a sight to arouse pity to see poor Frenchmen in a Canoe, amid rain and snow, borne hither and thither by whirlwinds in these great Lakes, which often show

⁷ Kellogg, *Early Narratives*, 52.

⁸ "Radisson and Groseilliers in Wisconsin," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 11: 80-82.

waves as high as those of the Sea. The men frequently found their hands and feet frozen," all to lay up a small store of fish to sustain life. Yet these traders lived to return to Canada, save only Father Ménard's servant, who was accidentally shot.⁹

Father Claude Allouez was the first to traverse the west and north coasts of Lake Superior and the first to attempt to map its shores. In 1667, two years after founding his mission on Chequamegon Bay, Allouez left that place on the sixth of May and, accompanied by two Indians, coasted in a canoe the entire west and north shore of the lake as far as Nipigon River and perhaps beyond. Allouez, who was a man of Herculean strength and great physical endurance, did his full share of the paddling and arrived at his destination completely fagged.¹⁰ Within the next three years, with the help of Father Marquette, a trained cartographer, Allouez prepared a complete map of the lake, which was published by the Jesuits in 1670-71. It is the first known map of any single one of the Great Lakes and is remarkably accurate in its delineation.

After Allouez's departure Marquette functioned at the Mission of the Holy Spirit on Chequamegon Bay until his neophytes fled from the region, when he accompanied them to the Straits of Mackinac. The occasion of the Indians' flight was the breaking out of an Indian war between the Sioux at the western end of the lake and the Indians of the east end living near the Sault, who were called on that account by the French Saulteurs and who are known by us as the Chippewa. This intertribal war closed Lake Superior to French traders and explorers for almost a decade.

Meanwhile, Governor Frontenac sent one of his engineers to visit and map Lake Superior and to carry thither presents to the warring tribesmen in order to induce them to keep the peace. We have no account of the visit of Captain Hughes Randin,

⁹ Kellogg, *French Régime*, 114-117.

¹⁰ Kellogg, *Early Narratives*, 135-137.

which occurred about 1676, except what is shown in his excellent map, which still exists only in manuscript.¹¹

The intertribal war continued to rage and Lake Superior remained closed to French trade and exploration until the arrival of that great gentleman of Old and New France, Daniel Greysolon, sieur du Lhut, or, to give his name its modern form, Duluth. What took Du Lhut to this distant region is not known; certainly it was not the desire for trade, for while his enemies stigmatized him as "king of the *coureurs de bois*," he indignantly repudiated the charge that he was a trader. Probably he was actuated by pure love of adventure and a desire to do an important service for New France. His first year on Lake Superior was spent in negotiating treaties between the warring tribesmen. Taking his life in his hands, in 1679 he advanced from the Chippewa habitat at the east end of Lake Superior into the territory of their deadliest enemies, the fierce, intractable Sioux. By sheer force of character he dominated this tribe, and induced it to form an alliance with France and all its allied tribesmen. Then, calling a great council at the head of the lake, he took thither deputies from the Assiniboin and Christinaux of the farther west and laid the *pax Franciscus* upon them all. Fitley indeed, has this great city, grown up near the council ground, taken the name of this explorer, discoverer, diplomat, and pacifier, Sieur du Lhut.

For a decade and a half more Du Lhut ranged the western country, driven by a strong desire to explore westward to the great salt sea of which he had heard, ever balked by the necessities of warfare and the demands of the governors of New France. Twice he was recalled to serve on expeditions against the Iroquois; and again to build and occupy a fort between Lakes Erie and Huron. But his heart was ever in the Far West and only when age and infirmities overtook him did he reluctantly ask for a recall to the quiet life at Montreal, where

¹¹ Kellogg, *French Régime*, 201.

in 1710 he died in his own house, with a modicum of honor for his discoveries.

