

THE RADISSON PROBLEM¹

THE PRAIRIE ISLAND CASE AGAIN

Indian descriptions of unexplored regions were notoriously unreliable. French writers were apt to attribute this to the natural tendency of the Indians to exaggerate, but that was not the principal reason. Much more important were first, the paucity of the Indian languages in words which could accurately describe natural features; and second, the extreme difficulty of getting an adequate translation of what the Indians actually said. The paid interpreters were trained to translate the terms that were commonly used in trading transactions. But once off this beaten path, they were, as a rule, lamentably deficient in capacity.

When Cartier was at Hochelaga, the Indian village on the site of Montreal, in 1536 the Indians told him about Niagara Falls. Similar statements were made to Champlain in 1604. But the French persisted in believing that it was a mere rapid, such as they had seen in the St. Lawrence River. Father Jerome Lalemant, writing in the *Relation* of 1641, gives a fairly good description of the Niagara River, but makes no mention of any falls.² Like other Frenchmen, he refused to believe in the falls until white men had seen them for themselves. Remember, this is the same Father Lalemant who recorded the interview with Groseilliers in 1660. It is extremely unlikely that Father Lalemant would give so specific and so accurate a description of the Mississippi River and conclude by comparing

¹ This discussion of the Radisson problem was opened by Mr. Goodrich and Dr. Nute in the September number of MINNESOTA HISTORY. The present rejoinder by Mr. Goodrich will be followed by further discussion of the subject in a future issue. *Ed.*

² Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 21: 191, 315 (Cleveland, 1899); Francis Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World*, 2: 65 n. (Boston, 1907).

its magnificence with that of the St. Lawrence, unless the statements of the Indians were backed up by the testimony of Groseilliers himself. He was so skeptical in regard to Indian descriptions, that he would not believe that there was a cataract in the Niagara River, although the Indians had been telling Frenchmen about it for a hundred years and more.

I believe that Dr. Nute has given a correct description of the "Auxoticiat" voyage of Radisson up to the point where he is about to leave Lake Huron. She has the wrong date, however, if, as seems to be pretty conclusively shown, the travelers described in the *Relation* of 1656 were Groseilliers and Radisson. Dr. Kellogg says: "Groseilliers, with his previous knowledge of the Algonquian languages, was very probably a man whom Lauson would select to go west in 1654. He may have taken Radisson with him at that time."³

It is quite certain that he took Radisson with him at that time. Radisson's narrative gives no intimation that either he or Groseilliers made any separate expeditions to the West. So far as can be shown from Radisson's narrative, they were together during this western trip. Many incidents recorded both in the *Jesuit Relations* and in Radisson's narrative, ending with the triumphant return in 1656, when the French explorers were greeted with salvos of artillery at Quebec, make fairly certain the fact that Groseilliers and Radisson were identical with the travelers named in the *Relation* of 1656. That being true, the "Auxoticiat" voyage began on August 6, 1654, and ended late in August, 1656.⁴

Henry Colin Campbell, in the *American Historical Review* for January, 1896, gives some very good reasons for

³ Louise P. Kellogg, *The French Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest*, 107 (Madison, 1925).

⁴ *Jesuit Relations*, 42:219; *Voyages of Peter Esprit Radisson, Being an Account of His Travels and Experiences among the North American Indians, from 1652 to 1684*, 170 (Boston, 1885).

his belief that the large island where the Hurons with Radisson found their wives and children was Bois Blanc in the northern part of Lake Huron, and that the strait which Radisson says was three leagues to the westward was Michilimackinac.

The map in the French archives in Paris to which Dr. Nute calls attention includes four islands at the mouth of Green Bay, marked "Islands whither the Hurons fled after the destruction of their nation by the Iroquois." After their disastrous defeat in 1649, the Hurons fled in all directions. Some of them fled to the Petuns, or Tobacco Hurons, south of Georgian Bay; some fled to the Neutral Nation; some fled to the Erie; some fled to the French settlements; and some even fled to the Conestoga. But a short time later the Neutrals and the Tobacco Hurons were themselves compelled to fly before Iroquois attacks. There is considerable evidence in addition to the map noted by Dr. Nute that certain bands of Tobacco Hurons took refuge on an island at the mouth of Green Bay. Perrot gives an account of this settlement and calls the place Huron Island. The *Jesuit Relations* give it the same name. Parkman also says the Hurons lived there.⁵

