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The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes

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PROLOGUE

The Fur Trade and New France to 1676

IN 1666, A JESUIT MISSIONARY set to paper an Ojibwa story of the culture hero Michabous, guardian of the Earth and its creatures:

They believe that [Lake Superior] is a pond made by beavers, and that its dam was double, the first being at the place called by us the Sault, and the second five leagues below. Angered by the damming of the river the manitou Michabous came up the Saint Mary's, smashed the dams, and chased the beaver from the lake. In view of so mighty an enemy, the beavers changed their location, and withdrew to another lake, whence they afterward, by means of rivers flowing from it, arrived at the North Sea, whence they intended to swim to France; but finding the water bitter, they lost heart, and spread throughout the rivers and lakes of this entire country. And that is why there are no beavers in France and the French come to get them here.¹

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, strangers came to the Great Lakes. First French then English, they would make the region the cockpit of a great contest which would shape the history of a continent. It was a confusing time and the Indians sought to explain it in the context of the world they knew, one which would not last much longer.

In 1497 Giovanni Caboto, sailing for Henry VII of England, discovered the island of Newfoundland. He found little of consequence, but reported an extraordinary number of codfish off-

shore. The news spread quickly and by 1550 cod accounted for 60 percent of all the fish consumed in Europe. By 1578 nearly 400 ships, Spanish, Basque, French, Portuguese, and English, worked the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. The drying stations of this exploding industry quickly attracted local Indians eager to trade. They wanted, in particular, cloth and iron goods. Late Stone Age people, they had little to offer in return, but there was one thing: beaver.

Europeans had used beaver fur for hatters' felt since the Middle Ages. Rising population and loss of habitat, however, had nearly wiped out the creature in the west. Russia had assumed the role of Europe's major supplier and could charge what the market would bear. In the late sixteenth century, demand rose as men's hats grew in size and grandeur. The underhairs of the beaver's coat have a rough surface which helped mat the felt into a particularly strong, waterproof material. Given the structural demands of the new fashion, beaver became the premier material for the gentleman's chapeau. Canada offered a new source which broke the Russian monopoly. In 1581 and 1582, a Breton ship turned a nice profit trading around the Gulf of Saint Lawrence for furs exclusively. In 1583 three fur-trading vessels set out from Saint Malo. Two ascended the Saint Lawrence River as far as Montreal and another coasted south from Nova Scotia to Maine. The following year, five traders set out from Saint Malo, and ten the next. By 1600, it was reported that the French were taking as much as 30,000 crowns in beaver and otter from the Saint Lawrence alone.

By the end of the sixteenth century, however, the English threatened to take over the fishery and growing competition among French fur traders had begun to cripple profits. In 1598, King Henri IV sought to establish a settlement which could protect French interests, regulate trade, and preserve order. The Canadian winter and scurvy wrecked early attempts at colonization, but in 1608 the French navigator Samuel de Champlain established a post on the lower Saint Lawrence which would take permanent hold. "I arrived there on the 3rd of July, when I searched for a place suitable for our settlement; but I could find none more convenient or better suited than the point of Quebec." By September, Champlain's post had taken shape: "I had the work of our quarters continued, which was composed of

three buildings of two stories. Each one was three fathoms long, and two and a half wide, with a fine cellar six feet deep. . . . There were also ditches, fifteen feet wide and six deep. On the other side of the ditches I constructed several spurs, which enclosed a part of the dwelling, at the points where we placed our cannon."²²

Having secured a base, Champlain set out to reconnoiter the river. By 1609, European goods had circulated among the Indians for nearly three-quarters of a century. Iron goods and fabrics the coastal peoples had obtained were, in turn, traded upriver to the Great Lakes. By 1525, European goods had appeared as far west as Lake Ontario, by 1580, Lake Huron, and by 1590 iron tools were replacing flint and stone implements in upstate New York. Access to the Saint Lawrence had become a matter of some importance and Champlain found himself in the midst of a war. Exploring near Montreal Island, he encountered a party of Huron, Algonquin, and Montagnais on their way to fight the Iroquois who controlled the south shore of Lake Ontario and the upper Saint Lawrence. Eager to form a commercial alliance, he accepted an invitation to join the expedition. The two sides met on Lake Champlain. As the battle began, the explorer "marched some twenty paces in advance of the rest, until I was within about thirty paces of the enemy. When I saw them making a move to fire at us, I rested my musket against my cheek, and aimed directly at one of the three [Iroquois] chiefs."²³ Having double-charged his matchlock, Champlain hit two with his first shot. One of his companions finished the third. Stunned, the rest of the Iroquois turned and fled. With this skirmish, Champlain had cemented an alliance with the Huron and begun what would prove nearly a century of warfare with the Iroquois.

Over the next six years, Champlain accompanied Indian parties as far west as the Georgian Bay, exploring the country and strengthening his ties to the Huron. He finally returned to Quebec in July 1616 and made no further journeys into the interior. In his middle forties, with a bad knee, he was no longer the man he had been a decade earlier. Moreover, the management of his trading post gave him more than enough to do. Henri IV had died by an assassin's hand in 1610 and support for the colony waxed and waned for the next half century. Rival traders sought to break Champlain's monopoly and he made repeated trips back to France to obtain funding and defend his title to the country.

