One would look in vain in the honor roll of the explorers and discoverers of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Valley for the name of the Baron de Lahontan. Not a single monument has been erected in his memory, not a single tablet inscribed in his honor. Yet, if the forgotten baron had his deserts, his name would stand beside those of Marquette and Jolliet and La Salle in the history of the Father of Waters. In particular the state of Minnesota would recall his memory as the man who was the first to push his way into the north central part of that state and to approach the great northern divide over a century before it became known to the world. French Canada, where the name of the baron is either utterly forgotten or utterly despised, ought to honor him as one of the most gallant, most talented, and most devoted of the nobles of France who spent the best of their years in the service of New France.

But it was the fate of the baron to “get in wrong.” He went to Canada in 1683 as an officer in the army. He was at that time a boy of seventeen. In the letters which he wrote home, and which he printed twenty years later as his Voyages, he was silly enough to repeat the barrack room stories he had heard about the class of women that the king of France had sent out to Canada twenty years before to be the brides of a disbanded regiment of his soldiers. The merry young baron “made his mouth warm over it,” as the French have it, without realizing the falsity and the reach of the insult. As a matter of fact, it has reached down the centuries until today, and those of the people of Quebec who have ever heard of the name of Lahontan know it.

1 An abstract of an address delivered before the Minnesota Historical Society on October 18, 1933. Ed.
therefore, as that of the man who slandered "the mothers of French Canada." In the light of that, all else that the baron did went for nothing.

But the unhappy young nobleman "got in" even worse. In his same letters of travel he expressed his opinion very frankly about the priests of New France and told how they tried, as he saw it, to tyrannize over the life of the colonists; worse than that, he was ill-advised enough to put into his travels and memoirs a lot of the scepticism already coming into fashion in his day. His dialogue on Christianity, carried on with an imaginary Indian, would have been enough to damn him even without the unlucky references to the women and the priests.

As a consequence the real achievements of Lahontan were belittled and his voyage of discovery into what is now Minnesota was laughed at as a fabrication. A few people in France tried to defend the story, but they lacked facts. The legend of Lahontan as a liar grew and solidified. It was presently accepted as a fact without further examination. Even the honest and industrious Francis Parkman compares the story to Gulliver. For once Parkman seems to prefer popular approval to the search after historic truth and accepts without proper investigation the current story. Finally, Mr. J. E. Roy, in a paper—admirable but erroneous—presented to the Royal Society of Canada in 1894, covers the whole career of Lahontan and rules him out of court as an infidel and a liar. Since then oblivion has fallen on the baron. In the latest edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica there is no article on Lahontan and no reference to his name appears in the index.

Lahontan went to Canada in 1683 and served there for ten years. He was in garrison at Quebec, Montreal, Chambly, and elsewhere. He spent many months, on various occasions, hunting and living with the Algonquins, whose language he mastered thoroughly. He took part in
NEW VOYAGES TO North-America.

CONTAINING
An Account of the several Nations of that vast Continent; their Customs, Commerce, and Way of Navigation upon the Lakes and Rivers; the several Attempts of the English and French to disposess one another; with the Reasons of the Miscarriage of the former; and the various Adventures between the French, and the Iroquiose Confederates of England, from 1683 to 1694.

A Geographical Description of Canada, and a Natural History of the Country, with Remarks upon their Government, and the Interest of the English and French in their Commerce.

Also a Dialogue between the Author and a General of the Savages, giving a full View of the Religion and strange Opinions of those People: With an Account of the Author's Retreat to Portugal and Denmark, and his Remarks on those Courts.

To which is added,

A Dictionary of the Algonquin Language, which is generally spoke in North-America.

Illustrated with Twenty Three Maps and Cuts.

Written in French

By the Baron LAHONTAN, Lord Lieutenant of the French Colony at Placentia in Newfoundland, now in England.

Done into English.

In Two VOLUMES.

A great part of which never Printed in the Original.

the expeditions against the Iroquois under La Barre and Denonville. He commanded a detachment of French and Indians in an expedition to Michilimackinac, where it stayed for a year. He served under Frontenac when Sir William Phips was driven away from Quebec. He helped to beat off an English fleet from Newfoundland, a service for which the king made him lieutenant, that is, lieutenant governor, of Placentia, or, so to speak, of French Newfoundland. His account of all his campaigns and adventures, of life in the woods, of Indian wars and Indian cruelty, of his part in the great epic of the coming of the white races to the forests of America reads like a story book. After the *Nouveaux Voyages* of the Baron de Lahontan was first printed in Holland in 1703, it was read all over polite Europe and it passed through edition after edition. The singular charm of Lahontan's writing, as fascinating today as it was two hundred years ago, appealed to thousands of people who would have yawned over the pages of the *Jesuit Relations* or the history of Charlevoix. Even today no one disputes the wonderful accuracy of Lahontan's account of war and peace in New France.

