

**Agnes C. Laut**



*Pathfinders  
of the West*



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# **Pathfinders of the West**

**Being the Thrilling Story of the Adventures of the  
Men Who / Discovered the Great Northwest:  
Radisson, La Vérendrye, / Lewis and Clark**



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# Foreword

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The question will at once occur why no mention is made of Marquette and Jolliet and La Salle in a work on the pathfinders of the West. The simple answer is—they were *not* pathfinders. Contrary to the notions imbibed at school, and repeated in all histories of the West, Marquette, Jolliet, and La Salle did not discover the vast region beyond the Great Lakes. Twelve years before these explorers had thought of visiting the land which the French hunter designated as the *Pays d'en Haut*, the West had already been discovered by the most intrepid *voyageurs* that France produced,—men whose wide-ranging explorations exceeded the achievements of Cartier and Champlain and La Salle put together.

It naturally rouses resentment to find that names revered for more than two centuries as the first explorers of the Great Northwest must give place to a name almost unknown. It seems impossible that at this late date history should have to be rewritten. Such is the fact *if we would have our history true*. Not Marquette, Jolliet, and La Salle discovered the West, but two poor adventurers, who sacrificed all earthly possessions to the enthusiasm for discovery, and incurred such bitter hostility from the governments of France and England that their names have been hounded to infamy. These were Sieur Pierre Esprit Radisson and Sieur Médard Chouart Groseillers, fur traders of Three Rivers, Quebec. [1]

The explanation of the long oblivion obscuring the fame of these two men is very simple. Radisson and Groseillers defied, first New France, then Old France, and lastly England. While on friendly terms with the church, they did not make their explorations subservient to the propagation of the faith. In consequence, they were ignored by both Church and State. The *Jesuit Relations* repeatedly refer to two young Frenchmen who went beyond Lake Michigan to a "Forked River" (the Mississippi), among the Sioux and other Indian tribes that used coal for fire because wood did not grow large enough on the prairie. Contemporaneous documents mention the exploits of the young Frenchmen. The State Papers of the Marine Department, Paris, contain numerous references to Radisson and Groseillers. But, then, the *Jesuit Relations* were not accessible to scholars, let alone the general public, until the middle of the last century, when a limited edition was reprinted of the Cramoisy copies published at the time the priests sent their letters home to France. The contemporaneous writings of Marie de l'Incarnation, the Abbé Belmont, and Dollier de Casson were not known outside the circle of French savants until still later; and it is only within recent years that the Archives of Paris have been searched for historical data. Meantime, the historians of France and England, animated by the hostility of their respective governments, either slurred over the discoveries of Radisson and Groseillers entirely, or blackened their memories without the slightest regard to truth. It would, in fact, take a large volume to contradict and disprove half the lies written of these two men. Instead of consulting contemporaneous documents,—which would

have entailed both cost and labor,—modern writers have, unfortunately, been satisfied to serve up a rehash of the detractions written by the old historians. In 1885 came a discovery that punished such slovenly methods by practically wiping out the work of the pseudo-historians. There was found in the British Museum, the Bodleian Library, and Hudson's Bay House, London, unmistakably authentic record of Radisson's voyages, written by himself. The Prince Society of Boston printed two hundred and fifty copies of the collected Journals. The Canadian Archives published the journals of the two last voyages. Francis Parkman was too conscientious to ignore the importance of the find; but his history of the West was already written. He made what reparation he could to Radisson's memory by appending a footnote to subsequent editions of two of his books, stating that Radisson and Groseillers' travels took them to the "Forked River" before 1660. Some ten other lines are all that Mr. Parkman relates of Radisson; and the data for these brief references have evidently been drawn from Radisson's enemies, for the explorer is called "a renegade." It is necessary to state this, because some writers, whose zeal for criticism was much greater than their qualifications, wanted to know why any one should attempt to write Radisson's life when Parkman had already done so.

Radisson's life reads more like a second Robinson Crusoe than sober history. For that reason I have put the corroborative evidence in footnotes, rather than cumber the movement of the main theme. I am sorry to have loaded the opening parts with so many notes; but Radisson's voyages change the relative positions of the other explorers so



