THE PALIMPSEST

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The Northwest Passage to Iowa

The written history of Iowa has its beginnings in the northeast; it was the towering hills below McGregor that Joliet and Marquette saw on June 17, 1673, as they drifted out of the mouth of the Wisconsin River into the broad expanse of the Mississippi. For a century and a quarter following the exploration of the Lower Mississippi Valley by Hernando de Soto, the Mississippi River had flowed undisturbed by white men and almost unknown to the civilized world. The spark of geographic knowledge had been kindled, only to be snuffed out and forgotten, save the bitter memory of De Soto's disastrous expedition. Convinced that the Mississippi Valley possessed none of the wealth of Mexico or Peru, the rapacious Spaniards turned their attention to the south.

Meanwhile England, France, and Holland entrenched themselves along the Atlantic seaboard. The English founded Jamestown in 1607, the French countered with Quebec the following year, and the Dutch settled New Amsterdam on the

Hudson in 1609. While both England and France played dramatic rôles in the history of the Upper Mississippi Valley, it is to France and her great colony of New France in North America that one must turn for the beginnings of Iowa history.

Forces Attracting French to Iowa

A number of underlying motives led the intrepid French to the Great Lakes country and Iowa. The first, and perhaps the most compelling motive, was the search for the "Western Sea" or "Northwest Passage" to distant China. Equally important was the exploitation of the fur trade, best illustrated by the formation of the "One Hundred Associates," although other individuals and groups are identified with the French period of discovery and exploration. The thirst for gold and other precious stones and metals is illustrated by fabulous John Law and his Mississippi Bubble. The religious motive in this story is best personified in Marquette and scores of other dedicated men and women who braved the wilderness to spread their faith and convert the savage. The desire of the king for territorial expansion, the ambitions of the French army and navy for successful exploits, and the yearning for adventure that throbbed in the breasts of men are additional forces that attracted the French to Iowaland.

Pointing the Way

France was quick to start her explorations of North America. The courageous but dissolute

King Francis I had long desired France to have a place under the American sun, not to mention the possibility of his nation finding the Northwest Passage before England could do so.

From Justin Winsor's *Cartier to Frontenac*

JACQUES CARTIER

Jacques Cartier

Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) was the first French explorer to point the way for his nation in the discovery and proposed conquest of North America. Francis I sent Cartier in the wake of

the countless French, English, and Portuguese fishing boats that had crossed the stormy Atlantic for years to fish off the banks of Newfoundland. But Cartier was instructed to find the northwest passage to the Orient — not to fish for cod. Cartier struck the American coast at Newfoundland, coasted across the mouth of the St. Lawrence River in a thick fog and twice thought he had found the Passage — once at the Straits of Belle Isle and again at Chaleur Bay. He landed at the latter place, erected a cross, took possession of the land for France and then returned home with two Indians as captives.

These poor captives told him of the River St. Lawrence and Cartier was firmly convinced that at last the "Westward Passage" had been found. He persuaded Francis I that such was the case and so, the very next year, 1535, Cartier went west again, this time with three ships. Up the St. Lawrence he worked his laborious way, probably hoping at every curve of the majestic stream that he would see the Pacific. At last he reached the rapids just beyond Montreal. Realizing that he was in another blind alley, Cartier spent the winter at the site of Quebec, took possession of the St. Lawrence Valley for his king, and returned home to report the rich empire he had found. No one realized it at the time, but actually Cartier had opened up the first stage on the long journey which eventually brought the French to Iowa.