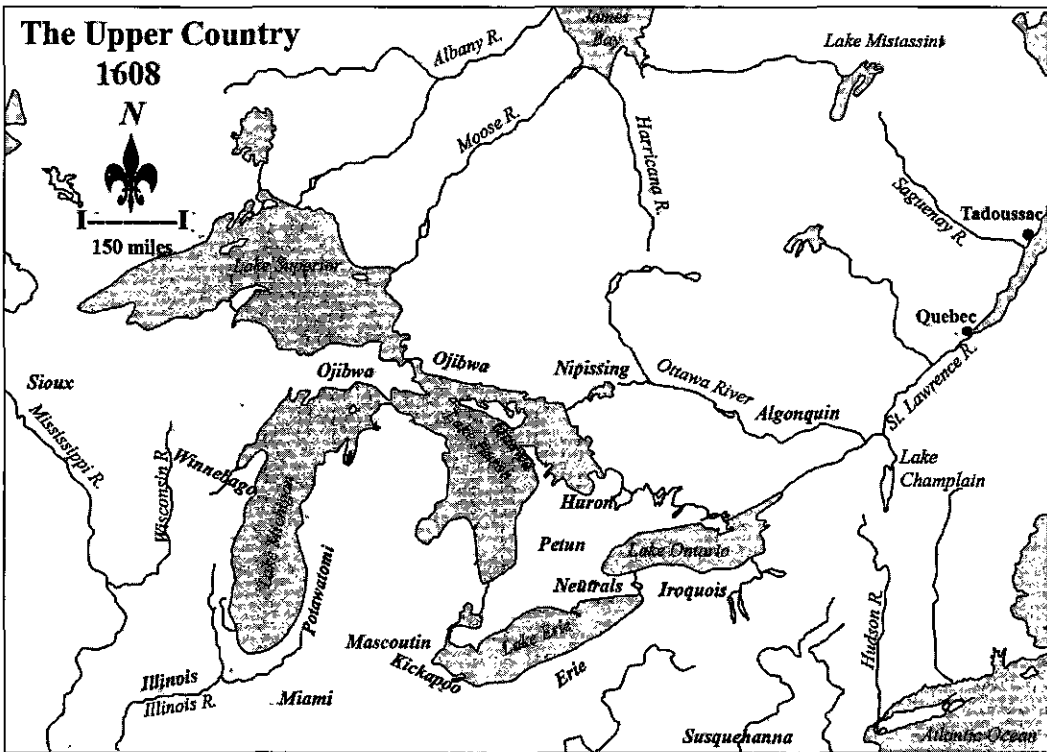
The Upper Country

1608

N



150 miles



In 1629 the English captured Quebec and Champlain could not return until 1633. He spent the remainder of his life rebuilding the settlement and establishing posts upriver, dying at Quebec in 1635.

The "Sweet Seas," as Champlain called the Great Lakes, were home to perhaps 200,000–250,000 people in 1600.⁴ They had arrived about 9000 BC, following the retreating glaciers. Originally hunter-gatherers, many had become farmers by around 500 AD as maize spread north from Mexico. Beans seemed to have arrived in the thirteenth century. Agriculture became common up to 45 degrees north latitude, roughly the north shores of Lakes Huron and Michigan. North of this, however, the frosts came too early. Thus the world the French encountered was a mixture of old and new. Northern Indians hunted and fished as they had for millennia. To the south, the inhabitants relied principally on farming.⁵

The Great Lakes peoples spoke three basic languages, divided into a host of dialects: Iroquoian, Algonkian, and Siouхан. The Iroquoian-speakers—the Iroquois and Huron Confederacies, the Susquehannock, and the Erie—accounted for between 60,000 and 110,000 people. The Algonkians—the Illiniwek Confederacy, the Ottawa, Potawatomi, Ojibwa, and a dozen smaller nations—comprised some 100,000 people. The Siouхан-speakers—the Sioux and Winnebago—had perhaps 40,000. The bulk of the population, as much as 80 percent, lived south of the 45-degree boundary. These farmers lived in large relatively permanent towns and population density could be considerable. Huronia, present-day Simcoe County, Ontario, had probably 25,000–30,000 people. North of the farming boundary, population densities tended to drop sharply. The Ojibwa and Cree who lived around Lake Superior and farther north had about one person for every two square miles.⁶

This northern country was a region of dense forests, lakes, and rivers. To avoid the trackless woods and the clouds of biting insects which infested them, people used the water as highways: first with rafts and then dugout canoes. These worked well enough on the rivers south of the Great Lakes, but were too low-sided for open water and too heavy to be carried around the rapids and waterfalls characteristic of the northern rivers. At some point, however, the Indians developed a new craft both

lighter and more versatile than the dugout: the birchbark canoe, which could be carried, or portaged, around obstacles, and had a higher freeboard, which permitted the Indians to cautiously ply the lakes as well. The birchbark canoe allowed hunters to travel greater distances in search of game and fostered a long-distance trade in luxury commodities like copper, shells, mica, and tobacco. The range of the birch forests necessary for the construction of canoes roughly corresponded to the northern edge of the corn-growing region and this interface produced several nations of trader-farmers, the Huron and Ottawa in particular.

Given all of this, the French fur trade evolved into a system quite different from that of our Rocky Mountain Men. To begin, New France had no trappers. Until the invention of the spring trap around 1800, catching beaver was a daunting proposition. In spring, the Indians used deadfall traps, nets, and occasionally dogs: Since winter pelts brought the best price, the hunting took place in the cold months: "During the winter they capture them in nets and under the ice. They cut an opening in the ice near the beaver's house and put into the hole a net with some wood which serves as bait. The poor animal, searching for something else to eat, gets caught in a net made of good, strong, double cord; it must be hauled out quickly before it cuts the net to bits. Once it is taken from the water, through the hole in the ice, they kill it with a big club." Hardier souls used a more direct approach: "The other way of taking them under the ice is more noble. Not all of the Indians use this method, only the most skillful. With their hatchets they break apart the cabin or house of the beaver, which is indeed most wonderfully made."⁷ As the beavers attempted to escape, the hunters would spear them and often had to leap into the freezing water to recover the creature. For all of his work, a good hunter might take fifty or sixty pelts between October and May.

