JEAN NICOLET, INTERPRETER AND VOYAGEUR IN CANADA.  
1613-1642.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF HENRI JOUAN,  BY GRACE CLARK.

For some time, considerable attention has been directed in France toward Canada, concerning which, as we must admit indeed, but little thought was given until recently, when some travelers who are eminent publicists reminded us that there is across the Atlantic a country called "New France," where there lives a population of French origin; that this population, even while it accepts certain accomplished facts not to be recalled, still preserves a filial veneration for the motherland, notwithstanding its separation of more than a century, still retains the faith of its fathers, and still speaks their tongue, which it deems a point of honor to keep pure from all mixture with the language of the rulers whom the fate of arms has placed over it. Thanks to their energy,

1Previous to 1853, Jean Nicolet was unknown to history as the discoverer of the Northwest. In his Discovery of the Mississippi, published that year, John G. Shea identified the Men of the Sea, spoken of in the Jesuit Relations, as the Winnebagoes, or "Quinipigon" of those days. In the Relation of 1638, Father Le Jeune outlines the history of Nicolet's exploration, and Dr. Shea was enabled, because of this identification he had made, to point out in his volume the fact that Nicolet was beyond doubt the first white man to set foot within what are now the States of Michigan and Wisconsin. But Dr. Shea had not pushed his researches further than to be able to say that this remarkable tour into the unbroken wilderness of the Northwest was made "as early as 1639," afterwards placing it "in 1634." This conclusion was followed by Western historians until 1878, when Benjamin Sute, of Ottawa, in his Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature (Ottawa, 1878, pp. 426, 428), showed that Nicolet's tour must have been made in 1631-6; M. Sute's "supposition" being that "Nicolet left Allamiste's island about

2Post-captain (retired), at the port of Cherbourg, France. The original article appeared in Revue Manchoise, 1st quarter, 1891.—En.
their perseverance and their mutual understanding, the descendants of the French in Canada have preserved almost intact their primitive institutions; they take an active part in the administration and government of the country; their language is upon the same footing as English in the deliberative assemblies; in a word, they have made a wide place for themselves there, —a thing quite necessary, however, to attribute to their number and to their vitality, which is affirmed by its remarkable growth. In 1703, at the time of the cession of Canada to England, there were sixty thousand Frenchmen there; to-day the French Canadians number nearly three millions!

Most of our large journals quite recently published some letters that were addressed to them by the publicists, merchants, engineers, etc., who were members of the French delegation conducted by the curé Labelle, perhaps the most popular man in Canada, where the Catholic clergy, recruited from the population of French origin, exercise a very great influence: which delegation was to ascertain de viez the varied resources that this country offers, and to study the means of establishing between it and France a direct run of business that should be profitable to both. These visitors are unanimous in declaring that the reception given

September, 1834, and went to Wisconsin." This supposition he amplified in a paper in Wts. Hist. Coll., vol. viii., under date of August, 1877. In 1881, Consul Willshire Butterfield issued a monograph entitled History of the Discovery of the Northwest by John Nicolet in 1634, with a Sketch of His Life. In this valuable little work, Mr. Butterfield brought forth new facts and arguments, which fixed the date at 1634 beyond the region of doubt, and confirmed an earlier assumption previously enunciated by historians of the West,—that Nicolet did not discover the Wisconsin river, as had been previously assumed, but only journeyed up the Fox river as far as the village of the Mascoutins and then journeyed southward to the country of the Illinois.

At the editor's request, Mr. Butterfield has prepared a bibliography of the subject of Nicolet's career. With this bibliography, the present article by M. Jouan, Mr. Butterfield's monograph, and M. Sutle's article in Vol. viii. of these Collections,—with Dr. Draper's notes upon the last named,—the subject of Nicolet is practically exhausted, so far as the presentation of historical material is concerned. — Ed.
to "our people of France," as we are still called there, exceeded all that they could have imagined; one of them goes so far as to say that he dares not relate all the kind attentions of which they have been the recipients, because he would not be believed. Their accounts are of continuous festivities of every sort, with addresses of welcome, picturesque excursions, and triumphal entrances, accompanied by the ringing of bells, into cities decked with tri-colored flags, among which some old banners adorned with the fleur-de-lis, still reverently preserved as relics, are here and there seen. The clergy in their altar garments, led by the great dignitaries of the church, came and received our countrymen at the doors of the churches that were adorned as for the greatest Catholic festivals and where the holy sacrament was exposed for adoration. It is but just to add that the reception given them by the English was no less warm nor less cordial.