radically that proofs must be given. The footnotes are for the student and may be omitted by the general reader. The study of Radisson arose from, using his later exploits on Hudson Bay as the subject of the novel, *Heralds of Empire*. On the publication of that book, several letters came from the Western states asking how far I thought Radisson had gone beyond Lake Superior before he went to Hudson Bay. Having in mind—I am sorry to say—mainly the early records of Radisson's enemies, I at first answered that I thought it very difficult to identify the discoverer's itinerary beyond the Great Lakes. So many letters continued to come on the subject that I began to investigate contemporaneous documents. The path followed by the explorer west of the Great Lakes—as given by Radisson himself—is here written. Full corroboration of all that Radisson relates is to be found—as already stated—in chronicles written at the period of his life and in the State Papers. Copies of these I have in my possession. Samples of the papers bearing on Radisson's times, copied from the Marine Archives, will be found in the Appendix. One must either accept the explorer's word as conclusive,—even when he relates his own trickery,—or in rejecting his journal also reject as fictions the *Jesuit Relations*, the *Marine Archives*, *Dollier de Casson*, *Marie de l'Incarnation*, and the *Abbé Belmont*, which record the same events as Radisson. In no case has reliance been placed on second-hand chronicles. Oldmixon and Charlevoix must both have written from hearsay; therefore, though quoted in the footnotes, they are not given as conclusive proof. The only means of identifying Radisson's routes are (1) by his descriptions of the countries, (2) his notes of the Indian

tribes; so that personal knowledge of the territory is absolutely essential in following Radisson's narrative. All the regions traversed by Radisson—the Ottawa, the St. Lawrence, the Great Lakes, Labrador, and the Great Northwest—I have visited, some of them many times, except the shores of Hudson Bay, and of that region I have some hundreds of photographs.

Material for the accounts of the other pathfinders of the West has been drawn directly from the different explorers' journals.

For historical matter I wish to express my indebtedness to Dr. N. E. Dionne of the Parliamentary Library, Quebec, whose splendid sketch of Radisson and Groseillers, read before the Royal Society of Canada, does much to redeem the memory of the discoverers from ignominy; to Dr. George Bryce of Winnipeg, whose investigation of Hudson's Bay Archives adds a new chapter to Radisson's life; to Mr. Benjamin Sulte of Ottawa, whose destructive criticism of inaccuracies in old and modern records has done so much to stop people writing history out of their heads and to put research on an honest basis; and to M. Edouard Richard for scholarly advice relating to the Marine Archives, which he has exploited so thoroughly. For transcripts and archives now out of print, thanks are due Mr. L. P. Sylvain of the Parliamentary Library, Ottawa, the officials of the Archives Department, Ottawa, Mr. F. C. Wurtele of Quebec, Professor Andrew Baird of Winnipeg, Mr. Alfred Matthews of the Prince Society, Boston, the Hon. Jacob V. Brower and Mr. Warren Upham of St. Paul. Mr. Lawrence J. Burpee of Ottawa was so good as to give me a reading of his exhaustive notes on La

Vérendrye and of data found on the Radisson family. To Mrs. Fred Paget of Ottawa, the daughter of a Hudson's Bay Company officer, and to Mr. and Mrs. C. C. Farr of the Northern Ottawa, I am indebted for interesting facts on life in the fur posts. Miss Talbot of Winnipeg obtained from retired officers of the Hudson's Bay Company a most complete set of photographs relating to the fur trade. To her and to those officers who loaned old heirlooms to be photographed, I beg to express my cordial appreciation. And the thanks of all who write on the North are permanently due Mr. C. C. Chipman, Chief Commissioner of the Hudson's Bay Company, for unfailing courtesy in extending information.

WILDWOOD PLACE,  
WASSAIC, N.Y.

[1] I of course refer to the West as beyond the Great Lakes; for Nicotet, in 1634, and two nameless Frenchmen—servants of Jean de Lauzon—in 1654, had been beyond the Sault.

Just as this volume was going to the printer, I received a copy of the very valuable Minnesota *Memoir*, Vol. VI, compiled by the Hon. J. V. Brower of St. Paul, to whom my thanks are due for this excellent contribution to Western annals. It may be said that the authors of this volume have done more than any other writers to vindicate Radisson and Groseillers as explorers of the West. The very differences of opinion over the regions visited establish the fact that Radisson *did* explore parts of Minnesota. I have purposely avoided trying to say *what* parts of Minnesota he exploited,

