THE MAPPING OF CANADA, 1497-1658

by C.C.J. BOND

Illustrations from N.F.B. Henriot's on Cartier and Champlain by Jean Dallaire.

From the 13th to the 16th century, while the Middle Ages were slowly giving way to the Renaissance, the basis for world discovery was being laid in Spain and Portugal. Under Alfonso X (1221-1284) of Castile and Leon all the known information on astronomy was gathered into a great encyclopedia. The Genoese invention of the portolan chart was exploited by the Portuguese. Armed with scientific knowledge and new instruments, men began to venture out into the Atlantic, to the Canary Islands in 1336, Madeira in 1418, the Azores in 1427, Prince Henry of Portugal. The Navigator, a descendant of John of Gaunt, directed a great outburst of exploration during the first half of the 16th century, particularly of Africa. Knowledge of what would later be called America began to emerge from the mists of obscurity as the century closed. The Vikings had been there five centuries earlier and the Greenlanders, whose colonies lasted for centuries after, had sent to Europe as early as the 12th century polar bears and falcons that might have come from islands to their west. Some maps of those days seem to indicate Baffin Island and other lands thereabout, but little was really known. There is evidence indicating voyages from Europe toward Newfoundland from about 1500, but nothing conclusive. As last came the first clear indication. In 1492 Columbus discovered in the Bahamas what he took to be the outleys of the Asian continent. His geography was faulty but his hypothesis seemed reasonable at that time. As though to corroborate him, in the same year as the epochal discovery, the cosmographer, Martin Behaim, created a terrestrial globe in Nuremberg which showed clear sailing, except for intervening archipelagos, from Europe to Asia. This conception of an open route to Asia was going to bedevil cartographers and explorers for some time.

The shortcomings of early cartography may only be understood in the light of this weakness.
Toward the close of the 15th century in England the enterprising merchants of Bristol had been venturing for decades to Iceland to catch the plentiful cod. About 1480 they began to push farther into the unknown wastes of the Atlantic. Lured by tales of the mythical Island of Brazil, the Seven Cities of Cibola and other chimeras believed to lie there, they sent out expeditions. After the news of Columbus’ discovery, when the Venetian captain Giovanni Caboto Montecuccia (Anglicized into John Cabot) arrived from Spain to propose to Henry VII a voyage of discovery into the Atlantic, the king granted the necessary letters patent and the Bristol merchants sponsored the project.

Cabot sailed from Bristol about the end of May, 1497, made a landfall on a new coast, saw many fish, and returned in mid-August. He prepared a map illustrating his voyage but he has lost. Since then, much ink has been spilled on speculation as to where the landfall was, and what part of the coast he had explored. Recently an American writer has analyzed the evidence in the light of our knowledge of meteorological and oceanic conditions, and proposed that the landfall was in Labrador, just north of Belle Isle strait. On the other hand, a New Brunswick botanist, W. E. Gannong, who for many years presented papers on the exploration of our Atlantic coasts to the Royal Society of Canada, maintained, on the basis of two maps (that today are not considered certain evidence), that Cabot’s landfall was in Cape Breton. There is strong partnership in the Maritimes for this thesis, and a scenic highway in Cape Breton Island has been named to celebrate the explorer’s fame. Cabot sailed westward again from England the next year, and disappeared.

The ice-sheets that come down Davis Strait in early summer and the consequent coastal fogs, which today plague the traveller by air in the Maritimes, must have posed enormous difficulties and hazards for the explorer

On May 10, 1534, Jacques Cartier’s two 60-ton ships out of St. Malo approached the shores of Newfoundland.

Newfoundland, naming some features there. Among the names originally given by the Portuguese are: Cape Bonavista, Fogo Island, Conception Bay, Cape Race, Ferryland (from Farilhom or Furelbâo), Burgeo (derived from Omne Mell Virginis) and Cape Smoky in the island of Cape Breton. About 1520 there was a short-lived Portuguese settlement in Cape Breton.

It has been argued that the name, Cape Breton, which first appears on maps of the late 1520’s, somehow constitutes evidence to support the theory of a Nova Scotia landfall for Cabot (Cape of the Britons?). A 1544 map by Cabot’s son Sebastian, identifying Cape Breton as “first land seen”, was recently adjudged dubious evidence for the landfall by a group of Canadian scholars interested in early exploration and cartography. A fair number of fishing ships had gone out from the coast of France early in the century and perhaps in their presence we can find a source for the name Cape Breton. North of Bayonne on the French Basque coast there exists a village called Cap Breton that was once an important seaport of 8,000 inhabitants. Whalers and fishermen from Cap Breton were noted for their prowess and their seagoing ships for their sturdiness. A scholar of Basque origin, writing at the end of the last century, held that the Basques, going to the New Found Land after the whale and the cod, gave the name of their home port to the salient promontory across the ocean, and that in addition they named Gahornas Bay (west of Cape Breton, the sight where Admiral Saunders’ expedition against Louisbourg mustered in 1758) after one of their famous townspeople called Gahornas.