The various provinces of France have co-operated in a greater or less degree in the formation of the French population of Canada, but it was the provinces of the West and Northwest that furnished the greatest number of emigrants; in particular, Normandy, whose influence is recognized to-day in the language, where we find certain turns of speech, certain meanings of words, still in use in our province. If one looks through the "Annuals" of the Canadian cities he will find there all our old family names. Almost all the employés of the company which was formed during the winter of 1613-1614 came from Normandy. The crews of the ships were furnished by the ports of Rouen, Honfleur, Le Havre, Dieppe, and Caen. These cities were the nurseries which produced the most useful interpreters.

In order to train these interpreters, the need of whom had been felt since the beginning of colonization, young men were taken, sometimes mere youths, and sent to live for some years in the midst of the "savages" as the natives were

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indiscriminately called, in order to learn their languages and to become initiated into their customs. Some of these interpreters were highly gifted persons and much better instructed than the generality of colonists; it was from their ranks that Champlain was accustomed to choose his agents to explore unknown regions and to conclude treaties with the savage nations.

Among these voyageurs and interpreters there is one, Jean Nicolet, who occupies a prominent place in the very earliest history of Canada, and of whom the inhabitants of Cherbourg have the right to be proud inasmuch as the strongest presumptions — as I shall forthwith show — permit them to claim him as a child of their city, or at least of its vicinity; and still I am much afraid that he is to-day unknown by the majority of them. Are there many among them who have read the extract from the Relation de la Nouvelle France de 1643 by M. Pierre Margry in the first volume of his careful studies upon the Discoveries and Settlements of the French in the West, and South of North America, where the salient facts of his life and tragic end are related? If Nicolet is forgotten among us, he is not so in Canada, where his name is constantly recalled to the present generation by the seignory and county of Nicolet, Nicolet lake, Nicolet river, and the pretty city of Nicolet, in high tide of prosperity, which numbered 7,364 inhabitants on January first of this year, and in which is located Nicolet seminary, one of the first colleges of the new world. Quite recently a decree of the pope divided the diocese of Three Rivers and one of the sections became the new diocese of Nicolet, the titulary taking possession of it in July last. "If Canada had entered the era of statues, it would be high time that Jean Nicolet had his bronze in the city of Nicolet," wrote a Canadian publicist to me, M. Benjamin

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1 During a period of forty years, beginning with 1633, the Jesuits in Canada kept their superiors in France regularly informed of all that concerned the country; taken together, their reports constitute the Relations. — H. J.


1 July, 1885. — En.
Sulitz, who has given much attention to our compatriot. Moreover it is not only in Canada that an interest is felt in him; in 1881 a citizen of the United States, Mr. C. W. Butterfield, of Madison, Wisconsin, wrote a book in memory of the explorer who first showed the way to the vast territory that to-day constitutes the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin, of him whom he calls "the gallant Norman," "the indomitable explorer," "the courageous Frenchman." Perhaps my fellow-citizens will find some interest in reading the following pages which I in my turn devote to Nicolet in order to make him known to them,—pages that sum up what I have learned from the publications to which I have just made reference and from the information that has been kindly furnished me by their authors.

Jean Nicolet may have been twenty years old when he arrived in Canada in 1618. Canadian historians place his birth at about 1598, at Cherbourg. Positive proof of this last assertion is wanting; at least I have not been able as yet to obtain from Canada any information authorizing the fixing of his birthplace indisputably, but there is a strong presumption that he was from Cherbourg or its vicinity. According to his marriage contract drawn up at Quebec in 1637, he was the son of Thomas Nicolet, mail-carrier [mecceger ordinaire] between Cherbourg and Paris, and Margaret Delamer, two family names still very common in Cherbourg and vicinity, and names that are found very often in the oldest titles preserved. Nothing surprising then if a Nicolet born in this district should have been mail-carrier between Cherbourg and Paris, and if one of his children,

1 At the present time president of the French section of the Royal Society of Canada.—H. J.
2 History of the Discovery of the Northwest by John Nicolet in 1634, with a Sketch of his Life, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1881.—H. J.
3 See note at close of this article.—H. J.
4 The Nicolets of Cherbourg and vicinity wrote their name ordinarily with two 't's; in the Relations of Canada we find without distinction "Nicollet" and "Nicolet" for the name of the explorer. It is the latter spelling that has prevailed in Canada and consequently I have adopted it.—H. J.
brought up in a maritime city, should have left his native country to go and seek his fortune in the lands beyond the sea.

