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### DE LA SALLE'S LAST EXPEDITION, 1684-1687

**R**ICHELIEU said of statesmen: "They are like men condemned to torture, with this difference only, that the latter are punished for their crimes and the others for their merits." Such has also been the end of the builders of the French Colonial Empire from Cavellier de la Salle to Brazza and Lyautey. It is part of their destiny to be rewarded for their services by the injustice of mediocre men and the vindictiveness of those in power.

De la Salle founds a new colony, while Talon, Frontenac, and Colbert direct the affairs of state and uphold his efforts. On November 17, 1682, the very year of his triumph, Frontenac leaves Canada. In 1683, Colbert dies. The reins of the French government pass into weak hands. In Canada, a weak-minded octogenarian, Lefebvre de la Barre, is appointed governor and surrenders his power to the factions which Frontenac had kept in check and to the superintendent Duchesneau, who, since his arrival in Canada in 1675, had done nothing but oppose the acts of the governor. After the departure of Frontenac, the new officials, as has too often been the case in French Colonial history, made it a rule to adopt policies exactly contrary to those of their more brilliant and imaginative predecessors.

De la Salle has to climb his Calvary, like Brazza and Lyautey. With but one thought, that of giving to the new empire a solid foundation, he did not rush to Quebec and to

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Versailles in 1682 to get his laurel crown. He sent his confidant, the Recollet Father Zénobe Membré, who was to report to Colbert the success of the great undertaking. De la Salle, with characteristic unselfishness, remains on the scene to strengthen the unfinished outposts of the Illinois. When his work there is accomplished, he prepares to leave for France to request the supplies needed by the new empire.

The tragedy begins. Just as later Brazza was almost accused of theft for a slight irregularity in his accounts, so is de la Salle accused by Duchesneau over a matter of fur pelts. The incompetent La Barre dares send to Versailles in November, 1683, a report in which he accuses de la Salle "of creating an imaginary empire by gathering together all the bankrupts and good-for-nothings in the country." He discharges him as governor of Fort Frontenac. He has him forcibly ejected by his agents. He has all the goods in the fort seized, although they were the personal property of the explorer. He strips Tonty of his command of Fort St. Louis of the Illinois. Subservient to hatreds of which he is the instrument, he goes so far as to suggest to the Iroquois that they kill him.

Colbert's son, Seignelay, is weak, but he means well. De la Salle returns to France, lands at La Rochelle in December, 1683, and asks for justice. The King restores him to his command, reestablishes Tonty in his post, dismisses Governor de la Barre, and replaces him by a new governor, René de Vrisay, Marquis de Denonville, whose first act is to call Tonty to the defense of Canada with the help of Indian tribes brought into alliance by de la Salle: the Miamis of the Great Lakes and the Illinois.

But Colbert's death has deprived France of a leader who knows what he wants and can have it carried out. The reins of State no longer held by a firm hand, things go their own way till they come to a standstill.

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The organization of de la Salle's last expedition is a typical example of the conditions brought on by the loss of a chieftain. De la Salle gives Seignelay an account of the successful completion of his extraordinary expedition of discovery. The latter receives him very cordially. He understands immediately that it is necessary to exploit the new colony, found there a naval base, colonize it, and protect it against the Spaniards. The latter did indeed consider the Gulf of Mexico as belonging to them alone. They had gone so far as to forbid the entry of any French ships. Besides Mexico, they possess at that time the territory comprising today the states of New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. They therefore menace by land and by sea the outlet of the new empire. If the treaty of Nimègue actually insured peace between France and Spain in 1678, it was only in Europe. In the West Indies and the Gulf of Mexico, the war, in fact, went on. The Spaniards captured every French ship which ventured into these waters; accordingly, in 1679, a Spanish squadron captured a French man-of-war, making prisoners of its crew. Louis XIV replied by sending the fleet of d'Estrées, with orders to sink or capture the Spanish squadron, and in 1683, he dispatched three men-of-war under the command of Gabaret. That very same year, 1683, Spain declared war on France and it was only through the truce of Ratisbonne of August 15, 1684, that France obtained promise of a change in Spanish policy.

