

La Vérendrye and his Work of Discovery

by

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No historian can write or speak adequately on New France unless he is aware of her intensely religious origin. No country or nation in the world has, in a like way, owed its birth and development to a missionary effort of such magnitude and such zeal. The student of early Canadian history who misses this point, not only falls short of the truth but overlooks the primary motive and the meaning of this unique enterprise which lasted for more than two centuries and whose influence, after more than 400 years, is still felt to-day. I should venture to add that the student in history who, through no merit of his, but by the mercy of God, shares a spiritual kinship with the saintly founders of New France, breaks with them over the centuries the same divine food, and drinks to the same sources, finds himself more capable, all things being equal, of weighing the motives of the men and women, small or great, who moved on the scene of that rugged and romantic land, in the days of frontier-life.

It may seem a platitude to state that the history of New France must also be envisaged in the light of the colonial policy of European countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in accordance with the political events of the time. This dependence upon Europe was more or less true of all newly-discovered lands at the time, but it was more so in the case of New France, precisely because of the apostolic zeal we have spoken of and of the proselytism of influential people such as Champlain, the Jesuits and their *Relations*, Bishop Laval, Marie de l'Incarnation, and many others who never allowed the Court or the Church to lose sight of the spiritual welfare of the natives or the growing colony. In general the French Crown never followed a strong and consistent colonial policy in Canada, but even as it was, the relationship between the mother-country and the daughter remained much more intimate, because of these factors, than in other instances of the same period. Thus, the new colony grew under a regime of paternalism, influenced by the Church and the missionaries. The French Crown frowned upon any expression of independence, or autonomy. And no wonder, as the French kings had just emerged victoriously from a long struggle against puppet-kings and feudal barons and had finally asserted their authority over the land. It should be said however that, through the force of things, a spirit of liberty was gradually expressing itself in the colony. This was perhaps more noticeable in Louisiana, but it existed also in New France as many reports to the Crown indicate: it was evidenced most particularly in the last

conflict between England and France for the ownership of Canada, when Montcalm, the very able general France sent to try and stem the tide, came into conflict with Vaudreuil the Canadian-born Governor, over this very question of European and French authority and the spirit of growing Canadianism.

I trust you will forgive me for bearing on the factors of early New France life. These, one might think, should not be mentioned here – except that we find them at work and may trace their influence throughout the entire period of the French regime and except that they affected the work of La Vérendrye. There is, in the entire history of New France, a definite consistency and a clear sequence.

There is another factor besides religion that has played an extremely important role in the history of New France and has swayed the entire economy of Indian life and habits. I refer to the fur-trade. The fur-trade in Canada is anterior to any attempt to colonize or evangelize the country. From the turn of the sixteenth century and probably much earlier, fishermen from Brittany, Normandy and the Basque provinces bartered their wares, on a modest scale at first, for smaller and finer furs, which the Canadian Indians who annually visited the shores offered them. The fishing industry grew rapidly and by the turn of the seventeenth century from Brittany alone there came to our land more than 600 ships every year. Yet the fur-trade completely supplanted the fishing industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, especially after the manufacturing of felt and beaver hats in Europe. The trade revolutionized Indian life and habits. Thus, when Cartier sailed up the St. Lawrence he found the Iroquois established on both shores of the river. Some 75 years later, when Champlain came, the Iroquois had been pushed back by the Algonquins and their allies of what has been called the “Laurentian Coalition.” It was with the Laurentian coalition in fact that the French came into contact at Tadoussac and later along the St. Lawrence, and it was with them that they made their first alliances. Innis in his *Fur Trade in Canada* suggests hypothetically that the Iroquois were driven back by the confederated because these had been supplied with European goods by the French and had thus a notable advantage over their antagonists. It is certain that the Iroquois, a century later, completely destroyed their kinsmen, the Hurons, because of the firearms and ammunitions the Dutch had given them for that very purpose. The Hurons had risen to be “middlemen” in the trade, that is a liaison between the French and the other distant tribes: a state of things which the Algonquins frowned upon and the Iroquois finally settled in their own brutal and barbarous way. In order to spare the Treasury added expenses, the French Crown decided to monopolize the fur-trade and lease it to chartered companies who in turn, because of the exclusive privileges they would enjoy, agreed to undertake and pursue the work of colonisation in New France. Much has been said in criticism of this plan and the general

