

The Mysterious 1688 Journey of M. Lahontan

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This essay, still a work in progress, reopens an obscure and intriguing “cold case file” that dates from the end of the seventeenth century. The file, labeled “Lahontan,” is bulky and well worn, but it has been shelved almost out of sight for generations. Nowadays, not many colonial American historians even know the unsolved case exists; very few have blown the dust off of this illusive folder and opened up. It concerns the incredible claim by a young French officer that he and his party went far west of the Mississippi River in the winter of 1688-89. This neglected “case file” hinges primarily on a long, intriguing letter and an accompanying map that have been available in published form in several languages since 1703. The best and most recent French edition of Lahontan’s works was published in Montreal in 1990.² Still, for the better part of three centuries, the saga of this extraordinary expedition has been repeatedly ignored, mocked, or misinterpreted. Because the possible implications are significant, the man and his evidence deserve another hearing. This paper is intended to begin that long proceeding.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual meeting of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, held at Laval University in Quebec, June 11, 2006. My work on this topic started during a stint as the Mellon Research Fellow at the John Carter Brown Library in the fall of 2005; it is still far from completion. (I have been drawn into this research not because of my French language ability, but in spite of it.)

² Louis-Armand de Lom d’Arce de Lahontan, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Réal Ouellet and Alaine Beaulieu, editors, 2 vols. (Montreal: Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1990). This critical edition “[s]upersedes all other editions, and the 190-page introduction improves on most other studies,” according to J. F. Boshier, in his entry on “Lahontan” in the recent *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3: 343-344.

** 1 **

On September 18, 1688, a young officer on the Canadian frontier composed a letter to a relative in France. Louis-Armand de Lom D’Arce, though barely twenty-two, already had considerable military training and service behind him. In the status-conscious empire of Louis XIV, he was a person of standing and promise, having inherited the title of Baron de Lahontan from his father at the tender age of eight. Following the death of his prominent parent, he sought advice and support from an anonymous kinsman. After sailing to Canada at age seventeen, the youthful baron wrote a report every few months to his elderly patron. Each extended letter—he drafted twenty-five before his final return to Europe in 1694—described candidly what he saw and experienced after arriving at Quebec in November 1683.

Now, in “Letter XV,” Lahontan was writing from the French outpost of Michilimackinac near the strait that links Lake Huron to Lake Michigan. He had gone there by canoe with his small detachment of soldiers from Fort St. Joseph, the station at the southern tip of Lake Huron near the future site of Detroit.³ They had destroyed the fort before departing, for in 1688 the powerful Iroquois Confederacy was threatening any isolated posts near the eastern Great Lakes and making travel in the region a dangerous proposition for the French and their Indian allies.

³ Within a dozen years, this wilderness choke point, where the St. Clair River widens to form Lake St. Clair, would become the location of a new fort, Detroit (“The Narrows”), evolving over three centuries from a strategic frontier site to a heartland metropolis. Brian Leigh Dunnigan, *Frontier Metropolis: Picturing Early Detroit, 1701-1838* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001). See maps on pages 14 and 23.

In Letter XV, Lahontan reports that the governor of Canada recently sent orders for him to return to Quebec if possible, or else “to tarry” at Mackinac “till the Spring...”⁴ Neither option appeals to the restless young man. Given the Iroquois danger and the lateness of the season, a journey east “seems ... impossible.”⁵ However, Lahontan is also unwilling to remain at the straits as cold weather approaches. Instead, he writes, “I am upon the point of undertaking another Voyage, for I cannot mew my self up here all this Winter. I design to make the best use of my time, and to travel through the Southern Countries that I have so often heard of, having engag’d four or five good Huntsmen of the *Outaouas* [Ottawas] to go along with me.”⁶ Within a week, his party departs on an arduous journey of exploration that will last for eight months.

After arriving in Canada, Lahontan had spent most of three winters on hunts with the Algonquian Indians, learning their language and their skill for operating in severe winter weather. But something more than cabin fever drove the ambitious soldier, for much had changed since the previous decade regarding French exploration westward beyond the St. Lawrence valley. Almost fifteen years earlier Louis XIV, feeling stretched in Europe, had virtually forbidden Governor Frontenac in Quebec to “undertake long expeditions up the river.” A letter of May 17, 1674, cautioned the governor on the

⁴ Letter XV, “Dated at *Missilimackinac*, Sept. 18, 1688,” in Baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*, Reuben Gold Thwaites, editor, reprinted from the English edition of 1703 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1905), 164. I have used this edition throughout this essay, unless otherwise noted (hereafter: Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed.). In transcribing Thwaites’s version of Lahontan, I have elected to change f to s throughout, where appropriate.

⁵ Postponing an eastward trip he probably did not wish to undertake, Lahontan added, “There are in that Passage so many Waterfalls, Cataracts, and Places where there’s a necessity of tedious Land-carriages, that I dare not run such Hazards with my Soldiers, who cannot work the Boats but upon stagnating Water.” Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 164.

⁶ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 164-165. The subsequent text remains uncertain about the number Ottawa guides, using both four and five.

St. Lawrence “not to push afar discoveries in lands of the countries so far removed that they cannot be inhabited nor possessed by Frenchmen.”⁷ But the directive arrived too late, for French exploration in North America was soon gathering new momentum, thanks to a journey undertaken the previous year.

In 1673, the annual catalogue of events in New France (sent to Rome each year by Jesuit missionaries) reported that Father Jacques Marquette “has undertaken a journey this spring toward the Pacific or Chinese Sea with French and Algonquin companions.”⁸ Teaming with Louis Joliet and Indian guides, Marquette had ventured west from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi, and then south on that river as far as the mouth of the Arkansas before returning to the Great Lakes. Word of this tantalizing journey prompted another explorer from Canada, René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, to descend to the mouth of the Mississippi River, reaching the Gulf of Mexico in 1682. He claimed the Mississippi’s vast watershed for France, as “Louisiana,” and he hoped to return later by sea from Europe to establish a settlement at the river’s mouth. But in 1685, after miscalculating the location of the river entrance and sailing to the Texas coast, the explorer and several hundred settlers planted an ill-fated colony near Matagorda Bay. In 1687, before the leader could discover his true whereabouts and establish contact with the small French outpost at the mouth of the Arkansas River, several of La Salle’s own men shot him and covered up the murder.⁹

⁷ Quoted in Cornelius J. Jaenen, ed., *The French Regime in the Upper Country of Canada during the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1996), 20–21.