On this presumption, M. Pierre Margry (who had become acquainted in Paris with a copy of the same marriage contract), in 1868, sought information at the mayoralty of Cherbourg, and obtained that which follows, gathered from the registers of catholicism of the church of the Holy Trinity, and deposited in the Hotel de Ville in 1792:

December 3rd, 1604: birth of Rouland Nicollet, son of Thomas Nicollet;
October 27th, 1605: birth of Thomas Nicollet, son of Thomas Nicollet;
December 15th, 1611: birth of Perrette, daughter of Thomas Nicollet;
August 13th, 1653: death of Jeanne Nicollet, daughter of the late Thomas;
December 14th, 1605: birth of Marguerite Delamer (possibly a first cousin of Jean, but, at all events, not his mother: the date would contradict it).

As one may see, there is in all this nothing about Jean.

During the last months of 1862, I resumed these researches at the request of M. Pierre Margry, commencing by examining the old catholic registers [registres de catholicité] of Cherbourg, which go back to June 12, 1540, but without success. There was nothing concerning the birth of Thomas Nicollet and of Margaret Delamer, their marriage, their death, nor the birth of a son named Jean up to the end of 1605. These records give only the births, and furthermore there is a break of eighteen years, from 1572 to 1610. The marriages and deaths are recorded only from 1610 onward, with a break from 1622 to Easter 1623. These old registers are otherwise very incomplete; the entries of births give only the family and christian names (usually only a single christian name) of the newborn, the father, the godfather and the godmother; the mother is not mentioned.

1 As appears from the marriage contract of Jean, executed in 1637, his father was dead at this last date.—H. J.
The entries of marriages mention only the family name and first name of the bride and groom and of the father of each. In the lists of deaths we find only the family name and first name of the father and again not always that. The registers kept by M. Groult, curé of Cherbourg, from 1628 to 1693, written entirely by his own hand, mention the baptisms, marriages, and burials, performed at Cherbourg, both at the church of the Holy Trinity and at the chapel of the château; but nothing affirms positively that before 1628 the clergymen of this chapel were not alone commissioned to keep note of the persons who were baptised, married and buried. May it not be that such was the case of Thomas Nicolet, Margaret Delamer, and their son Jean? We can affirm nothing, deny nothing, in this respect, since the records of the chapel of the château, which was pulled down in 1689, have not for a long time been in existence.

I have likewise sought the marriage contract of Thomas Nicolet and Margaret Delamer, and for that purpose have turned over from three to four thousand different documents, kindly placed at my disposal by M. Druet, a notary of Cherbourg — documents which were signed by M. Druet, royal tabellion, and his colleague M. François Landrin, from 1590 to 1603. I have indeed found numerous marriage deeds but not the one I was seeking; although it was in this interval from 1580 to 1603 that there was the greatest number of chances to discover it. I can even say that in all these deeds in which the Nicolets figure many times, I have seen but a single time (May 10, 1693) a "Thomas Nicolet, bourgeois of Cherbourg"; it must however be observed that there were at Cherbourg other notaries, than M. Philip Delamer, and their minutes have been scattered or lost. There is nothing which says that the contract in question was not drawn up by one of these.

Canadian historians, as I said before, make Cherbourg the birthplace of Jean Nicolet, probably on account of the declaration that he made on arriving in Canada, that he came from Cherbourg, that he was from Cherbourg; but does this declaration specify that he was born in the city; or indeed, in saying that he was from Cherbourg, a city
already well known at that time in maritime and colonial circles, did he not better fix the ideas of those whom he addressed than if he had given as his birthplace a small locality entirely unknown? This supposition is not too bold, it comes to me, for I see the same thing done every day. This fact led me to conduct researches in the neighborhood of Cherbourg, chiefly at Hainneville, five kilometers from Cherbourg, where, out of 1,050 inhabitants, one can count thirty-seven heads of families bearing the name of Nicolet. I had besides heard some old letters spoken of that existed still in that commune; letters written long ago by a person who had afterwards crossed the sea. I was not more fortunate at Hainneville than at Cherbourg; the registers of births, deaths, and marriages go back only to 1660, and among the numerous Nicolets and Delamers who figure there I found nothing bearing upon Jean or his parents. The different Nicolets whom I questioned—especially the more aged of them—could acquaint me with nothing more.¹

