

How Cochrane came to make a distant bow to Canadian history

By Harold A. Wills

Canada is so young a country that an event of 300 years ago may be considered as "early" history, deserving of recognition for no other reason than that. However, the trials and adventures of the hundred men led by the Chevalier de Troyes in 1686 were so varied, so marked by hardship and danger, so - outstandingly successful, that by themselves they should bury the often-heard complaint that Canadian history lacks colour, the thrill of brave exploits, or impact upon the destiny of nations.

For the young and old of Cochrane, it is a story which gains fascination because the expedition's canoe route used one of the great rivers next door to this town of the future.

As with many events of that period, there was a mixing of the affairs of state with the affairs of commerce, of the politics of France with the politics of England. In 1670 King Charles II of England had granted a charter to "the Governor and Company of Adventures of England trading into Hudson's Bay." While the HBC (now the oldest department store chain in the world) had received its royal charter in return for obligation to continue to search for a Northwest Passage to the Orient, its more immediate and profitable business was to trade the products of English factories for the fur of the industrious beaver, trapped by Indians. The pioneer voyage of the little ship *Nonsuch* in 1668 had proved that the American continent could be penetrated from the north, through the Great Bays - not only through the St. Lawrence river or by the Atlantic seaboard.

The French equivalent of the HBC was the *Compagnie du Nord*, set up in 1682 and chartered in 1685. Among its employees were those stormy petrels, Radisson and the Sieur des Groseilliers, who switched their underwear. They were classified as patriots or traitors, as heroes or renegades, as the circumstances and viewpoints of the moment demanded. The French Sun King (Louis XIV) was at the time paying secret subsidies to English King Charles II, so it was exceptionally difficult to distinguish between friends and enemies.

The Iroquois, with the timely aid of an epidemic (possibly influenza) had humbled the French military forces in Canada, but when a new governor, the Marquis de Denonville, arrived in Quebec in 1685 he knew, or was quickly made to understand, that now was the time for action, treaties or no treaties with England. Already the HBC had fortified trading posts in what was picturesquely described as the "Bottom of the Bay" - Rupert's House founded in 1668, Moose Factory in 1672, Albany in 1678 - and others farther north on the western coasts of James and Hudson Bays. The *Compagnie du Nord* had none there, but what one did not have, one might take - with skill, luck - and surprise.

Surprise could be the vital weapon. The French presumably had no confidence in their ability to attack by sea, in waters in which the English

already had long experience, hardly-won knowledge - and ships. There was a known route by way of the Saguenay river; experience had shown it to be dangerous, and to have a short travel season. But there was another route, by way of the Ottawa river, and the chain of rivers and lakes which linked with the mighty Abitibi and Moose Rivers (as they are now known). The Ottawa river section was well known by men of the *Compagnie du Nord*, as well as the Indians who roamed the whole vast hinterland. A couple of hardy French adventurers had used it.

If the English were at all on the alert they might be expected to be keeping an eye on the sea and the Saguenay, but who would venture to attack from the south?

Denonville had brought with him from France some 350 troupes de la marine, not regular soldiers, but men well fitted for garrison duty, among them a captain with a fine reputation, Pierre Chevalier de Troyes, who was named to head the expedition. Probably some of those new arrivals were also chosen, but many of the 30 who were to be the fighting backbone of the party seem to have been marines already on the spot. Seventy more were Canadians, all expert canoeists, but many were chosen as well for a knowledge of trades - such as carpenters and blacksmiths, men capable of keeping the canoes and weapons in shape, manufacturing the ammunition, and helping in siege operations - as well as being good men in a fight.

One interesting sidelight is that all costs of the expedition were paid by the *Compagnie du Nord* - just as the costs of maintaining and staffing the HBC posts were met by that company. Three hundred years later, these partnerships between business and government sound vaguely familiar.

Most of the hundred men under de Troyes's command are anonymous figures, but some names in addition to that of the commander are on the record, and were to leave their mark on the history of their country. One of the most distinguished families of all was represented by three of the twelve sons of Charles Le Moyne, Sieur de Longueuil et de Chateauguay - Sainte-Hélène, Iberville and Maricourt. (Charles Le Moyne had been until his death in 1685 a director of the *Compagnie*, and readers who may like to trace a connection between the financing of the expedition and the French government are at liberty to do so.) At 27, Sainte-Hélène was second in command as lieutenant. Iberville, then 25, has been called "the most renowned son of New France". Maricourt, then 22, acted as Iberville's lieutenant on the Bay in later years, and until his death served faithfully and well.

One other name stands out. Father Antoine Silvy, S.J., chaplain of the expedition, was older than the officers, having spent already 13 years in Canada. He was not only the spiritual guide of the war party, but to some extent its experienced geographical guide, its translator of the

languages of many of the tribes, its tough and seasoned counsellor.

It takes a book to tell the highlights of the story; only bits here and there can be mentioned. In de Troyes's journal or campaign notes he reported leaving Quebec City in early March, 1686, for Ville Marie on the Island of Montreal, where his 100 men were being gathered, and where 35 canoes (large and small) were loaded. Other canoes were added.

The mishaps started early, with men, oxen and baggage breaking through the soft ice on the river. "Much of our time was spent in rescuing one another," de Troyes wrote. Later they passed the remains of the old fort, mute reminder of that memorable event in history when Adam Dollard and his companions had fought and died to save the infant settlement from the Indians 26 years before. "The trail was very bad, the river was even worse," it was noted. They celebrated May Day, but bad weather, bad ice, bad accidents were only parts of their problem. De Troyes found reason to distrust the natives around Mattawa, and the Frenchmen slept with weapons in their hands. With only 100 leagues of the journey accomplished, their English interpreter cut his leg to the bone with an axe.

On May 30th a more terrible disaster almost wrote "finis" to the venture. "At the last portage" de Troyes wrote, "an accident occurred which was terrifying enough to be worthy of note. At a previous portage the men in one of the last canoes had lit a fire which got out of control. It burned into the woods with great fierceness, pushed along by a very strong wind. The flames did not spread out, but burned a narrow, fiery path along the shore of the lake which we had just passed. The fire caught up with us at a 1500-foot portage. We were in great danger because of the confusion in our ranks. Some men were loading canoes at the top of the portage, others were packing gear over it, while some were returning to the bottom of the portage for fresh loads. There were so many comings and goings that I can think of no

better comparison than that of ants bustling around their ant-hill.

"When the wind suddenly changed, our destruction appeared inevitable. Whirlwinds of flame swept the length of the portage, making it difficult for me to describe how we protected ourselves. It is

equally difficult for me to describe the grandeur of such a fire, and the speed with which it swept through the bush. Those who were still at the foot of the portage threw themselves, the gunpowder, and other inflammable materials into

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