Samuel de Champlain

The next stage on the way to Iowa was taken by Cartier's successor, Samuel de Champlain (1567-1635). As a mere lad, Champlain entered the French navy and, after considerable service in

From Justin Winsor's *Cartier to Frontenac*

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

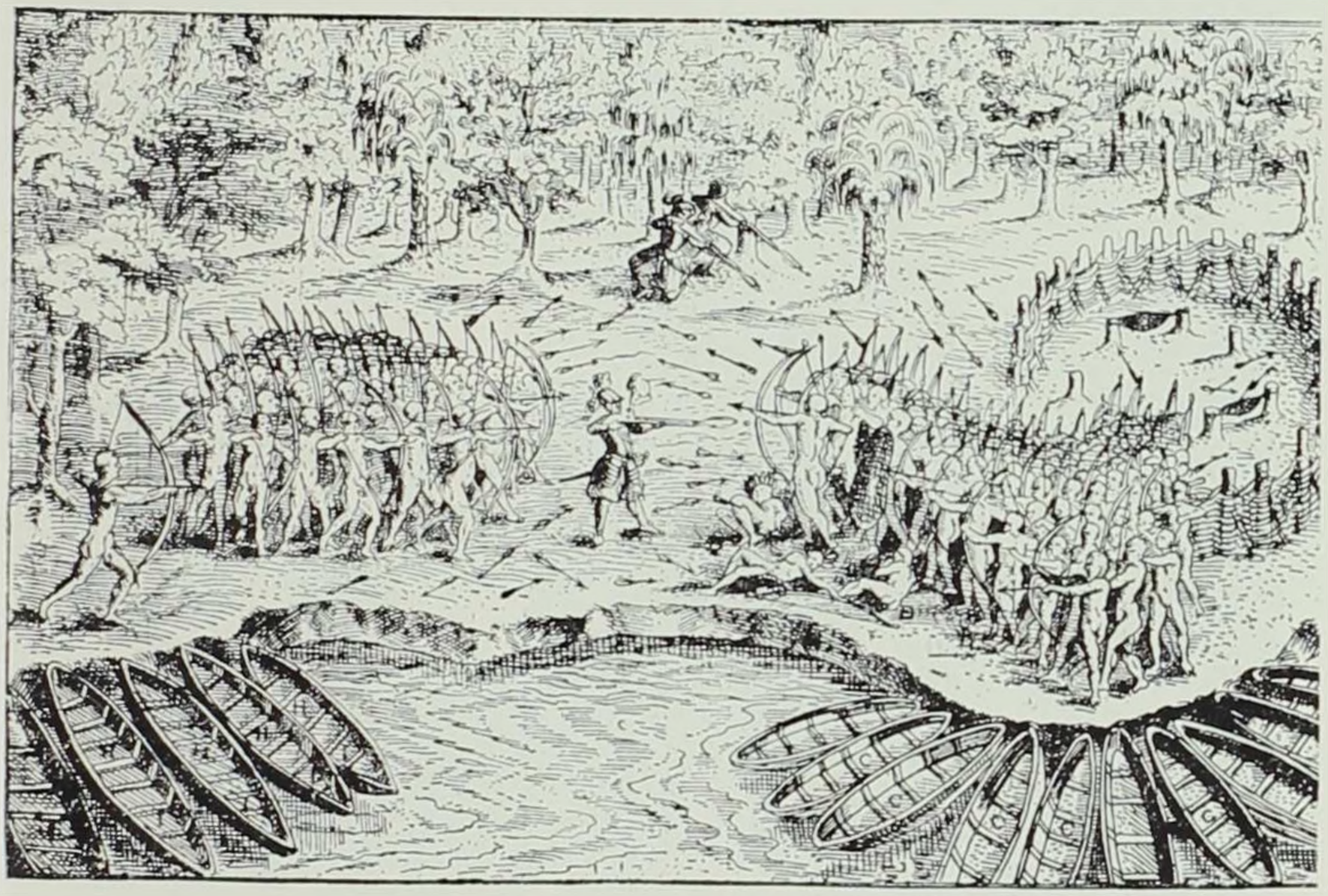
the West Indies, returned to France in 1603, a famous French officer and explorer. He joined a French company which had been formed, under royal grants, to colonize Acadia (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) and the Province of Quebec,

and to drive down through New England to halt the British settlements which were being projected. Champlain always regretted that this company chose to follow Cartier instead of settling in New England and New York. If the French had moved into New England, the discovery of the Mississippi Valley, including Iowa, might have been left to Spain. Carrying out his orders, Champlain established colonies in Acadia and then, on his own, voyaged down the New England coast, making maps and explorations so he could persuade his company to start settlement there. Finally, in 1608, he founded Quebec and during the next few years avidly pushed the exploration of the wilderness to the west.