⁸ “Catalogus Provinciae Franciae, 1673,” quoted in Raphael N. Hamilton, S.J., *Marquette’s Explorations: The Narratives Reexamined* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 18.

⁹ Peter H. Wood, “La Salle: Discovery of a Lost Explorer,” *American Historical Review* 89 (April, 1984): 294-323; Robert S. Weddle, *The Wreck of the Belle, the Ruin of La Salle* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 214-253. See also, James E. Bruseth and Toni S. Turner, *From a Watery Grave:*

In the fall of 1688, therefore, the French in Canada and France knew only that La Salle and his colonists had disappeared, and that numerous huge and basic geographical riddles regarding western North America, stretching between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean, still remained to be solved. Marquette and Joliet, returning up the Mississippi fifteen years earlier, had speculated as to whether the Missouri (the huge, muddy river entering from the west that they called the Pekistanoni) would prove to be the avenue that could lead them toward the fabled cities of the Southwest and the great ocean that lay beyond.¹⁰ By heading west with experienced Indian guides, the young baron could hope to obtain word of La Salle's whereabouts or, better yet, to make significant discoveries of his own.

** 2 **

Lahontan set out from Michilimackinac on September 22, 1688, accompanied by his "own Detachment" of at least ten or twenty men (perhaps more), and the five seasoned Ottawa hunters "who indeed did me a great deal of Service."¹¹ He returned 240 days later, on May 22, 1689. By May 28 he had drafted a lengthy though hasty report to his patron, "*Containing...the Journal of a remarkable Voyage upon the Long River, and a Map of the adjacent Country.*" This is the much-disputed "Letter XVI," first published in French and in English in 1703. "THANK God," Lahontan began, "I am now return'd

The Discovery and Excavation of La Salle's Shipwreck, La Belle (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Carl I. Wheat, *Mapping the Transmississippi West, 1540-1861*, 5 vols. (San Francisco: Institute of Historical Geography, 1957-1963), I, 49. Wheat went on to explain dismissively (p. 55) that "the ordinarily canoe-bound French" would only "make a few rather feeble and isolated efforts towards more westerly exploration."

¹¹ Letter XVI, "Dated at *Missilimackinac*, May 28, 1689," in Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 167. Subsequent quotations in the following paragraphs are from this letter, pages 167-215.

from my Voyage upon the *Long River*, which falls into the River of *Missisipi*. I would willingly have trac'd it up to its Source, if several Obstacles had not stood in my way.”¹² Exactly where was “the Long River,” and—if the author was not simply fabricating this experience, as many have suggested—how did he get there and return?

The beginning and end of the trip, confined to the Mississippi and points east, are not obscure or controversial. During the first four weeks, Lahontan’s party traveled west from Michilimackinac to the Mississippi, following a common Indian route made known to the French by the explorers Marquette and Joliet in 1673. Crossing northern Lake Michigan to Green Bay, they ascended the Fox River and descended the Wisconsin to the Mississippi. Along the way, they received “a very kind Reception” from the Outagami, or Fox Indians, who spoke an Algoquian dialect that Lahontan could understand.¹³ After the chief received assurances that they were not headed northwest to trade arms to his enemies, the Sioux (in what is now Minnesota), pipes were smoked, and gifts were exchanged.

Most importantly, the Fox leader responded warmly to Lahontan’s request “to send *six* Warriours to accompany me to the long River, which I design’d to trace up to its Source.” Indeed, “instead of the six Warriours that I desir’d, he gave me ten, who understood the Lingua, and knew the Country of the *Eokoros*, with whom his Nation had maintain’d a Peace of twenty years standing.”¹⁴ The Eokoros it now seems likely, at least

¹² Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 167.

¹³ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 175.

¹⁴ “Two of the ten Warriours that he gave me, could speak the Language of the *Outaouas*, which I was well pleas’d with; not that I was a stranger to their own Language, for between that and the *Algonkin* there is no great difference, but in regard that there were several words that puzzled me.” Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 176.

to me, were the Arikaras, located along the Middle Missouri River. It also seems clear that the Indians of the pays *d'en haut* who went overland regularly to trade with them referred to the river as the Long River. Significantly, Lahontan's Ottawa companions were delighted by word of "this little Reinforcement, and were then so encouraged, that they told me above four times, that we might venture safely so far as the Plantation of the Sun." The expanded party reached the Mississippi on October 22.¹⁵

Now jump ahead more than four months to the final segment of Lahontan's journey, beginning on March 2, 1689, when the exhausted party returned to an unspecified point on the Upper Mississippi. The last eleven and half weeks of their odyssey are generally uncontested and can be summarized briefly. Drifting south with the current,¹⁶ they explored the mouth of the Missouri River on their right,¹⁷ and then the entrance to the Ohio on their left, before returning upstream to the mouth of the Illinois River.¹⁸ Lahontan entered that stream (already a familiar thoroughfare for French

¹⁵ Lahontan found the Mississippi to be "about half a League broad in that part. The force of the Current, and the breadth of that River, is much the same as that of the *Loire*. It lies North-East, and South-West; and its sides are adorn'd with Meadows, lofty Trees and Firs." Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 177.

¹⁶ Lahontan stopped on March 12 at an Oto village at the mouth of the Des Moines River (below Keokuk, in the southeastern tip of modern-day Iowa). He bargained for corn, "of which these People have great store," and he learned that bands of Pawnees resided further west up the substantial stream. "But considering that I was straitned [sic] for time, and *that I saw no probability of learning what I wanted to know with reference to the Spaniards*, I took leave of 'em the next day." Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 200. Italics added.

¹⁷ In ten days (March 16-25), the party made a round trip of nearly 275 miles, pushing up the Lower Missouri to the hostile Osage Indian villages in the vicinity of modern Jefferson City and returning. But they were still hundreds of miles below the spot where they had entered that same river in November, and several degrees of latitude further south. Therefore, there is no way that Lahontan could surmise that this powerful stream was in fact the lower portion of his Long River, nor is there any evidence that he inquired.

