

COUNT ANDREANI: A FORGOTTEN TRAVELER¹

PERHAPS FEW PERSONS nowadays could give more than an approximate date for even the more important events in the history of science. Nearly everyone has a general notion of the date on which the law of gravitation was announced, or would be able to connect this law with Sir Isaac Newton. But how many persons could tell when the exact shape of the earth was satisfactorily established? It is now known that the earth is not exactly round, but rather is an oblate spheroid — that is, the diameter from pole to pole is slightly shorter than that across the equator. It is somewhat surprising that this fact was not definitely established until the middle of the eighteenth century, some years after the death of Newton, and then only after the French Royal Academy of Sciences had sent expeditions under famous astronomers to Lapland and to Peru.

It may not at once be clear what this matter of the exact shape of the earth has to do with the history of the Northwest. The connection becomes clearer when it is said that in 1791 a titled Italian traveler, now nearly forgotten, could have been found on Lake Superior testing the French theory of the earth's true shape in the light of his own observations. Thus he was among the first of a long train of naturalists and scientists, including David Thompson, Joseph N. Nicollet, David Dale Owen, and many others, who were to visit the Northwest in search not of wealth or mere adventure, but of information on the geography and natural history of the region.

¹A paper presented at the afternoon session of the eighty-ninth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul on January 10, 1938. *Ed.*

In July, 1790, the erudite president of Yale College in New Haven, Dr. Ezra Stiles, noted in his prodigious diary that he had been visited by one "Count Andreani a Nobleman of Milan," who was making a tour of America. In a letter of introduction to Stiles, the count is described as "a nobleman of character and consequence . . . and a friend of liberty whose zeal and curiosity have determined him to visit the United States."² This was Count Paolo Andreani, who, in March, 1784, had made the first successful balloon ascension in Italy. The flight was so well known at the time that a medal was struck commemorating it. At a still earlier date Andreani appears to have traveled in the East Indies.

Count Andreani came to the United States carrying letters of introduction from several interesting persons of his day. A letter from Phillip Mazzei made him known to James Madison. Among his effects was an honorary ode by one of his countrymen, the dramatist, Vittorio Alfieri, which was to be presented to George Washington. In a letter to the president, John Paradise, another picturesque cosmopolitan and a friend of the great Doctor Johnson, described Andreani as "highly distinguished by every valuable endowment" and well deserving of the honor of being presented to Washington. He is said to have been thoroughly acquainted with affairs in Europe, and there is reason to suspect that he was a somewhat ardent political freethinker. An amusing and revealing allusion occurs in a letter of Richard Henry Lee to a nephew, who had probably met the count during a visit to Italy some years earlier. Lee had received from the nephew a letter for the visitor, and had searched for him several times, but in vain, and he finally left it with James Madison, who lodged in the same house.

² Franklin B. Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 3: 398 (New York, 1901). Information concerning the letter of introduction from Dr. Richard Price, dated April 2, 1790, now in the Yale University Library, has kindly been furnished by Miss Anne S. Pratt, reference librarian.

"Being as you state him an Agreeable," says Lee, "he is so sought after that there is no finding him."³

Washington makes no mention of Andreani's visit, and although the reason for this is not known, it is not difficult to imagine. Perhaps he was displeased by the undoubtedly fulsome ode that Alfieri had written in his honor; what seems more likely is that he was offended by what he looked upon as mere democratic cant. It may perhaps be inferred that the reception accorded Andreani was somewhat cold, and that he came to think but lightly of the new United States. There appear to be few sources from which one can reconstruct the incident, but in October, Colonel David Humphreys, then on a special secret mission in Europe, wrote indignantly to the president to the effect that the Italian had written some things about the government of the United States which were "monstrously absurd and ill-founded." No such writings have been found, but the president, in a cold and haughty reply to Humphreys, suggested that the count's remarks did no credit to his judgment or his heart. "They are the superficial observations," says the president of the proud young republic, "of a few months' residence, and an insult to the inhabitants of a country, where he has received much more attention and civility than he seems to merit."⁴

The events of Andreani's travels in America are not eas-

³ Richard C. Garlick, ed., *Phillip Mazzei, Friend of Jefferson: His Life and Letters*, 127 (Baltimore, 1933); Jared Sparks, ed., *Correspondence of the American Revolution*, 4: 343 (Boston, 1853); James C. Ballagh, ed., *Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, 2: 527, 533 (New York, 1914). See also Giuseppe Prezzolini, "American Travelers in Italy at the Beginning of the 18th Century," in *Italy and the Italians in Washington's Time*, 67 (New York, 1933), and Sylvia Harris, tr., "Search for Eden: An Eighteenth-Century Disaster; Memoirs of Count de Lezay-Marnésia," in *Franco-American Review*, 2: 50-60 (Summer, 1937). The latter source presents a charming reminiscence of Count Andreani.

