RADISSON AND GROSEILLIERS' CONTRIBUTION TO GEOGRAPHY

One method for determining the western and northern limits of the country explored by Pierre Esprit Radisson and Médard Chouart, sieur des Groseilliers, in their trips about Lake Superior and beyond appears never to have been employed by historians. It is the assembling of all the reports about their journeys as recorded by men who heard the Frenchmen recount their experiences. From any considerable body of such reports the historian and geographer can draw deductions that will approximate the truth regarding the itinerary of the two explorers.

At least seven contemporary forms of Radisson and Groseilliers' story of their "discovery" have survived, five of which are printed herewith. The most indefinite of the seven, as well as the longest and one of the latest, is Radisson's Voyages.1 This is in print and need not be discussed here. The earliest appears in the preface to the Voyages.2

Another form of the story, very brief and to the point, also is in print and has been used by biographers of the two men, though it is not so well known as the Voyages. It is Henry Oldenburg's letter of December 30, 1665, to Robert Boyle at Oxford, which is printed here from the original in the Royal Society.* The version already in print has minor inaccuracies. The letter was written from London while

1 Voyages of Peter Esprit Radisson, Being an Account of His Travels and Experiences among the North American Indians, from 1652 to 1684 (Boston, 1885).

2 This is a letter by Colonel George Cartwright, not Carr, as printed in certain works, of December 14, 1665, to Lord Arlington. It may also be found in Maine Historical Collections, 4:299 (second series). It tells of Radisson and Groseilliers' account of "A Passage from the West Sea to the South Sea, and of a great trade of Beaver in that Passage."

3 Henry Oldenburg, the first secretary of the Royal Society, was a man deeply interested in science, geography, and philosophy. The extract herewith printed appears in Boyle's Works, 5:345 (London, 1744).
Radisson and Groseilliers, lately arrived in England after capture by a Dutch caper, were attending Charles II at court at Oxford. Though it is only a third-hand report of the interview at Oxford, it is significant as being the earliest account of any exactness that has survived. It is plain, if Oldenburg's informant gave him a truthful description of what happened at Oxford, that the French narrators there claimed no less than a personal discovery of a passage to the South Sea.

Doubtless they told their story to Charles II in their native tongue; and the king and his brother, much at home in that language, were evidently greatly interested in the odyssey. Incredible as it may seem, we have the king's own version of the story. It is to be found in a letter addressed to his brother, the Duke of York, and is dated February 7, 1667/8. The king contented himself with "great hope" of discovering a passage to the South Sea.

The most explicit account was written by the men who invested their money in sending out an expedition to prove the truth of the "discovery." One may be sure that they examined and cross-examined the Frenchmen on every point of the narrative before they put their hands into their pockets to support the explorers and their enterprise. The letter of instruction from the nascent Hudson's Bay Company to its sea captains may therefore be taken to contain accurate information as to what the explorers had told of their travels in western North America. In brief it was the disclosure that the interior of the continent could be

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4 It is necessary only to refer to the long residence of Charles II and his brother in France and to the former's French correspondence with his sister to show how great was the proficiency of the three in the French language.

5 This letter is by no means unknown to scholars, but it seems desirable, nevertheless, to print its full text here. A reference is made to it in George Bryce, *The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company*, 10 n. (New York, 1910); and excerpts from it are partly quoted, partly paraphrased by Agnes Laut in *The Conquest of the Great Northwest*, 108, 109 (New York, 1908).
reached more easily from Hudson Bay than by the painful and dangerous route via the Great Lakes. The instructions give no hint as to whether Radisson and his brother-in-law claimed to have been at their "stinking lake." The absurdity of the second part of their story, which tells of the closeness of the sea to that lake, makes one believe that the entire account was simply their version of another Indian attempt to explain the geography of the continent to the whites. The early narratives of explorers and missionaries are replete with such vague references to the Western Sea and its tributaries. In this instance, however, the account as a whole is fairly accurate. If, as seems probable, the "stinking lake" was Lake Winnipeg (Winnipeg means "stinking" in one of the Indian languages), Radisson and Groseilliers were correct in their statements that that body of water was easily accessible from Hudson Bay, and that, through the lake—but by a route requiring weeks of toilsome paddling instead of seven days—lay the easiest canoe route to the western ocean.

