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JOHN G. REID

FRENCH ASPIRATIONS IN THE KENNEBEC-PENOBSCOT REGION, 1671*

It is well known that a substantial area of what is now the northeastern part of the state of Maine was once claimed by France as part of the colony of Acadia. Hector d'Andigné de Grandfontaine, who arrived in Acadia as governor in 1670, thus ending sixteen years of English rule, was given instructions which defined the colony as including the entire coastline from "Quinibeciy" (Kennebec) northeastwards as far as Cape Breton Island, and all the land stretching westward from that coastline as far as the St. Lawrence River. Specifically mentioned in the instructions, as it had frequently been during the preceding negotiations between the English and French crowns, was the fort at Pentagouet (known more usually to the English as "Penobscot," and located on the site later known as Castine), and it was here that Grandfontaine set up his headquarters.¹ It is equally well known that by this time there were substantial English colonial settlements on the Kennebec River and to the eastward at such locations as Sheepscot and Pemaquid. The English claim to possession of this area was longstanding and had been reaffirmed in the granting of all the territory between Kennebec and Ste. Croix rivers to James, duke of York, by the English crown in 1664.²

That there was considerable potential for conflict in this disputed territory is clear enough. What is not so widely known – although the episode has been alluded to by some historians³ – is that in 1671 French colonial officials became

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convinced that the matter could readily be resolved through the voluntary and permanent submission of the English colonists to French rule. That this seemingly unlikely assessment was offered to the French government both by Governor Grandfontaine and by the intendant of New France, Jean Talon, is clear from fragmentary but conclusive evidence. Grandfontaine's observations were made in a passage contained in his report of 1671:

Que si le Roy faisoit restituer par Mr le Duc d'Yorck Kennebecquy, et Paincouit les habitans qui ne veullent point reconnoistre baston ne demanderont que la liberte de Religion et Samaté profiteroit de la pesche et de traicte de la coste, dont on tireroit beaucoup d'utilité.⁴

That if the king [of France] would bring about the restitution of Kennebec and Pemaquid by the duke of York, the inhabitants – who have no wish to recognize [the authority of] Boston – would ask for nothing other than freedom of religion. His Majesty would profit from the fishery and from a very useful coastal trade.

Jean Talon, meanwhile, went into greater detail when writing to Jean-Baptiste Colbert, chief minister of King Louis XIV, on 11 November of the same year:

En achevant ce memoire le sieur de Saint-Lusson retourne de Pentagouet, mais si abatu de la fatigue de son voyage et si affoibly par la faim qu'il a souffert que je doute qu'il puisse aller en france ou je serois bien aise qu'il passast pour avoir l'honneur de vous informer luy-mesme de ce qu'il a vû dans les rivieres de Peinsuit et Kinibiki, toutes deux couvertes de belles habitations Angloises bien basties et dans de belles plaines, les

While this memorandum was being completed, the Sieur [Simon-François Daumont] de Saint-Lusson returned from Pentagouet, but so worn out by his journey and so weakened by hunger that I doubt if he will be able to proceed to France, where I would very much like him to go in order to have the honor of personally informing you of what he saw on the Pemaquid and Kennebec rivers. [The surrounding areas of]

colons de ces lieux, quoyque la pluspart anglois de nation, l'ont receu en Prince, ont salué de Mousquet et de Canon et tous l'ont regalé a qui mieux, avec demonstration d'une joye sensible de veoir Pentagouet avec les pretensions sur les terres entre les mains du Roy, que cette joye enterieure soit un effect de la crainte qu'ils ont du voisinage des Francois ou d'une veritable passion de passer sous la domination de Sa Majesté, je n'en puis bien juger, ils ont chargé ledict sieur de Saint-Lusson de me faire des propositions sur ce sujet, que je luy ay deffendu de declarer à qui que ce soit, Il vous porte les memoires.⁵

both rivers are covered with fine English habitations, well built and in beautiful open country. The colonists of these places, although mostly of English nationality, gave him [Saint-Lusson] a princely reception with musket and cannon salutes, and vied with one another in entertaining him. They showed an evident joy at the prospect of seeing Pentagouet, and the claimed territories, in the hands of the king [of France]. Whether this exterior joyfulness is an effect of the fear which they have of the French being so close, or of a true desire to come under the rule of His Majesty, I cannot judge. They instructed the said Sieur de Saint-Lusson to make representations to me on this subject, which I have forbidden him to discuss with anyone. He is bringing you the documentation.