philosophy behind it. In practice it turned out to be inoperative: the obligations imposed upon the companies were heavy; the revenues, although high, were conditioned by many factors – Indian warfare, fluctuations of the market, ship-wrecks, piracy, wars between European nations, etc. In fact it seems to us contradictory to ask of fur-traders, whose main preoccupation would be the returns and revenues of the trade, to be responsible for opening the country and helping the nomadic Indian tribes to become sedentary, thereby destroying the very conditions on which fur-trade thrived.

Yet there is a redeeming feature to the system, in the sense that it subordinated money-making to a high idealism, which was of course in keeping with the constant teaching of the Church on wealth and the social obligation attached to it and it placed the entire undertaking in a different light. Thus the merchants and financiers of France were asked, in return for their trading privileges, to cooperate with the missionaries and the other agents of Christian civilization in the work of the spiritual advancement of the colony. This purpose, which as we have said, was always kept alive through the devotion of zealous friends of New France, could never be overlooked entirely by the traders, whose attitude towards the Indians was coloured by this very fact.

The judgment of the historian on the effects of the fur-trade in the history of New France, is not an easy one to formulate. Nor can it be absolute and unconditioned. In my humble opinion the fur-trade was given a social duty which it could never undertake to discharge. So much revolved upon its success that when it occasionally failed, the whole work of civilization and missionary expansion was curtailed, as Marie de l'Incarnation expresses it, after the massacre of the Hurons by the Iroquois. And even if it disrupted the domestic life of the young nascent colony as in the case of the *Coureurs des bois* or wood-runners who left their thinly-settled villages to roam over the entire continent, it contributed to the work of penetration and discovery in a unique way. Had the fur-trade been controlled within reasonable limits and used as a means for a consistent system of discovery with a strong policy of colonization it would gradually and by the force of things, have receded to its proper place and could be heralded in the history of New France as one of the most beneficial influence.

The paramount influence of Church and religion as affecting the life of the pioneers and the zeal of the missionaries... The monopoly of state as expressed in the form of government and public institutions and as bearing upon the fur-trade in particular... the Indian back-ground with the native as an indispensable spoke in the wheel of fur industry or again as a possible member of the mystical body of Christ and a candidate to Christian civilization... such is the fabric of New France and early Canadian culture. We shall find these same factors when we come to analyse the work and influence of one of Canada's greatest sons, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes,

Sieur de la Vérendrye.

Less than twenty-five years after the founding of Quebec the French had discovered the Great Lakes and their subsidiaries. In 1634 Jean Nicolet, at the request of Champlain, had reached Lake Michigan, and going up the Fox River had come into contact with the Sioux tribes at Lake Winnibago. The Sioux Indians were thus known to the French a hundred years before La Vérendrye's time. The explorers and discoverers did not go any further west. In 1640 the first great Iroquois war broke out. It lasted for more than twenty-five years and it was only in 1666 that a truce was obtained from these ferocious warriors, well-equipped with guns and ammunition by the English of New York and the Dutch of Manhattan. Shortly after the peace with the Iroquois, two events contributed to delay again the westward advance of the French. The first was the founding of the Kingdom of Louisiana; the second which had a more lasting effect, the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company in the waters of Hudson Bay.