¹⁸ The Illinois River struck Lahontan as particularly deserving of praise. He was impressed by the "infinity" of fruit trees and grape vines along its banks, and "the great quantities of Deer, Roe-Bucks, and Turkeys that feed upon its brinks: Not to mention several other Beasts and Fowls, a description of which would require an intire Volume." In a rare reference to his actual field notes, Lahontan adds: "If you saw but my journal, you would be sick of the tedious particulars of our daily Adventures both in Hunting and Fishing divers species of Animals, and in Rencounters with the Savages." He does feel obliged to pass

explorers and traders) on April 10, and six days later reached the main French fort, where Tonti, La Salle's assistant, received him "with all imaginable Civility."¹⁹ Pushing on to the head of the Illinois River, he then portaged, with Indian help, to the shore of Lake Michigan at "Chekakou" (the future site of Chicago).²⁰ From that point,²¹ the party made its way gradually up the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. It took the explorers four more weeks before they finally "landed at *Missilimakinac*" on May 22.²²

** 3 **

But what of the long stretch between late October and early March, when Lahontan claimed to have been west of the Mississippi River, venturing up the so-called Long River? There, according to Letter XVI, he encountered three very large and

along one point immediately regarding his travels, since it has implications in the search for beaver pelts—a consuming interest for the French at this time. "The Beavers," he reports candidly, "are as unfrequent" along the Illinois "as in the long River, where I saw nothing but Otters, of which the People make Furs for the Winter." Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 206.

¹⁹ Given that almost nothing would become widely known about Lahontan's western travels after his return, it seems likely that he and his men said as little as possible about their winter venture to Tonti.

²⁰ On April 20, Lahontan moved upriver to "the Village of the *Illinese*; and to lessen the drudgery of a great Land-carriage of twelve great Leagues, ingag'd four hundred Men to transport our Baggage, which they did in the space of four days, being encourag'd by a Bribe of a great Roll of *Brasil* Tobacco, an hundred pound weight of Powder, two hundred weight of Ball, and some Arms, which I gave to the most considerable Men of their number." This is one of the few passages that suggests a very substantial size for Lahontan's party, though he may have been traveling this leg with some "thirty *Coueurs de Bois*" who were in the area to trade with the Illinois Indians. Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 207.

²¹ Reaching Lake Michigan, Lahontan parted company with his invaluable Outagami guides. These Fox Indians continued up the western shore of the lake "to return to their own Country, being very well satisfied" with the coveted guns and pistols Lahontan presented to them as parting gifts. Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 207.

²² Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 208. Lahontan found that "coasting along the Lake" in early May was very different from river travel. They proceeded slowly, since spring storms moving across the open expanse of Lake Michigan often made the water too rough to embark. After a pause at the Miami River, they passed the distinctive coastal dunes said to resemble a sleeping bear (*l'ours qui dort*) and crossed the exposed eight-mile stretch at the mouth of the "Bay of the Sleeping Bear," now known as Grand Traverse Bay. Next came Little Traverse Bay and Sturgeon Bay. They had covered the stretch from "Chekakou" to Michilimackinac—nearly 450 windswept miles—in exactly four weeks. The entire expedition had lasted nearly eight full months.

distinctive Native American societies and heard, through a difficult translation, intriguing first-hand testimony about cultures much further west, beyond a mountain range, where a large west-flowing river stretched to the rim of a great salt lake.

Two dominant interpretations have emerged over the years. The first is that this entire tale is a fantastic invention, part of a genre of imaginary travel narratives blossoming in Europe at the time.²³ In the eighteenth century, religious and political enemies of Lahontan, hostile to his work and jealous of his popular literary success, used this interpretation effectively. By the nineteenth century, most leading historians had accepted the dismissive view of Lahontan's Letter XVI, casting a shadow over the remaining 700 pages of his published *Voyages*.²⁴ "La Hontan has seen much," declared Francis Parkman, "and portions of his story have a substantial value; but his account of his pretended voyage up the 'Long River' is a sheer fabrication." Parkman continued: "His 'Long River' corresponds in position with the St. Peter, but it corresponds in nothing else; and the populous nations whom he found on it—the Eokoros, the

²³ In most library catalogues (including Duke University's), Lahontan's book is given the following subject listings: "Utopias" and "Voyages, Imaginary." See Geoffroy Atkinson, *The Extraordinary Voyage in French Literature from 1700 to 1720* (Paris: É. Champion, 1922).

²⁴ See for example, Justin Winsor, *The Mississippi Basin: The Struggle in America Between England and France, 1697-1763* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 80-82. Winsor reproduced the French-language version of Lahontan's 1703 map and explained:

This story-teller claimed that some fifteen years before he had found a stream entering the Mississippi near Lake Pepin, which came from the setting sun. By following its sluggish current he had come to a large lake, lying beneath the mountains, and beyond these highlands there were the sources of another river, which could be followed to the Pacific. The statement was specific and gained credence, and the wonders of it had doubtless something to do with causing of multifarious publication of the book in French, English, and German, which was put upon the market at The Hague, in London, Hamburg, Amsterdam, and Leipzig, for the next eight or ten years. For a while the story prospered, and it gained a qualified assent from De Fer. Delisle was inclined to believe it, but at a later day importuned to discard it, he yielded to the arguments of Bobé against it. Homann, in 1706, puts this "Rivière longue" on his map. The English cartographers, Moll and Senex, gave it full play in their maps, though Senex finally rejected it.

The impressions produced by what is now known to have been a studied deceit were hard to dispel, and in certain quarters the illusion did not vanish till the century was near its end.

Esanapes, and the Gnacsitares, no less than their neighbors the Mozeemlek and the Tahuglauk—are as real as the nations visited by Captain Gulliver.”²⁵

Such dismissals continued throughout the twentieth century as well, and examples are numerous. In 1925, historian Louise Phelps Kellogg explained: “After reaching the Mississippi, Lahontan indulged in pages of description of a voyage to an imaginary river which he calls ‘Long,’ with unknown tribes thereon. Whether this journey was intended as a satire like Gulliver’s voyage to Liliput, or was a deliberate fabrication, has never been determined.”²⁶ Three decades later, Bernard DeVoto also chided the French explorer as someone who, “with a single chapter...befogged a large area of geography for half a century.” He scoffed at “the Long River, which Lahontan caused to flow among impossible tribes across a landscape from the dark side of the moon.” To DeVoto, “The Long River was art but it ministered to desire, for it might be the water route to the Pacific, which was even more urgently wanted in 1703 than before. So it twisted across the maps and the printed page, sometimes paralleling the Missouri River, whose exploration it affected, sometimes creating from its own substance large provinces for the truth to get lost in.”²⁷

In contrast, scholars of European literature and intellectual history remained fascinated with Lahontan, for his admiring descriptions of Indian life, experienced over a decade of travel, had proven a key source for the emerging Enlightenment view of the

²⁵ Francis Parkman, *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (1879; New York: Random House Modern Library Edition, 1985), 349-350.

²⁶ Louise Phelps Kellogg, *The French Régime in Wisconsin and the Northwest* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1925), 240.

