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EARLIEST EXPLORATIONS ON THE GREAT LAKES

LET us now consider de la Salle's achievements, which can be divided into three periods: sixteen years of preparation; the triumphant expedition and the foundation of the empire in 1682; and, immediately after the death of Colbert, the final mission, which ended in disaster and murder.

Robert Cavalier de la Salle and his elder brother, Abbot Jean Cavalier, were the sons of an important merchant of Rouen. Born November 22, 1643, Robert was of an independent nature and adventurous spirit. He was practically disinherited by his family, his father having left him only the capital yielding an income of four hundred livres, which was all he was able to take with him to Canada. He landed at Montreal, one year after Talon, in 1666, at the age of twenty-three, no doubt at the invitation of his elder brother, then a Sulpician priest in Canada. His uncle, Henri Cavalier, a wholesale haberdasher, was one of the "One Hundred Associates" organized by Richelieu to carry out the colonization of Canada. Soon after his arrival, Robert Cavalier seizes on the great plan of Champlain, and henceforth he has but one purpose, to accomplish it. Thus does the discovery of the streams which flow westward toward the Vermillion Sea and thence to China become his dream, as it had been that of the "Father of New France."

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With wise perseverance he begins by acquainting himself with the language and customs of the Indians, through traveling about in their country, and questioning them. It was then that he learned through them of the existence of the "Missi-Sepe" (the Great Water) and of the Ohio (the Beautiful Water). The Father Superior of the Sulpicians of Montreal, the Abbot de Queylus, perhaps at the suggestion of Robert's brother, tries to keep him at Montreal. But his independent spirit and his ambition assert themselves. He wants to be a French Christopher Columbus, and to complete the task of the former, that is, to complete the circle of navigation around the world, and to conquer an empire for France as Columbus had done for Spain.

He sets out, at the age of twenty-six, in 1669, extends the scope of his explorations, and, in the course of his first expedition, reaches the Ohio river, which he is the first to discover. On his second expedition, in 1671, he discovers the Illinois river. It was during the course of these first two expeditions that he is supposed to have pushed on to the Mississippi, on the waters of which he would have sailed before Father Marquette who descended it only in 1673.

Disregarding this controversy, we may accept, concerning these first two expeditions, the main part of the account given by Cavelier's friend, the Academician Renaudot, who wrote in 1678 his "Entretiens de Cavelier de la Salle sur ses onze années en Canada" and his "Histoire de la Salle," after having had conversations in Paris with the explorer, who had come to win Colbert's support for his plans.

Cavelier had acquired, near Montreal, soon after his arrival in 1666, a small estate in a place since called "La Chine," which he sold in 1669 in order to cover the expenses of the expedition which he was about to undertake. The deed of sale is dated January 9, 1669, and deals with "La Seigneu-

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riere appelée de Saint-Sulpice," which was called "La Chine," perhaps with some irony, because of Cavalier's plan which was at that time to reach China. This sale brought him 3,800 livres. His last bit of land was sold at the time of his departure, in order to pay for the final equipment, to Charles Le Moyne, head of the Lemoyne family, the members of which were to distinguish themselves in the history of the French Empire of America, and who were to carry on the work of Cavalier, Iberville, Bienville, etc. It may be recalled that Montreal and its environs were the domain of the Sulpicians at the time.

Wishing to insure for himself the support of Jean Talon, and out of consideration for his brother and the Sulpicians, he agreed that François Dollier de Casson should command the expedition and that they should also take along another Sulpician brother, young René Bréhan de Gallinée, a supposed astronomer, in any case a cartographer. They left on July 6, 1669. The two Sulpician brothers' desire was to reach tribes which would look favorably upon their mission. They wished to convert the natives, and, in their warm zeal, their main concern was not to be outstripped by the Jesuits, who had just established a mission at Ste. Marie du Sault. On September 30, 1669, on the shores of Lake Ontario, de la Salle and his companions parted without any friction, and merely in consequence of the arrival of Louis Joliet. The latter, who had been sent by Talon to seek copper mines, had failed; but he had visited many tribes, and he advised the two Sulpicians to go and preach the gospel to the tribes, north of Lake Superior, whom he had just visited. Cavalier's plans did not permit him to accompany them; he followed his own design, crossing the portage which separated Lake Ontario from the Ohio River which he had discovered and descended, we do not know exactly how far. He went so far

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that he was abandoned by nearly all his companions; but he did not lose courage. He moved on, and did not return to Montreal until about the middle of 1671.