because, it seems to me, the controversy is futile. Radisson's memory has been the subject of controversy from the time of his life. The controversy—first between the governments of France and England, subsequently between the French and English historians—has eclipsed the real achievements of Radisson. To me it seems non-essential as to whether Radisson camped on an island in the Mississippi, or only visited the region of that island. The fact remains that he discovered the Great Northwest, meaning by that the region west of the Mississippi. The same dispute has obscured his explorations of Hudson Bay, French writers maintaining that he went overland to the North and put his feet in the waters of the bay, the English writers insisting that he only crossed over the watershed toward Hudson Bay. Again, the fact remains that he did what others had failed to do—discovered an overland route to the bay. I am sorry that Radisson is accused in this *Memoir* of intentionally falsifying his relations in two respects, (1) in adding a fanciful year to the 1658-1660 voyage; (2) in saying that he had voyaged down the Mississippi to Mexico. (1) Internal evidence plainly shows that Radisson's first four voyages were written twenty years afterward, when he was in London, and not while on the voyage across the Atlantic with Cartwright, the Boston commissioner. It is the most natural thing in the world that Radisson, who had so often been to the wilds, should have mixed his dates. Every slip as to dates is so easily checked by contemporaneous records—which, themselves, need to be checked—that it seems too bad to accuse Radisson of wilfully lying in the matter. When Radisson lied it was to avoid bloodshed, and not to exalt

himself. If he had had glorification of self in mind, he would not have set down his own faults so unblushingly; for instance, where he deceives M. Colbert of Paris. (2) Radisson does not try to give the impression that he went to Mexico. The sense of the context is that he met an Indian tribe—Illinois, Mandans, Omahas, or some other—who lived next to another tribe who told *of* the Spaniards. I feel almost sure that the scholarly Mr. Benjamin Sulte is right in his letter to me when he suggests that Radisson's manuscript has been mixed by transposition of pages or paragraphs, rather than that Radisson himself was confused in his account. At the same time every one of the contributors to the Minnesota *Memoir* deserves the thanks of all who love *true* history.

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Since the above foreword was written, the contents of this volume have appeared serially in four New York magazines. The context of the book was slightly abridged in these articles, so that a very vital distinction—namely, the difference between what is given as in dispute, and what is given as incontrovertible fact—was lost; but what was my amusement to receive letters from all parts of the West all but challenging me to a duel. One wants to know "how a reputable author dare" suggest that Radisson's voyages be taken as authentic. There is no "dare" about it. It is a fact.



For any "reputable" historian to suggest—as two recently have—that Radisson's voyages are a fabrication, is to stamp that historian as a pretender who has not investigated a single record contemporaneous with Radisson's life. One cannot consult documents contemporaneous with his life and not learn instantly that he was a very live fact of the most troublesome kind the governments of France and England ever had to accept. That is why it impresses me as a presumption that is almost comical for any modern writer to condescend to say that he "accepts" or "rejects" this or that part of Radisson's record. If he "rejects" Radisson, he also rejects the *Marine Archives of Paris*, and the *Jesuit Relations*, which are the recognized sources of our early history.

Another correspondent furiously denounces Radisson as a liar because he mixes his dates of the 1660 trip. It would be just as reasonable to call La Salle a liar because there are discrepancies in the dates of his exploits, as to call Radisson a liar for the slips in his dates. When the mistakes can be checked from internal evidence, one is hardly justified in charging falsification.

A third correspondent is troubled by the reference to the Mascoutin Indians being *beyond* the Mississippi. State documents establish this fact. I am not responsible for it; and Radisson could not circle west-northwest from the Mascoutins to the great encampments of the Sioux without going far west of the Mississippi. Even if the Jesuits make a slip in referring to the Sioux's use of some kind of coal for fire because there was no wood on the prairie, and really mean turf or buffalo refuse,—which I have seen the Sioux

use for fire,—the fact is that only the tribes far west of the Mississippi habitually used such substitutes for wood.

My Wisconsin correspondents I have offended by saying that Radisson went beyond the Wisconsin; my Minnesota friends, by saying that he went beyond Minnesota; and my Manitoba co-workers of past days, by suggesting that he ever went beyond Manitoba. The fact remains that when we try to identify Radisson's voyages, we must take his own account of his journeyings; and that account establishes him as the Discoverer of the Northwest.

For those who know, I surely do not need to state that there is no picture of Radisson extant, and that some of the studies of his life are just as genuine (?) as alleged old prints of his likeness.