The French Crown, as represented by Colbert in France and Talon in Canada, had given orders that the work of discovery be discontinued and that the positions so far obtained be strengthened. But because of the growing pressure and the gradual expansion of the American and Spanish colonies, it was decided to let Cavalier de La Salle build his chain of forts, from Detroit to the Gulf of Mexico along the Mississippi. Vauban says emphatically that the first purpose of La Salle's enterprise was to erect a barrier against the danger of encirclement from the English colonies. In his report, La Salle notes that through the control of the Mississippi the French shall have the upper-hand on the fur-trade emanating from that district. But he points out that the English on Hudson's Bay are doing a considerable business in beaver trade without being molested. The struggle for Hudson's Bay between the French and the English dates from these years, and no one saw its importance more than d'Iberville. He had accompanied Chevalier de Troyes and his hundred men in 1686 on his journey from the interior, when the English were routed from their positions. Later d'Iberville was appointed Commander of the North with the Mission of dislodging the English, a thing he accomplished through a series of feats of arms which have rarely been equalled in the history of the world. D'Iberville knew that he who would control Hudson's Bay would ultimately own Canada. He also upheld, against the opinion of his time, that the only road to the mythical Western Sea was through Hudson's Bay and time showed he was right.

It was at this period of our history – when the American colonies were held back, at least temporarily, and when the English had been defeated in the waters of Hudson's Bay, – that war broke out between France and England over the succession to the Spanish throne. The war opened in 1702 and in the course of the struggle the British fleet mastered the seas and this marked the beginning of the decline of France. In April, 1713, the King of

France signed the Treaty of Utrecht by which he abandoned Newfoundland, Acadia and Hudson's Bay to Britain. Perhaps it is true to say that few Canadian historians rightly have given to the loss of Hudson's Bay by France, the importance it really deserves. The Canadians and Frenchmen of the time knew the meaning of the loss of that part of their heritage. They never gave up the hope of reconquering it and twenty years after the fall of New France, in 1783, La Perouse was commissioned by the French Court to attack the English in the Bay once more.

Following the Treaty of Utrecht and the loss of Hudson's Bay, the French and Canadian authorities gradually penetrated through the interior west of the Great Lakes. In 1712, Governor Vaudreuil re-established Fort Michillimakinac at the junction of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. The post, which had been opened as early as 1668, had been the gateway to western trade. It had been closed in 1701 in favour of Detroit and the Louisiana forts. It was now being re-established, with the clear intention of using it as a base for further discovery and advance. These have been years of progress and restoration for New France. The Canadians were coming of age and they knew better where the real interest of their country stood. At the same time and because of factors we shall explain, the ancient idea and project of the discovery of the Western Sea was taken up again in France. The Regent sent Father Charlevoix, a well known Jesuit, on a mission of reconnaissance to New France. Father Charlevoix was in Montreal in the early spring of 1721, and reached Fort Michillimakinac some weeks later. He continued his voyage, paying a visit to the Sioux, west of Lake Michigan and returned to France by way of the Mississippi. Later, he prepared a lengthy and precise report in which he recommended that the discovery of the Western Sea should be made through the Sioux country where a permanent mission and fort should be established; or as an alternative, that the Missouri River be followed upstream to the height of land and then on to the Western Sea.

It is clear enough that Father Charlevoix was primarily interested in the spiritual welfare of the Sioux, and other western Indians. As a young man, he had come to Quebec and again he volunteered for mission-work among the Sioux. And it is equally clear that he envisaged the discovery of the Western Sea as something relatively easy, to be entrusted to some Canadian explorer and financed by the Court. The discovery should be made in the shortest possible time and these new lands added to the Crown. The Canadian authorities had their say in the project. They could not overlook the fur-trade, upon which so much was hanging. Furthermore they were notified, in due time, that the Crown would not be responsible financially. It was then decided in the light of this decision, to refer to the old policy and to lease the fur-trade to some commander, with the understanding that the work of discovery would not be completely overlooked.