But in 1653 the Iroquois sent a war party of eight hundred men to attack Huron Island, in consequence of which the Hurons and Ottawa hastily abandoned that island and fled to the Potawatomi, at or near the southwest shore of Green Bay. From this point some of them proceeded to the Mississippi River and ascended that river to Prairie Island.⁶ Radisson found some Hurons still living among the Potawatomi, and tried to persuade them to accompany

⁵ Nicolas Perrot, "Memoir on the Manners, Customs, and Religion of the Savages of North America," in Emma H. Blair, *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Region of the Great Lakes*, 1: 148, 149 n. (Cleveland, 1911); *Jesuit Relations*, 56: 115; Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century*, 2: 250-252 (Boston, 1906).

⁶ Perrot, in Blair, *Indian Tribes*, 1: 151, 159-164; Kellogg, *French Régime*, 96.

him on a visit to the Sioux on Prairie Island or in its vicinity, where their brethren were already living, but they would not go. He says:

We had not as yett seene the nation Nadoneceronons. We had hurrons wth us. Wee persuaded them to come along to see their owne nation that fled there, but they would not by any means. We thought to gett some castors there to bring downe to the ffrench, seeing [it] att last impossible to us to make such a circuit in a twelve month's time.⁷

Dr. Nute's account of Radisson's snowshoe journey, it seems to me, is unsatisfactory. She makes him start near Lake Superior and proceed by a trail following a part of the distance along Wolf River to the vicinity of Green Bay, and thence down a river (although he plainly says he went up a river) to the "First Landing Isle." Such a trip would have been wholly without any purpose. If the "First Landing Isle" was Huron Island at the mouth of Green Bay, as she seems to intimate, he would find nobody there, for the Hurons and Ottawa had fled to the main land in 1653, and they never went back.

There is every reason to believe that the snowshoe journey began somewhere on Green Bay and ended on the Mississippi River near the mouth of the Wisconsin River, at which place the party built boats and ascended the Mississippi to Prairie Island. If Dr. Nute is correct in locating the village of St. Michel on the western shore of Green Bay, and if the Matonenock Indians whom Radisson names are the same as the Makoutensak mentioned in the *Jesuit Relations* of 1657-58 as being "about three days' journey inland, by water, from the village of St. Michel," then it is not surprising that Radisson should find them a short distance farther west, hunting in the buffalo country along the Mississippi River, nor that they should have with them a band of Potawatomi.

⁷ Radisson, *Voyages*, 152.

Radisson and Groseilliers had been well received by the Potawatomi and by the Mascoutens, and when they reached Prairie Island they "weare well received againe" by the Hurons and Ottawa who were living there. Radisson had two very definite objects in taking so much trouble to reach Prairie Island. In the first place he wanted to see the Sioux, who were reputed to have great numbers of beaver within their domain. But more important still, he wanted to secure the assistance of the Tobacco Hurons in the perilous trip back to Montreal. These Hurons were familiar with the military tactics of the Iroquois, and could be depended upon to withstand a determined Iroquois attack. That Radisson's confidence in the Hurons was not misplaced was shown when the Iroquois attacked the return expedition in the Ottawa River. Radisson expresses the opinion that, if it had not been for the Hurons, "that knewed the Iroquoits' tricks," the whole squadron would have fled in dismay, with a good prospect that the entire party would have been massacred.⁸

As for Michilimackinac being the "First Landing Isle," that is impossible. By 1655 the Iroquois scourge had swept the islands of the great lakes clean of inhabitants. A few Hurons had found an asylum among the Conestoga living along the Susquehanna River. Aside from that region, there was no safety from 1655 to 1670 east of Wisconsin for Hurons or Ottawa or Neutrals, except in the vicinity of the French settlements.

When the Hurons and Ottawa fled from Huron Island to the Potawatomi settlement, the three tribes built a strong fort, which the Iroquois were unable to take. With the help of the Illinois and some other tribes, the Iroquois were badly defeated and their further western progress stopped.⁹ When a band of Ottawa still left on Manitoulin Island fled

⁸ Radisson, *Voyages*, 164.