The last of this group of documents exists in two forms, both of which appear below. For reasons which are very significant, but which need not be discussed here, the earlier form was revoked after Groseilliers returned from Hudson Bay in October, 1669. In a volume in the Public Record Office in London, it will be found struck through with lines which denote that it was invalid. At the end of the document the following statement is written: "Memorand this Warrant was afterwards altered as in page 129." It is fortunate that the earlier form could not be totally obliterated, since, in some ways, it is the most interesting of all the documents. For one thing, it is probably Radisson's own version of the "discovery." Groseilliers, as the elder of the two men and the more experienced, was regarded as their spokesman. The other accounts—the Voyages excepted—probably reflect his language and ideas. When
this warrant was penned, however, Groseilliers had been absent from England a full year. Radisson, on the other hand, had returned to England in August, 1668. It is believed that he had filled the intervening months by writing his *Voyages*. The translation of that document was paid for at practically the identical time of the writing of this warrant, and there was probably a close relation between the two events. Moreover, the phraseology of the warrant reflects the *Voyages*, especially in the spelling of the word designating the Sioux Indians, "Nadouseranohs." This was a new word to Englishmen, and the penman of the warrant doubtless had a translation of the *Voyages* at his elbow for ready reference for just such a case as this.

It is not necessary here to point out the significance of the two forms of the last document for the expansion of the British Empire and for the impending struggle between France and Great Britain to possess the North American continent. Here we are concerned only with the growth of geographical knowledge of that continent. Radisson and Groseilliers' contribution to it may be said to have been information that a relatively easy canoe route led from Hudson Bay to Lake Winnipeg; and that from that lake one could go, by the principal Indian canoe route, to the western ocean. That Radisson and Groseilliers themselves ever saw Lake Winnipeg is extremely doubtful. Whether

*A newsletter from Plymouth, in the *London Gazette*, August 10–13, 1668, notes the return of the "Eagle—Ketch" from the vicinity of Newfoundland the preceding Wednesday, August 5, having "been severely handled by storm." The vessel, on which Radisson had embarked, appears to have been called indiscriminately "Eaglet" and "Eagle" by those who knew or sailed upon it.

*Fulmer Mood, "The London Background of the Radisson Problem," *ante*, p. 391–413. The evidence that Radisson's *Voyages* was translated about this time may be found in Ledger 1/101, folio 33, Hudson's Bay Company Archives. The reference to the translation is herewith published by permission of the governor and committee of the Hudson's Bay Company.

*Groseilliers was in Three Rivers on August 4, 1658, and Radisson was in Quebec on May 29 and 31, 1659. The record of a suit of Bar-
or not they made their "discovery" in person is, however, immaterial, for on the strength of their representations of it, practical business men undertook the opening of the region between Lake Superior, Lake Winnipeg, and Hudson Bay.\(^9\)

**GRACE LEE NUTE**  
**MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
**ST. PAUL**

**HENRY OLDENBURG TO ROBERT BOYLE, DECEMBER 30, 1665**  
[Boyle Papers, Royal Society — A. L. S.]

... Surely I need not tell you from hence, what is said here with great joy of ye discovery of a North-west-passage, made by 2 English and one French man, lately represented by ym to his maj[e]sty at Oxford, and answered by a royall graunt of a vessel, to saile into Hudson's bay, and thence into the South-Sea, these men affirming, as I heare, yt w[i]th a boat they went out of a Lake in Canada, into a river, w[hi]ch discharged itself North-west into the South-Sea, into w[hi]ch they went, and returned North-East into Hudson's Bay. I hope, if this be truth, I shall receave the favor of y[ou]r confirmation, together with a correction of mistakes, as to ye particulars. ...

... tholemy Bertaut versus Médard Chouart on August 4, 1658, is in the register in the courthouse at Three Rivers; and Radisson's signature appears on two documents, dated May 29 and 31, 1659, in the greffe of Audouart in the courthouse at Quebec. The latter are receipts in favor of the widow Sylvestre. Thus the two men could not have been absent together on their "voyage" for more than fifteen months, when, on August 21, 1660, they returned to Montreal. A trip to Lake Winnipeg, much less to Hudson Bay, in such a brief period is unthinkable in view of other trips that they made into the Sioux country on this same voyage.