Still determined to push New France southward, he discovered Lake Champlain in 1609 — and the way was open, not only to New York but to all the wealth of the vast area beyond. Here Champlain was guilty of an error which profoundly affected the history of France in America. He found the Algonquin Indians very friendly and to aid them in a war against the fierce Iroquois, he joined one of their war parties. Near the present site of Ticonderoga, the war party surprised a group of Iroquois. According to Champlain:

> When I was within twenty paces the enemy, halting, gazed at me; as I also gazed at them. When I saw them move to shoot I drew a bead on one of the three chiefs. I had loaded with four bullets and hit three men at the

first discharge, killing two on the spot. When our Indians saw this they roared so loudly that you could not have heard it thunder. Then arrows flew like hail on both sides. But when my companions [white] fired from the woods the Iroquois, seeing their chief killed, turned tail and fled.



From Justin Winsor's *Cartier to Frontenac*

Champlain's fight with the Iroquois near Ticonderoga

Those few musket shots actually became one of the decisive battles of America; they made the powerful Iroquois hate the French, thereafter barring their road southward. When the time came, the Iroquois helped first the Dutch and then the English in the bitter series of French and Indian wars. As for Iowa, the hatred of the Iroquois

forced the French to expand westward only — and thus, eventually, to reach Iowa by the most northerly route.

Champlain was criticized in France because he gave attention to his wanderings in the wilderness

Courtesy National Life Insurance Co. of Vermont

Champlain with the Algonquin Indians

instead of attending to his administrative duties. Although he failed to send home as many furs as had been expected, Champlain explored the Ottawa River in 1613, and then within a year or two reached Lake Nipissing, Georgian Bay, Lake On-

tario, and the adjacent territory. He did much to point the way to Iowa. His final contribution toward Iowa history came in 1634 when he sent Jean Nicolet to find what lay beyond the furthest limits he had reached.