Understandably, the French left the hunting to the Indians. Equally important, one could not simply trap the most valuable grade of pelt: *castor gras*, or greasy beaver. Indians used these, worn fur side in, for winter clothing. By spring, their robes had become saturated with body oil and grease from the cooking fires. The movements of the wearer had, moreover, loosened the outer guard hairs of the pelt, laying bare the underfur beneath. This fat-saturated fur soon became the most sought-after mate-

rial for the hatter's trade. Here again, it lay in the interests of the French to buy fur rather than hunt for themselves. For their part, the Indians thought this fascination with the beaver comic. The Jesuit Father Paul Le Jeune tells of a common Indian joke: "The beaver knows how to make all things to perfection: It makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; in short, it makes everything."⁸

The French system also arose from simple necessity. Champlain had arrived at Quebec in 1608 with 28 men. In 1620, he had 60 and a decade later 117. By 1640, the number had risen to only 240. The organization of the trade reflected the fact that the French simply lacked the manpower to do anything else. In practice, the real work fell to the Hurons. Each year, 200-250 Hurons would make the 1,400-mile round-trip from Georgian Bay to the Saint Lawrence to exchange pelts for fabrics, metal goods, and jewelry. Others would paddle to Sault Sainte Marie to exchange these and tobacco for furs, which they would then reship east. By the 1620s, Champlain had perhaps a dozen missionaries and interpreters in Huronia itself. The number would eventually reach twenty or thirty priests, interpreters, servants, and soldiers, but up to 1649 the trade remained Huron.⁹

This commerce predated the Europeans. Huronia lay near the northern maize boundary. Its inhabitants had corn and could also obtain tobacco, important in religious ritual, as an appetite suppressant, and for its narcotic properties, from their southern neighbors the Petuns. On the other hand, intensively cultivated with a population of perhaps 25,000 people, Huronia had few furs. However, close by lay birch forests for canoes. So it is no surprise that the Huron became traders, exchanging corn and tobacco with northern peoples for pelts. Lake Superior, moreover, had raw copper so pure that it could be worked cold into items of jewelry, which the Huron reexported south and east.

Up to this point, Huron commerce can be discussed in European terms. The *ends* of trade, however, differed sharply. Indians did not think of profit as a Dutchman might. Exchange obtained useful products, but the surplus did not become wealth in the European sense. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Frenchman Marc Lescarbot observed that "all savages do live in common. . . . If it happen, then, that our savages have venison or other food, all the company have part of it. They have

this mutual charity, which hath been taken from us since that mine and thine have come into the world.”¹⁰ Lescarbot had no illusions that he had stumbled upon the Garden of Eden. Rather, he perceived shrewdly that there was something else at stake here: “There is no man that giveth, intending to lose. If a great personage giveth to a mean man, that is for to draw some service from him. Even that which is given to the poor is to receive the hundredfold according to the promise of the gospel.”¹¹ A successful trader earned prestige, but largely by giving his profits away as gifts. The Huron used trade much as individuals did. It gave them a kind of suzerainty over their neighbors the Petuns, Neutrals, and Tobacco People and allowed them to forge alliances among other nations.

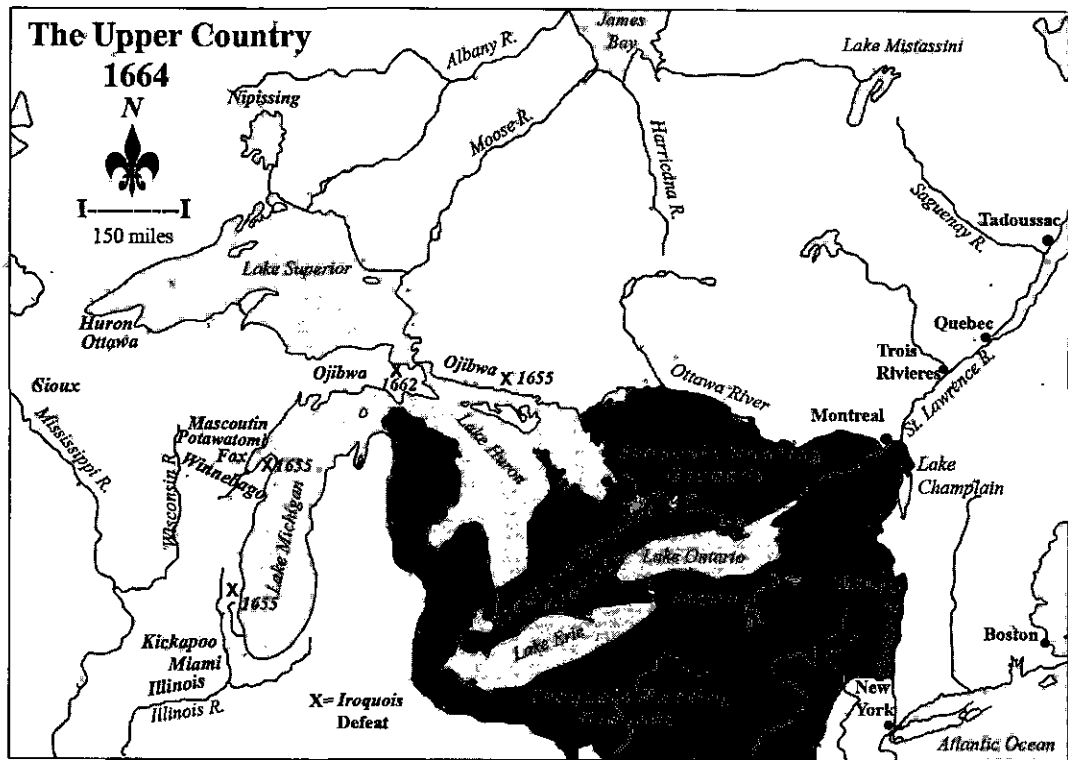
The arrival of the French did not really change the system. The Huron benefited from access to European goods and the demand these enjoyed among their customers, but there was really nothing like a commercial revolution in the Lakes. On the other hand, the prestige of the alliance gave the Huron leverage with their neighbors. In 1634, they asked the interpreter Jean Nicolet to negotiate with the powerful Winnebago nation. He had a reputation for such things, having arranged an Iroquois-Algonquin treaty a decade earlier. Arriving in Green Bay, he planted two sticks in the ground and hung presents from them to announce his good intentions. Four or five thousand people quickly gathered from neighboring nations to see their first European. He did not disappoint: “He wore a grand robe of Chinese damask, all strewn with flowers and birds of many colors. No sooner did they perceive him than the women and children fled, at the sight of a man who carried thunder in both hands—for thus they called the two pistols he held.”¹² The negotiations prospered and Nicolet returned with the desired treaty.