²⁷ Bernard DeVoto, *The Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), 64.

noble savage.²⁸ As Richard White remarks in *The Middle Ground*, Lahontan's sage Huron leader, Adario, became "the model for all the noble savages who followed him in European literature."²⁹ Among skeptical historians of exploration, however, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that a second, alternative interpretation emerged. Perhaps Lahontan's Long River, rather than being fictional as Parkman and others suspected, was indeed the St. Peter's (or St. Pierre) River, now known as the Minnesota, which enters the Mississippi near modern-day Minneapolis.

²⁸ Anonymous review of Baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*, Reuben Gold Thwaites, editor, reprinted from the English edition of 1703 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1905), in the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, 37:9 (1905), 576:

It is not surprising that Lahontan's volumes had great vogue in Europe and were published in its five leading languages. They appeared at the dawn of the eighteenth century, when half the New World was still white on the maps and every recital of fresh adventure and discovery only whetted the appetite for more information; and here came the narrative of a Frenchman of noble family who has long lived among these new scenes and loved them, and who had the art of telling simply what he had seen and of drawing word-pictures of the life in the wilderness and of the manners and customs of the aborigines, whose mastery in their realm was now disputed by the white invader.

Lahontan also had other qualities that gave his book a piquant and original flavour. There was no danger of mistaking it for one of the Jesuit Relations. He had a caustic wit, a gift for ridicule, and a grievance; and he called especial attention to the weak points in some of the ways and institutions of the Old World. He even found American savages superior in many respects to the Jesuit missionary and to European society. His satire was entertaining, and did not detract from the value of his keen and usually accurate descriptions of the geography, ethnology, and natural history of New France.

But all the really good material he presented came, in time, to be neglected by writers on the New World because his story of Long River and its discovery was false. There are many theories as to the reasons that may have induced Lahontan to tell this story. It need be said here only that fortune had not dealt kindly with him, and his fact partly explains, if it cannot excuse, his conduct. The penalty was severe, for he was long discredited. But many students of the early history and exploration of North America undoubtedly agree with the opinion expressed by Dr. Thwaites, that "Lahontan's work stands as one of the important sources for the intimate study of New France."

²⁹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 144; cf. 421. Jonathan I. Israel's recent synthesis entitled *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), puts Lahontan's work into its wider European context:

In the Parisian salons Lahontan was read and quoted, among others, by Fontenelle and L  vesque de Burigny. In Italy the work was deemed unsuitable for Catholic readers and banned by the papal Inquisition in 1712. Radical socially, politically, and in sexual matters as well as theology, Lahontan ... stood out as the foremost champion in the era between Spinoza and Rousseau of 'natural man' as a tool of criticism of existing social and cultural realities (p. 582).

Even before Minnesota joined the Union in 1858, newcomers to that region began to wonder, after looking at Lahontan's published map, whether he might have visited their territory.³⁰ When James H. Perkins published his *Annals of the West* in 1846, he reasoned that Lahontan apparently entered the St. Peter's, and then, at his furthest point on that river, "heard from Indians of the connection by it and the Red River with Lake Winnipeg," and eventually with "Hudson's Bay by Nelson River."³¹

Later, during the Great Depression, this Minnesota River theory, with its orientation toward Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay, found its true champion in Stephen Leacock (1869-1944), the venerable Canadian humorist and man of letters. Born in England and raised on a farm in Ontario as the third of eleven children, Leacock's numerous interests included early Canadian history.³² Leacock took a liking to Lahontan

³⁰ The mapping of the upper Mississippi river basin had been completed in 1843 [Joseph N. Nicollet, *The Hydrographic Basin of the Upper Missouri River, 1843* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1976)], and new settlers were beginning to explore and promote their regional history. In the course of searching for early European arrivals, they turned to Lahontan and his map. In 1850, the Rev. Edward D. Neill discussed Lahontan when he addressed an early gathering of the Minnesota Historical Society. In a talk entitled "French Voyageurs to Minnesota During the Seventeenth Century," Neill acknowledged disagreements regarding the Long River: "As there is no stream in existence that answers to the description," Neill observed, "many have been inclined to look upon the account of Baron Lahontan, in the same light as they view the stories of Baron Munchausen." But he added, "Others, more credulous, have credited him with the discovery of the Minnesota or St. Pierre river." The minister went on to note local debate about whether Lahontan could have entered the nearby Root River or Cannon River instead. Rev. Edward D. Neill, "French Voyageurs to Minnesota During the Seventeenth Century," Address delivered January 1, 1850, *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, vol. 1 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1872), 1: 13.

³¹ Aware that this north-facing interpretation rotated Lahontan's river nearly ninety degrees, the chronicler added sardonically that the Frenchman must have been "looking Westward all the while, turning Hudson's Bay into the South Sea." James H. Perkins, *Annals of the West* (Cincinnati, 1846), 20. Expanded editions were published in St. Louis in 1850 and Pittsburgh in 1857.

³² Among half a dozen books on historical topics, Leacock wrote three contributions to the "Chronicles of Canada" series, all published in the same year: *Adventurers of the Far North: A Chronicle of the Arctic Seas* (1914), *The Dawn of Canadian History: A Chronicle of Aboriginal Canada* (1914), and *The Mariner of St. Malo: A Chronicle of the Voyages of Jacques Cartier* (1914). Leacock's numerous works of humor were widely read in the United States, as well as in Canada, and his academic education bridged the two countries, so he was well positioned to argue for an explorer who had roamed somewhere across the upper Midwest.

and resented his harsh treatment at the hands of scholars. In 1932, he edited an updated English version of *Lahontan's Voyages*, praising the explorer and pressing the Minnesota River interpretation of Letter XVI in his introduction.³³ Not surprisingly, it is Leacock's north-leaning interpretation of Letter XVI that is adopted and elaborated in the 1990 Canadian version of Lahontan's *Oeuvres Complètes*, mentioned at the start.³⁴

** 4 **

Was Letter XVI, unlike most of Lahontan's writing from and about North America, pure bunkum? Or was it, as the baron's published map might suggest, an account of a voyage trending northward up the Minnesota River, despite the fact that Lahontan professed more interest in the South and West and assured the Fox chief that he had no intention of trading with the Sioux in that region? Or could there be another