But when the book came out, Lahontan was already in disgrace. A quarrel with his senior, the governor of Newfoundland,—a quarrel of youth with age, of wit with stupidity, of efficiency with ineptitude,—had led to his banishment from France. He lived and died (1713) in exile. His banishment further helped to discredit, most unjustly, his reputation.

Now when the young Baron de Lahontan, still well under thirty, was in command at Michilimackinac, it occurred to him that he might use the enforced leisure of an interval of temporary peace in a voyage of exploration. His own curiosity was always insatiable, and at the moment the curiosity of all the world was turned toward the Mississippi. Let us recall the chronology of the matter. The Missis-
sippi was discovered, not at its mouth, but from overland higher up, by the Spaniard De Soto in 1641. He and his men wintered on the Ouachita River in Arkansas. After their visit the Mississippi passes out of record till 1673, when Jolliet and Father Marquette went from Lake Huron by way of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers to the upper Mississippi. In 1680 Father Hennepin reached the Mississippi by the same route. After being captured by the Sioux, he was taken upstream to a point near the present site of St. Paul and then overland to the Sioux village on Mille Lacs. Later, with the permission of the Indians, he descended the Rum River and the Mississippi on a journey that resulted in the discovery of the Falls of St. Anthony. Eventually Hennepin was rescued by Daniel Greysolon, sieur du Lhut, who reached the river from Lake Superior by way of the St. Croix.

In 1682 La Salle descended the Mississippi to its mouth and named and claimed Louisiana. Upon returning to France he equipped a new expedition in 1684 to reach the Mississippi from the gulf. Mystery closed over his fate. We know now that he was murdered by some of his own men in 1687. But at the alleged time of Lahontan's journey (1689–90), news of La Salle's fate had reached France only as criminal confession and uncertain rumor.

This new vast territory of the great river, therefore, appealed to adventurous minds as did the East Indies to Vasco da Gama or the coast of America to Columbus. Indeed, it was still the quest of Columbus—the "search for the Western Sea"—that inspired the explorers. To modern eyes without historical perspective Lahontan's voyage into the marshes and meadows of central Minnesota seems vague and purposeless. To his contemporaries the aim was as clear as was that of Nansen and Peary in their search for the North Pole.

Lahontan says that he left Michilimackinac with soldiers
and Indians on September 24, 1688, entered Green Bay off Lake Michigan,—which he calls "Baie des Puants,"—went up the Fox River, portaged to the Wisconsin River, and reached its junction with the Mississippi on October 23, 1688. From there he says he went up the Mississippi so many days and so many leagues. Thus far there is no inherent objection to the story. If he did not do as he says, at least he could have. The times and distances are consistent. Per contra he could have made up the story! The route was known and had been described. After ascending the Mississippi till November 2, Lahontan came, so he says, to a stretch of shoals and cascades. There he turned off into a branch of the river that came in from the left. If this is not the rapid water below the Falls of St. Anthony, and if the river is not the Minnesota (otherwise known as the St. Peter's or St. Pierre), at least it could have been.

Now begins the controversial matter. Lahontan, like a chess player, has got beyond the moves in the book. He cannot copy. What he says is that he found here a long, long river, most of which was very still and quiet and with reaches almost stagnant. It was long, very long. Lahontan gives no accurate table of distances. How can he? "We went 12 leagues"; "we stopped five days"; "we hunted"; "we went 12 leagues"; "the savages said that 60 leagues further we should find so and so." It is all like that. It adds up at least to hundreds of miles. The Minnesota, incidentally, has a course of 450 miles. It has long still reaches. Most of it is navigable for steamers.