In this early period, the French had a powerful hold over the Indian imagination. In the 1830s, the Sauk chief Black Hawk related how his great-grandfather Na-Na-Ma-Kee had met his first Frenchman. The Great Spirit told him that he would meet a “white man who would be to him his father” four years hence and he fasted and dreamed for the next three in preparation.¹³ Na-Na-Ma-Kee and his two brothers traveled five days to the east, where they encountered a tent in which sat the son of the King of France. The Prince, too, had been instructed by the

Great Spirit to journey west to meet the Indians, who would be "his children." The King had laughed, but he crossed the Atlantic and journeyed to the place where he met Na-Na-Ma-Kee. From this encounter, said Black Hawk, the Sauk became part of the French alliance and his great-grandfather a chief. The alliance provided the Huron with considerable benefits, but at a price: war with the Iroquois. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, warfare had been endemic among the Great Lakes peoples, but relatively small in scope and short in duration. The newcomers now raised the stakes.

By tradition the Iroquois Confederacy, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations, began around 1570. Perennially at war, they had put aside their differences through the teachings of a Huron shaman Deganawida and the Onondaga chief Hiawatha. Over the next forty years, the united Iroquois drove the Algonquin from the upper Saint Lawrence. The vanquished appealed to the Huron and Montagnais, and the two sides were locked in warfare when the French arrived at Quebec in 1608. Champlain's alliance with the northern Indians gave them the upper hand for a time. In 1614, however, Dutch traders built a post, Fort Orange, on the Hudson River. Supplied with iron goods and later muskets, the Iroquois now struck back. By 1632, they had recovered the upper Saint Lawrence and, by 1637, had conquered the lower Ottawa Valley. Between 1645 and 1649, an epidemic struck Huronia, killing nearly half the population, and the Iroquois mounted a series of attacks which drove them from Georgian Bay. In 1651, the Five Nations pushed the Neutrals out of Ontario as well. By 1655, they had defeated the Susquehannocks and the next year the Erie nation fell. In the aftermath of this, most of the nations of the eastern Great Lakes and the Ohio River Valley fled west into Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Arkansas.

Iroquoian power had now reached its zenith. The Confederacy nominally controlled vast territories in Ontario and the Middle West. Adopted captives, moreover, had made up population losses from war and epidemics. With perhaps 25,000 people, it stood as the largest Indian power east of the Mississippi. For the French, these successes had been a disaster. In 1653, a Jesuit reported: "Before the devastation of the Hurons, a hundred canoes used to come to trade, all laden with Beaver-skins; the



Algonquins brought them from all directions; and each year we had two or three hundred thousand livres' worth." The Five Nations had changed all of that, he reported; "the Huron fleets no longer come down to trade; the Algonquins are depopulated; and the more distant Nations are withdrawing still farther. . . . For a year, the warehouse of Montreal has not bought a single Beaver-skin from the Savages."¹⁴ With their Indian trade in tatters, the colony faced ruin.

Iroquois power, however, was more apparent than real. Rather than submit, its opponents had, for the most part, fled, and remained defiant. Iroquois policy also sought to isolate the French from their fur suppliers and force them to trade exclusively with the Five Nations. This the French refused to do. Half a century of war had, thus, accomplished very little. Moreover, the tide had actually begun to turn. Each Iroquois success drew the Five Nations deeper into the interior and by the early 1650s war parties had to march as much as 600–700 miles to attack their enemies. Traveling on foot rather than by canoe, they had to obtain their provisions along the way. If the hunting failed, an expedition could quickly come to grief. Equally serious, if for any reason it had to retreat, it was vulnerable. Both problems now began to cripple the Iroquois. The first great failure came in 1655. A war party sent to Wisconsin to finish the Huron ran out of food and was defeated on Green Bay. The Illiniwek and Ojibwa then wiped out the survivors on their way home. In 1662, the Ojibwa destroyed another force sent to Lake Superior to avenge this defeat. Failing in the west, the Iroquois attacked the French settlements directly. The Canadians petitioned for aid and in 1663 Louis XIV royalized the colony and sent the 1,250-man Regiment de Carignan-Salières to Quebec two years later. In 1666, it mounted an expedition which forced the Mohawk to sue for peace.