In these circumstances, de la Salle conceives a carefully thought out plan for an offensive and defensive base at the mouth of the Mississippi. In order to penetrate peacefully and colonize these parts one must at least be prepared against an imminent Spanish attack which was not at all improbable. Hence, a preventive offensive might become necessary in order to insure the security of the new terri-

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ories, if they were threatened. To this end, de la Salle proposes to organize an expedition composed partly of soldiers for defense, partly of civilians for colonization, taking with them the supplies necessary for war and agriculture. De la Salle goes back to the old Roman formula: by the sword and by the plow, the sword protecting, if need be, the plow. De la Salle understands perfectly the situation of France in Europe, threatened as she is, on her frontiers. His personal experience tells him that he will have to recruit an army of natives under French command. He will strongly organize these groups of Indians which will be provided by allied and friendly tribes, just as, later, France organized an army with North African troops, then with black troops. Thus did de la Salle propose to organize an Indian army. He laid his plan before the King and Seignelay: an army of fifteen thousand men could be organized if he is granted necessary supplies and men: soldiers, carefully chosen and capable of forming the backbone of the new army, officers like Tonty, men like the companions of his former expeditions. He asks authority to recruit two hundred men in France together with inhabitants of Santo Domingo, who were accustomed to the climate of these parts.

The tribes he had already organized around Fort Frontenac and especially around Fort St. Louis, contingents of the new "nations," whom he had made his allies on his voyages down and up the Mississippi, would constitute the main part of his army. With these elements, he would establish a commercial and military center, sixty leagues above the mouth of the Mississippi, at the junction of the Red River, which river comes straight from New Biscay, the northern part of Mexico, where the threatening Spaniards had established their extreme penetration even into the basin of the Mississippi, of which France had already taken possession.

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To the soldiers must be added colonists and artisans necessary in the foundation of a settlement: carpenters, laborers, etc., finally missionaries must be included in the mission to play their spiritual rôle. Such is the plan presented by de la Salle, well thought out and adapted to local circumstances. It is approved on July 24, 1684, and on that date Cavalier was able to leave La Rochelle with four ships: a man of war, the "Joly," carrying thirty-six guns; a transport, named by Cavalier "L'Aimable," loaded with ammunition, food, and other supplies; a brig carrying six cannon, "La Belle," and another one, "Le St. François," carrying ammunition. This last ship was captured off Santo Domingo by two Spanish ships, either actual buccaneers, or disguised as such.

These ships carried, in addition to their crew of seventy men and two hundred soldiers, about one hundred colonists, among whom were men of all trades engaged by de la Salle, a few women, two of whom were married and had children, and six missionaries: three Sulpicians, among whom was Robert's brother, Jean Cavalier, and three Recollet fathers, Father Zénobe Membré, Father Anastase Douay, and Father Maxime Le Clercq.

The story of this expedition is the epic of a disaster which ended in murder. Such utter failure in the wake of such a great triumph, has its origin in the disintegration of government authority in France, and the personal weakness of Seignelay. A certain Captain Pingault was to take command of the "Joly" in the name of the King. He was not supposed to land, and was placed under the orders of de la Salle in all things except when "the safety of the vessel and navigation" were concerned. He was unfortunately replaced by Beaujeu. The letters exchanged between the latter and the Minister before the departure of the expedition re-

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vealed the serious mistake which had been made by the Minister responsible for the appointment. From the very first day, there is a lack of understanding between de la Salle and Beaujeu, who despises this colonial boor and attempts with adroit insincerity at every turn to discredit him. As a captain is in full command of his ship, the perpetual conflict is exceptionally serious. It was eventually to endanger the expedition. It is apparent that the expedition is disorganized from the very beginning, and Seignelay himself realizes it so well that he writes to Beaujeu, "by the trouble you are making you will cause the failure of the expedition." Still Seignelay neglects to take energetic steps to remedy the evil. His weakness was the primary cause of the death of de la Salle.