¹I had however a moment's hope. When I spoke of old letters I was told a story that had agitated all Hainneville nearly forty years before. At that time there was discovered in the study of a notary at Laval, a will left by one Nicolet who had quitted the country long ago: an inheritance of eighteen millions that had not been claimed, was in question. Had this Nicolet any connection with the Canadian? Some anecdotes told me at Cherbourg might have led me to believe it, but it was a mistake. A delegation of the Nicolets of Hainneville had repaired to Laval and to Rennes. One of the delegates was still living at Cherbourg. We were brought together and he told me that there was indeed a will and a valuable estate was to be inherited, but they had been obliged to admit that they had nothing to do with it. The testator was called Le Nicolet, and was originally from another part of the country. I was ignorant of this when I presented myself at Hainneville; my questions caused the old story to be suddenly revived and at the same time excited a distrust towards me that people scarcely gave themselves the trouble to conceal. Evidently I had come for the millions; in vain I protested it was the first time I had heard them spoken of. I was not believed; I knew much more about it than I would say; I was simply an intriguer, a schemer for the inheritance. Some tried to cajole me by reminding me that they had been the first to give me information, that it was fair consequently that I should share with them. Others, more skeptical, but more kindly disposed, contented themselves with considering me an "innocent," and
In other communes, my attempts were not more successful; therefore up to the present time nothing affirms positively that Jean Nicolet was born at Cherbourg or in its vicinity. There is only a presumption; but until a more fortunate, or more skilful, seeker shall have found certain proofs, may not this presumption, ought it not indeed, to be regarded as equivalent to a certainty?

Nicolet arrived as I have stated in 1618 in Canada, where “his temperament and excellent memory aroused great hopes for him.” He was a man full of spirit, daring, and at the same time deeply religious. He was sent very early (probably about 1620) a hundred leagues from Quebec up the Ottawa river, among the Algonquins of Allumette island (Champlain had ascended this river in 1615) in order to learn the language of the Algonquins which was then in general use in the west and on the north bank of the St. Lawrence. He remained for two years among these savages without seeing a single European, living their life, “always accompanying the barbarians on their expeditions and travels, amid fatigues that cannot be imagined except by those who have seen them; several times he passed seven or eight days without eating anything; he was seven whole weeks without other nourishment than a little bark.” About 1622, he at the head of 400 Algonquins went to negotiate peace with the Iroquois and succeeded completely in the undertaking. Later he went among the Nipisings, or Algonquins of Lake Nipissing, they received him to the north-west, and remained with them eight or nine years, becoming so to speak, one of them, adopted by the nation, taking part in their frequent councils, “having his cabin apart, doing his own fishing and trading.”

During this long residence among the Nipisings, did Nic-
olet appear at all at Quebec? We cannot say; but it is more than probable that he did not leave the Indians while the English continued to occupy this city, from 1629 to 1632; and more than probable, also, that he with some other Frenchmen who were in the same situation, left not a stone untumed in order to harm the invaders in the minds of the savages.

On the return of the French to Quebec, Nicolet was recalled there to be employed as clerk and interpreter of the Company of the Hundred Associates. It seems however that he may have requested his recall, alarmed for the safety of his soul,—I have stated that he had very pronounced religious views,—in a remote region where there were no missionaries. Without doubt, also, Champlain, who had resumed the government of the colony after the departure of the English, was delighted to see him again and to consult him concerning a project that he was meditating, and one which Nicolet more than any other seemed to him capable of carrying out, owing to his intercourse with the Indians and the influence that he very quickly exercised over them.

Champlain had ascended a part of the Ottawa river and visited the shore of the Georgian bay, in the northeast angle of Lake Huron, but his ideas on the region of the great lakes were still very vague, hardly defined at all in fact, in 1634. Lakes Erie, Michigan, and Superior were unknown to him; he had heard the falls of Niagara spoken of but to him they were no more than ordinary rapids. Still he had heard it said that toward the west, four hundred leagues away, there

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1 Benjamin Sulte, Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature, Ottawa, 1876.—H. J.

