

ROBERT CAVELIER, SIEUR DE LA SALLE*

I

A PORTRAIT OF DE LA SALLE

“**R**OBERT CAVELIER, Sieur de la Salle, who a few years before† had crossed from France to America, and with the purpose of engaging in some enterprise capable of bringing him riches and honor, realized that nothing would be more likely to help him succeed than an acceptance of the views of M. Talon on the discovery of the Great River and the country which it waters. He was born in Rouen of a well-to-do family, but having spent several years among the Jesuits, he was not entitled to share in the family inheritance. . . .”

“He was well educated and wished to distinguish himself and felt spirited and courageous enough to succeed in his purpose. Indeed, he lacked neither the resolution to start an undertaking, nor confidence to carry it through, nor did he lack either the fortitude to face obstacles, the resourcefulness to recoup his fortune; but he knew not how to command affection, nor to handle those whom he needed, and, as soon

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†In the spring of 1666.

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as he was given authority, he exercised it in a severe and haughty manner. . . .”

“The first project that he conceived and which led him to cross the seas was to find a passage to Japan and China by the North and West of Canada; and although lacking all that was necessary for such an undertaking, although during the first years he was in straitened circumstances, in a country to which he had brought nothing and where there were no natural resources, he was not dismayed,” being “a man of great ability, of breadth of mind, of courage and steadfastness of spirit, which might have led him to great accomplishments, if, with so many good qualities, he had been able to control his gloomy and surly temper and overcome the severity or rather the harshness of his nature.”*1

This text is a document; it is a pen-picture by the Jesuit Father Charlevoix, who published early in the eighteenth century his famous book on *New France*. Such praise, from such an author, can be fully estimated only if one remembers the campaigns carried on, from the very first explorations of the Mississippi, by the partisans and the adversaries of Cavalier de la Salle. A noble rivalry had set the Jesuits against the Recollets, that is to say, Franciscans; the former extolling the discoveries of Father Marquette and his companion, Louis Joliet, disciple of the Jesuits of Quebec, who having remained a layman, had become one of their “liege men,” as they were called then; the latter praising highly the discoveries and the personality of de la Salle. When the question of granting the concession of the country of the Illinois arose, each side resorted to every means to insure the appointment of its candidate, la Salle or Louis Joliet. And what insinuations were not whispered in the corridors of Versailles to detract from the merits of de la Salle! Louis

*For this and subsequent footnotes see p. 41.

XIV, in conformity with the proposals of Colbert, pronounced himself, however, in his favor. But the controversy did not come to a close; historians who specialize in colonial history, and who for the last one hundred years have been commenting on these events, have gone on disagreeing. In one camp it is maintained that Father Marquette and Louis Joliet were the first to reach the Mississippi; in the other, the credit is given to Cavalier. The echo of this dispute is heard even today. In 1934, the Franciscans published in New York an important study, in English, by Father Habig, on the friend, the companion, and the chaplain of Cavalier de la Salle, a Recollet, Father Zénobe Membré, and they entitled it "A Franciscan Father Marquette."

A few changes must, however, be made in the portrait of Father Charlevoix, and a few touches be added in order to bring out fully the exceptional personality of Cavalier de la Salle and the importance of his accomplishments.

No sooner had de la Salle become somewhat familiar with Canada and found his bearings, than he deliberately launched upon a mission, which, after sixteen strenuous years, he accomplished.

He takes up the great plan of Champlain, modifies it, and carries it out. His aim is to conquer an empire for France, and this he does without bloodshed and almost without expense. Thus he unites the two outstanding qualities of man: the true vision of possibilities, of the means to be used and the policy to be followed, and the powerful will which brushes aside all obstacles. And so he convinces Colbert, at first hostile to his plans, and carries them out in spite of all difficulties. His motto, as he once wrote, is: "Either I shall succeed or I shall die." He succeeded. He persevered in raising the structure of which he had already laid the foundation; he died on his field of triumph, murdered by one of those who had been sent to support him loyally.