³³ Baron de Lahontan, *Lahontan's Voyages*, Stephen Leacock, editor, reprinted from the English edition of 1703 (Ottawa, Graphic Publishers Limited, 1932). Unfortunately, the book's publishing house went under shortly after creating an initial run of several hundred volumes, and today the edition remains a rare collector's item. See also Stephen Leacock, "Lahontan in Minnesota," *Minnesota History*, 14:4 (December, 1933), 367-377 [Abstract of an address delivered to the Minnesota Historical Society on October 18, 1933]:

One would look in vain in the honor roll of the explorers and discoverers of the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Valley for the name of the Baron de Lahontan.... Yet, if the forgotten baron had his deserts, his name would stand beside those of Marquette and Jolliet and La Salle in the history of the Father of Waters.... French Canada, where the name of the baron is either utterly forgotten or utterly despised, ought to honor him as one of the most gallant, most talented, and most devoted of the nobles of France who spent the best of their years in the service of New France.... But the unhappy young nobleman ... expressed his opinion very frankly about the priests of New France and told how they tried, as he saw it, to tyrannize over the life of the colonists; worse than that, he was ill-advised enough to put into his travels and memoirs a lot of the scepticism already coming into fashion in his day....

As a consequence the real achievements of Lahontan were belittled and his voyage of discovery into what is now Minnesota was laughed at as a fabrication. A few people in France tried to defend the story, but they lacked facts. The legend of Lahontan as a liar grew and solidified. It was presently accepted as a fact without further examination. Even the honest and industrious Francis Parkman compares the story to Gulliver.... Finally, Mr. J. E. Roy, in a paper—admirable but erroneous—presented to the Royal Society of Canada in 1894, covers the whole career of Lahontan and rules him out of court as an infidel and a liar. Since then oblivion has fallen on the baron. In the latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* there is no article on Lahontan and no reference to his name appears in the index.

³⁴ Lahontan, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:383ff, and editors' map of "Voyage à la Rivière Longue" following page 1:199.

interpretation that leans further south and west? Very recently, several experienced Plains archaeologists suggested that Lahontan may have traveled up the South Platte River.³⁵ My own suspicion, at present, is that the Frenchman could actually have spent more than three months on the middle and upper Missouri River between what is now northwest Iowa and northwest North Dakota? There are several telling clues that this may be the case, but to get him there we must account for a confusing omission in his text and a misleading element in his map.

First, the mysterious gap in the text. Lahontan reported reaching the mouth of the Wisconsin on October 22, 1688, and camping on the west bank of the Mississippi two days later. Then comes a nine day gap, for the next sentence (still in the same paragraph) states: “The 2d of *November* we made the Mouth of the *Long River*....” The map, drawn up in Europe, suggests that Lahontan paddled up the Mississippi during those days before entering directly into his Long River. On the contrary, I now suspect that the French, led by their experienced Fox guides, moved swiftly across Iowa in those days, using familiar east-west Indian trails that already existed. The distance was long—roughly 300 miles—but several points make this journey far more plausible than it first appears.

For one thing, the dates are uncertain, so a span of two weeks may have been involved, though nine days is certainly conceivable, given the conditions. Intent upon exploration rather than trade, the men carried light packs and little food, since game was plentiful. The brisk autumn weather, without heat or bugs, was ideal for fast travel.

³⁵ W. Raymond Wood, “A Review of Past Criticisms and the Baron Lahontan’s Mapping of His Long River,” and Steven G. Baker, “Spanish Documentary Confirmation of Lahontan’s Observations Regarding the Great Salt Lake and the Atypical Bearded ‘Ainu-Like’ Indians of Utah’s Grand Teguayo.” Papers delivered in Session 15, “Reconsidering the Authenticity of the Baron Lahontan’s Account of His Longue (Platte) River Journey of 1688-1689,” at the 64th Plains Anthropological Conference, Topeka, Kansas, Nov. 8-11, 2006.

Moreover, the land was open and relatively flat, with only a low ridge dividing Iowa in the western portion.³⁶ On one side of this minimal divide, numerous rivers flowed east into the Mississippi; on the other side, navigable streams slanted southwest into the Missouri. Whether the group moved mostly across land, or traveled largely by water, with several brief portages, it seems probable that they, like many earlier and later Indian travelers, left their boats on the Mississippi side of the watershed and bargained for new ones as they approached the Missouri.³⁷ For many centuries, herds of buffalo living on the plains of western Iowa had made trails leading west toward the Missouri, and they had been utilized, linked, and expanded by generations of Native American migrants, traders, hunters, and guides.³⁸ By the early eighteenth century, French maps show a

³⁶ Geologists believe that before the last ice age "a preglacial river" may have flowed across Iowa, allowing water pushing from the west "to join what is now the Des Moines River." Charles B. Hunt, *Natural Regions of the United States and Canada* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1974), 354.

³⁷ Even at this early date, canoes were sometimes carried overland using rude carriages with wheels, but that would hardly suit such a long trek. Instead, it is clear that seventeenth-century Indians on both the Mississippi and the Missouri had an abundance of very large dugout canoes, usually made from poplar, that were constantly being used and exchanged. When Lahontan needed four new boats on the upper Missouri, a local chief showed him fifty drawn up on the bank below the village and offered him his pick. See the text for note 54 below.

³⁸ The abundance of this well-worn region can be sensed in a chatty account from 1830. A large party of fur traders and their pack animals set out from the village of Liberty, Missouri, across the prairie lands lying east of the Missouri River, heading for Council Bluffs. As they crossed into Iowa, the landscape became more and more inviting:

Passing the boundary of those two great states, Missouri and Misery, and leaving the forest bordering the river, we emerged into an almost limitless prairie, embroidered with woodland strips and dots, fringing and skirting the streams and rivulets by which it was not inelegantly intersected and adorned. [We found the prairie] to be lacquered with numerous trails or paths beaten by herds of buffaloes, that formerly grazed these plains, vestiges of which were still every where to be seen. One of these trails bearing to the westward we followed...We saw herds of deer daily, now and then a herd of elk, and of deer and buffalo more bones than we cared to pick. We met also with a great variety of wild fowl....