⁴ Worthington C. Ford, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 12: 19 (New York, 1891). There is also a letter of July 17, 1790, from Dr. Benjamin Rush, discussing the count's remarks on America. See *Calendar of the Correspondence of James Madison*, 607 (Washington, 1894).

ily traceable. It appears, however, that he traveled rather extensively during 1790 and 1791, and in the latter year, according to the Earl of Selkirk, he visited Grand Portage, then at the height of its importance in the fur trade. Selkirk's acquaintance with Andreani began in 1794, when they met in Switzerland, and it is possible that it was the count who first directed Selkirk's attention to the promise of the New World—an attention that was to be focused, some years later, on the formation of the famous Red River colony.⁵ Andreani traveled "in the interior parts of America" in 1791, according to still another titled foreigner, François Alexandre Frédéric, duc de la Rochefoucauld Liancourt, who quotes from a journal kept by the count. From still other sources, it is known that Andreani made use of a birch canoe for the journey, large enough to hold ten or twelve men besides himself and his equipment. This canoe he seems to have obtained from the firm of Forsyth and Richardson, Montreal merchants who at this time were trading south of the lakes, and later were partners, successively, of both the XY and Northwest companies.⁶

At least one person reports meeting Andreani on Lake Superior. John Johnston says that in September, 1791, at La Pointe, he encountered Andreani, who was taking observations "to ascertain whether the earth was more elevated or depressed towards the poles."⁷ A recent scholar has suggested that Andreani's interest in the shape of the earth was a bit naive; as has been seen, however, in his day the earth's shape was still a subject for discussion. Andreani's

⁵ Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade in North America*, 36 (London, 1816); Chester Martin, *Lord Selkirk's Work in Canada*, 17 (Oxford, 1916).

⁶ John J. Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe, or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas*, 2: 228 (London, 1840); Patrick Campbell, *Travels in the Interior Inhabited Parts of North America in the Years 1791 and 1792*, 125 (Toronto, 1937). On the authority of Thompson, Bigsby states that the journey was made about 1800, but it is likely that Thompson's memory was at fault.

⁷ Johnston to Henry R. Schoolcraft, June 10, 1828, in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 32: 341 (Lansing, 1903).

conclusion that the earth is more depressed toward the poles was based, Johnston infers, on the count's own calculation that La Pointe is only six hundred and ninety feet above sea level. If Johnston did not misrepresent the reason for Andreani's belief in the oblateness of the earth—if the count actually thought that the earth was flattened at the poles because La Pointe, so far north of the equator, had only this slight elevation above the sea—his conclusion was certainly naive. It is difficult to see that the slight elevation of La Pointe has any bearing on the problem of the shape of the earth. It is, however, probable that Johnston did not understand the count's science—perhaps because he did not understand his English, or his French! Johnston concludes with the humorous reflection that “the subject was then much discussed amongst naturalists, but now is set at rest forever, for were the high aspiring parties to move towards each other in hostile array, the consequence would be rather disagreeable to us emmets occupying the intermediate mole hills.”

Johnston related the circumstances of this meeting to another visitor to the lakes at a later date. An amusing paragraph in Thomas L. McKenney's *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes* relates that Johnston recalled having seen, at La Pointe, “a scientific Frenchman, or Italian, with his instruments adjusted, taking observations; and endeavouring to ascertain the longitude.”

He told him [*Johnston*] that he had visited the highest mountains, and among these Mont Blanc; and his ulterior object had relation to the question regarding the formation of the earth at the poles. His name was *Count Andriani*. Does anyone know anything of the result of the count's investigations? Few people would suppose that this extreme point, so far beyond the bounds of civilized life, and so far in the interior, had ever been the theatre of such investigations.⁸

Many persons have echoed McKenney's query, but it is still unanswered.

⁸ Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*, 263 (Baltimore, 1827).

Andreani left La Pointe to continue his tour of the lake, and he may, as one reliable witness asserts, have circumnavigated Lake Superior, "occupying himself in astronomical observations, and admeasurements of heights, mingling also freely with the Indians."⁹ One of his admeasurements, preserved by David Thompson, the geographer, was that of the height of Thunder Mountain on Black Bay, near the present city of Port Arthur. From this record, and the fact that he visited Grand Portage and La Pointe, it seems most probable that he actually did circumnavigate the lake. If such is the case, he is one of the first white persons of whom there is record to accomplish this feat.

How long Count Andreani was engaged in his travels in the Great Lakes region is not known. It may be supposed, however, that he spent the summer of 1791 there, for he had returned to Philadelphia by December of that year and early in the next was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society at that place.¹⁰ Of his subsequent movements very little is known, and what meager information is available is contained in a single letter, written some years later to Madison, with whom he seems to have formed a lasting friendship. Andreani relates that he was in Europe during the closing years of the century. It would be interesting to know what part this "friend of liberty" played in the events of that troubled period, but he is silent on that point. For some years he had toyed with the idea of returning to America. In 1806 he found himself in a position to execute his design, but from the outset his venture was inauspicious. First of all, the ship in which he set sail for America was captured by pirates and taken to Jamaica. From Jamaica he eventually got to New Orleans. Scarcely had he been set down there when he contracted smallpox.

⁹ Bigsby, *Shoe and Canoe*, 2: 228.