The Canadians' plea for assistance arrived in Paris at a critical juncture. In the sixty years since the founding of Quebec, the world had changed a great deal. England had resolved a half century of political and religious conflict, restoring Charles Stuart as its king. France had weathered storms as well. Beginning with the murder of Henri IV in 1610, protracted religious upheavals, foreign wars, and aristocratic rebellion had wracked the country. These ended in 1661, when Louis XIV assumed personal control

of his realm. With their newfound peace, the two princes began to look outward toward the Atlantic. Other events fed this confidence. Spain's "Golden Age" had finally run its course. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) had inflicted a mortal wound and Spain now entered a decline which would last the next three centuries. The war had crippled Austria too. Checked in its bid to reunite the Holy Roman Empire under Habsburg authority, it would never again threaten Europe. The rest of Germany would languish, a polyglot nonentity, for another century. Holland remained the commercial powerhouse of Europe but, with an ambitious France to the south and a resurgent England to the northwest, the Dutch found themselves badly outflanked. In 1652-54, Oliver Cromwell's fleet stunned them in the first Anglo-Dutch war. Over the next quarter century, England would co-opt much of Holland's commerce. All in all, England and France found themselves in positions of relative power previously unknown. Now the question became: What should they do with it?

For Canada, the future seemed bright in 1667. It was a royal colony of the greatest prince in Christendom, and who knew what might be accomplished? In this euphoria, the Jesuit Father François Le Mercier observed: "We have seen Canada transformed. . . it is no longer that forbidding and frost-bound land which was painted in such unfavorable colors, but a veritable new France."¹⁵ He was, perhaps, guilty of overstatement. Lack of funds, the harsh climate, and war had all discouraged settlement. In 1663, New France possessed but three towns worth the name: Quebec, Trois-Rivières, and Montreal, with a scattering of farms along the Saint Lawrence between them and a population of only 3,215. The English to the south by contrast had perhaps 60,000 colonists and, with the resurgent Stuarts at the helm, these might become a problem. Equally important, the fur trade excepted, New France had no staple export.

Responsibility for this unpromising state of affairs fell to Louis's finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert. He saw New France as a source of raw materials and a market for French manufactures. Furs would remain important, but only as a part of a much grander plan. In the early 1660s, Holland controlled some 80 percent of Europe's seaborne commerce. Colbert wanted a merchant fleet to challenge this virtual monopoly and a navy to

crush it if competition and protection failed. Holland, however, dominated the Baltic Sea and the lumber, masts, and naval stores of Russia and Scandinavia. Canada's vast forests would provide the materials for his challenge. Additionally, the colony would export foodstuffs to France's Caribbean islands. Finally, the voyages required to move all of these goods would employ thousands of French sailors who could then be impressed in time of war.

A grand plan, but Colbert knew all too well the difficulties facing him. Rocks, shoals, and fog made the Saint Lawrence between Quebec and the Gulf extremely dangerous for shipping. Contrary winds often halted vessels for weeks in the narrow channel. The headland which marked the beginning of the river came to be known as Cap Tourmente (Cape Torment) for the often agonizing delays. Even more serious, ice blocked access to the channel five or six months a year and September gales reduced this further. It seemed unlikely that such a port could sustain a large-scale colonial enterprise. The plan would also require immense amounts of labor, which Colbert was loath to send. In a letter, the minister declared, "It would not be prudent to depopulate [Louis's] Kingdom which he should do to people Canada." Further, he questioned what precisely the new colonists would eat. "If his Majesty removed thither a greater number of men than what the land, now cleared, would feed 'tis certain that if they did not all perish at once they would at least suffer great privations." These would, in turn, become more of a burden than an asset to the colony. The proper course, he concluded, "is to cause justice to reign there, to establish a good police, to preserve the inhabitants in safety, to procure them peace, repose, and plenty, and to discipline them against all sorts of enemies; . . . being well attended to, the country will get filled up insensibly, and in the course of time may become very considerable."¹⁶

Colbert had more on his mind than mere expense, however. In the face of English naval power, investing in an American enterprise risked the King's prestige. Given this, he observed, "It would be better to restrict yourselves to an extent of land which the colony could protect by itself, than to claim too vast an amount, part of which one might perhaps be obliged one day to abandon."¹⁷ It was not to be. While Colbert had envisioned a

small, orderly agricultural colony, New France would quickly prove something different entirely. The removal of the threat to their homes freed the Canadians to dream dreams, and gave them the confidence to do so.

Demographics played a role as well. In 1663, the population stood at around 3,000. By 1666, this had risen to 4,244, and the peculiar makeup of the total made for an explosive mix: the various monopoly companies which originally supported the colony had customarily hired only male indentures. This had resulted in roughly seven men for each woman of marriageable age. If one wished to marry, most men had one of two options: find an Indian wife or go home. Probably half of them chose the latter. Marriage involved more than romance or biology, as a farm took a great deal of labor: too much for one man without a wife and children. The Regiment de Carignan-Salières added to this problem. After the peace of 1667 Louis, to save himself the cost of shipping his soldiers home, offered them the choice of returning or remaining in the colony. Some 400 elected to stay as colonists and another 100 went into garrison. This disproportionately male society, tough, inured to hardship, and not overly fond of husbandry, would recast New France from a subsistence farming society into a confident, turbulent, aggressive, and spectacularly expansionist enterprise.