"The chapter of Canadian history has yet to be written that tells of the first exploration of waterways into the interior from Port Nelson and Lake Superior and along the Albany River, largely by Radisson, Groseilliers and his son, Jean Baptiste Chouart, Jean Baptiste Pére and two companions, Du Lhut and his brother, and a few others. This was a race between two nations in an effort to be the first to spy out the land, to claim its sovereignty, and to control its great wealth of beaver pelts. The editor of these documents hopes to devote a portion of her forthcoming biography of Radisson and Groseilliers to this topic.

\(^{10}\)A postscript to this letter, dated January 16, 1665/6, mentions the subject again: "I Doubt, ye good news, we had here, of ye discovery of a Northwest passage, is not true, because you would else, I am persuaded, have done me the favor of confirming it by a word or two." See Boyle, *Works*, 5: 348.
CHARLES II TO JAMES, DUKE OF YORK, FEBRUARY 7, 1667/8

[State Papers, Domestic, Charles II, Entry Book 44/26, Public Record Office.]


Wee greet you well.

Whereas Our Dear Cousin Prince Rupert George Duke of Albemarle William Earle of Craven & others having been informed by two Frenchmen who have lived long in Canada & have been up in ye great Lakes that lye in the midst of that part of America, That there is great hope of finding some passage through those Lakes into the South Sea are thereby encouraged & have accordingly resolved to set out ships for a further discovery thereof; and the better to enable them in that their undertaking, they have humbly besought Us to Lend them one of Our small Vessells for the first expedicon onely; Wee are graciously pleas'd to condescend unto that their request, and have hereby thought fit to signify Our pl[ease]ure unto you on that behalf, That you give Order for the Eaglet Ketch to be further deliv­ered unto such person or persons as they shall appoint to receive the same to be by them used & employed as aforesaid for this their first Voyage onely but so as they Rigg & victuall the sd. Vessell at their own charge. And for so doing this shall be yr Warrant. Given &c Febr 7th 1667.

INSTRUCTIONS TO CAP'NE WILLIAM STANNARD COMANDER OF THE Eaglet Ketch and CAPTaine Zachariah Guillam Comander of the Nonsuch Ketch in relacon to the Voyage now undertaken for Hudsons Bay

[State Papers, Domestic, Charles II, 251/180, Public Record Office.]

You are with the first wind that presents to saile with the sd vess­sells unto Hudsons Bay either by the Northward or Westward ac­cording to your owne discretion endeavouring to keepe company as much as you can and in order there unto you are to appointe your Places of Rendezvous in case of separation

When it shall Please God to bring you thither you are to saile to such place as M'' Gooseberry and M'' Raddison shall direct you within the Bay and there endeavour to bring yo'' said vessells into some safe Harbour in ord'' to trade with the Indyans there and you are to deliver unto them the goods you carry by small p'cells with this Caution that there be no more than fifty Pounds worth at a time out of each shipp
and that when they returne on board with such goods as they shall have in Exchange from the Natives you stowe the same on board the vessels before you deliver out any more. This being according to the perticuler advice wee have recieved of Mr Gooseberry and Mr Raddison themselves

You are to take notice that the wampumpeage w'ch you carry with you is part of our Joyn Cargoe wee having bought it for our money of Mr Gooseberry and Mr Raddison and is to be delivered by small quantityes with like Caution as the other goods

You are upon yo' first arrivall there to raise some fortifications upon the shore for your more convenient accomodation and safety in the prepaireing whereof both your shipps Companies are to give their mutuall assistance and you are allwaies to have extraordinary Care of your Vessells to prevent any Surprise.

As soone as you have gotten togeather of the Comodityes of the Country to any considerable value you are to putt them all on board the Nonsuch Ketch into w'ch Capt. Stannard is to remove with so many of the company of the Eaglett Ketch as you shall Judge convenient to saile her home and shall bringe along with him Mr Gooseberry upon the said Vessell and also you are to use your utmost endeav"r to bring some of the copper or other mineralls of that Country making what hast you can in the dispatch of the said vessell that so it may be out of the streights before the Ice doth hinder

Cap'n Guillam is to remaine behind with Mr Raddison upon the Eaglet Ketch into w'ch you are to remove the Seamen of the Nonsuch Ketch and all such comodityes as remaine undisposed of togeather with all such provisions as shall be more then necessary for the said Nonsuch Ketch in her returne and the sd Capt Guillam and Mr Raddison are to trade with the Inhabitants of the Country collect what goods they can against the next returne from England.