In attempting to assess the significance of these documents, two cautionary observations must initially be made. First, that in certain important respects, both documents are frustratingly (and tantalizingly) imprecise. We do not know exactly which settlements were visited by Saint-Lusson on what are referred to as "the Pemaquid and Kennebec rivers"; it may be suspected that his journey included at least the Sheepscott plantations as well as those on the Kennebec and at Pemaquid, but the documents do not give a definite indi-

cation. Nor do they indicate exactly who among the colonists met with Saint-Lusson. This latter point is of some importance in introducing the second note of caution: that the hopes of Grandfontaine and Talon were never realized. On the contrary, a petition was sent to the general court of Massachusetts in May 1672 by "Severall of the Inhabitants of the Easterne parts of New England viz. Kenebeck, Cape Bonawagon [Southport], Damaras Cove, shipscoate Pemaquid and Monhegen." The ninety-six petitioners requested the extension of Massachusetts government to their communities, and in the summer of 1674 they were rewarded by the creation of the new county of Devon — extending eastward from the Kennebec — under the authority of the general court.⁶ Thus the statement of Grandfontaine that "the inhabitants . . . have no wish to recognize Boston" was apparently confuted.

Yet despite these reflections, there is good reason to take seriously the reports of Grandfontaine and Talon in 1671. The Sieur de Saint-Lusson, upon whose experiences both reports were probably based — although Grandfontaine, because his headquarters on the Penobscot River were so close, may well also have conducted his own investigations — was a seasoned and successful explorer. When he departed for Pentagouet in the fall of 1671, instructed by Talon to search for a secure and convenient travel route between Quebec and Acadia, Saint-Lusson had newly returned from an expedition west to the Great Lakes country where he had forged diplomatic links with native peoples in the vicinity of Lake Superior. Neither Talon nor Grandfontaine, moreover, was likely to be a gullible or passive recipient of Saint-Lusson's contentions; and Grandfontaine also had the advantage of good intelligence on New England matters, gained from his trade contacts with Boston.⁷ There is good circumstantial evidence, therefore, for supposing that Saint-Lusson's experiences were substantially as he related them, and that they were conveyed to the French government by shrewd and well-informed officials.

Furthermore, the 1671 reports were by no means the only instances of close contacts between the English of the Kennebec-Pemaquid area and their French neighbors and visitors. As early as 1635, the Plymouth governor William Bradford was complaining that English merchants at Pemaquid were trading with the French in Acadia, who at that time were competitors of the Plymouth colony in the northeastern fur trade.⁸ Some nine years later, John Winthrop of Massachusetts indicated in his journal that Abraham Shurt, merchant at Pemaquid, was trading with both of the rival Acadian governors Charles de Menou d'Aulnay and Charles de Saint-Etienne de la Tour.⁹ More striking still was the welcome given to the Jesuit priest Gabriel Druillettes, who visited several English settlements on the Kennebec in 1647, in the course of his missionary endeavors among the Abenaki, and was received with a cordiality that was described in the *Jesuit Relation* for that year as "extraordinary."¹⁰ The reports of Saint-Lusson had thus been foreshadowed by the earlier experience of Druillettes. Even after the movement to affiliate the northeastern settlements with Massachusetts, contacts with the French continued. The French merchant Henri Brunet, for example, dined at Pentagouet on 5 October 1673 with Thomas Gardner, an English merchant of Pemaquid, and for several years thereafter he made regular visits to the area to trade with Gardner and with other merchants such as Silvanus Davis.¹¹ The visit of Saint-Lusson to the Kennebec-Penobscot area therefore, was not an isolated incident but one of a series of French-English contacts that extended over a forty-year period.

How, then, to interpret the 1671 reports of Grandfontaine and Talon? Talon was no doubt well justified in his reluctance to take at face value the "exterior joyfulness" of the English colonists at the prospect of French rule, and to question whether this represented "a true desire to come under the rule of His Majesty." The successful establishment of the Massachusetts county of Devon shortly afterwards is enough to suggest that Talon's appraisal was more accurate

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than the over-optimistic statement of Grandfontaine. It is entirely possible too, although direct evidence is lacking, that there was dissension among the English communities and within the communities as to the relative merits of a close identification with the French or with Massachusetts. Yet what is clear from the entire episode is the display in the northeastern English settlements of the necessary pragmatism of a border people.

