

leading one hundred men, set off from Quebec City, paddled and portaged fifteen hundred miles to James Bay, captured three English Hudson's Bay Company forts, and was back in Quebec by autumn.

De Troyes himself wrote a casual, sometimes humorous and detailed journal of this neat and effective guerrilla operation which is translated into English for the first time here, and is the centrepiece of this book. In addition to de Troyes's Journal there are accounts by two other members of the French expedition and also the reports of the unfortunate Hudson's Bay Company employees who were captured.

The book opens with an historical introduction by J. R. Turnbull who sets the scene and traces the careers of some of the men involved in the expedition. Following the French and English accounts, Dr. Kenyon brings the story down to the present with a description of the rediscovery of Fort Albany and the remarkable archeological finds — including the extensive remains of de Troyes's battle — which have been

The Battle for James Bay 1686 combines historical perspective, documentary narrative, and archeological evidence to give a three-dimensional view of this dramatic episode in early Canadian history.

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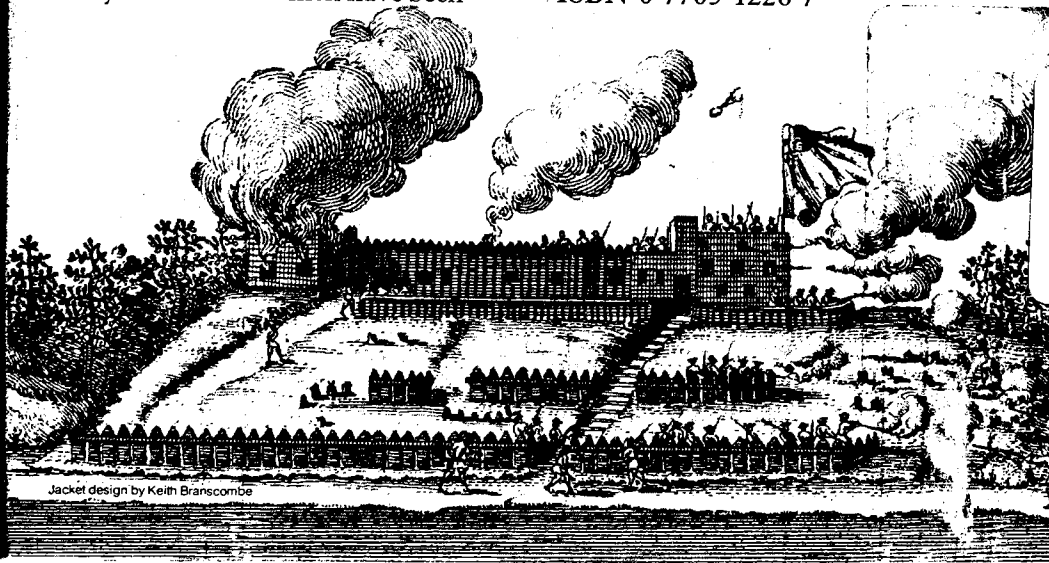
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THE BATTLE FOR JAMES BAY

1686

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I

De Troyes's expedition to James Bay in 1686 was not an isolated raid, a rash and untypical break with French policy. It was, rather, another response to the challenge presented the Canadian fur trade by the presence of English traders on the northern flank of New France, a presence probably rendered all the more irritating by the knowledge that the English might not have been there at all had it not been for the French.

For it was Frenchmen, in the persons of Pierre Esprit Radisson and Médart Chouart, Sieur des Groseilliers — the almost legendary figures of the fur trade — who turned to the English in the 1660s when the French government rejected their dream of capturing the trade in prime beaver by sailing into Hudson Bay and establishing trading posts along its shores. The first such English ship entered the Bay in 1668; its return to England, laden with furs, provided the economic proof necessary. The Hudson's Bay Company was formed in 1670.

To the commercial rivalry that developed after that date must be added the conflicting French and English dreams of empire. The discovery of a Northwest Passage to the riches of the east, despite repeated failures in the search, was still a vivid possibility, and it seemed to both French and English that the west shore of Hudson Bay might yield such a passage. Neither country, therefore, was prepared to recognize the exclusive right of the other to the lands surrounding Hudson Bay, for to do so would have meant the surrender of a potential trade route of enormous value. At the very time de Troyes was leading his expedition to the Bay, English and French diplomats were involved in negotiating their claims and counterclaims at the Court of St. James in London.