The Sioux were known to the French ever since Jean Nicolet had met them in 1634. They were a powerful tribe, extending from Lake Superior to the Rockies, and divided into Prairie and Wood Sioux. Later, in the middle of the seventeenth century, they had been pushed back by the Ojibwa who were furnished with arms by the Canadian traders. Thus they had been at war with the Ojibwa or Saultaux Indians, with the Cris, the Assiniboines and even the Mandans. They were called the “Iroquois of the West.” Perrot, Duluth and Tonty had made truces with them but never for long. In general they were friendly enough to the French and being more sedentary should have been easier to instruct. This was probably why the Jesuits decided to send them missionaries after Father Charlevoix’s voyage. In 1727 the French built a fort on Lake Pepin, in the heart of the Sioux country. La Perrière was put in charge, at the request of the missionaries who were sent out the same year. A company was formed, known as “Compagnie des Sioux” and given the usual privileges of trade. The Company undertook to build a chapel and a dwelling for the missionaries, and to guard and man the fort. Two years later the establishment was closed. It was re-established in 1731 and a new “Compagnie des Sioux” was formed. Governor Beauharnois in his report to the Court says (October 12, 1731) “It has been decided to re-establish the Sioux post that had been abandoned because of the Fox Indian the Sieur de la Vérendrye has asked that the fort be reopened in order to make peace between the Assiniboines and Cris whose country one must cross to reach the Western Sea.”

I shall not dwell at any length on the early life of La Vérendrye. He was born at Trois Rivières, a city famous in the history of exploration and trade, on November 17, 1685. He was the son, and eleventh child, of René de Varenne, then Governor of Trois Rivières and the grandson of the celebrated Pierre Boucher. La Vérendrye lost his father at the age of four and spent most of his childhood days at his grandfather’s place at Boucherville. At an early age he joined the French army and saw service both in Canada and in France. He was wounded at Malplaquet and left for dead on the battlefield. He was made prisoner and returned to New France in 1711. The next year he was married to Marie-Anne Dandonneau and during the following years he lived at l’Ile Dupas, where his six children were born. He had asked for leave to go to France in 1724, and again in 1725. The next we hear he was appointed by the new Governor Beauharnois, “Commander of the Northern Post” which meant Kaministiquia (the actual Fort William) Lake Nipigon and Michipicoton, in the Bay of that name, in Lake Superior. Unfortunately there does not seem to exist any record of his commission: what were the instructions given him by the Governor, if any? Was he told to be on the lookout and find out from the Indians all they knew about the way to the Western Sea? It will be noticed that he was appointed Commander of the Northern posts precisely at the time of the establishment of Fort Beauharnois

among the Sioux. Had La Vérendrye been chosen to attempt the voyage up the Missouri river? Did the authorities contemplate a more northerly route and was La Vérendrye commissioned in that respect? These questions cannot actually be answered because of the lack of proper exact information.

In the Summer of 1738, Father Guignas and Father de Gonor were forced to leave Fort Beauharnois and return to Michillimakinac. The Sioux enterprise had turned out to be not only extremely hazardous but rather useless. At Michillimakinac Father de Gonor met La Vérendrye who had come from Kaministiquia. In the course of their conversations La Vérendrye informed the priest of what the Cris Indians had told him about the country west of the Lakes. An Indian chief, who volunteered to lead the French, had traced a map showing the series of rivers and lakes emptying into Lake Winnipeg and from there a great river flowing west into a greater river still where the waters rose and fell. Father de Gonor took this map and La Vérendrye's report to the Governor in Quebec, where he arrived in the fall of the same year. It is possible that La Vérendrye also visited the Governor that same year. The explorer at the time shared the illusion of his own countrymen as to the relative vicinity of the Western Sea.