Just at this moment, the Canadians discovered an unlikely ally. To further his plans, Colbert dispatched Jean Talon to the colony to oversee Canada's development. A born promoter, he urged exploiting all of its resources at once: lumbering, fishing, farming, ship-building, and cattle-raising. He also advocated massive immigration, especially of women. Colbert, however, leery of investing so much in so dubious a project, feared sending out so many potential soldiers and laborers. Immigration remained limited and the population grew from 3,215 in 1663 to only 7,605 a decade later. Despite this, Talon persevered. While loyal to Colbert, he thought he saw something his master did not. Geography had imposed its own logic on the colony:

Canada is of such a vast extent that I know not its limits on the North, they are at so great a distance from us; and on the south there is nothing to prevent his Majesty's name and arms from being carried as far as Florida, New Sweden, New Netherlands, New England; and that

through the first of these access can be even had to Mexico. All this country is watered diversely by the Saint Lawrence, and the beautiful rivers which flow into it laterally, that communicate with the diverse Indian nations rich in furs, especially the more northern of them. The southern nations may also be reached by way of Lake Ontario. . . . If these southern nations do not abound in peltries as do those of the north, they may have more precious commodities.¹⁸

The Saint Lawrence offered a highway to the fur country, returning traders reported evidence of rich mines, and there were rumors of a great river which might flow to the Pacific. To ignore the interior seemed absurd and even dangerous. England had seized New Netherlands in 1664, but her control of the region was tenuous. However, in 1670 Charles II, raised in France and privately Catholic, signed the secret Treaty of Dover with Louis XIV, agreeing to support his ambitions in the Netherlands in exchange for an annuity and a hazy promise to restore Catholicism in England. Thus, the Third Anglo-Dutch War coincided with a French invasion of the Netherlands. Holland sought aid from Spain, but French and English buccaneers had run amok in the West Indies and tied up such help as it might have provided. The Dutch had had to make a bitter decision: England threatened their trade, but France threatened their very existence. Therefore, Holland's survival depended on an accommodation with Charles II to break up the Anglo-French coalition. In one of the sorrier episodes of European history, the English had finally throttled the Dutch, and New York would remain theirs. Holland had never challenged New France directly, but now England might. The Saint Lawrence Basin thus represented both an opportunity and a threat. Whoever seized it controlled the heart of the continent. Whoever did not would find themselves with powerful enemies on their western flank.

Colbert's concerns notwithstanding, Talon sent men west to reconnoiter the country and claim it for France: "I have dispatched persons of resolution, who promise to penetrate further than has been done. . . . These adventurers are to keep journals in all instances, and . . . in all cases they are to take possession, display the King's arms and draw up *procés verbaux* to serve as titles."¹⁹ In 1666, Adrien Jolliet made a voyage to Lake Superior with seven other traders. The next year, Nicholas Perrot went

trading in Wisconsin and worked to bring its Indians into an alliance. In 1668, Talon recruited Jolliet and Jean Peré to look for mines along the shores of Lake Superior. The following year, the Sulpicians Dollier Casson and Galinéé explored Lakes Ontario and Erie. In 1671, Talon sent Father Charles Albanel to Hudson's Bay to claim the country and the Sieur de Saint Lusson to Sault Sainte Marie on a similar errand. Finally, in 1672, he dispatched Adrien Jolliet's brother Louis and the Jesuit Jacques Marquette to look for the fabled western river which would lead to the Pacific.

Talon's explorations added an immense territory to France's New World claims, but there was a problem. He had drawn his agents, for the most part, from either the missionaries or Canadians who had gone west in their service. Men of good character with ties to the church and the governor's palace, the *intendant* could rely upon them. However, a new sort of trader had begun to appear. The demobilization of the Carignan troops had released some 400 French regulars into the colony as settlers. Thieves, brawlers, and murderers, some resumed their old ways. Drunkenness became more common. Between 1667 and 1670, the authorities hung one man and condemned another to the galleys for counterfeiting, indicted two others for kidnap and rape, and publicly flogged another for assaulting a child. These sorts of goings on began to drift over into the fur trade as well. The governor bundled one officer out of the colony for, among other things, selling brandy to the Indians and suspected several others of doing the same. Despite the hazards, it would appear that many of the ex-soldiers went into the fur trade. It had the sort of risk and adventure which had drawn them to soldiering and also offered a living without the sort of work they considered work: husbandry, trades, and the like. Montreal became the center of the trade. The fur traders turned what had begun as essentially a religious community into a brawling, bustling commercial center: all in all, a volatile addition to the colony's makeup.

Despite Talon's enthusiasm for expansion, Colbert remained unimpressed. Rather than having the French go west to trade, he preferred the Indians bring their pelts down to the Saint Lawrence, and he established commercial fairs at Montreal for the purpose. It was, it seemed, too late for that. More and more Canadians set out for the backcountry each year despite dire

threats of service in the King's galleys or worse. These illegal traders became known as *coureurs de bois*, "bush runners," and by 1672, they had become a force to be reckoned with. In a letter to Colbert, the governor requested troops both as further protection against the Iroquois and as a check to the coureurs, "who will finally become, if care not be taken, like the Banditti of Naples or the Bucaneers of Santo Domingo—their number augmenting every day . . . despite all of the ordinances that have been made. . . . Their insolence as I am informed, extends even to the formation of leagues, and to the distribution of notices of rendezvous; threatening to build forts and repair towards [New York] and [Albany], boasting that they will be received and have protection there."²⁰ None of this had much effect and by decade's end the intendant Duchesneau estimated that some 700 Canadians did business in the backcountry.