On the other hand, the whole plan was based on the conception of a native army under French leadership. It could succeed only if the men chosen to lead the Indian army were capable of fulfilling such a delicate mission. De la Salle knew how to prepare them for it, to instill in them the proper spirit, and to train them as instructors and leaders of an army of natives. Lyautey and Mangin have always stressed the importance of such preparation, which requires special training. Now the discord which reigned on board, fomented by Beaujeu's intrigues, undermines from the very first an element indispensable to success: the unquestioned prestige of the chief. And although about ten officers and volunteers, first among them Henri Joutel, represented a sound element, the others seem ridiculously unfit for so great an undertaking. These soldiers of the King were military castoffs, "a very poor lot, and hardly fit for service," according to the reports of the day. Instead of being carefully chosen to be the leaders of an army of fifteen thousand men, they were themselves but an undisciplined rabble, ripe

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for desertion and treason. This situation gives Beaujeu ample opportunity to undermine the authority of Cavelier and he takes advantage of it from the beginning.<sup>15</sup>

Other unforeseen difficulties might have been overcome by de la Salle if such serious mistakes had not doomed him beforehand to failure. Surrounded with men who were either hostile or incompetent, he could not possibly succeed, and his failure was to turn into a disaster. He had taken the latitude of the mouth of the Mississippi, which he must find; but not the longitude, which could not then be calculated; and that was the reason why he was to be led quite a distance to the west of the river. The probable landing place seems to have been four degrees to the west of the mouth of the Mississippi. For some fifty years, cartographers, uncertain in their knowledge of longitude, had this mouth of the Mississippi located farther west, toward Spanish Mexico. In the letter which de la Salle writes to Seignelay on March 4, 1685, immediately after landing, he reports having noticed the main mouth of the delta on January 6 at a point thirty leagues to the northeast, that is to say, in approximately the exact position; and he adds, "the pilots of His Majesty's ship . . . were mistaken and what we saw on January 6 was indeed the main entrance to the river which we were seeking." But he lands, believing that the river at the end of the bay is a "channel of Colbert River," and fearing to "spend the rest of the winter trying to work my way toward the east, from which direction the winds blow almost continually and drive the currents toward the west." He asks "M. de Beaujeu to go and explore that other river's mouth," to which Beaujeu pays no heed. The responsibility for the serious mistake made in the choice of landing-place has been widely discussed. M. Lauvrière credits the error to Beaujeu and his pilots, although he points

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out the uncertainty of the cartography of this region before the year 1770, when the chronometer made possible the calculation of longitude.<sup>16</sup> It seems that on this one point the mistake was excusable: "The constant similarity and low level of the coast, the shallowness of the water, the narrowness of the entrance to bays," says one observer, make it quite admissible, considering the inability to calculate longitude. De la Salle was right; the pilots were wrong, but are excusable; the mistake would have been rectified if Beaujeu had done his duty by going to explore the point indicated. But de la Salle might have reached it later, with some delay, if, besides the miscalculations, inherent in the organization of his expedition, there had not been another mistake of the same order as the one which led them to believe that the climate of New France was the same as that of the mother country. De la Salle and his companions had explored the delta region of the Mississippi in the spring. Accustomed as they were to the severity of the northern climate, they had been delighted by the enchantment of the months of March and April, so severe in Canada, but so mild in Louisiana. They were not prepared for the other side of the picture, and had no idea of what was in store for them during the three years they were to spend in these unknown shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Torrid summers, tropical marsh fevers, scurvy, snakes, poisonous fruits, the Indians along the shore, who like the Iroquois of the north were the most hostile and cruel of all the tribes. Such was the lot of the two hundred soldiers and the colonists who had been led to expect an earthly paradise. Inexperienced, ill-adapted to the task, ill-recruited, rendered hostile to de la Salle during the crossing by the intrigues of Beaujeu, d'Aigron, and Minet, most of these men were bound to become sick, mutinous, and trouble makers.