⁹ Kellogg, *French Régime*, 98.

to Quebec in 1650, they found the whole country along the French and Ottawa rivers deserted as far as Montreal, on account of Iroquois attacks. The Nipissing Indians had fled westward to Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior. Many fragments of tribes gathered in Wisconsin.¹⁰

The Iroquois war with the Erie gave the Hurons and Ottawa a little respite, and they succeeded in reaching Montreal in 1654. Radisson and Groseilliers went back with them, probably at the governor's request, but the Mohawk, who were not engaged in the Erie war, attacked them fiercely. In August, 1656, Radisson and Groseilliers returned to Quebec, accompanied by several hundred Indians with great quantities of beaver skins, and were welcomed with universal rejoicing.¹¹ Perhaps they made another trip to the west the same year.

When Father Menard went west in 1660 to attempt the reestablishment of a mission among the Ottawa, he found complete desolation. He found no habitations until he reached Keweenaw Bay, half way along the south shore of Lake Superior. After his untimely death, Father Allouez went out to succeed him in 1665 and found similar conditions. Bands of Indians of various tribes visited Sault Ste. Marie at certain seasons of the year to fish and trade, but there were no villages east of Keweenaw except those about Green Bay.¹²

The Potawatomi made their first trip to Montreal in 1668. The following year they made another attempt to reach the French settlements. On the way they stopped at Michilimackinac, and found that island still without inhabitants. They encountered there, however, a small roving band of Iroquois. The two bands fled from each other with equal terror, and the Potawatomi abandoned their trip

¹⁰ *Jesuit Relations*, 35: 15, 199-205; 40: 213; 41: 79; 44: 245-247.

¹¹ Radisson, *Voyages*, 140, 169; *Jesuit Relations*, 41: 77; 42: 33, 219.

¹² *Jesuit Relations*, 48: 259-265; 49: 161, 249; 50: 249-271.

to Montreal and returned to Wisconsin.¹³ Even as late as 1670, when the Iroquois were at peace with the French and Perrot was conducting a party of Ottawa down the Ottawa River, he had great difficulty in persuading his companions that the Iroquois would keep the peace, and they crept past small parties of Iroquois with fear and trembling.¹⁴ In 1670, after the Iroquois had demonstrated their pacific disposition, certain bands of Ottawa ventured to reoccupy their old home on Manitoulin Island. During the same year Huron hunters visited Michilimackinac and announced to the Jesuits their intention of returning there to make a permanent home, whereupon the latter were encouraged to begin the mission of St. Ignace.¹⁵

Hurons and Ottawa living at Chequamegon Bay, many of whom had formerly lived on Prairie Island, envied the Sioux their possession of the Indian paradise at Centerville.¹⁶ In 1671 they persuaded the Potawatomi and Sauk to assist them in an attack upon the Sioux, for which purpose they had collected a large quantity of guns and ammunition. But bows and arrows won nevertheless, and this—their third attack upon the Sioux—failed even more disastrously than had their previous attacks. Lake Superior was no longer a safe refuge for Hurons and Ottawa, and they fled eastward, dragging their missionary, Father Marquette, with them. The Hurons made their home at Michilimackinac, which had been unoccupied for fifteen years. The Ottawa went on to Manitoulin Island, from which their people had fled during the Iroquois wars, and which had been destitute of inhabitants from that time un-

¹³ *Jesuit Relations*, 51: 264; Claude Charles Le Roy, Bacqueville de la Potherie, "History of the Savage Peoples Who Are Allies of New France," in Blair, *Indian Tribes*, 1: 334.

¹⁴ Perrot, in Blair, *Indian Tribes*, 1: 210-214.

¹⁵ *Jesuit Relations*, 55: 99-101, 143, 159, 171, 319.

¹⁶ Albert M. Goodrich, "Early Dakota Trails and Settlements at Centerville, Minn.," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15: 315-322 (1915).

til the previous year. The Potawatomi, also flying from the Sioux, reoccupied Huron Island, at the mouth of Green Bay, and the island came to be called Potawatomi Island, and is now known as Washington Island. This island had also been vacant since 1653.¹⁷

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¹⁷ See the translation of a note by R. P. J. Tailhan, in Blair, *Indian Tribes*, 1: 149.



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