The second expedition must have taken place between 1671 and 1672. On August 6, 1671, he received various supplies on credit from the fiscal agent of the colony. By a new contract of December 18, 1672, he pledged himself to pay for them. It was between these two dates that he discovered the Illinois River which flows from the east to the west, then another river which he believed to be the same and which, according to some was the Mississippi, running from the northwest to the southeast.

The observations made by Cavalier between 1669 and 1672 have shown him that the streams which he has discovered do not flow to the west, as Champlain imagined, and as he himself had believed. They run towards the south and southeast, that is to say toward the Gulf of Mexico, which had long been known to the Spanish and traveled over by Spanish ships. Revising immediately his first plan, he substitutes for it another great plan, which was to link the Gulf of Mexico with New France by a series of military posts and settlements, and thereby found a great French empire from the Gulf of the St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico.

How will he carry it out? He must win over Talon, who has so far supported him, but who will leave Canada in 1673, and Frontenac, who arrives in 1672; but above all he must obtain the full support of France; that is to say, the cooperation of Colbert.

Jean Talon and Frontenac were quite favorable to the policy of expansion in New France, but they encountered the opposition of Colbert. Frontenac had just come from the Court; he knew that the Government was to conduct, in Europe, wars which would require all its resources; and the

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demands were so great that Louis XIV had the regiment of Carignan-Salières brought back from Canada in 1673. Frontenac, who pictured to Colbert the situation of Canada once deprived of its defenders, was advised by Colbert to organize the inhabitants into companies, not to give up the task of colonization, but to take great care to fall back to the banks of the St. Lawrence, just as in 1914 when Lyautey was ordered to limit himself to the occupation of the coast of Morocco. The order of Colbert was formal, and on May 17, 1674, he urged Frontenac to do his utmost to clear and colonize only the most fertile territories, those the closest to the sea and having communication with France, instead of carrying on explorations into the interior, over territories so far removed that they could neither be inhabited nor held by the French.³ To run counter to these instructions, Frontenac and Cavalier de la Salle, in full agreement as to the plans to be carried out, acted cautiously. Things could not be rushed; they had to wait till events in Europe should take a favorable turn in order to gain the confidence of Colbert.

That is why Frontenac sent Cavalier to France in 1674. He had asked him beforehand, in order to have good grounds for recommending him to the minister, to go to Katarokony (Kingston) on the left bank of the St. Lawrence, and to build a fort there which would dominate the country of the Iroquois. These warriors were the terror of the colony. In 1660, Dollard des Ormeaux and his sixteen companions had to sacrifice themselves to save Montreal. The new outpost was to be a barrier against their attacks. On July 12, 1673, the governor held a solemn assembly in the presence of the delegates of the neighboring tribes.

This task accomplished, Cavalier was able to go to Versailles and present to Colbert a letter from Frontenac dated November 14, 1674, which pointed out the merits and dis-

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coveries of the explorer. The latter won the favor of the Minister. The king indeed, by letters patent of May 13, 1675, ennobled him "for the good and praiseworthy report which has been made to us of his good deeds in the country of Canada (that is, in North America)" and named him governor of the Fort of Katarokony, otherwise called Frontenac, on condition that he clear the land, colonize it, attract the natives, support two Recollets, and build a church within six years.