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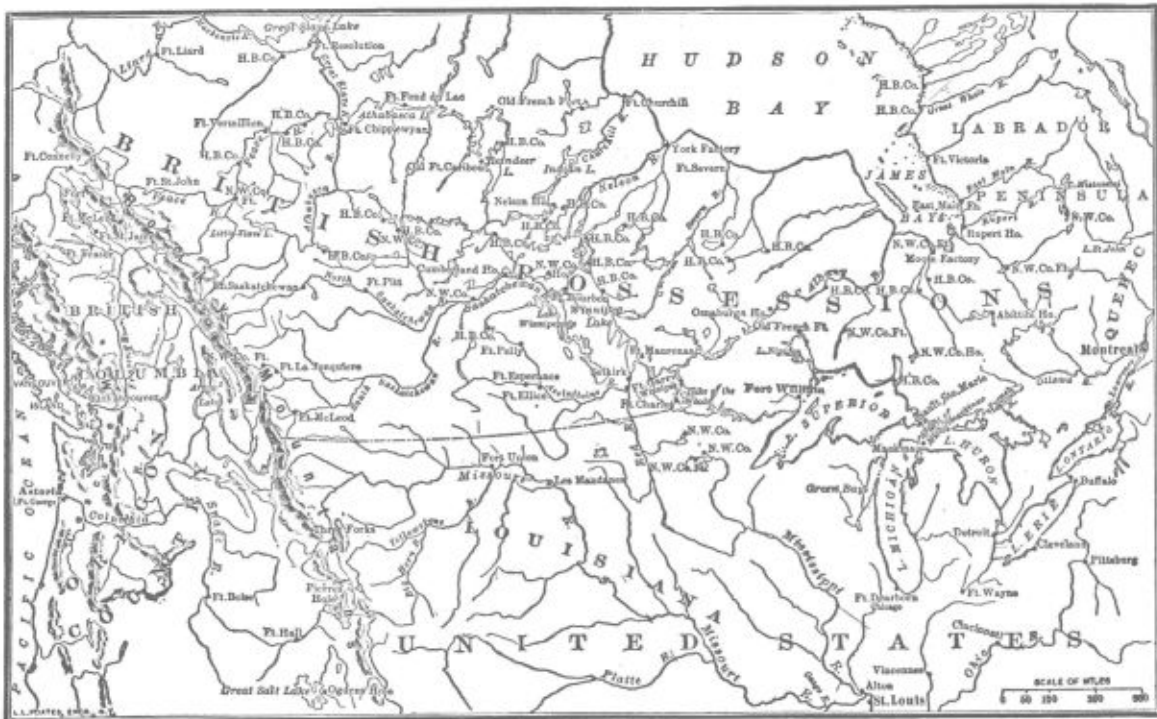
# PART I

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## PIERRE ESPRIT RADISSON

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ADVENTURES OF THE FIRST WHITE MAN TO EXPLORE  
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Map of the Great Fur Country.

**[Illustration: Map of the Great Fur Company.]**

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## **CHAPTER I**

**1651-1653**

### **RADISSON'S FIRST VOYAGE**

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Early one morning in the spring of 1652 three young men left the little stockaded fort of Three Rivers, on the north bank of the St. Lawrence, for a day's hunting in the marshes of Lake St. Peter. On one side were the forested hills, purple with the mists of rising vapor and still streaked with white patches of snow where the dense woods shut out the sunlight. On the other lay the silver expanse of the St. Lawrence, more like a lake than a river, with mile on mile southwestward of rush-grown marshes, where plover and curlew and duck and wild geese flocked to their favorite feeding-grounds three hundred years ago just as they do to-day. Northeastward, the three mouths of the St. Maurice poured their spring flood into the St. Lawrence.

The hunters were very young. Only hunters rash with the courage of untried youth would have left the shelter of the fort walls when all the world knew that the Iroquois had been lying in ambush round the little settlement of Three Rivers day and night for the preceding year. Not a week passed but some settler working on the outskirts of Three Rivers was set upon and left dead in his fields by marauding Iroquois. The tortures suffered by Jogues, the great Jesuit missionary who had been captured by the Iroquois a few years before, were still fresh in the memory of every man, woman, and child in New France. It was from Three Rivers that Piescaret, the famous Algonquin chief who could outrun a deer, had set out against the Iroquois, turning his snowshoes back to front, so that the track seemed to lead north when he was really going south, and then, having thrown his pursuers off the trail, coming back on his own footsteps, slipping up stealthily on the Iroquois that were following the false scent, and tomahawking the laggards.[1] It was from Three Rivers that the Mohawks had captured the Algonquin girl who escaped by slipping off the thongs that bound her. Stepping over the prostrate forms of her sleeping guards, such a fury of revenge possessed her that she seized an axe and brained the nearest sleeper, then eluded her pursuers by first hiding in a hollow tree and afterward diving under the debris of a beaver dam.