W. A. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains: A Diary of Wanderings on the Sources of the Rivers Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado from February, 1830, to November, 1835*, Paul C. Phillips, ed. (Denver: Old West Publishing Company, 1940), 9-12.

dotted line across Iowa, from the mouth of the Wisconsin to the region between Council Bluffs and Sioux City, labeled *Chemin des Voyageurs* [path of the voyageurs].³⁹

** 5 **

This brings us to Lahontan's own map. In late October, 1688, he was following guides across prairies uncharted by Europeans, taking one of several overlapping Indian routes. It is uncertain how well the young officer understood his own whereabouts. But he certainly knew the importance of not committing key discoveries to paper.⁴⁰ Whether in written accounts or published maps, the name of the game was to offer enough evidence of your findings so that you could claim precedence over later explorers, but not

³⁹ A few experts on early Iowa history have noticed this trail. [See See Jacob Van der Zee, "Episodes in the Early History of the Western Iowa Country," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 11 (July, 1913), 325; William J. Petersen, *Iowa: The Rivers of Her Valleys* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1941), 254.] One of them pointed out the path almost seventy-five years ago on "the maps of William Delisle, the royal geographer of France and the 'foremost cartographer' of his time." William J. Petersen, "Historical Setting of the Mound Region in Northeastern Iowa," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 31 (January, 1933), 54-55, went on to note that on Delisle's North America map of 1703:

the road of the fur traders stretches out across the *R. des Moingona* (Des Moines) to the Missouri, striking that stream below the mouth of *R. des Panis* (Platte). On his map of 1718 Delisle labels this first river-to-river road the *Chemin des Voyageurs* or road of the traders. Commencing almost opposite the mouth of the Wisconsin, this road ran due westward across the Des Moines, skirting the Okoboji and Spirit lakes which are shown connected with the *R des Aiaouez* (Iowa--but really Little Sioux), and continuing onward to the *R du Rocher* (Rock--but probably the Big Sioux) which it struck at a point some distance above the junction of that stream with the Missouri. Beginning as it does in one of the ravines that cut back from the effigy mound regions about present day McGregor, the *Chemin des Voyageurs* immediately challenges the imagination. One wonders how many intrepid French voyageurs and *coureur de bois* traveled this lonely, unmarked trail which, a century before Thomas Jefferson purchased Louisiana, was so well known that it enjoyed a distinct place on the outstanding maps of that colorful period.

Soon the French were giving their voyageurs credit for creating this ancient trail. The Vermale map of 1717, (copy in the Yale Library) appears in Wheat, *Mapping the Transmississippi West*, I, opposite page 63. A horizontal title stretches between the mouth of the "Oüisconsin" and four unnamed Indian villages on both sides of a tributary, apparently the Big Sioux River, that flows southeast into the Missouri (here labeled the "F. du Missouri"). This east-west title, reaching across clearly labeled "Prairies" and the substantial "R. de Mongona" (Des Moines River), reads "Chemin qu'on[t] fait des voyageurs français," or "Trail made by French voyageurs."

⁴⁰ Lahontan was aware that other things besides newfound routes and locations were best left unstated in the risky world of long-distance correspondence. At one point in Letter XV (Sept. 18, 1688), the young baron, afraid to commit a bit of Canadian political gossip to paper, remarks to his unnamed patron: "I must go no farther upon this matter, lest my Letter should be intercepted....If it pleases God to allow me a safe Return to France, I shall tell you the Story by word of mouth." Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 165.

so many details as would allow a rival to retrace your steps.⁴¹ Lahontan's published map deserves an extensive essay in its own right. But for our purposes it is important to note two possible divisions. First, the map is clearly divided by a line somewhat left of center. There, two fleurs-de-lis beside the Long River represent (as Lahontan tells us in the key) the place "that I stop'd at with out going higher up." The vertical line itself, labeled "The Division of the Two Maps" shows where his direct observations end and Indian accounts begin. A box makes clear that the far left-hand portion was initially "drawn upon Stag-skins by ye Gnacsitares."

But the map may make more sense if we divide it again, treating the unknown Long River in the center as separate from the now familiar Great Lakes and Mississippi on the right. Just as there is a nine-day break in the written narrative, there is, I suspect, an unseen division in the map, visualized by drawing a vertical line that intersects the mouth of the Long River. To the right is "les pays d'en haut" known to the French; to the left is an early representation of the trans-Mississippi west, as sketched by Lahontan and his guides, hosts, and informants, following Native American cartographic practices.

In his multi-volume survey of early western cartography, Carl Wheat followed common form when he observed, "the Baron Lahontan is ordinarily recalled more for his vagaries than for his many accurate observations." He noted that this "veritable Munchausen" apparently "left fact for fancy" after he reached the Mississippi River. But Wheat, writing in an era before Native American mapping had been given much attention

⁴¹ The point is a recurrent one in the literature of highly competitive European exploration. Regarding "Virginia," Thomas Harriot told his English readers in 1590, "I might have said more; as of the particular places ...; but because others then welwishers might bee therewithal acquainted, not to the good of the action, I have wittingly omitted them..." Thomas Harriot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia: The Complete 1590 Theodor de Bry Edition*, ed. Paul Hulton (New York: Dover, 1972), 12.

or respect, still conceded in a footnote the possibility of an alternative view. “It has long been fashionable in historical circles to deride Lahontan for mendacity,” he observed, “but Rev. J. Neilson Barry, indefatigable cartographic scholar of Portland, Oregon, points out that maps made by Indians--though not laid out in the fashion with which Europeans were familiar--proved of immense import to Peter Fidler, William Clark and many other explorers.”⁴²

In the half-century since Wheat and Barry, several generations of ethocartographers have begun to give more careful consideration to Native American maps--and to non-European maps generally.⁴³ G. Malcolm Lewis, in particular, has advanced the discussion of Indian mapmaking.⁴⁴ Almost a quarter century ago, Lewis illuminated the process by which the maps of Plains Indian groups were transposed into the cartographic forms used by European mapmakers. Scholars of early western maps, Lewis argued, have often failed to recognize that the original information transcribed into these maps “was derived from Indians via a complex sequence of assimilation by persons who had little understanding of Indians as informants, of Indians’ spatial concepts or the

⁴² Wheat, *Mapping the Transmississippi West*, I, 60-61. Reverend Barry also suggested to Wheat (footnote 11) “that to criticize Lahontan for accepting the tale of a vast salt lake out in the farther west is hardly justifiable, since such a lake did--and does--exist. Lahontan was gullible, all right--and a bit of a Munchausen--but a germ of geographical truth lurked within him.”

⁴³ See, for example, Mark Warhus, *Another America: Native American Maps and the History of Our Land* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), plus the next four footnotes.