Mr Thomas Gorst is to remaine also in the Country to keepe the accompts of the Voiadge and to be assistant to Capt. Guillam and Mr Raddison and if either of them should happen to dye then the said Mr Gorst and the chiefe mate of the said Ketch are to be Joyned with the survivour for the management of the affaires

Note: that by the mate wee meane Mr Sheppard

You are to have in yo' thoughts the discovery of the Passage into the South sea and to attempt it as occasion shall offer with the advice
and direction of Mr Gooseberry and Mr Raddison, or one of them they having told us that it is but 7 daies padling or sailing from the River where they intend to trade and Harbour unto the stinking Lake and not above 7 daies more to the streight whe* leads into that sea they call the South sea and from thence but forty or fifty Leagues to the sea it selfe in all whe streight it Ebbs and flowes by meanes whereof the passage up and downe will be quicke and if it be possible you are to gett so much light in this matter before the returne of the Nonsuch Ketch as may encourage us the next spring to send a vessell on purpose for that discovery

Captaine Guillam is to remaine wth the Eaglett Ketch in the place where Capt Stannard shall leave him untill his returne except some good reason offer for his removeall whe if it happen then he is to leave such intelligence as may direct Capt Stannard or whom wee shall send to find him

And Whereas wee doe intend by Gods permission upon the returne of Capt Stannard to send from hence the next yeare for the further encouragem* of this action wee thinke fitt to signify that Capt Guilliam is to be in expectacon of some shipp or shipps from us untill the latter End of August 1669 after wch. time if none come wee must leave it to his discretion by and with the advice of Mr Raddison either to come straite home or to stay longer there as shall by them be thought best but if he shall have disposed of the Cargo before that time and gotten to trade on board then if Mr Raddison shall soe advise he may come home leaving the said Mr Raddison and Mr Gorst and such others as shall be willing to stay behind to provide trade ag* the next returne of the Shipps.

You are to keepe exact Journalls of all proceedings and observations and to be curious in your Soundings that wee may know the depth of the waters in all places whe you come and according to the best of your Skill shall provide such mapps as may give us an accompt of the places where you goe.11

11 For accounts of the adventures of Captain Gillam and his vessel of sixty tons on this momentous voyage, see "A Breviate of Captain Zechariah Gillam's Journal to the North-West, in the Nonsuch-Catch, in the Year 1668," in John Seller, The English Pilot, the Fourth Book, 5-9 (London, 1689), and Joseph Robson, A Short History of the Discovery of Hudson's Bay, Appendix 1, p. 5 (London, 1752). The former contains a map of Hudson Bay by John Thorton, which almost certainly is based, in part at least, on maps that Gillam and his company supplied.
If it shall happen that you cannot find the Places and Trade proposed and that noe considerable discoveryes are likely to be made and that Mr. Gooseberry and Mr. Raddison shall without force or Compulsion give under their hands that there is neither Trade considerable nor discovery to be made by them.

Then it is our order that Capt Guillam doe bring the Nonsuch Ketch directely home having first putt her cargoe and all such provisions as he can spare on board the Eaglett and taken out of the Eaglett such men as shee may spare w^ch are to be brought home to save our charges together with Mr. Gooseberry and Mr. Raddison and Capt. Stannard is then to saile to Newfoundland and there to sell such provisions as may be spared for Bills of Exchange and from thence he is to goe to New Jersey or New Yorke, w^ch he shall judge most for our advantage and if he shall thinke fitt to goe to New Jersey he is to apply himselfe to Mr. Phillipp Carterett, who is Gouv^r there and deliver our Letters to him who will wee doubt not give his best advice and assistance as to the disposeing of the Cargoe and lading back of the Ketch.\footnote{Philip Carteret (1639–1682) was a fourth cousin of Sir George Carteret, the patron of Radisson and Groseilliers. He was the first governor of New Jersey. See the \textit{Dictionary of American Biography} for a sketch of his life.}

Wee conceive that some small private adventurers may be also car-ryed by you and your men w^ch wee doe not refuse to allow but doe absolutely restraine all persons from tradeing themselves with the Indians because thereby our Trade may be distroyed and the said Mr. Gooseberry and Mr. Raddison loose there credit with the Indians wherefore it is Our Order that all such Private adventurers be disposed of in like manner as our own goods are wherein wee doubt not but the adventurers will find there gaine sufficient.