If de la Salle, since such is henceforth his name, had not been moved by an indomitable will, in the service of a great design which he was never to abandon, he might have repaired the disaster to his fortune and might have easily enriched himself by remaining peacefully as governor of Fort Frontenac. But contrary to the suggestion of Father Charlevoix, he did not come to America to enrich himself, but to enrich France by the gift of an empire. He has only one dream: to complete and profit by the discovery of which the first two expeditions were preliminary surveys. The plan which he conceives consists in linking Fort Frontenac, situated on Lake Ontario, with the Great Lakes by a first Establishment placed on the Niagara at the portage between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie; then by a second at the portage between the Great Lakes and the Illinois River, which he had already explored: from there, according to the data collected by himself, Joliet, and Father Marquette, he would be able to reach the sea by following down the course of the river, and establish at its mouth a port for the French Navy.

But Colbert continued to oppose obstinately any further expansion; he wrote to Frontenac: "The population of Canada must be increased before we can think of other territory." Frontenac and de la Salle agreed that only one method would be effective. They must see Colbert and convince him.

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Cavelier de la Salle left Canada in November, 1677, having, it was reported, ten thousand pounds to deliver to the French director of commerce, *Sieur Bellinzani*, who was later accused of treachery and threatened with the Bastille.⁴ De la Salle obtained, at any rate, an audience with Colbert. He had a hard part to play and that conversation with the minister marks an important date in his own career as well as in French politics. It was on that day that Colbert made the decision to establish the great French Empire of America. De la Salle was insistent and enthusiastic; he really won Colbert over by the clearness of his plan, the cogency of his reasoning, and the precision of his information. Colbert, as a rule so unimaginative and appreciative only of concrete facts,⁵ realized the opportunity of the moment and saw before him the man capable of profiting by it. This moment was the convergence of two great wills.

This point won, it was inevitable that Colbert should reject the counter propositions presented by *Louis Joliet*, who was asking for the concession of the country of the Illinois as a reward for his discovery. Between the man who sought to enrich himself and the man who sought to create an empire, Colbert could not hesitate, in spite of the support which the Jesuits gave to their protégé, and in spite of the slanderous remarks made among the entourage of the King and Colbert by *Father Ragueneau* "having purposely come from Canada to France to whisper about before the expected visit of de la Salle that the latter was mad enough to be put into solitary confinement."⁶

This so-called madman, having convinced Colbert,⁷ obtained from the King letters patent on May 12, 1678. It was *Prince de Conti* who presented de la Salle to the King, and who presented to de la Salle *Chevalier de Tonty*, who was to become his faithful companion. Wasting no time, de

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la Salle took ship at La Rochelle on July 14 to return to Canada, where he conferred with Frontenac. De la Salle, although resolute and enthusiastic, is at the same time patient, methodical, and sagacious. For twelve years he has been preparing for his great work by studying the country, the natives, and their languages. He is now going to devote three years, not to the technical preparation of the expedition itself, but to the establishment of a strong base of operations to the south of the Great Lakes. The methodical exploitation of his colony of the Illinois, the moral conquest of the natives, the establishment of forts and posts, occupy de la Salle during this time. This base is to furnish him men, connections with the south, military supplies, and a zone of security to which he might return in case of trouble. His genius is the fruit of long patience and far-sighted labor. Again the man shows his complete unselfishness, since the concession of the Illinois country was of such a nature as to enrich its beneficiary. De la Salle uses his concession only as a means of furthering the idea to which he has entirely devoted himself.