⁴⁴ See G. Malcolm Lewis, “Native North Americans’ Cosmological Ideas and Geographical Awareness: Their Representation and Influence on Early European Exploration and Geographical Knowledge,” in *North American Exploration*, volume 1, *A New World Disclosed*, John Logan Allen, editor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 71-126; G. Malcolm Lewis, “Maps, Mapmaking, and Map Use by Native North Americans,” in David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, *The History of Cartography*, vol. 2 book 3, *Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51-182; and G. Malcolm Lewis, editor, *Cartographic Encounters: Perspectives on Native American Mapmaking and Map Use* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

properties of their *maps* and whose judgement was influenced by hopes of finding a relatively short and easy route westward to the Pacific across the Euro-Americans' *terra incognita*."⁴⁵

Although Lewis did not make use of Lahontan's chart in his suggestive 1984 article on the place of Indian mapping in the history of Great Plains cartography, that notorious map actually fits his general description of this complex process more fully than he suspects.⁴⁶ While Lewis accepted the Minnesota River interpretation of Lahontan's map, he also acknowledged that it remains enigmatic. Moreover, he accepts the Frenchman's assertion that Native Americans originally drew the left side of the chart: "Now fairly well known and often reproduced, Louis Armand de Lom D'Arce's 'A Map drawn upon Stag skins by Ye Gnacsitaires...' has still to be adequately interpreted more than three hundred years after it was made for Baron La Hontan in the winter of 1688-89."⁴⁷

** 6 **

If it is true that Lahontan crossed Iowa rather than paddling up the Mississippi River to the Minnesota, then the rest of Letter XVI becomes more plausible and comprehensible, not less. This is especially true when you realize that the European

⁴⁵ G. Malcolm Lewis, "Indicators of Unacknowledged Assimilations from Amerindian *Maps* on Euro-American Maps of North America: Some General Principles Arising from a Study of La Vérendrye's Composite Map, 1728-29," *Imago Mundi*, 38 (1986): 14.

⁴⁶ G. Malcolm Lewis, "Indian Maps: Their Place in the History of Great Plains Cartography," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 4:2 (1984), 91-108.

⁴⁷ G. Malcolm Lewis, "Encounters in Government Bureaus, Archives, Museums, and Libraries, 1782-1911," in Lewis, editor, *Cartographic Encounters*, 42-43. Lewis points out that when the German geographer Johann G. Kohl visited the American frontier in the 1850s, he helped to "draw attention to the fact that" in both America and Europe "Indian maps had been redrawn for publication from the early eighteenth century onward."

(re) naming of rivers in the vast Mississippi Valley was only just beginning.⁴⁸ It seems possible that the vast river flowing down through North and South Dakota—a pathway that the Indians called “the Long River” (and represented in their traditional schematic fashion as nearly a straight line)—had its “mouth” between Iowa and Nebraska, where it entered into the wider Platte River flowing in from the plains.⁴⁹

Lahontan was somewhat above this “mouth” when he entered the Missouri from the northeast, but the extensive marsh he first encountered was slightly below any junction familiar to his guides. “In the Morning,” Lahontan relates, “I enquir’d of my ten *Outagamis*, if we had far to sail before we were clear of the Rushes, and receiv’d this answer, that they had never been in the Mouth of that River before, though at the same time they assur’d me, that about twenty Leagues higher, the Banks of it were clad with Woods and Meadows.”⁵⁰

Paddling their large, newly acquired dugout canoes, and often sailing them when the wind permitted, Lahontan’s party moved rapidly up this Long River (which I shall call the Missouri), into territory familiar to his guides. Soon they reached the first of the three major Indian tribes that inhabited separate clusters of large villages along the river. On November 8, they spotted a hunting party of Arikaras (Lahontan’s *Eokoros*) who

⁴⁸ Where two rivers come together near St. Louis to form the lower Mississippi, for instance, who is to say that the longer, western stream should not be the Upper Mississippi and the shorter, northern branch should not have another name? Likewise, where two extended rivers converge just below the cities of Omaha and Council Bluffs, who is to say that the wider, western stream should not be the Upper Missouri and the longer, northern branch should not have another name, such as “the Long River”?

⁴⁹ Hunt, *Natural Regions*, 360-361, and Figure 13.36.

⁵⁰ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 179.

immediately recognized the speech of his Fox Indian guides and welcomed them.⁵¹ After a visit of several days, they proceeded upstream to the region of the Mandans (Lahontan's *Essanapes*). With half a dozen Mandans serving as their guides, they arrived at the capital on December 3 "and there met with a very honourable Reception."⁵² In an apt description of Mandan lodges, Lahontan commented: "The Houses are built almost like Ovens." As with the Arikaras, he was struck by the huge population, noting that this particular town might more aptly be described as a city.⁵³ The extensive populations that Lahontan reported along the Long River have often been used to discredit his account. But this could be changing, as scholars begin to realize the large size of these groups on the Upper Missouri before they were overtaken and decimated by smallpox in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

** 7 **

Seeking four new boats to proceed further upstream, Lahontan had no trouble obtaining them from his host.

I ask'd four Pirogues of him, which he granted very frankly, allowing me to pick and choose that number out of fifty. Having thus concerted my Measures, I was resolv'd to lose no time; and with that view order'd my Carpenters to plane the Pirogues; by which they were thinner and lighter by one half. The poor

⁵¹ "As soon as the Huntsmen heard the voice of the *Outagamis*, they threw down their Arms, and presented the Company with some Deer that they had just kill'd, which they likewise help'd to carry to my Canows. The Benefactors were some of the *Eokoros*, who had left their Villages, and come thither to hunt." Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 180.

⁵² Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 186. By mistake, Lahontan gives the date as November 3, instead of December 3.

⁵³ "The large extent of this Village might justly intitle it to the name of a City." Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 188.

innocent People of this Country, could not conceive how we work'd with an Axe; every stroke we gave they cry'd out, as if they had seen some new Prodigy; nay, the firing of Pistols could not divert 'em from that Amazement, though they were equally strangers both to the Pistol and the Axe. As soon as my Pirogues were got ready, I left my Canows with the Governour or Prince, and beg'd of him that they might remain untouch'd by any body; in which point he was very faithful to me.⁵⁴

On December 19, as fierce winter weather finally set in, the explorers reached the three towns of the *Gnacsitaires*. This group, it seems quite possible, was the people later known by a similar name: the Minitaris (or Hidatsas), who lived in three villages near the mouth of the Knife River, roughly fifty miles northwest of Bismarck, North Dakota.⁵⁵

The party would remain here more than five weeks before turning homeward on January 26. Once the Indian leader determined that the newcomers were not unwelcome Spaniards, relations warmed, and they were treated with hospitality. Here, Lahontan gained the most striking information of his entire journey, provided to him by four “slaves” or hostages who belonged to a powerful nation from much further west, known as the *Mozeemleks*.⁵⁶ Most “unluckily,” he lacked “a good Interpreter” and had to make

⁵⁴ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 187-188.