The English claimed the Bay and surrounding territory by right of prior discovery, going back as far as the voyages of Frobisher and John Davis in the late sixteenth century, but most importantly to the explorations of Henry Hudson in 1610-11 and Sir Thomas Button in 1612-13. Thomas James and Luke Foxe visited the Bay in 1631, and Foxe had spent the winter of 1631-2 on Charlton Island

in the southern part of James Bay. But no permanent settlements had been established, and the English had not returned to the Bay for almost forty years until the *Nonsuch*, bearing Groseilliers, sailed into those waters in the summer of 1668. Radisson's ship, the *Eaglet*, should have been there too, but it had been forced to turn back by navigational problems — ice floes and bad weather — the hazards of Arctic navigation which would continue to harass mariners in future years.

The French diplomats did not deny that the English had been there first; such a denial would have been too easily refuted. Rather, they claimed, and with some reason, that the early English voyages to the Bay were voyages in search of a Northwest Passage, and that Hudson Bay was used merely in transit as part of the navigation of the high seas. Such voyages did not confer territorial rights to land glimpsed in passing. Territorial rights could come only from a physical presence and therefore were based on occupation.

By 1686, of course, the English did have occupational rights. Over the previous fifteen years, the Hudson's Bay Company had established several trading posts: three on James Bay — the "Bottom of the Bay" in their parlance — and one halfway up the western shore of Hudson Bay proper.

The three posts on James Bay were known to the English as Fort Albany, Moose Factory, and Charles Fort, but these posts, like various rivers and other landmarks, were frequently given different designations by the French or the Indians. Thus Fort Albany was also known as Quichichouan, one of several attempts at a phonetic rendition of the Cree name, and then as Fort Ste. Anne after its capture by de Troyes. Moose Factory was known as Mon-sipi or Monsoni (Moosonee, anyone?) and Charles Fort gradually became known as Rupert from the name of the river at whose mouth it was located. If some confusion existed at the Bottom of the Bay, the confusion became considerably greater when the post on the western shore of Hudson Bay was added to the roster.

Port Nelson was at the mouth of the Nelson River (Rivière Bourbon to the French). Another river, the Hayes (Ste. Thérèse)

drained into Hudson Bay within a few miles of the Nelson. Both rivers flowed from the west, not the south, and thus made the Port Nelson area the most desirable trading location from which to secure the rich peltry of the west. Naturally, the area was very much in dispute between French and English traders.

Port Nelson, while it shared certain things in common with the forts on James Bay — location at the mouth of a river, a stockade, and cannon — was significantly different in one important way. It was inaccessible to a land-based expedition coming from the St. Lawrence by canoe.

The James Bay posts were not so fortunate, for their rivers flowed from the south, providing several highways for French intruders. Albnel reached them twice, Jolliet followed him in 1679, and the Sieur Peré and his two companions made the journey in 1685. It was an extremely difficult journey, to be sure, but not an impossible one. Nevertheless, despite warnings from their superiors, the Bay men were lulled into a sense of security by the thought that they could deal easily with small groups of French traders or priests poaching on their preserve. They did not seriously contemplate a raiding party of over a hundred men emerging out of the wilderness. In this they were committing the all too human error of assuming that, since such an expedition was beyond their physical capacities and skills, it must be beyond those of the French.

The French diplomats did not even deny that the English had occupational rights; they denied, rather, that these posts conferred *exclusive* occupational rights. French fur traders were quick to point out to their representatives that the English “were obliged to intrude there by the aid of the aforementioned de Groseilliers and Radisson, inhabitants of Canada, who deserted for the first time the French Company they served. It was not truly credible that the treason of these two men would be used as title against the French Company.”

Treason is a strong word, but its use is understandable. Radisson and Groseilliers had returned to the bosom of the French in 1678, had been deeply involved in the formation of the “French Com-

pany” referred to — the Compagnie du Nord — and had made a voyage to the Bay by sea on its behalf. Radisson had subsequently reverted to the Hudson’s Bay Company, a change of allegiance he announced to the French by capturing in 1684 the French fort he had helped build in 1683, taking his own nephew, Groseilliers’s son, prisoner in the process. Radisson knew one loyalty only, and that was not to a country or king but to the fur trade out of the Bay.