Whatever might be the jurisdictional disputes between French and English, conflict with a powerful neighbor was a luxury which the English colonists on the Kennebec and further east could not afford. Later events, including the re-establishment of the authority of the duke of York at Pemaquid in 1677 and the outbreak of open warfare between French and English in 1689, would make that conflict inevitable. In 1671, however, there was still good reason for the colonists to encourage friendly contacts with the French, and even to contemplate the possibility of adapting to French government in case boundary changes should make this the only way of safeguarding the developing communities and their agricultural, fishing, and trading economy. Historians have already remarked upon the ability of Acadian communities, in the territory now known as the Maritime region of Canada, to adapt to changes in political authority: Naomi Griffiths, for example, has argued persuasively that "the Acadians . . . were as much a people of the frontier as the inhabitants of Monmouthshire, Cumberland, Alsace-Lorraine, or the Basque country."¹² The experiences of Saint-Lusson, and the reports of Talon and Grandfontaine, provide strong evidence for suggesting that the same can be said of the English inhabitants of the disputed territory between Kennebec and Penobscot rivers.

NOTES

¹Instructions to Grandfontaine, 5 March 1670. France, Archives Nationales, Archives des Colonies (hereafter cited as AC), B, 2, ff. 57-60.

²See Edwin A. Churchill, "Introduction: Colonial Pemaquid," in Helen B. Camp, *Archaeological Excavations at Pemaquid, Maine, 1965-1974* (Augusta, Me., 1975), pp. ix-xi; Gordon E. Kershaw, "Gentlemen of Large Property and Judicious Men": *The Kennebec Proprietors, 1749-1775* (Somersworth, N.H., 1975), pp. 7-16; John G. Reid, *Acadia, Maine, and New Scotland: Marginal Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto, 1981), p. 153 (hereafter cited as Reid, *Acadia, Maine, and New Scotland*).

³See, for examples, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 1, s.v. "Daumont de Saint-Lusson, Simon-François," by Léopold Lamontagne (hereafter cited as Lamontagne, "Saint-Lusson"); Honorius Provost, *Chaudière-Kennebec: Grand Chemin Séculaire* (Quebec, 1974), p. 175; Reid, *Acadia, Maine, and New Scotland*, p. 154.

⁴Report of Grandfontaine, [1671], AC, C11D, 1, f. 139. The passage is quoted here from a précis version of the report prepared, as was a normal routine, by a minor official of the ministry of marine for presentation to the minister. In this case, the original report has not survived on record.

⁵Talon to Colbert, 11 November 1671, AC, C11A, 3, ff. 187-8. One internal inconsistency within this passage requires comment: whereas Talon indicates at the beginning that Saint-Lusson's weakened condition would probably prevent him from sailing for France, he later states that "he [Saint-Lusson] is bringing you [the minister] the documentation." A clue to the solution of this problem may well lie in the fact that Saint-Lusson did in fact take ship almost immediately, and reached France in January 1672. Lamontagne, "Saint-Lusson." It is possible that Talon's final phrase was added to his report when he learned of Saint-Lusson's impending departure; the fact that a clerical error was apparently made in this phrase — a superscript "les" was written between "vous" and "porte" — can be interpreted as a further indication of haste. Also unclear from surviving evidence is the nature of the documentation carried to the minister by Saint-Lusson, which may well have consisted of more detailed reports of the expedition.

⁶Petition, 18 May 1672, Suffolk County (Mass.) court files, no. 1117; Proceedings of Commissioners, 22 July 1674, Massachusetts Archives, 3, ff. 306-8.

⁷Grandfontaine's trading links with New England contributed eventually to his recall from his governorship in 1673: see Reid, *Acadia, Maine, and New Scotland*, p. 161; and Jean Daigle, "Nos Amis les Ennemis: Relations Commercial de l'Acadie Avec le Massachusetts, 1670-1711" (Ph.D.

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dissertation, University of Maine, 1975), p. 84. On Saint-Lusson's previous expedition, see Lamontagne, "Saint-Lusson"; and on Talon's instructions to him in the fall of 1671, see Talon to Colbert, 2 November 1671, AC, C11A, 3, f. 161.

⁸William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Planation*, ed. S. E. Morison (New York, 1952), p. 279.

⁹John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer, 2 vols. (New York, 1908), 2: 180.

¹⁰Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France*, 73 vols. (Cleveland, 1896-1901), 31: 186-87.

¹¹Journals of Henri Brunet, France, Bibliothèque Nationale, Collection Clairambault, vol. 864, part 1, f. 39, and *passim*. See also Louis-Andre Vigneras, "Letters of an Acadian Trader, 1674-1676," *New England Quarterly* 13 (March 1940): 98-110.

¹²*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 4, s.v. "The Acadians," by N.E.S. Griffiths.

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