Du Lhut's successor in the Lake Superior country was a man of a different temper, an eager trader and a successful diplomat, Pierre le Sueur. He built on the foundation laid by his predecessor and safeguarded for French activity the passage between Lake Superior and the Mississippi by placing a fortress near each end of the route. The triumph of Le Sueur's career occurred in 1695 when he induced a great Sioux chieftain to accompany him to Montreal and there in the presence of the governor and his staff to sign a treaty of alliance with the French authority and thus to end the intertribal warfare around the upper lake.

The close of the seventeenth century saw a great transformation in the French policy concerning the West; all posts were abandoned, all officers withdrawn, traders were forbidden to go up the lakes, the Indians were to be induced to visit Canada to do their trading, and, for the rest, the entire region was left to solitude. These conditions lasted only a few years. The Indians, accustomed to traders' visits, refused to make the long journey to Montreal, their intertribal quarrels broke out anew, and the governors of New France found it necessary to protect the fur trade by new garrisoned posts in the western country. Michilimackinac was reoccupied in 1714; in 1717 a French officer was sent to the northwest extremity of Lake Superior to build a post, from which it was hoped a route might be found to the western ocean. La Pointe on Chequamegon Bay was regarrisoned in 1718, and from this center a systematic attempt was made to exploit the copper resources of the southern shore.¹²

For the French of the eighteenth century Lake Superior was an economic resource rather than a scene for adventure. Thence came the richest furs, there were mines they hoped to exploit; yet in the heart of one commandant at a north shore

¹² Kellogg, *French Régime*, 257-260, 297-299, 351-356.

post lingered the love of adventure and the lure for the unknown. Pierre Gauthier, sieur de la Vérendrye, and his noble sons maintained the tradition of French courage and resource in the Far West and, in the face of almost insuperable obstacles, pushed French occupation out onto the vast plains northwest of Lake Superior and opened a great empire for New France.

But it was all in vain, the rulers of Canada were no longer of heroic strain. Cupidity and fraud had eaten into the fabric of the colony, which fell an easy prey to the robust Britons. During the French and Indian Wars, which ended in the entire expulsion of French power from the North American continent, the posts on Lake Superior were abandoned one by one, their officers and men called in for the defense of the St. Lawrence, and the great upper lake was left once more to Indian occupation. At the capitulation of Montreal in 1760 all the western posts were included in the surrender. So far as is known, however, none of the French posts on Lake Superior were then garrisoned. La Pointe was evacuated in 1759 and probably the few soldiers at the Sault were withdrawn at this time or earlier. When Lieutenant Jamet with a British contingent went in 1762 to take possession at the Sault, he found only a single trader in charge. In May of the same year a few British soldiers accompanied some traders as far as Grand Portage, thus bearing for the first time the British flag throughout the length of Lake Superior.¹³

The French régime on the Great Lakes was ended officially and diplomatically. Yet in being conquered the French were still conquerors. Throughout all the many years of the later fur trade, French *engagés* and *voyageurs* were indispensable. None knew like the light-hearted French-Canadian habitants how to endure courageously the dangers of the wilderness, how to breast and run the swift rapids of the northern streams,

¹³ Thompson Maxwell, "Narrative—1760-1763," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 11: 215.

how to portage around falls and obstructions, how to seek the distant hunting grounds of the Indians, how to barter with the red men for their valued pelts. No flotilla set forth along Lake Superior or braved the difficult passage to the interior without its quota of western Frenchmen. Every dip of the oar or the paddle was accompanied by French songs, and the language of barter was a curious admixture of French and Indian.¹⁴ In this sense the French régime in the Great Lakes country is not yet ended; the guides who take summer tourists through the north country are nearly all French-speaking, the place names of the soft French syllables still linger on our maps. The debt of the Northwest to French discoverers and explorers is not yet extinguished. In the Great Lakes country the French régime still lingers as a memory of the past and a heritage for the future.

LOUISE PHELPS KELLOGG

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN
MADISON

¹⁴ See Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur* (New York, 1931).



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