Wee doe also declare that if by accident you meete with any sea horse or mors teeth or make any advantage by killing of whales It is to be made good to our accompt.

Lastly wee desire and require you to use the said Mr. Gooseberry and Mr. Raddison with all manner of Civility and Courtesy and to take care that all your Company doe beare a perticular respect unto them they being the persons upon whose Credit wee have undertaken this expedition.
Which wee beseech Almighty God to prosper and was signed

RUPERT ALBERMALE [sic]
CRAVEN G CARTERETT
J HAYES P COLETON

THO. GORST Wm STANNARD Capt of y" Eagles
ZACH. GUILLAM Capt of the Nonsuch

[Endorsed:] Discoveryes
Voyedge for y" N. West passadge 1668

GRANT OF THE TRADE & TERRITORIES OF HUDSONS BAY TO SIR ED HUNGERFORD &c


Whereas Our Trusty and Welbeloved Sir Edward Hungerford Bar cattle Sir John Robinson and Sir Robert Vyner Kntr & Bar cattle Sir Peter Colleton Bar cattle James Hayes and John Kirk Esqt are by the information of experienced persons wel satisfied that some of the great Lakes in the North parts of America have an Outlet by Navigable Rivers into Hudsons Bay by meanes whereof there may bee discoveries made of very great advantage to us and Our Kingdom of England by finding some passage through those Lakes into the South Sea or by finding some Trade for Furs, Minerales, or other considerable commodities; In regard whereof and for their encouragemt in the great expences they shall bee at upon that designe — they have humbly besought Us to grant unto them their Heirs and Assigns the sole Trade a[n]d comers of all those Seas Streights and Bayes in the said North parts of America: Wee are gratiously pleased to condescend unto that their request; And it is Our will and pleasure that you prepare a Bill for Our Royall Signature to pass Our Great Seale containing Our grant unto them the said Sir Ed. Hungerford, Sir John Robinson Sir Ro: Vyner Sir Peter Colleton James Hayes and John Kirke their Heirs and Assignes of the sole Trade and Comers of all those Seas, streights and Bayes in America within the Capes comonly called Cape Carroll lying in 59 Degrees Northerne Latitude and Cape Chidley lying in 61 deg 30 Min or thereabouts (w" seas streights and Bayes are comonly knowne by the names of Fretum Davis and Baffins Bay Fretum Hudson & Hudsons Bay and the Sole Trade and Comers
of all Havens Bayes Creeks Rivers Lakes, & Seas into wch they shall find entrance or passage by water or Land out of the Seas Bayes Frets abovementioned, together with the sole Trade and commerce wth the Christianoats Nadouseranohs and all other Nations inhabiting the Coasts adjacent to the Seas Bayes, Frets, Creeks, Havens Lakes and Rivers abovesd. And alsoe all the Lands and Territories adjacent, with all Mines and Minerals that shall bee found in any of the said Territories and all the Royall Fishing and other fishing that shall be found in any of the waters abovesaid. To have and to hold all and singular the Premises unto them the said Sir E H. Sir J R Sir R V Sir P C J H J K their heirs and Assignes for ever in free and comon socage as of Our Mannor of East Greenwich under ye yearly Rent of [blank in MS] payable into the Exchequer of Us Our Heirs and Successors and reserving unto us Our Heirs and Successors all requisite powers and Royalties for raising of Forts or otherwise to comand and defend such passage or passages into the South sea as shall bee hereafter found by the foresaid Grantees or any of them and with all other such Covenants Restrictions provisoes Nonabstantes and clauses as are usuall in Grants of like nature and as you shall think fit convenient and requisite in this Our Royal Grant as well for our Own Interest as yt of the said Grantees And for soe doing &c

June 23th [sic] 1669

By his Majtes Comand

J Trevor

Grant of the Trade and Territories of Hudsons Bay to Sir Ed. Hungerford, &c.18


Whereas Our Trusty and Welbeloved Sir Edward Hungerford Bar1 Sir John Robinson and Sir Robert Vyner Kn18 and Bar18 Sir Peter Colleton Bar1 James Hayes and John Kirke Esq18 have at their