Interest in the New Found Land waned in Europe about 1520. The French merchant-voyagers kept a knowledge of the new region alive.
Verrazzano's notion of a viable Western Sea. Meanwhile François I had become embroiled in war against Charles V in Italy and was captured at Pavia. Expeditions were out of the question for the time. Finally, in 1534, Jacques Cartier left Saint-Malo, armed with an appointment from the French king and sailed westward with two small ships. After sighting land at Cape Bonavista in Newfoundland he turned north. He was probably aware of the great Gulf of St. Lawrence, but apparently knew of only one entrance, the channel we call the Strait of Belle Isle, and here he entered. At last the Grand Bay, our Gulf of St. Lawrence, was officially discovered. 

First the explorer skirted the north shore, surprisingly encountering a big ship from La Rochelle, then followed the Newfoundland coast. At Cape Ray he turned westward, touched the north shore of the Magdalen and made another landing at the northern tip of what we call Prince Edward Island. Cartier interpreted these sightings as features of a continuous coast to his south; the true shape of the Grand Bay was by no means clear.

Northward along the New Brunswick coast went the little ships, into an opening Cartier called Baie de la Chaleur, Warm Bay, which proved disappointingly to be no passage to the spice islands. On he went to the tip of Honguedo (Gaspé Peninsula) where the French erected a cross and Cartier took possession of the lands for France. Still gouging, the expedition went northward on July 25, coasted along part of the southern and northern shores of Anticosti, which was unrecognized as an island, and went quickly back to France the way they had come.

The next year Cartier came again, entered the gulf by the same route and went upstream past Anticosti, which he named Isle de l’Assomption. It was not till later that he gave it its present Indian name. His fleet anchored briefly in a bay Cartier named Saint-

Laurens, after the saint on whose feast-day they had arrived. This name came later to be applied to the great gulf he had explored and the great river he was about to investigate.

On route, mountains in Honguedo were called “Notre-Dame.” Islands in the river received more prosaic titles: Isle aux lièvres, after the hares there, and Isle aux coudres, after the hazel trees. At the latter place, the Indians told Cartier that the province of Canada (from an Indian word meaning “the village”) began. Upstream he named a big island where the vines grew, “Bascue” (Bacchus). Later he would re-name it Isle d’Orléans, after a son of François I, the future Henri II. Upstream, where a small river entered near a great escarpment, was the village of the chief Donaucon, called Stadacona.

Leaving his two larger craft here, Cartier went on upstream passing fine cultivated lands on either side with many small settlements. At a point where the river widened into a lake, he left his ship and proceeded with longboats. The lake, our Lake St. Peter, he called Lac d’Angouleme, after the king’s family name. At the beginning of October he reached the palisaded village of Hochelaga on and near the present-day grounds of McGill University in Montreal. The explorer climbed a butte behind the village, naming it Mont Royal, probably after his lieutenant, de Pontbriand, son of the seigneur of Montreal in southwestern France. From the height he could see further reaches of the great river and a large tributary flowing from the northwest (the Ottawa).

Cartier wintered at Stadacona and in 1536 returned to France, this time via the south shore of Newfoundland. He had clarified much of the geography of eastern Canada at last and circumnavigated Newfoundland.

Except for an abortive attempt by Cartier to establish a colony in 1541, France, emboldened for much of the

the light of a map in the printed atlas of the brilliant cosmographer, Martin Waldseemüller, that had appeared in France in 1507, in which he pos-
tulated a homogenous continent. (Another map in the atlas showed a broken continent. Waldseemüller latinized the explorer Vespucci’s Christian name and named America in his atlas.)

Sailing from Madeira, Verrazzano made a landing just south of present-day Savannah, coasted southward for 150 miles then sailed northward, ob-
serving and mapping. He called the coast Francesco, after his patron, Pamlico Sound, lying behind the sandbars near Cape Hatteras, seemed

2 A great new bridge bearing his name has been built at New York.
Indian term meaning "the narrows" was named. Farther up-river, Cartier's Lac d'Angolesses was renamed Lac St-Pierre—it was his feast day—and an island in the river before Mont Royal was called Sainte-Hélène, after the explorer's wife, Hélène.

From 1604 to 1607 Champlain, abandoning the great river, mapped the Atlantic coast from Massachusetts to Cape Breton. A small colony, at first in the mouth of the Ste-Croix River in present-day New Brunswick, later at the eastern end of the great inlet we call Annapolis Basin, served as base. Some names on Nova Scotia features appear in Champlain's narratives, or on his maps that were published later: Cancseau, St. Marguerite's Bay, La Hève, Saugeb (Sambro), Port Mouton, Port Rossignol, Cap de Sable, Cap Fourchu and St. Mary's Bay.

In 1608 the explorer again entered the Great River of Canada. He built his "Habitation" at Quebec and next spring moved with Indian allies up the river that came to be called the Richelieu, after the powerful first minister of France from 1624, into the large lake that soon acquired his own name. Here, a battle was fought with the Iroquois. Sixty miles to the south, a few weeks later, Henry Hudson, working for the Dutch, was exploring the river that bears his name.

