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The Jesuit Relations

Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America

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To Eleanor

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Montagnais Hunters of the Northern Woodlands

The earliest published *Jesuit Relations* were written by Father Paul Le Jeune (1592-1664), the first superior of the New France mission. Le Jeune was raised as a Protestant but converted to Catholicism as a young man. He later joined the Society of Jesus and acquired years of experience as an educator and administrator in various Jesuit colleges in France before traveling to Canada at the age of forty. Administrative duties kept him at Quebec through most of his North American career, but he still had extensive contact with the Montagnais and Algonquin bands that spent the summer in the vicinity of the French fort. The earliest volumes of the *Jesuit Relations* are almost entirely Le Jeune's work, and they focus mainly on the Montagnais.

Thanks to half a century of fur trading, these hunting-gathering people had experienced considerable contact with the French by the time Le Jeune encountered them, and yet their ancestral way of life was only beginning to show the effects of European colonization. The Montagnais had developed finely tuned strategies for deriving a living from an inhospitable environment of spruce forests, low rocky hills, rivers, lakes, and wetlands. In summer they gathered several hundred strong along the St. Lawrence River, wherever the fishing and berrying were good. But autumn found them dispersing to inland hunting grounds, where they sought moose and other large mammals for their meat and hides, as well as beavers, the pelts of which were central to trade with the French.

The itinerant life of the Montagnais and Algonquins required not only an intimate knowledge of the landscape and its seasonal resources but also amazing technical sophistication. These peoples excelled above all in the technology of transportation. In summer the birch bark canoe carried them and all their possessions along the intricate network of rivers

and lakes, yet it remained light enough for portages. When the waterways froze and snow covered the land, hunters donned their snowshoes and pulled their cargo on wooden toboggans.

Algonquin-Montagnais spiritual beliefs and practices were naturally of great interest to the Jesuits. Because these peoples saw different animals, as well as natural phenomena such as thunder and waterfalls, as possessing their own spirits and personalities, some anthropologists classify their religion as "animism." These peoples assumed that spirits could be helpful or harmful to humans, and the aim of Algonquian rituals was to propitiate these spirits — to deflect their malevolence or direct their powers toward human ends. They told stories of supernatural creatures and magical heroes as a means of conveying an understanding of the world. They consulted men or women known to possess special spiritual powers (shamans, or "jugglers," as the Jesuits derisively called them). They also looked for insight in their dreams and in ecstatic states induced by ceremonies such as the "shaking tent."

PAUL LE JEUNE WINTERS WITH MESTIGOIT'S BAND, 1633-1634

Le Jeune follows
Mestigoit

In the fall of 1633, not long after arriving in Canada, Father Le Jeune made a rather rash decision to follow a Montagnais band on its travels into the interior in search of game. The party was led by Mestigoit — Le Jeune calls him "my host" — and included a shaman, referred to by the missionary as "the sorcerer," and the shaman's brother, Pastedechouan. Le Jeune called the latter "the Apostate" because he had traveled to France several years earlier, converted to Christianity, and then reverted to the Montagnais religion upon his return to Canada. Their destination was the hunting grounds of the northern Appalachians, east of Quebec and south of the St. Lawrence. Le Jeune's aim in accompanying the band was to improve his knowledge of the native language and customs, while pressing his companions to abandon their "superstitions" and recognize the truth of Christianity. The missionary expedition ended up as an arduous struggle for survival, and far from making converts, Le Jeune seems to have impressed the Montagnais mainly with the incompetence and odd beliefs of the French. Still, the Jesuit did get to know the natives intimately, as his writings demonstrate.

There is an engagingly naive quality to these early writings of Paul Le Jeune. In retrospect, though the author does his best to maintain a stance of



Portrait of Father Paul Le Jeune (1591-1664)

Father Le Jeune was the first superior of the New France mission, and the pioneer author of the *Relations*.

National Archives of Canada/C-021404.

European superiority, he has difficulty disguising his own anxieties and uncertainties. It seems that the missionary found it unsettling to confront the Montagnais way of life, very much on its own ground and far from any European presence.

PAUL LE JEUNE

*Journal [of a Winter Hunt]*¹

1634

The Indians pass the winter in these woods, ranging here and there to get their living. In the early snows, they seek the beaver in the small rivers and porcupines upon the land; when the deep snows come, they hunt the moose and caribou, as I have said. From the twelfth of November of the year 1633, when we entered these vast forests, to the twenty-second of April of this year 1634, when we returned to the banks of the great river St. Lawrence, we camped at twenty-three different places. Sometimes we were in deep valleys, then upon lofty mountains, sometimes in the low flat country; but always in the snow. These forests where I was are made up of different kinds of trees, especially pines, cedars, and firs. We crossed many torrents of water, some rivers, several beautiful lakes and ponds, always walking over the ice. But let us come down to particulars and say a few words about each camping spot. My fear of becoming tedious will cause me to omit many things that I have considered trifling, although they might throw some light upon these memoirs.

Upon entering these regions, there were three cabins in our company: nineteen persons being in ours, sixteen in the cabin of the Indian named Ekhennabamate, and ten in that of the newcomers. This does not include the Indians who were encamped a few leagues² away from us. We were in all forty-five persons, who were to be kept alive on what it should please the holy providence of God to send us, for our provisions were getting very low.