### **[Illustration: Three Rivers in 1757.]**

These things were known to every inhabitant of Three Rivers. Farmers had flocked into the little fort and could venture back to their fields only when armed with a musket. [2] Yet the three young hunters rashly left the shelter of the fort walls and took the very dangerous path that led between the forests and the water. One of the young men was barely in his seventeenth year.[3] This was Pierre Esprit Radisson, from St. Malo, the town of the famous Cartier. Young Radisson had only come to New France the year before, and therefore could not realize the dangers of Indian warfare. Like boys the world over, the three went along, boasting how they would fight if the Indians came. One skirted the forest, on the watch for Iroquois, the others kept to the water, on the lookout for game. About a mile from Three Rivers they encountered a herdsman who warned them to keep out from the foot of the hills. Things that looked like a multitude of heads had risen out of the earth back there, he said, pointing to the forests. That set the

young hunters loading their pistols and priming muskets. It must also have chilled their zest; for, shooting some ducks, one of the young men presently declared that he had had enough—he was going back. With that daring which was to prove both the lodestar and the curse of his life, young Radisson laughed to scorn the sudden change of mind. Thereupon the first hunter was joined by the second, and the two went off in high dudgeon. With a laugh, Pierre Radisson marched along alone, foreshadowing his after life,—a type of every pathfinder facing the dangers of the unknown with dauntless scorn, an immortal type of the world-hero.

Shooting at every pace and hilarious over his luck, Radisson had wandered some nine miles from the fort, when he came to a stream too deep to ford and realized that he already had more game than he could possibly carry. Hiding in hollow trees what he could not bring back, he began trudging toward Three Rivers with a string of geese, ducks, and odd teal over his shoulders, Wading swollen brooks and scrambling over windfalls, he retraced his way without pause till he caught sight of the town chapel glimmering in the sunlight against the darkening horizon above the river. He was almost back where his comrades had left him; so he sat down to rest. The cowherd had driven his cattle back to Three Rivers.[4] The river came lapping through the rushes. There was a clacking of wild-fowl flocking down to their marsh nests; perhaps a crane flopped through the reeds; but Radisson, who had laughed the nervous fears of the others to scorn, suddenly gave a start at the lonely sounds of twilight. Then he noticed that his pistols were water-



soaked. Emptying the charges, he at once reloaded, and with characteristic daring crept softly back to reconnoitre the woods. Dodging from tree to tree, he peered up and down the river. Great flocks of ducks were swimming on the water. That reassured him, for the bird is more alert to alarm than man. The fort was almost within call. Radisson determined to have a shot at such easy quarry; but as he crept through the grass toward the game, he almost stumbled over what rooted him to the spot with horror. Just as they had fallen, naked and scalped, with bullet and hatchet wounds all over their bodies, lay his comrades of the morning, dead among the rushes. Radisson was too far out to get back to the woods. Stooping, he tried to grope to the hiding of the rushes. As he bent, half a hundred heads rose from the grasses, peering which way he might go. They were behind, before, on all sides—his only hope was a dash for the cane-grown river, where he might hide by diving and wading, till darkness gave a chance for a rush to the fort. Slipping bullet and shot in his musket as he ran, and ramming down the paper, hoping against hope that he had not been seen, he dashed through the brushwood. A score of guns crashed from the forest.[5] Before he realized the penalty that the Iroquois might exact for such an act, he had fired back; but they were upon him. He was thrown down and disarmed. When he came giddily to his senses, he found himself being dragged back to the woods, where the Iroquois flaunted the fresh scalps of his dead friends. Half drawn, half driven, he was taken to the shore. Here, a flotilla of canoes lay concealed where he had been hunting wild-fowl but a few hours before. Fires were kindled, and the

crotched sticks driven in the ground to boil the kettle for the evening meal. The young Frenchman was searched, stripped, and tied round the waist with a rope, the Indians yelling and howling like so many wolves all the while till a pause was given their jubilation by the alarm of a scout that the French and Algonquins were coming. In a trice, the fire was out and covered. A score of young braves set off to reconnoitre. Fifty remained at the boats; but if Radisson hoped for a rescue, he was doomed to disappointment. The warriors returned. Seventy Iroquois gathered round a second fire for the night. The one predominating passion of the savage nature is bravery. Lying in ambush, they had heard this French youth laugh at his comrades' fears. In defiance of danger, they had seen him go hunting alone. After he had heard an alarm, he had daringly come out to shoot at the ducks. And, then, boy as he was, when attacked he had instantly fired back at numerous enough enemies to have intimidated a score of grown men. There is not the slightest doubt it was Radisson's bravery that now saved him from the fate of his companions.

His clothes were returned. While the evening meal was boiling, young warriors dressed and combed the Frenchman's hair after the manner of braves. They daubed his cheeks with war-paint; and when they saw that their rancid meats turned him faint, they boiled meat in clean water and gave him meal browned on burning sand.[6] He did not struggle to escape, so he was now untied. That night he slept between two warriors under a common blanket, through which he counted the stars. For fifty years his home was to be under the stars. It is typically Radisson when he