¹⁰ Ernest A. Cruikshank, ed., *The Correspondence of Lieut. Governor John Graves Simcoe*, 1: 94 (Toronto, 1923). Information concerning Andreani's membership in the American Philosophical Society has kindly been furnished by Miss Laura E. Hanson, librarian of the society.

As if this were not affliction enough for one of his years—he seems to have been rather well advanced in age by this time—he was seized with the gout. Such was his condition that he proposed, in his letter to Madison, to make the fashionable visit to the springs in New York or Virginia, in order to restore his shattered health.¹¹

Whether the count's tour to the springs was accomplished is not known, nor is there further information now available on the career of this interesting traveler. He may have been the veriest dilettante, after the fashion of his day—one who was mildly interested in subjects as diverse as ballooning and the political fortunes of the new republics, who made a sentimental tour of the lakes, and who was vastly pleased by the wildness of the scenery and the primitive innocence of the Indian. It seems more likely to the writer that he was an earnest, if sometimes misunderstood, student of government, geography, and natural science. At any rate, he left an account of the fur trade, which is today of no little value. This account was preserved by La Rochefoucauld in his own *Travels* published in two ponderous quartos in 1799. Andreani's notes in this work are said to have been taken from his journal.¹²

These notes afford interesting information on the importance in the trade, at the time of Andreani's visit, of the various trading houses on the lakes. To the great carrying place, or Grand Portage, were taken annually fourteen hundred bundles of fine peltry—beaver, otter, marten, and wildcat—besides mixed furs of other sorts, an amount greater than the combined yield at Niagara, Lake Ontario, Detroit, Lake Erie, Michilimackinac, and Lake Huron,

¹¹ The original letter from Andreani to Madison, dated at New Orleans, March 11, 1808, is in the Library of Congress; the Minnesota Historical Society has a photostatic copy.

¹² Duke de la Rochefoucauld Liancourt, *Travels through the United States of North America*, 1: 325–335 (London, 1799). See also William R. Riddell, ed., *La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt's Travels in Canada, 1795*, 110–119 (Province of Ontario, Bureau of Archives, *Thirteenth Report*—Toronto, 1917).

while the posts at Fond du Lac and at La Pointe yielded only twenty bundles of fine furs each. The finest furs were collected northwest of the lakes, in British dominions, the furs growing coarser in quality as one neared the lakes. Something of the enormous value of these furs is conveyed by Andreani's statement that at Montreal the bundles brought forty pounds sterling each. The portion taken to Grand Portage formed approximately half of all the yearly export of furs from Canada, exclusive of those from Labrador, the Bay of Chaleurs, and Gaspé. In London the furs from Grand Portage would bring as much as eighty-eight thousand pounds sterling.

The extensive trade described by Andreani was carried on by the Northwest Company and two or three small companies. The success of the Nor'westers he ascribes to the large capital available to them, the "unanimity of the members," their untiring efforts, and their virtual monopoly of the trade. Nevertheless there were at the great carrying place no fewer than three different companies, which "rivalled each other in the purchase of furs with a degree of emulation, which could not but prove highly detrimental to themselves and advantageous to the Indians." The powerful Nor'westers, more opulent than the others, used their wealth to ruin their competitors — "no stone was left unturned" — by bribing and seducing them from their own interests. The animosity among the traders was so great as frequently to lead them to blows; their warfare cost several lives and large sums of money. All this finally caused the traders to see the necessity of union, and to obtain this end the largest company, which was most anxious for peace, made several sacrifices.

Andreani arrived at Grand Portage just after the period of the greatest congregations there. Formerly, he says, several thousand Indians took their furs thither, but in 1791 the company agents were accustomed to go as far as a thousand miles inland, where they frequently wintered before re-

turning. About two thousand men were thus employed in the interior, and whatever articles of clothing or subsistence they required must needs be brought from Montreal with considerable difficulty and at enormous expense. At this great meeting ground of the trade stood a fort, kept in good repair, and garrisoned with fifty men, where at the time of the "delivery of the skins" there was frequently a concourse of more than two thousand persons. The merchandise imported for the trade consisted of woollen blankets, coarse cloths, thread and worsted ribands of different colors, vermilion, porcelain bracelets, silver trinkets, firelocks or flintlock guns, shot, gunpowder, "and especially rum." The prices of these articles at Grand Portage, because of the expense of transportation, was eight times that at Montreal, and in the interior the chief traders fixed the prices "at their will and pleasure." The employees were paid in merchandise, and open accounts were kept with them. Extravagant as these men were, in general, and given to drink and to excess, they were exactly the sort wanted by the company. In 1791 nine hundred employees owed the company more than the amount of fifteen years' pay.

Much time has been spent in an attempt to locate the original of Count Andreani's missing journal, used by La Rochefoucauld, but so far the search has been quite fruitless. If it could be found, it would doubtless afford other valuable items of information from his own observations on the Indian, the interesting persons he must have met at the various trading posts, and the geography of the great Lake Superior region, in that vast and then little-known area to the north and west of the new United States.

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