America had a peculiar effect upon people, whether French or English. A sort of freedom flavored the air. In Virginia, this took form in the struggles of Governor William Berkeley and Nathaniel Bacon. In Massachusetts, it appeared in the battles over the founding of the general court. New France never witnessed the political upheavals of the English colonies: Seventeenth-century Frenchmen simply did not think that way. However, the struggle over the backcountry became a conflict about liberty as the French understood it: the freedom to go and come as they pleased, to touch their forelocks to no man. Pierre Radisson, perhaps the greatest of the coureurs, summed it up best when he observed: "We were as *Caesars in the wilderness*, there being none to oppose us."²¹

It was nevertheless an exacting calling. Radisson described the hardships of his 1660 voyage to Lake Superior: "It is a strange thing when victuals are wanting, work whole nights and dayes, lye downe on the bare ground, and not always that hap, the breech in the water, the feare in the buttocks, to have the belly empty, the weariness in the bones, and the drowsiness of the body by the bad weather that you are to suffer."²² On the other hand, it could be a wondrous life. For Frenchmen accustomed to the hardships of peasant life, there was the food. Writing of Lake Superior, Radisson observed: "For whatever a man could desire was to be had in great plenty; staggs, fish in abundance, and all sorts of meat."²³ Women were part of the lure as well. Among

Indians, Judeo-Christian notions of sexual propriety, in particular premarital chastity, did not carry much weight, as one French official observed: "The manner in which the girls live among the savages is very convenient. They are mistresses of their bodies until they are absolutely married."²⁴

The final attraction was economic. The Saint Lawrence Valley produced only French crops. Tobacco and sugar might make a man rich, as they did in the Chesapeake and the West Indies. Corn, peas, and hogs would not. Moreover, it took a year's back-breaking work for a man to clear an acre of ground for cultivation. Colbert's nascent industries would amount to little as well. From first to last, fur constituted 75 percent of the colony's exports. The trade offered a commoner the only way to get ahead. Even for the less ambitious, the lure of easy wealth proved powerful. When combined with the other attractions of the trader's life, it was an irresistible call for those hardy enough to heed it:

The Pedlars call'd *coureurs de bois*, export from hence every year several Canows full of Merchandise, which they dispose of among all of the Savage Nations of the Continent, by way of exchange for Beaver-Skins. Seven or eight days ago, I saw twenty-five or thirty of the Canows return with heavy Cargoes; each Canow was manag'd by two or three Men, and carried twenty hundred weight, i.e. forty packs of Beaver Skins, which are worth a hundred Crowns a piece. These Canows had 'been a year and eighteen months out. You would be amaz'd if you saw how lewd these Pedlars are when they return; how they Feast and Game, and how prodigal they are, not only in their Cloaths but upon Women. Such of 'em as are married, have the wisdom to retire to their own Houses; but the Batchelors act just as our *East India Men*, and Pirates are wont to do; for they Lavish, Eat, Drink, and Play all away as long as the Goods hold out; and when these are gone, they e'en sell their Embroidery, their lace, and even their Cloaths. This done, they are forced to go upon a New Voyage for their subsistence.²⁵

In light of all this, it is hard to see how Colbert's plan could have worked. In fact, the peculiar nature of the trade probably doomed it from the outset. The northern nations such as the Ojibwa were hunter-gatherers who migrated from place to place within their territories to take advantage of seasonal products: winter was for hunting, summer for fishing, autumn for the wild

rice. The farmers to the south also went on extended hunts before and after the harvest. They purchased only as much as they could carry, as possessions were an encumbrance. To expand production, the French needed more customers and this fact would drive them ever deeper into the west.

There were, however, two expedients. The first was brandy. The Great Lakes Indians had no intoxicants. Alcohol is as old as civilization. Indeed, some have argued that farming was as much about beer as bread. Over time, the West had evolved moral and legal strictures to govern drink. The Indians, by contrast, had a long tradition of inducing hallucination through hunger and physical suffering to communicate with the supernatural. As a result, Indians drank hard, and would give all that they owned for liquor. As a commercial lever, then, brandy offered a potent tool to the fur traders. It was a dangerous tool, however. Europeans functioned under a system of external constraints: death or prison for those who broke the statute law and Hell for those who broke the tenets of Christianity. Indian societies had very little of this. They remained largely clan-based and so the execution of an individual could provoke civil war; prison provided a poor deterrent in migratory societies which lived in bark houses; and finally, Indian religion had no real conception of Hell. In place of these, their societies functioned by a system of internal constraints. Honor and reputation were the highest aspirations of these peoples. Behavior that brought shame or disgrace was shunned and one who acted dishonorably was never allowed to forget it. Success in hunting or war brought renown. Failure brought ignominy. The Indians' famed stoicism, in fact, represented a form of ferocious self-control. Indian societies were, thus, powder kegs which needed only a spark to explode.