Beauharnois, upon the report of La Vérendrye, took it upon himself to appoint him Commander of the Western Posts and sent him out on his journey. His own report to the Minister in France Count Maurepas, is of 1730 and at the time La Vérendrye was on his way. The enterprise began on a misunderstanding which was to harm and finally to ruin the Canadian discoverer. La Vérendrye had make his terms clear to Beauharnois, the Governor and Hocquart the Intendant. His intention was to open a new country and add it to the colony of New France and the Crown of France before a foreign country – in fact the English – did it for their own benefit. He would establish a chain of forts at strategic points, and, through this gradual penetration, reach the Western Sea. These various establishments would be permanent forts with church and missionaries; there would also be the commercial advantage to France and the colony in the wealth of the fur-trade, particularly beaver (castor gras). Such was the thought of La Vérendrye. And it was the idea of an empire-builder; a work of civilisation and long-range culture. On the other hand, Beauharnois and Hocquart who knew well the thought of Maurepas, led the Minister to believe that the main objective was precisely the discovery of the Western Sea and the establishments along the route were to be nothing more than warehouses or magazines for provisions and ammunition. Maurepas was a scientist of repute who had raised the French marine to a new level, by opening a naval academy in Paris. He had encouraged discoveries in other parts of the world and had generally rendered assistance to men of science. He was primarily interested in the discovery of the Western Sea as such and it seems likely he wished to have the credit of the successful attempt. He did not realize the

difficulties involved: the Indian warfare with which La Vérendrye was faced from the beginning; the distances from headquarters and the cost of transportation. He should have given credit to the intentions of a man who had engaged all he had in the enterprise; who had with him his four sons and a nephew he cherished as much; whose sole ambition was to serve his country under extremely difficult conditions. In the long years of this gigantic task Maurepas never once found a word of encouragement for the discoverer. He was never satisfied and constantly found fault with everything La Vérendrye attempted. His progress was too slow; he had done wrong in his alliance with the Cris Indians; he was more interested in the trade than in the work of discovery. Beauharnois, on the other hand, generally took the defense of La Vérendrye but never clarified the position of the Canadian explorer. The Governor would find reasons and excuses for the slow work of penetration without ever giving the right emphasis and showing, with his knowledge of conditions, how it was far more important to build a new empire in that part of Canada and to civilize the Indians than to endeavor to discover a mythical sea of which so few knew anything tangible. This was the tragedy of the life and work of La Vérendrye; this is what in the long run killed his enthusiasm and forced him to withdraw after more than fifteen years of unflinching effort after the loss of his son and his missionary and the death of his nephew, de la Jemmeraye.

I am afraid time will not allow me to dwell at length upon the progress of the La Vérendrye's explorations and discoveries. In June of 1731 he left Montreal with his three sons, ranging from seventeen, sixteen to fifteen years and his nephew Christophe Dufrost de la Jemmeraye. At Michillimakinac he picked up Father Messaiger. That same year Fort St. Pierre was built by de la Jemmeraye on the Rainy River. The following Spring La Vérendrye built a more pretentious fort in the north west angle of Lake of the Woods, with chapel and house for the missionary, as has been understood. Fort St. Charles became the headquarters of the explorer during the trying years. There, from the Indians, he learned more about the Missouri river, and the Mantannes Indians who lived in its vicinity. He spent these first years in trying to bring about peace among the Indian tribes. Fort Maurepas, the first one, was built in 1734. That same year he made an alliance with the Cris and thereby strongly displeased the Sioux. Like Champlain, to whom he has many points of resemblance, he found himself forced to get mixed up in Indian warfare and his son Jean-Baptiste accompanied the Cris on an expedition against the Sioux. Fort Beauharnois had been reopened at the request of La Vérendrye. In 1735 Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, the commander, observed a notable difference in the attitude of the Sioux who were becoming more and more insolent: they had just massacred two Frenchmen they had met on their way. The next year they overtook a party of Frenchmen on Lake of the Woods, including Jean-Baptiste the eldest son of La Vérendrye, Father Aulneau his