⁵⁵ By the early nineteenth century, both the Mandans and Hidatsas, greatly diminished in numbers, would be living in the Knife River area. In 1804-5, the Lewis and Clark expedition spent the winter in the vicinity, at Fort Mandan on the eastern bank of the Missouri River.

⁵⁶ It remains unclear exactly which western tribe these four represented. Through translators, they told Lahontan that it was “their Misfortune to be took Prisoners by the *Gnacsitaires* in the War which had lasted for eighteen Years; but, that they hoped a Peace would be speedily concluded, upon which the Prisoners would be exchang'd, pursuant to the usual Custom.” Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 194-195.

do “with several Persons that did not well understand.”⁵⁷ But the picture that emerged is so clear that it is amazing that it has been overlooked or misconstrued for three centuries.

“These four Slaves,” Lahontan stated, “gave me a Description of their Country, which the *Gnacsitaires* represented by way of a Map upon a Deer’s Skin; as you see it drawn in this Map. Their Villages stand upon a River that springs out of a ridge of Mountains, from which the Long River likewise derives its Source....” They seem to have lived in the western Rockies, along the Snake River or some other tributary of the Columbia, for beyond them lived others, “the *Tahuglauk*,” with whom they traded.⁵⁸ These peoples, “as numerous as the Leaves of Trees,” and no doubt more than one tribe, must have resided along the Lower Columbia and the adjacent coast, for “the great River of that Nation runs all along Westward,” emptying into a huge “salt Lake.” The Frenchman did not speculate in his account as to whether this enormous “lake” could actually be the Pacific Ocean, but he did note that it was said to stretch “a great way to the Southward.”⁵⁹

These tantalizing scraps, heard in translation, fascinated Lahontan. He dreamed of pressing further but realized that it was not a practical option at the time. “I would fain

⁵⁷ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 196.

⁵⁸ The Tillamook were the southernmost Salish-speaking language group, living along the Oregon coast south of the mouth of the Columbia River. William R. Seaburg and Jay Miller, “Tillamook,” in Wayne Suttles, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, volume 7: *Northwest Coast* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 560:

They built their villages near the mouths of the principle rivers that flow westward from the mountains of the Pacific Coast Range....Lewis and Clark (in Thwaites 1904-1905, 3:338) describe a lively trade network across the whole region. E.D. Jacobs (1976) indicates that tanned beaver hides, canoes, and baskets were taken to the Columbia River to trade for abalone shell, dentalia, buffalo hides and buffalo horn dishes, and dired non-smoke-cured Columbia River salmon. Lewis and Clark (in Thwaites 1904-1905, 3:325) report that the Tillamook traveled east of the Coast Range to Sauvie Island in the Columbia River to purchase wapato roots and other items.

⁵⁹ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 193-195.

have satisfied my Curiosity in being an eye-witness of the Manners and Customs of the *Tahuglauk*,” he recalls in Letter XVI; “but that being impracticable, I was forc’d to be instructed at second hand by these *Mozeemlek* Slaves.”⁶⁰ Even so, what he records seems to be a brief and slightly jumbled, but clearly recognizable, description of Northwest Coast Indian culture.⁶¹ Lahontan’s informants assured him “that the *Tahuglauk* wear their Beards two Fingers breadth long,” and “that they cover their Heads with a sharp-pointed Cap.”⁶² (Both characteristics are applicable to many Northwest Coast Indians, and to almost no other Native Americans.) These people, he learned, were avid traders and skilled craftsmen, with a warlike disposition and a hierarchical government—all recognizable traits of the region.

Perhaps most significant of all, the map as published in Europe reproduced three revealing illustrations, still unmistakable after having been copied (no doubt) several times. The originals had been sketched on tree bark for Lahontan, at the farthest point of his journey, by his Indian informants, “the *Mozeemlek* slaves” who came from far to the west. According to them, the peoples who lived far beyond them, along salt water, were known to reside in very large houses, flat across the top, “as you see ‘em drawn in the Map.” The image shows a long wooden building that suggests the distinctive rectangular plank dwellings of the Northwest Coast. If true, then the circular ends of the roof beams, made from large cedar logs, are visible along the top. In addition, Lahontan was told that when traveling by water along the “Sea” coast, these people “navigate with such Boats as

⁶⁰ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 195-196.

⁶¹ See Suttles, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, volume 7: *Northwest Coast*, passim.

⁶² Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 196.

you see drawn in the Map.” “The Vessels used by the Tahuglauk,” he was told, were of great length, took many man to paddle, and had an uplifted prow at either end. The distinctive image suggests a gigantic Northwest Coast war canoe, and little else.

A third drawing is equally distinctive. It shows both sides (somewhat decorated) of a medal of the Tahuglauk “made of a certain sort of metal of a Red colour not unlike copper.” According to Lahontan, “One of the four *Mozeemlek* Slaves had a reddish sort of a Copper Medal hanging upon his Neck, the Figure of which is represented in the Map.” After trading for the strange item, or accepting it as a gift, “I desir’d the Slaves to give me a circumstantial Account of these Medals; and accordingly they gave me to understand, that they are made by the *Tahuglauk*, who are excellent Artizans, and put a great value upon such Medals.” These oblong tokens of various sizes, later known as “coppers,” were highly prized items among Northwest Coast peoples. Any one of these three items would offer a suggestive clue, but taken together the surprisingly accurate images provide powerful (if long overlooked) evidence that Lahontan was hearing a second-hand account of Pacific Coast cultures near the mouth of the Columbia River.⁶³

As the ice on the river began to thaw in late January, Lahontan started his return journey. He had, at least in my current estimation, managed to reach the Knife River region of the Missouri River four generations before Lewis and Clark. Unlike their Corps of Discovery, he did not press further, but he took back with him to the East unprecedented word of the Rockies, the Columbia River, the Pacific Ocean, and the Northwest Coast. For complex reasons, his information became buried in plain sight—so invisible that it may take more than a short paper to convince you of its reality. But I

⁶³ Lahontan, *New Voyages*, Thwaites, ed., 194, and map of the Long River. Images of these items from later times and additional references can be found in Suttles, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, volume 7: *Northwest Coast*, houses (and pointed hats): 243; war canoes: 214; coppers: 275.

hope, at the very least, readers will now see why I have been drawn into a long-term reappraisal of this unusual man and the story he recounted in his Letter XVI.