Alcohol provided the spark: "They are naturally very much inclined to drink and become intoxicated willingly because at this time they believe everything is permitted . . . [them]."²⁶ In this state, they could also turn violent. Knowing this, chiefs demanded the trade in spirits cease. The Jesuits supported them, having all too often seen years of evangelical labor destroyed in a night. Given the colony's weakness and the church's power, the brandy trade remained forbidden until 1665. In the years which followed, however, the situation became more ambiguous. The Jesuits and traders like the Jolliets continued to oppose it, as did

officers charged with keeping peace in the west. Now, however, other voices made themselves heard. Colbert, interested in wine exports, tended to look the other way. Talon, with his dreams of economic growth, declared it a necessary evil. In general, the new imperial administrators supported the trade while the old hands resisted it: a dangerous situation.

A less obvious, but ultimately more important, instrument lay in the nature of the other trade goods. With them, Neolithic people might progress 5,000 years in an afternoon. Iron tools and copper kettles made work more efficient and food preparation simpler. Replacing animal skins with cloth made people more comfortable. Despite this, many Indians were reluctant to trade. The French brought disease; their priests sowed discord, and the time spent trapping and traveling to the trading posts might be better spent in hunting or farming. Factoring these things together, many felt trade goods not worth the cost.

Firearms, however, had a calculus all their own. Expensive to buy and maintain, slower to load, less reliable, and often less accurate than bows, muskets would seem a dubious improvement. Yet they remained in high demand. Part of this was psychological. If your opponent hurls smoke, flame, and thunder at you, you want to hurl it back, particularly as the Indians initially saw guns as supernatural devices and called them "spirits." Another part was a realistic assessment of what a gun did to the human body. A seventeenth-century fusil fired a .50- to .75-caliber ball at 700 to 900 feet per second. Where arrows tended to glance off bone, the soft lead ball would plow right through, removing as much as an inch and sending fragments like shrapnel into muscles and organs. Where an arrow left a relatively neat puncture wound, the kinetic energy of the ball often damaged surrounding tissue. The aftermath was worse. A lead ball wrapped in cloth and lubricated with animal fat invited infection, blood, or lead poisoning. Muskets ultimately sold because they killed better. To spurn the French carried the risk that your neighbors might obtain weapons you did not have. This fear was often decisive, as one trader wrote from Wisconsin: "These peoples held several councils to deliberate whether they should go down to Montreal; they hesitated at first, because they had so few beavers . . . [and] preferred to devote themselves to hunting such animals as could furnish subsistence for their families."

Finally, however, they elected to go, “[reflecting] that if they allowed the Frenchmen to go away . . . , the latter would thereafter attach themselves to some other tribe.”²⁷

Colbert’s idea that he could import alcohol and firearms into the upper country and remain aloof from the consequences was wishful thinking. Worse, the English had now entered the equation. The minister’s plan assumed no competition. Indians would simply paddle down to trade as the Huron had. By 1670, this was no longer the case. In 1660, Pierre Radisson and his brother-in-law Medart Chouart des Groseilliers had returned from Lake Superior with a rich haul of furs. They expected a heroes’ welcome. Instead the governor seized their pelts as they had set out without permission and clapped Des Groseilliers in jail. The two men sailed for France seeking redress, but found none. The irrepressible Radisson now set on a new scheme. While traveling on Lake Superior, he had learned that only a relatively short canoe journey separated the lake from Hudson’s Bay, a region abounding in beaver. He tried to interest French captains in a voyage to the Bay but, failing in this, he went to New England and finally to London, where he found backers. The first trips brought promising returns, and in May 1670, Charles II granted a charter for a “company of merchant adventurers trading into Hudson’s Bay.” In 1671, Radisson founded a trading post in James Bay, only 400 miles northeast of Lake Superior. If the French did not go west, who would keep the Indians from going north?

To the south, there was more trouble. Until the 1670s the English had really only dabbled in the fur trade. Dealing primarily with local Indians, the commerce was always ancillary to agriculture. Now this began to change. In 1675, a fumbled Puritan landgrab in Massachusetts exploded into a full-scale war. Led by a Wampanoag sachem, Metacomet (King Phillip), the Indians burned villages, killed 600 colonists, and for a time threatened to push the Puritans into the sea. Watching this, Governor Edmund Andros of New York treated with the Iroquois to relieve the pressure and, in a winter campaign, the Mohawk smashed Metacomet. This victory restored Iroquois prestige lost in 1667 and they again emerged as the most powerful nation in the northeast. At Andros’s urging, they also adopted many of the refugees fleeing New England. In Virginia, colonists and royal

authorities had clashed over Indian policy. Led by Nathaniel Bacon, the small planters had deposed the governor and attacked Indians living between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers. Many fled north, seeking asylum among the Iroquois. New France now found itself caught between the Hudson's Bay Company and Andros's resurgent allies.

What made Andros particularly dangerous to the French was his rather different vision of America. New England had posed no great threat, as the Puritans with their burgeoning population had tended to antagonize neighboring Indians. Occasionally, as with the Pequot War in 1632 and Metacomet's War, this had exploded into outright violence. Moreover, Calvinism tended to discourage Red-White interaction. To Puritans the Indians were not souls to be saved, but were rather predestined to Hell. In Virginia, competition for land had already triggered Indian wars in 1622 and 1644 and Bacon's Rebellion in 1675. The Dutch, however, had enjoyed considerable success as fur traders, and Andros would now follow their example. Charles II wanted to contain the independent New Englanders. The Iroquois could arrange it. The King also had an imperial vision for America and wished to cripple the French. The Iroquois could help there as well. The governor now set out to forge an Anglo-Iroquoian alliance. He met with them in a great council, put an end to the trade abuses which had plagued Dutch relations with the Iroquois, and sought to negotiate border problems which distracted them from the task he had in mind: Canada.