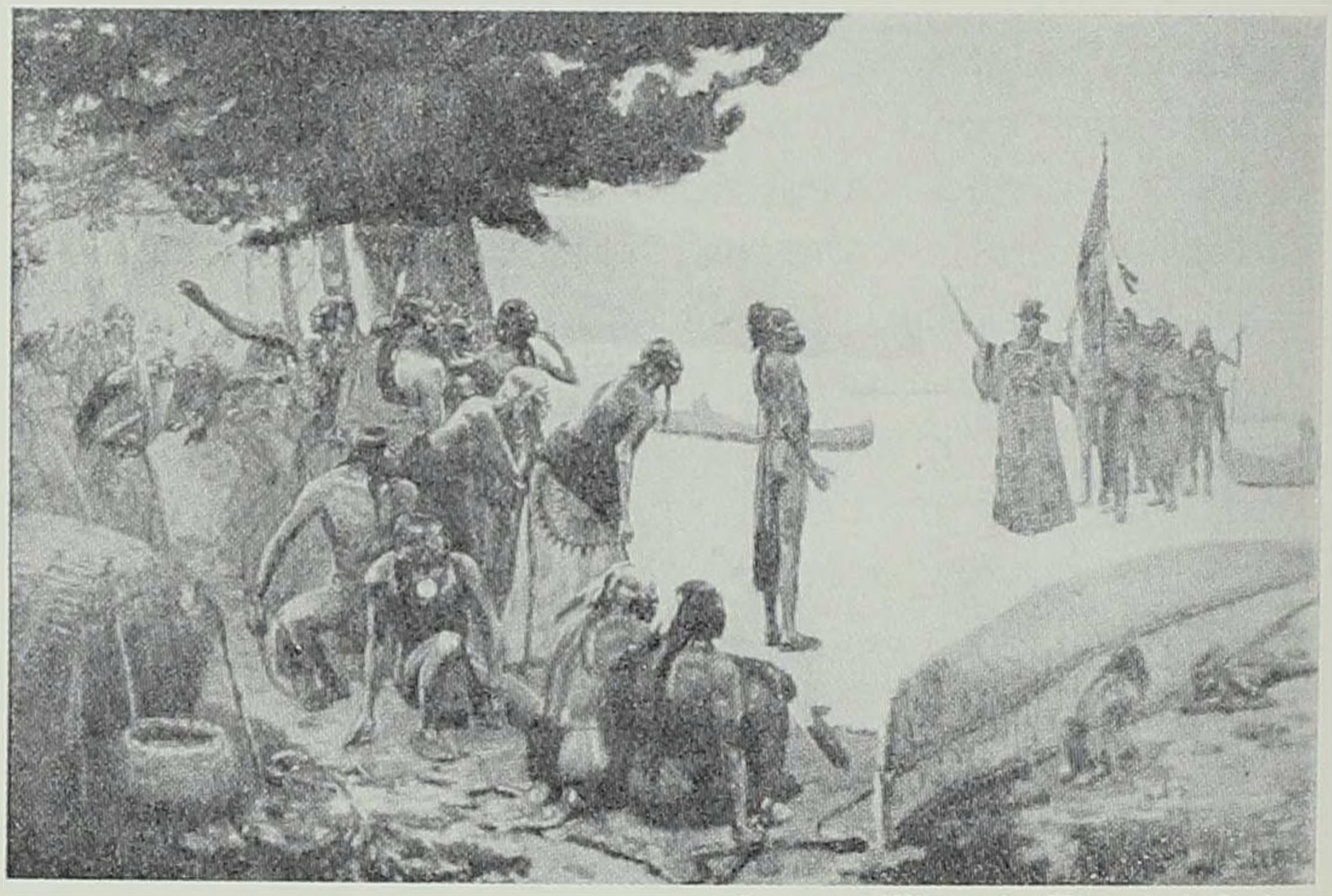
Unfortunately illness had already laid its hand upon Champlain and he died the next year before Jean Nicolet returned. Champlain's contributions were many and his name is revered in Canada today. He had given France claim to a vast wilderness empire, he had established a lucrative fur trade, he had founded two permanent colonies (Port Royal and Quebec), and he had won the firm friendship of the northern Indians. His only serious error occurred when he gained the enmity of the mighty Iroquois.

Jean Nicolet

Jean Nicolet, who was born in Cherbourg, France, in 1599, came to Quebec at the age of twenty and was promptly dispatched by Champlain to live among the Algonquin Indians on Allumette Island and learn their language, customs, and laws. He was appointed official interpreter for the French colony in 1633, with headquarters at Three Rivers. The following year he set out with some Jesuit missionaries for Huronia, where he secured a large canoe with seven Huron Indians to paddle it.

Jean Nicolet started westward to make peace between the Indians about Lake Michigan and the

Hurons, allies of the French. He had heard of a nation without hair or beards who used huge wooden canoes instead of portable canoes of birch bark. Surely, he thought, these must be Chinese or Japanese, who came to this region in ships. Nicolet arrived in the Wisconsin country about



Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society

Jean Nicolet meets the Winnebago
The landfall of the white man in Wisconsin

Green Bay and donned "a grand robe of China damask, all strewn with flowers and birds of many colors," but instead of Chinese he encountered some filthy Winnebago Indians whose "women and children fled, at the sight of a man who carried thunder in both hands — for thus they called the two pistols that he held. The news of his com-

ing quickly spread to the places round about, and there assembled four or five thousand men. Each of the chief men made a feast for him, and at one of these banquets they served at least sixscore beavers." Nicolet was successful in establishing peace between the Huron and Winnebago and returned to eastern Canada.