While the French had reason enough to reject any claim the English might make based on the activities of Radisson and Groseilliers, they made counterclaims of discovery which predated 1670. One was based on a voyage along the coast of Labrador made by Jean Bourdon in 1657. Bourdon was in search of the Bay, but bad weather and ice turned him back at 55 degrees north latitude before he could even enter Hudson Strait. They could also point to the voyage in search of the Northwest Passage made in 1670 by Lawrence Van Heemskerck, a Dutchman in the French service, sent out from France by order of Louis XIV but turned back, like Bourdon, by the problems of Arctic navigation. In themselves, these voyages did not constitute much of a claim, but to them was added the overland journey of the Jesuit fathers Dablon and Druillettes who in 1661 started out from Tadoussac up the Saguenay River for Hudson Bay. Forced to turn back shortly after reaching the height of land between New France and the Bay, they nevertheless claimed on behalf of the French Crown the land draining north from that watershed to the Bay.

In the twenty-five years between Dablon’s distant reconnaissance and de Troyes’s expedition, the French did not forget the Bay. In the decade before the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company, however, the colony of New France was involved in pressing problems of development in the St. Lawrence Valley which precluded any serious concern for a distant, uninhabited area. It was not even known for certain that the Mer du Nord (the Northern Sea) and Hudson Bay were the same body of water.

Father Dablon, writing in the Jesuit Relation of 1660-1, the annual report of the Jesuit missions to the superiors of their Order

in France, summed up French geographical knowledge of the area. "We have known," he said, "for a long time that the Northern Sea was at our back, inhabited by a number of Indians who have never known Europeans, that it is this sea which is contiguous to that of China, and that only the gateway remains to be discovered, that it is there that one can see this famous Bay, seventy leagues wide and two hundred and sixty leagues long, discovered for the first time by Husson [*sic*] who gave it its name without receiving other fame than that of being the first to uncover a road to unknown Empires."

Dablon's comments sum up well the interest in the North. The Northwest Passage was there, just awaiting a discoverer; the Indians were there, needing missionaries to bring them the word of God. The geographic confusion, too, is evident, and easily explained. The seventeenth-century explorer had neither sextant nor chronometer to help him determine his position; he was obliged to use the astrolabe, an instrument which could determine latitude — one's distance north or south of the equator — with some accuracy but was useless in determining longitude — distance east or west of the prime meridian. Thus there was nothing inconsistent in the French thinking that the Northern Sea and Hudson Bay might be two contiguous bodies of water in the same general latitude — the Great Lakes, after all, fitted that definition.

Nine years later, the problem had not yet been resolved. Dablon, writing in the Jesuit Relation of 1669-70, repeated the same two reasons for seeking out the Bay. The missionary goal, naturally, took precedence, but the second was to discover, conclusively, if the Mer du Nord and Hudson Bay were really one and the same. Dablon very sensibly suggested that the way to find this out was to travel overland to the Bay, thus fixing its position relative to New France. The lure of the Northwest Passage and the conversion of the Indians were not sufficient incentive alone to launch any concerted drive to the Bay; it took the additional impetus of the fur trade, the need for prime pelts of beaver, to give urgency to this undertaking. Commercial competition, imperial designs, missionary zeal, all these would play their part in the interval

between the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company and de Troyes's expedition sixteen years later.

English penetration of the Bay had not gone unnoticed by the French. Even the first exploratory voyage of the *Nonsuch* in 1668 had been reported by an Indian to Father Albanel, like Dablon a Jesuit missionary. This unofficial intelligence network of Indian and Jesuit was of great value, even if this particular report was a little garbled. (The Indian took the *Nonsuch* for a French ship.) In 1670, when two English ships entered the Bay, Indians again reported their presence to Tadoussac, this time correctly. By November of that year the Intendant, Talon, had planned a countermove and sent word of it to France. The French government, however, deemed no action either necessary or desirable at that time.

With their representative in New France urging action upon them it seems all the more surprising that French metropolitan officials took such a casual attitude toward the foundation of the Hudson's Bay Company. Their reasons lay in a combination of diplomatic considerations and the dictates of French colonial policy. For one thing, the Company did not appear at the beginning as a threat to French commercial interests, for the French had no established posts on the Bay whose trade could be damaged by the appearance of two English ships carrying indifferent cargoes of trade goods. Even if it had appeared more dangerous, it is doubtful that Louis XIV at Versailles would have taken strong action.

To ensure a peaceful relationship with England, he was secretly subsidizing its king, Charles II, while pursuing a policy of European continental expansion. Within two years of the granting of the Hudson's Bay Company Charter in May of 1670, the French and the English were involved in a wartime alliance against the Dutch, their mutual commercial rival on the high seas. It is an axiom of diplomacy that one does not needlessly anger or thwart potential allies, and in 1670 there appeared to be no such need.

French colonial policy contributed to this "live and let live" attitude as well. Under Louis XIV's great minister, Colbert, a determined attempt was being made during those years to build up a