missionary, and eighteen of the fifty voyageurs La Vérendrye had with him, and massacred them all. Father Aulneau had replaced Father Messaiger in 1735 and had come west to work among the Mantannes who were to be visited as soon as the opportunity arose. That same spring La Vérendrye had lost his nephew who had died from exposure en route from Fort St. Charles to Fort Maurepas. And yet the explorer's courage remained undaunted. In the early spring of 1737 he repaired to Quebec where once again he had to defend himself against the unfair accusations of Maurepas. He returned west in 1738, revisiting all his posts and forts as he went along. That fall he established Fort Rouge at the mouth of the Assiniboine and Fort La Reine on the Assiniboine. It was from the latter fort that he left on the 18th of October for his visit to the Mantannes whom he reached on November the 28th. This voyage was a disappointment for many reasons; he lost his interpreter and the gifts meant for the chiefs were stolen; he finally decided to retrace his steps to Fort La Reine. But he fell sick on the 7th of December and had to remain four days in bed. He finally left the Mantannes and arrived at Fort La Reine on the 10th of January, 1739. "I have never in my whole life suffered as much as during this trip" he wrote later.

After the trip to the Mantannes his work of discovery and settlement was turned northward and from Lake Winnipeg along the Saskatchewan River. It is true that Pierre went back to the Mantannes country in 1741 but he achieved little; on his return he established Fort Dauphin. In the spring of 1742 the other two sons of La Vérendrye, François and Louis Joseph, went back to the Mantannes once more and on a trip that took them to the Rocky Mountains they visited the various tribes on their way. This was the last episode to the La Vérendrye enterprise. Shortly after he asked to be relieved of his command and in the spring of 1744 he left the country definitively. In a letter to Maurepas he summed up his life's work in these words: "The glory of my king and the welfare of New France have been the only motives of my enterprise."

His role and action were somewhat vindicated later. The Court appointed de Noyelles de Fleurimont, a brilliant officer, as his successor. De Noyelles asked to be relieved after an attempt of three years. Beauharnois immediately insisted on having La Vérendrye appointed again. The discoverer was then living in Montreal. He had finally been given his right rank in the army and had previously been decorated with the Croix de Saint Louis for his valour and services. The thought of going back to the West fired his imagination again. He outlined his plans. He would this time search for the route to the Western Sea, through the north of Lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan River. While he was preparing for his new venture he took sick and on the 5th of December, 1749, he died in Montreal at the age of 64 years. It happened that one son, Pierre, was with him. The other two were still out west.

There is something of the Greek tragedies and the caprice of fate, in the life and work of La Vérendrye. At every phase of his checkered existence he was faced with trial and suffering: the adversities that besieged him; the blows he received; the sorrows he endured, received little or no compensation in the success of his enterprise which forcibly remained precarious and fraught with danger and insecurity. His merit is to have faced these adverse conditions with indomitable courage and fortitude of soul. Having once set his mind on a majestic course, he never faltered, but with heroic determination followed his path. No trial, however great, could turn him from his goal and he stands forever as an admirable example of endurance and sheer courage. He failed in a part of the work allotted to him: it is possible he may have known from the start how mythical and highly utopian was the search for the Western Sea but in many other ways his success was far beyond what appeared on the surface. In 1731, as he stood by the shores of Lake Superior he faced an unknown world. A little more than ten years later he had mapped this entire country, had penetrated as far as the Rocky Mountains, had taken possession of it in the name of France and Canada and had added it to New France. He had made alliances with the Indians that inhabited the country and established a long chain of forts from Lake Superior to the Saskatchewan River. He had established the first forms of civilized and Christian life, had sown the first wheat in the Prairies, introduced the first horses and cultivated the land. His name can well go down in history as that of a great man, a great explorer, one endowed with deeply rooted Christian qualities of courage, fortitude, unselfishness, an admirable vision, one to whom this country of ours owes a great debt of gratitude with the unflinching tribute of our admiration. This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the work of La Vérendrye and such is the mettle of his heroic soul.