Lahontan says that he met various tribes of Indians as he went up. There were the Nadouessis, and the Eokoros, and the Gnacsitares, and the Essanapes. These names might well look bewildering and absurd, in fact like Gulliver's names. But the Nadouessis are quite evidently the Nadouessioux of Hennepin and others, and are merely the
LAHONTAN'S MAP OF THE LONG RIVER

[From a copy in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.]
Sioux. Any one acquainted with the phonetic bewilderment of Indian names written down by white people will be ready to accept the Eokoros as the Crows and the Essanapes as the Assiniboin. Both these names have appeared in various forms. As an illustration of the multiform ways of spelling the Indian names of western places, Mr. Carl Roden, librarian of the Chicago Public Library, sent to the writer twenty-one of the more familiar ways of writing the Indian word for Chicago. Among these first prize may be awarded to "Stktschagko," with honorable mention for "Tschakko."

Now the Minnesota River runs with a great bend or elbow somewhat below the middle of its course. That is, it comes down from the north, then turns sideways and a little upward and in its lower course toward its union with the Mississippi its general direction is from the southwest to the northeast. One might, therefore, argue that it was very wonderful of Lahontan to have invented a long, long river like the Minnesota—for no white person had yet seen the course of the Minnesota and recorded it—but very unlucky that he forgot its outstanding feature, the huge bend in its course. How easily could that disqualify his whole story! What! Leave out by accident such an obvious fact? Impossible!

But alas for argument when confronted by fact! The next white explorer of this region was a certain Captain Carver, a veteran of the Seven Years' War. In 1766 he ascended the Minnesota. No one has ever doubted that. He went away up—in distance obviously beyond the great curve. He never refers to it in his book, Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768 (London, 1778), in which he records in great detail the scenery along the banks and the Indians who dwelt there.

Lahontan speaks constantly as if he and his Indians
"sailed" up the river. Again and again he writes, "the wind being unfavorable we had to use our oars," or, "the wind being so and so we sailed." The critic objects that mast and sails were unknown to the American Indian, who used only canoes. The answer is that the Indians of the plains used dugouts or pirogues and that they sailed these boats by standing up in them with a blanket held outward by both arms and downward by their feet. Carver describes this.

Carver had read, or had heard of, Lahontan's narrative. It is only fair to say that he says that "many of the stories told by the Baron are mere delusions." But this is not the same as saying that the baron was not there and that his journey is fabulous. He says the account is "very erroneous" in its geographical parts. But he says the same of Charlevoix. Geographical mistakes in first-hand exploration are inevitable and universal. See any explorer's first map of any country. The "stories" most likely refer to Lahontan's experiences on the upper stretches of the river beyond where Carver reached. There he met a swarthy tribe of natives, whom he called "Mozeemleks." They were dark, and had beards. This is the acid test of Lahontan's narrative. Where are those bearded savages now?

Notice again that Catlin, the famous traveler of the early nineteenth century, whose book on the North American Indians, published in 1839, is a classic, speaks of the extraordinary and abundant hair of the Crows and other tribes; says that they would have beards but that they pull them out; and that some old men (careless old fellows!) let them grow.

The "toughest" part of Lahontan's narrative now follows, and it proves to be really its chief corroboration. The Mozeemleks tell him that the Long River rises in marshes and hills up to the north; that beyond this is another river, their own proper river, which runs away to the
Some of the critics once proved that Lahontan lied because the weather did not fit! Imagine, they said, voyaging at forty below zero (as it always is in Minnesota) in open pirogues on frozen rivers in December blizzards. But that will not do. Lahontan said there was no ice till well into December. It appears there often is none till then. When the winter got too severe the party turned back.

The return was easy; down the "Long River," down the Mississippi, a little way up the Missouri and back, then down to the "Ouabach," or Wabash, — here, as often, the Ohio, — then up the Mississippi again, and so by the Illinois portage to "Chekakou," which is Chicago. The fatal objection that there were no hotels in Chicago in 1690 easily vanishes. The name antedates by centuries even Fort Dearborn. And so Lahontan and his men passed down Lake Michigan and back home to Michilimackinac in May of 1689.

Lahontan in all his memoirs writes like a gentleman, like a man of honor. No literary skill or duplicity could counterfeit the honor and the honesty of his narration. Lahontan would not lie, and could not lie. He was, so far as recorded words go, the first discoverer of central Minnesota and the Red River portage route to the Canadian
Northwest. But for the cold, he would have gone to Winnipeg; others can sympathize.

The whole matter resolves itself into giving a dog a bad name and then hanging him. It remains for some Minnesota scholar on the spot to follow up the track, measure the distances, locate the islands or the marshes, and vindicate a great and courageous name from historic slander.

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