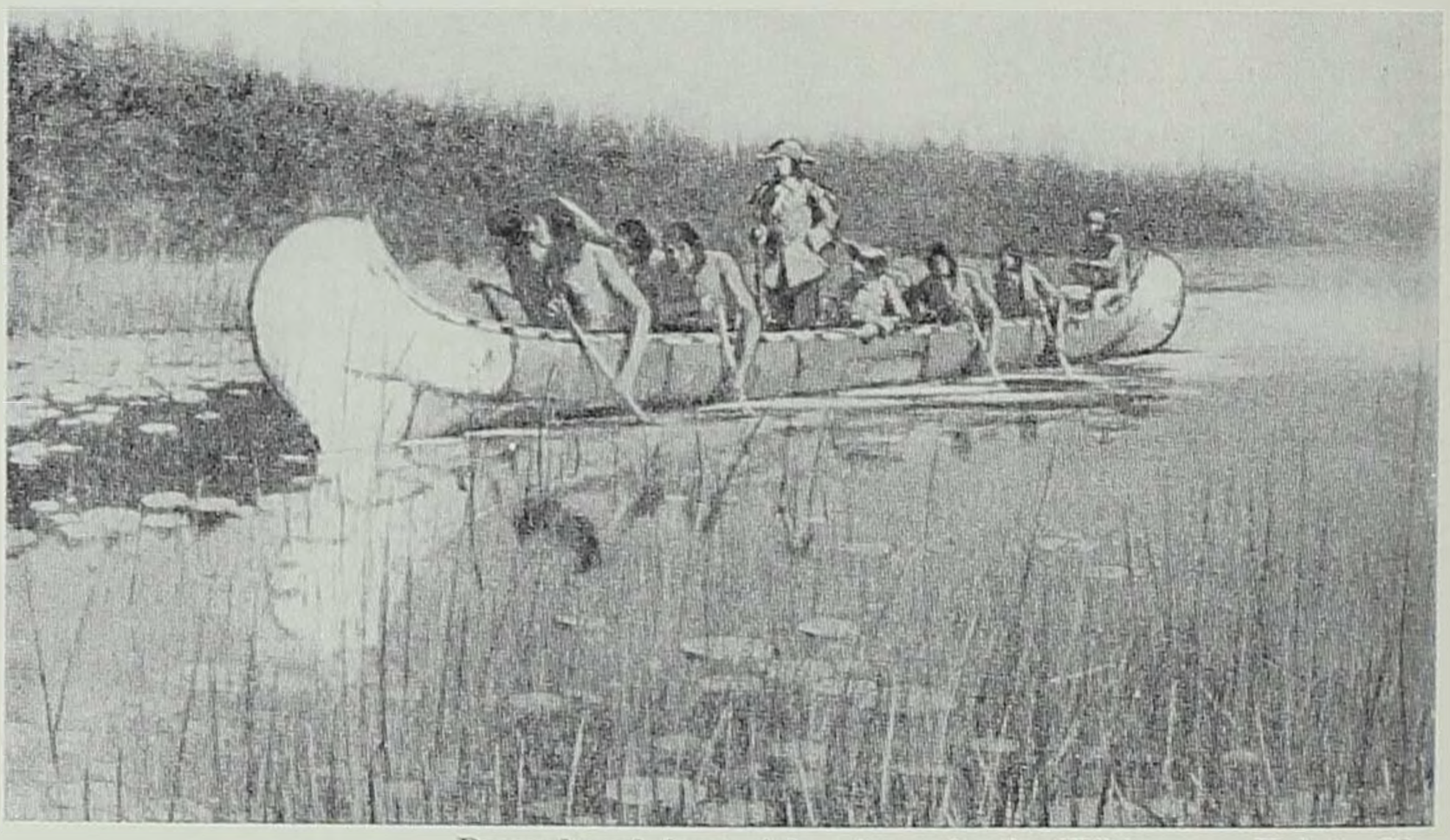
Upon his return, Nicolet assured a Jesuit missionary that "if he had sailed three days' journey farther upon a great river which issues from this lake, he would have found the sea." The good father ventured to observe: "Now I have strong suspicions that this is the sea which answers to that North of new Mexico, and that from this sea there would be an outlet towards Japan and China. Nevertheless, as we do not know whither this great lake tends, or this freshwater sea, it would be a bold undertaking to go and explore those countries."