Here, then, are the main outlines of the preparatory stages of the great expedition of 1682. Immediately after his return to Fort Frontenac on December 16, 1678, de la Salle sets out to establish posts along the route to the south. On January 30, 1679, he leaves to construct Fort Conti (which burned in 1680) on the portage of the Niagara. This fort with its enclosure and palisade at the mouth of the Niagara had a most pacific aspect. There he leaves the Chevalier de Tonty. In May, 1679, he completes the construction of a beautiful sailboat, "Le Griffon," a vessel of fifty tons, carrying seven cannon. This is the first European vessel to make its appearance on the Great Lakes. It contributes to a high degree to de la Salle's prestige with the

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Indians. After a cruise on the Great Lakes, in the course of which the "Griffon" braved the storms of August, 1679, this ship disappeared in September, 1679, without leaving any trace. There were then only six men on board. De la Salle thought that the crew plundered the ship, then sank it, and fled to sell their plunder to the Indians; and he even adds that this was done at the suggestion of his adversaries.

The line of the forts on the Great Lakes, Fort Frontenac, and Fort Niagara, is completed by the new fort of the Miamis. This strategic post is situated on a natural bluff at the southernmost point of the Great Lakes at a river outlet in the center of the great tribe of the Miamis, and at the spot where the portage will be short to join the point on the Illinois River which is free of ice in winter. De la Salle studied with greatest care the streams of the Ohio and the Illinois. The voyage of Father Marquette informed him about the course of the Wisconsin. These are the three streams nearest to the Great Lakes. He must choose one of the three in order to pass from the St. Lawrence basin and the Great Lakes over into the Mississippi basin. He chooses the Illinois because it is on the most direct route to the south and because on its course is the nearest point free of ice. The portage will be made then from the fort of the Miamis to the posts of the Illinois: Crèvecœur and St. Louis.

Accordingly, he constructs on the southern shores of Lake Michigan, at the mouth of the Miami River, Fort Miami, a strong fortress, eighty by forty feet, connected to the lake by a navigable canal. This is in November, 1679. From the shores of the Great Lakes he descends to the south through the middle of the Illinois country, where the territory is new, and difficulties arise. He goes with Tonty to the largest village of the Illinois, one hundred and twenty leagues away from Fort Miami, and arrives there January 1, 1680. He

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remains there two months, departs again March 1, leaving the faithful Tonty to take his place and complete the fort which he has just established in the very heart of the Illinois country, on the Illinois River and on the direct route to the Mississippi. This fort would permit him to shift the point of departure from the Great Lakes to one of the tributaries of the Mississippi, and thus avoid any portage. It was Fort Crèvecœur, on the left bank of the Illinois River, just across from the present city of Peoria. Later, de la Salle established his main outpost at Fort St. Louis, likewise situated on the left bank of the Illinois, but a little more to the north, opposite the present city of La Salle. The present city of St. Louis is more to the south on the Mississippi, below the junction of the Illinois and the Missouri Rivers.

De la Salle must allow Tonty sufficient time to complete the main structure of the fort. He makes use of this time from March 1 to May 6 to travel over his Illinois colony and make contact with the natives. On May 6 he returns to Fort Frontenac where he prepares for his next trip, which takes place August 10, 1680. From then on, he is accompanied by Nica, an Indian whom he bought, whose life he had saved, and who had come to worship him devotedly. He sets out to reach the new Fort Crèvecœur of the Illinois and to find Tonty again; but a catastrophe has taken place which the zealots of the "good savage" do not mention in their works. De la Salle reaches the great village of the Illinois which he has just visited a few months ago and finds it a vast scene of devastation: an invading horde of the Iroquois of the great warlike tribes of the State of New York had come this far west. All is laid waste; seven hundred bodies of women and children are impaled and roasted; other bodies are still in the boiling pots; these are the remnants of the conquering Iroquois' feast.

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The task must be taken up again. With unswerving perseverance de la Salle returns to Frontenac, thence to the house with the palisade at Niagara, and next reaches Fort Miami. There he reassembles his forces, since the raid of the Iroquois does not permit him for the moment to get aid from the southward. This catastrophe retards the execution of the great plan; but finally, in 1681, everything is in order; the mission is ready. The chief has again grouped about him his faithful ones, giving them a heroic challenge: "Now we shall go more willingly since we know that the greatness of our task will keep our names forever alive, though we perish in the execution of our enterprise."