THE INDIAN CONCEPTION OF AMERICA AS AN ISLAND

Arthur Lee, one of the commissioners at the treaty of Fort Stanwix was at Fort McIntosh, now Beaver, for negotiations there, in December of 1784, and inserted this in his journal: (1) "Our Indians have got the idea that this is an island, and have certainly made a most manful resistance to every impression to the contrary." A just inference from his language is that this was a long, as well as firmly established, Indian idea. Owing to his royal contempt for the Indian intellect as well as character he did not deign to inquire how the idea originated or what might be offered to sustain it, dismissing it as a product of ignorance, wherein he was misled by his own ignorance. Like too many of us, he regarded an unlettered man as an ignorant one, crassest of errors, because it assumes that books are the source of knowledge, while the fact is that observation and study preceded books. There have been thousands of excellent observers little acquainted with them, or not at all; thousands of men unable to read who led successful lives, and whose judgements were often sought by scholars.

Although I must own that I have never seen a syllable on the subject, or talked of it to a person who had, here is the thesis of this paper: How the Indians got the idea that North America was an island and how far in this matter they were wrong.

To treat it properly the space of a book would be needed, and to do it so would indeed be more easy, for I am as one who must put a gallon into a pint cup.

What word is so indefinite as "island"? It means a few acres in a river; it means also, for example, Madagascar, 350 miles at its widest and 980 miles long, which withal ranks third in the list of great islands. "Our Indians," in Lee's phrase, by observation or information, as the case may have been, were not strangers to Long Island, New York, with its area of 1,682 square miles, or to other large islands off our Atlantic Coast, and by a deduction as logical as any that we can draw, could have arrived at Madagascar. We say that Australia is a continent, but by the definition it is as truly as island as Brunot's Island or Davis's Island.
The geographers for the sake of convenience make a continent of it. "Our Indians" were not aware of this distinction between tracts of land surrounded by water, and therein were certainly excusable.

There is evidence enough that though many of them had never stood on its beaches, they all clearly understood when one spoke to them of the Atlantic. Had they not heard again and again that from beyond it came the white man and could they not from their familiarity with Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, Lake Superior even, have formed a fairly just conclusion as to its immensity? From all points between the mouth of the St. Lawrence and the mouth of the St. Johns of Florida lines of knowledge of the sea had for time out of mind centered at the head of the Ohio, and by Indians who hunted there were extended over the far west. The Iroquois, who controlled the territory around and about the site of Pittsburgh carried their conquering arms to the Illinois, and no less their tales of the sea. One can still trace the trail from Carolina traveled by the Cherokees to the Iroquois council fires in the lake region of New York, where on occasion were ambassadors of the Algonquins of Canada, hereditary foes, and more frequently prisoners of the Iroquois. The Canadian couriers of the woods traded at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, and were accompanied by priests on missions of evangelization, who did not fail to impress the imagination of the savage by pointing him to the majesty and power of the sea. Savages of the distant interior floated down the St. Lawrence in their canoes to a market for their peltries at Quebec, and when they went back had often an indomitable Jesuit for company. As the Cherokee of Carolina was in touch with the Creek of Georgia, and the Creek with the Seminole of Florida, so were in touch the tribes of the west and the northwest, all eager to spread the news of what they had heard. It is incredible, that to them the Atlantic was unknown; their knowledge of it was as nearly correct as that of many a white man who lived and died within the boundaries of the middle western state in which he was born.

In April 1540, Coronado quitted Culiacan near the entrance to the Gulf of California, at the head of 350 Spaniards and 800 Indians, on his exploration to the north, which
he pursued into Kansas. He followed the coast nearly to the upper end of the gulf, struck off to the Gila, which he traced to its sources, climbed the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, and continued over the plains until, as Kansas City people will insist to you, he reached the junction of the Kansas and of the Missouri. On his way he halted at a captured place which he named Granada, and from there, in a report to the viceroy of Mexico, who sent him out, wrote with evident surprise that the Indians there "have no knowledge among them of the North Sea nor of the Western Sea, neither can I tell your lordship to which we be nearest." (2) His Western Sea was plainly the Pacific, and his North Sea the Arctic. He was at a loss as to his whereabouts. There was less to be surprised at than he thought: he was among the cliff-dwellers of the Arizona Mesa, who had not the wanderlust of the other Indians.

Thirty years later, in 1570, Charles the Second chartered the Hudson Bay Company. It established its first posts on the western shore of the bay; later, exclusive of Canada and Alaska, they dotted the vast domain from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Arctic Ocean to the American border. One of its factors is honored in history as the Father of Oregon, and another, met by Fremont on one of his exploring expeditions, gave name to the Payette river and valley of Idaho.

In short, now, the red man of the Pacific coast had sufficient means to know of the Atlantic, and they of the Atlantic to know of the Pacific, and I venture to add that they had a better knowledge of it than had a certain member of the Pennsylvania legislature contemptuously commemorated in Lee's journal.

It seems to be beyond question that our Indians of 1779, through those of the British northwest, had a passable notion of Hudson's Bay and even of the Arctic, because Coronado 239 years before wondered that the cliff-dwellers of Arizona were ignorant of it. Broadly, their notion was of a vast expanse of water up there. To certain of the ancients Iceland, to others Norway, to still others the Shetland Isles were the Ultima Thule, the end of the world. It seems to be equally beyond question that the Indian of
North America only vaguely conceived of Central America and South America; Southern Mexico I imagine was to him an Ultima Thule. He of the Pacific coast thought of the Atlantic, he of the Atlantic Coast thought of the Pacific; those of the plains and mountains thought of both, though none of them thought of either ocean as separate from the other, but as a continuation of the other, flowing around the north and the south as well as along the east and the west. Such is my explanation of the origin of the idea that this country was an island, to which the Indians adhered in face of all arguments to the contrary. The arguments to the contrary were by men like Arthur Lee, and I fancy that between the debaters there was some confusion of mind arising out of the word "island." The Indians were in error, to be sure, but their error was not such as to justify derision in Lee or in any other man the more especially when we compare it with the white man's errors in geography then and later.

Stephen Quinon.

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