¹ Selection titles are generally from the *Jesuit Relations*. Brackets indicate titles or parts of titles that were added by the editor.

² A league (French *lieue*) was a distance of approximately four kilometers, or two and a half miles.

JR 7: 106-15, Paul Le Jeune, *Relation of 1634*.

(Source notes throughout use the abbreviation JR, followed by a volume and page reference, to designate Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 vols. [Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1900].)

cabins
3/15
et

This is the order we followed in breaking up our camps, in tramping over the country, and in erecting our tents and pavilions. When our people saw that there was no longer any game within three or four leagues of us, an Indian who was best acquainted with the way to the place where we were going cried out in a loud voice outside the cabin one fine day, "Listen, men, I am going to mark the way for breaking camp tomorrow at daybreak." He took a hatchet and marked some trees, which guided us. They do not mark the way except in the beginning of winter, for when all the rivers and streams are frozen and the snow is deep, they do not take this trouble. *hatchet*

When there are a number of things to be carried, as often happens when they have killed a great many moose,³ the women go ahead and carry a portion of these things to the place where they are to camp the following day. When the snow is deep, they make sledges of wood which splits and which can be peeled off like leaves in very thin, long strips. These sledges are very narrow, because they have to be dragged among masses of trees closely crowded in some places; but to make up for this, they are very long. One day, seeing the sledge of my host standing against a tree, I could scarcely reach to the middle of it, stretching out my arm as far as I could. They fasten their baggage upon these, and, with a cord that they pass over their chests, they drag these wheel-less chariots over the snow.

But not to wander farther from my subject, as soon as it is day each one prepares to break camp. They begin by having breakfast, if there is any; for sometimes they depart without breakfasting, continue on their way without dining, and go to bed without supping. Each one arranges his own baggage, as best he can, and the women strike the cabin, to remove the ice and snow from the bark, which they roll up in a bundle. Once packed, the baggage is thrown upon their backs or loins in long bundles, which they hold with a cord that passes over their foreheads, beneath which they place a piece of bark so that it will not hurt them. When everyone is loaded, they mount their snowshoes, which are bound to the feet so that they will not sink into the snow, and then they march over plain and mountain. They make the children start early and go on ahead, but even so they often do not arrive until quite late. These little

children

³In the original French, Le Jeune refers to the main quarry of the Montagnais as *les eslans*, which in the Thwaites edition is translated as "elk," although it seems highly unlikely that the hunters would have encountered elk in this region. Europeans at this time were still somewhat uncertain as to how to designate unfamiliar North American animals. Le Jeune refers to caribou as "wild asses."

ones have their packs, or their sledges, to accustom them early to fatigue; the adults try to stimulate them by making a contest to see who will carry or drag the most.

To paint for you the hardships of the journey, I have neither pen nor brush equal to the task. You would have to see them to understand, as this is a meal that must be tasted to be appreciated. We did nothing but go up and go down. Frequently we had to bend over double to pass under partly fallen trees, and step over others lying upon the ground whose branches sometimes knocked us over, gently enough to be sure, but always coldly, for we fell upon the snow. If there happened to be a thaw, oh God, what suffering! It seemed to me I was walking over a road of glass that broke under my feet at every step. The frozen snow, beginning to melt, would fall and break into blocks or big pieces, into which we often sank up to our knees, and sometimes to our waists. Falling was painful enough, but pulling oneself out was even worse, for our snowshoes would be loaded with snow and so heavy that, when we tried to draw them out, it seemed as if somebody were tugging at our legs to dismember us. I have seen some who slid so far under the logs buried in the snow that they could pull out neither their legs nor their snowshoes without assistance. So imagine someone on these paths, loaded down like a mule, and you may judge how easy is the life of the Indian. *i unis*

In the discomforts of a journey in France, there are villages where one can refresh and fortify oneself, but the only inns that we encountered were brooks. We even had to break the ice in order to get some water to drink. It is true that we did not travel far each day, for that would indeed have been absolutely impossible for us. *120*

When we reached the place where we were to camp, the women went to cut the poles for the cabin, and the men to clear away the snow. Now a person had to work at this building, or shiver with cold for three long hours upon the snow waiting until it was finished. Sometimes I put my hand to the work to warm myself, but usually I was so frozen that fire alone could thaw me. The Indians were surprised at this, for they were working hard enough to sweat. Assuring them now and then that I was very cold, they would say to me, "Give us your hands so that we may see if you are telling the truth"; and finding them quite frozen, they were touched with compassion and gave me their warm mittens and took my cold ones. This went so far that my host, after having tried it several times, said to me, "Nicanis,⁴ do not winter anymore with the Indians, for

⁴Nicanis is the name the Montagnais gave to Father Le Jeune.

they will kill you." I think he meant that I would fall ill, and because I could not be dragged along with the baggage, they would kill me. I began to laugh and told him that he was trying to frighten me.

When the cabin was finished, about nightfall or a little before, they began to talk about dinner and supper all in one, for as we had departed in the morning with only a small morsel to eat, we had to have patience to reach our destination and to wait until the hotel was erected, in order to lodge and eat there. Unfortunately, on this particular day, our people did not go hunting as usual, and so it was for us a day of fasting as well as a day of work. . . .