

2-1-1954

St. Rene Goupil - Physician-Martyr

Norman MacNeill

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

MacNeill, Norman (1954) "St. Rene Goupil - Physician-Martyr," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 21 : No. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol21/iss1/5>

St. Rene Goupil—Physician-Martyr

NORMAN MACNEILL, M.D.

The Catholic Medical Guild of

St. Rene Goupil

THE first martyr's blood to consecrate the soil of North America was that of a physician—Rene Goupil.

Little is known of his early life except that he was born in Anjou, France, about 1607. He entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Rouen and his various biographers¹ are not in agreement as to whether his medical training was secured before he entered the novitiate or after he left it, because of ill-health. That he was a qualified surgeon of his time, is attested in medical literature by Howell², who states that he served as surgeon at L'Hotel Dieu, Quebec.

The nature and extent of his medical training is nowhere recorded, though we know that the status of medical and surgical training in Paris at that time was involved and uncertain. It was within a century of the admission of Ambroise Pare to the College de St. Come, which represented direct succession to the Confrere de St. Come or Guild of St. Cosmos as it would be known in our language today; and at that time continental medicine was beginning to emerge from the contentious period of the Barbers and the Surgeons of the Long Robe. It was in 1520 that peace was finally signed between the contenders and authority over both corporations was given to the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris.

It is of interest to note in passing, that Pare is said to have received much of his surgical or preceptorial training from a Prof. Goupil³ in the College de France and it is conceivable that there may have been consanguinity between persons of a similar and unusual name.

Goupil's novitiate rejection because of ill-health did not dampen his ardour for the Missions, and we find him at the age of 34, volunteering as a Donne for the Jesuit Mission at Quebec. The Donne belonged to a special group found only in the Canadian missions at that time (our closest synonym would be oblate or volunteer). He offered his services gratis to the mission without being bound by vows. Following two years service on the staff of L'Hotel Dieu, Goupil left with Father

Jogues and his companions for the Huron territory. Within a few days the group encountered the Iroquois enemy; outnumbered, ambushed and subjected to weeks of tortures, equalled only, in diabolical ingenuity, by the inhuman atrocities which are being enacted in our own day, behind the Iron Curtain, they finally reached the village of Ossernenon (now Auriesville, New York), the scene of their martyrdom. Their torturers had stripped them of their clothes, torn out their fingernails and ground their lacerated fingertips between their teeth. Father Jogues writing to the Father Provincial of the French Province states, "All our faces especially Rene's presented sad spectacles. The number of blows that he received on all parts of his body and particularly on his face, so disfigured him that we could see but the whites of his eyes. They cut off his thumb at the first joint." What need to elaborate on the details of Rene's tortures—He was seen to make the Sign of the Cross on the forehead of a child and believing it to be evil, an old Indian who witnessed the act, ordered his martyrdom. On September 22, 1642, Rene's skull was cloven by a hatchet blow, and thus he became the first American Jesuit Martyr, a glorious victim to his Faith and an immortal example to his profession. He was canonized June 29, 1930, by Pope Pius XI.

1. Talbot, F., S.J. — O'Brien, John A., — Drs. Ahern, — St. Nazaire. Sister, O.S.A. — et al.
2. Howell, Wm. B., *Ann. Med. Hist.* vol VI. '34
3. Diefenbach, W. C., *Merck Rep. Jan.* '53