Nicolet doubtless stimulated the French to renewed activity. More important, he was the first white man to meet the Winnebago in their homes about Green Bay. It was the ancient Winnebago whom many of the Wisconsin archeologists believed responsible for the effigy mounds in Iowa. Of Siouan stock, the Winnebago were plains Indians who had lived in Wisconsin long before the coming of the whites. The large number of the mounds as well as the size of the trees growing upon them clearly indicate a residence in this re-

gion two or three centuries before the voyage of Nicolet and that the ancient tribe had a much larger membership than the Winnebago had in historic times.

Radisson and Groseilliers

The next Frenchman whose account of travels to the Northwest has been preserved is Pierre



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Radisson and Groseilliers
The first white men to enter the Mississippi Basin

Esprit Radisson. Radisson's manuscript, written for the information of Charles II, whose patronage the explorer desired, was found in the Bodleian Library at Oxford about 1880, more than two hundred years after it had been written. It was published by the Prince Society in 1885. Written in a quaint English style, Radisson describes four voyages in New France partly by himself and

partly in company with his brother-in-law, Medart Chouart Sieur de Groseilliers. Students of western history have been puzzled both as to the exact date and the extent of the travels of these intrepid Frenchmen. The portion of Radisson's journal which has struck some historians as possibly alluding to the Mississippi River and the Iowa country follows:

> We weare 4 moneths in our voyage wthout doeing any thing but goe from river to river. We mett severall sorts of people. We conversed wth them, being long time in alliance wth them. By the persuasion of som of them we went into ye great river that divides itselfe in 2, where the hurrons wth some Ottanake & the wild men that had warrs wth them had retired. . . . This nation have warrs against those of [the] forked river. It is so called because it has 2 branches, the one towards the west, the other towards the South, wch we believe runs towards Mexico, by the token they gave us.

A number of scholars are firmly convinced that Radisson and Groseilliers discovered the Upper Mississippi before Joliet and Marquette did, and that they traveled in what is now Iowa and Minnesota. The association of the voyage of Radisson and Groseilliers with the Mississippi River was given added weight by Perrot's memoirs which chronicled the precipitate flight of the Hurons and Ottawas before the Iroquois. The portion of this journal relating directly to the Iowa country and incidentally to the effigy mound region tells of a brief foray by these Hurons and Ottawas on the

Upper Iowa River before they moved to the island on the Mississippi above Lake Pepin where Radisson and Groseilliers are believed to have visited them. Perrot tells the following story:

> When all the Ottawas were scattered toward the lakes, the Saulteurs [Ojibway] and Missisakis [who had lived on the north shore of Lake Huron] fled to the north, and then to Kionconan [Keweenaw], for the sake of hunting; and the Ottawas, fearing that they would not be sufficiently strong to resist the incursions of the Iroquois, who would be informed of the place where they had made their settlement, fled for refuge to the Mississippi river, which is called at the present time the Louisianne. They ascended this river to the distance of a dozen leagues or thereabout from the Wisconsin river, where they found another river which is called the river of the Iowas [Upper Iowa]. They followed it to its source, and there encountered tribes who received them kindly. But in all the extent of country which they passed through having seen no place suitable for their settlement, by reason that there was no timber at all, and that it showed only prairies and smooth plains, though buffaloes and other animals were in abundance, they resumed their same route to return upon their steps; and after having once more reached the Louisianne, they went higher up.

Cartier, Champlain, Nicolet, and Radisson and Groseilliers, these were adventurous trail-blazing souls who pointed the way to Iowa. Perrot himself was a colorful personality whose career among the Indian tribes of the Great Lakes region had begun as early as 1665, eight years before the Joliet-Marquette expedition. The stage for the

exploration that led to the discovery of Iowa was set by these swashbuckling Frenchmen in a day when France was a power to reckon with in the family of nations.

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Painting by O. E. Berninghaus—Courtesy State Historical Society of Missouri

Joliet and Marquette Descending the Mississippi