The fur trade kept the royal geographer occupied for the next few years. Meanwhile, far to the north and working for the English crown, Hudson was exploring the great bay that also bears his name, and where he died in 1611. The next year Champlain published a map in France that shows the course of the St. Lawrence as far as Montreal and westward, the latter all conjecture. To the west lies one large lake, Ontario.

Lake Champlain is indicated and the Atlantic coast is depicted fairly well. Isle Saint-Jean, now Prince Edward Island is strangely omitted. This publication, except for a manuscript map by Champlain dated 1607, is the first document to show the Nova Scotia peninsula in anything approaching its real shape. The Ottawa River is completely missing and the Hudson flows eastward instead of southward.

Hudson's mutinous crew had returned, bearing his records, and a map illustrating his discoveries was published in Amsterdam in 1612. Champlain took advantage of this and published his own map in 1613, showing Hudson Bay with a note in English indicating the Englishmen's wintering place. On this version the hypothetical Lake Ontario of the 1612 Champlain map has vanished and a maze of intersecting rivers appears.

In 1613 Champlain started to explore again, going by canoe up the river we call the Ottawa, naming it the Rivière des Algonguins (Algonquin) in its lower reaches and higher up after Montgomery. He saw the as yet unnamed Gatineau and Rideau Rivers and named the Chaudière Falls after its Indian title, oslicou.
or kettle. He also named Calumet Island after the pipestone available there. Once again, in 1615, he went up the Algonkin River, passed by the Mattawa and Lake Nipissing to the French River to Georgian Bay and attained the land of the Hurons at its southern end. From here he travelled overland to the Bay of Quinte, across Lake Ontario and up the Oswego, was wounded outside an Iroquois fort near modern Syracuse and made a painful retreat the way he had come, back to Lake Huron. The St. Lawrence River from Lake Ontario to Montreal remained terra incognita.

Narratives describing these and other years in New France show the origin of other place-names. Point Louis commemorates Henry de Levé, Duc de Ventadour, Viceroy and Lieutenant General of New France in 1618. Bic, La Malbaie, Grondines, Les Escoumins, Cap Tourmente and many other features in the St. Lawrence country were named by Champlain.

From his return to Quebec in 1616 until his death there in 1635, Champlain, when in New France, led a life filled with colonial administrative duties, business affairs and ordinary or extraordinary excursions. In 1616 he prepared in France, but did not publish, a map which incorporated his discoveries of 1613-15 and Hudson’s work to the north. About 1628, his agent, Etienne Brûlé, who had long lived with the Indians, brought back a rough description of Lake Superior. This information, together with all his other gathered knowledge, Champlain had compiled and published in his 1632 map of New France.

There are some curious points of interest about his cartography. In 1607 Champlain drew a map illustrating his Atlantic coast explorations, a good depiction of the New England shores and western Nova Scotia. A few years later, his Paris map of 1612, the first to show Lake Champlain, gives no more than a crude representation of what he had so well mapped earlier in this region. Champlain never returned to that refined piece of Maritimes cartography in his mapping. In 1613 the revised version that bore Hudson’s information is interesting in view of the great secrecy that in previous years had shrouded geographical discovery. There is at least one other geographical anomaly: the 1616 unpublished map shows the French River correctly running westward from Lake Nipissing, whereas the 1632 map shows the French flowing southward. Possibly in reconciling some conflicting data the geographer introduced this error, of which he must have been aware.

Discoveries for the next twenty years or so after the publication of the 1632 map were made by coureurs des bois and missionaries. In 1637 Father Vimont wrote of a great cataract called Onguëshira (Niagara) of which he had heard, and about 1638 Jean Nicotet investigated Lake Michi- gan. In 1640 Fathers Béreouf and Chaumonton saw Lake Erie and the next year Father Jogues got clearer information on Lake Superior. In 1642, the year Montreal was estab-

lished, Jogues was captured by the Iroquois and as a captive learned of the Lake Champlain-Hudson River-Mohawk River route to the lands of the Confederacy. In 1648, at last, the splendour of Niagara was seen by a missionary, Father Ragueneau.

There now ensued the terrible years of the great Iroquois onslaught against the Algonkins, forcing them from their lands along the valley of that river that Champlain had named for them; and against the Hurons and their neighbours, scattering them. In 1653, in a brief period of peace with the Iroquois, Father Pontet was brought back to Montreal from the Mohawk country via the St. Lawrence, the first white man to travel that route and see the Thousand Islands and Lake St. Francis. The next year Father Le Moyne followed his trail back up to Lake Ontario and ascended the Oswego on a mission of peace. In 1656 Radisson and Groselliers came back from the west via Lake Nipissing and the River of the Algonkins through a valley empty of its former inhabitants. The traders travelled in canoes manned by a tribe from the Lake Superior-Lake Huron area, the Outaouais or Ottawas, who were soon to give their name to the fur-traders’ river-highway.

The next outburst of the Iroquois that immediately followed brought military intervention from France, where another strong monarch was on the throne at last. Under Louis XIV there would be forceful colonial administration and military power in New France. With this stimulating environment, a more systematic investigation was going to enroll the map farther to the west and south, and to make clear the complicated ramifications of the continent’s waterways that had so puzzled Champlain and the bony-handed or priestly amateur geographers who followed in his steps.