2 "He (Nicolet) withdrew only in order to secure his salvation in the use of the sacraments, for want of which there is great peril for the soul among the savages." Relation of 1643.—H. J.

3 "... whom (the savages) he was able to control and to direct whether he wished with a skill that will hardly find its equal." Relation of 1643.—H. J.

4 Champlain's map of 1632 gives a fair outline of Lakes Huron and Superior and the Sault Ste. Marie; while the general features of the Fox-Wisconsin water-course are also given, although of course from nearsity, and placed north of Lake Superior instead of south of it.—Ed.
was a people that had formerly lived in the neighborhood of a distant sea, and called on that account by the Algonquins the "Tribe of the Men of the Sea." It was told furthermore that this "Tribe of the Sea" held intercourse with people living still farther west who reached them by crossing a vast extent of water in large canoes made of wood, and not of bark, and who because of their lack of beards, their shaved heads, costumes, etc., seemed to resemble greatly the Tartars or the Chinese.\(^1\) With the aid of a little imagination and with no lack of willingness—one is always inclined to believe what one desires!—it was easy to discern this vast extent of water, the sea that separates America from Asia, the north Pacific; and in the voyagers, the Chinese or Japanese. It was the opinion of Champlain, of the missionaries, and of the better informed colonists, that in pushing westward it would be comparatively easy to find a shorter road to China by crossing America, than that usually followed in rounding the cape of Good Hope. Ever since the time of James Cartier this idea had haunted the minds of men and they deceived themselves as to the real width of the American continent. They believed that it would be sufficient to penetrate two or three hundred leagues inland, in order to find, if not the Pacific ocean, at least a bay or some great river, leading there.

Nicolet, during his long sojourn at Lake Nipissing, must have heard the same tales, as the Nipissirious went every year, it appears, to trade with a tribe removed from them by a five or six weeks' journey; and this tribe was supposed to trade with people living still farther who came by water in large wooden canoes.\(^2\) His curiosity must have been as much excited as Champlain's and we may suppose that they had spoken together of the problem to be solved—the discovery of a direct route to China,—and no one appeared more capable than Nicolet of clearing up the matter.

The 1st of July, 1634, two fleets of canoes left Quebec and

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\(^1\)The first mentioned tribe were the Winnebagoes and the second the Sioux.—Ed.

\(^2\) Benjamin Sulte (after F. Sagard, 1835), Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature, 1878.—H. J.
ascended the St. Lawrence river; one to build a fort in the place where to-day stands the city of Three Rivers; the other, under the direction of Father Brébeuf, to explore "the upper country"—today the Canadian province of Ontario by ascending the Ottawa river. Nicolet was in the second fleet, and when the two expeditions met at Three Rivers, he, putting the stakes in place with his own hands, helped in the foundation of the city where he was to pass the last years of his life. Allumette island was reached after a thousand sufferings had been endured by these travelers who were unaccustomed to the life of the woods and who were moreover hostilely received on the road by the natives; but this was no obstacle to a coureur des bois, a demi-savage such as Nicolet. Leaving Brébeuf at Allumette island he went first among his old friends of Lake Nipissing to make preparations for his voyage. Then, descending the French river which issues from Lake Nipissing and empties into the Georgian bay (northeastern part of Lake Huron), he visits the Hurons who inhabit this region and with whom in all probability he came to execute some commission given him by Champlain. From this time he sets out for unknown lands in a birch-bark canoe—a forerunner of the many steamers and ships that now plow the great lakes in all directions—with only seven savages, Hurons, for his entire crew and escort into a region where now arise agricultural and industrial settlements and populous cities, but which were then the exclusive domain of tribes of redskins whose number or names no one knew, and where the traveler could depend only upon the hunting and fishing for his daily subsistence. He begins by coasting along the north shore of Lake Huron, then, following the strait that leads into Lake Superior, he pushes to the place since called Sault Sainte Marie, where he remains for some time to let his men rest; then, crossing the straits of Mackinaw he enters

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1 "C. W. Butterfield, loc. cit.—H. J.
2 "Jean Nicolet in the journey which he made with us to the island, sustained all the hard work of one of the most robust savages." Relation of 1635.—H. J.
3 Not crossing, but ascending.—Ed.