18 It will be noted that the personnel of the grantees of this warrant in both its forms is different from that of the two succeeding documents that resulted, finally, in the incorporation of the Hudson’s Bay Company. The second of these, the charter of May 2, 1670, is too well known to need description here. The original is in the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives. An earlier instrument of incorporation does not appear to be known by historians of the company. It is dated April 18, 1670, and is entitled “An Incorporacion of Prince Rupert, Duke of
owne great cost and charge formerly undertaken an Expedition for Hudsons Bay for the discovery of a new passage unto the South Sea and alsoe for the finding some Trade for Furrs Mineralls and other considerable comodities and by such their undertaking have made such discoveries as doe encourage them to proceed further in pursuance of their said Designe; By means whereof there may probably hereafter arise very great advantage to Us and Our Kingdome; and Whereas the said Undertakers for their further encouragement in the said Designe have humbly besought Us to grant unto them their Heirs and Assignes the Sole Trade and Comerce of all those Seas Streights and Bayes, Rivers Lakes Creeks and Sounds in whatsoever Latitude they shall lye that lye within the entrance of the Streights comonly called Hudsons Streights together with all the Lands Countries and Territories upon the Coasts and Confines of the Seas Streights Bayes Lakes Rivers Creeks and sounds aforesd which are not now actually possessed by any of Our Subjects or by the Subjects of any other Christian Prince or State Wee are graciously pleased to condescend unto that Request; And it is Our will and pleasure that you prepare a Bill for Our Royall Signature to passe Our Great Seale containing such Our Grant unto them the said Sir Ed. Hungerford Sir John Robinson Sir Robert Vyner Sir Peter Colleton James Hayes & John Kirke their Heirs and Assignes of the sole Trade and Comerce of all the Seas, Streights & Bays Lands Rivers Lakes Creeks and Sounds Countries and Territories that lye within Hudsons Streights or Hudsons Bay in what Latitude soever they shall lye together wth all Lands and Territories upon the Countries and Confines of the

Albemarle, Earl of Craven, Lord Arlington, Lord Ashley, Sir John Robinson, Sir Robert Vyner, Sir Peter Collston, Sir Edward Hungerford, Sir Paule Neil, Sir John Griffith, Sir Phillip Carteret, James Hayes, John Kirke, Francis Millington, William Prettyman, John Fenne, John Portman, into one body politique by the name of Governours and Adventurers trading to Hudsons baye” and grants “them and their successors all the lands and the sole trade into the seas and creekes, lying within the entrance of Hudson Streights.” This item in Sir Edward Dering’s “Privy Seal Docquet-Book” is listed in *The Manuscripts of J. Eliot Hodgkin, Esq. F.S.A., of Richmond, Surrey, 11* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Fifteenth Report*, Appendix, part 2—London, 1897). The success of Groseilliers’ venture, with Captain Gillam’s aid, seems to have made the new enterprise popular once more. The men who had sent out the first ships, and who, then, had withdrawn, probably discouraged at the “Eaglet’s” fate, now re-entered the company along with a number of new members.
Seas, Bayes, Lakes, Rivers, Creeks, and sounds aforesaid that are not already actually possessed by any of Our Subjects or by the Subjects of any other Christian Prince or State; And of the Sole Trade and Commerce with all Nations inhabiting the Lands and Territories aforesaid with all Mines and Minerals that shall be found in any the Waters aforesaid To have and to hold all and singular the premises unto the said Sir Ed Hungerford Sir John Robinson Sir Robert Vyner Sir Peter Colleton James Hayes and John Kirke their Heirs and Assignes for ever in Free and Common Soccage as of Our Manor of East Greenwich under the yearly Rent of Two Elks and Two Black Beavers whenever and as often as Wee Our Heirs and Successors shall happen to enter into the said Countries Territories and Regions hereby Granted with all Requisite and necessary powers and authority Covenants Restrictions Provisoes Nonobstantes and Clauses as are fit and usual in Grants of like Nature as well for Our own Interest as for that of the said Grantees. And for soe doing &c

21st day of Oct. 1669

By his Majesty's Command

J. TREVOR