WHAT THE FRENCH
HAVE DONE
IN AMERICA
FROM THE DISCOVERY TO THE OPENING
OF THE Isthmus OF PANAMA

BY
CH. DE LA RONCIÈRE
HISTORIAN OF THE FRENCH NAVY

PARIS
TYPOGRAPHIE PLON-NOURRIT ET Cie
8, RUE GARANCIÈRE — 6e
1915
AMVEL
DE
CHAMPLAIN

1608

THE FIRST FRENCHMAN WHO PROPOSED THE CUTTING OF THE PANAMA CANAL (1600)
WHAT THE FRENCH HAVE DONE IN AMERICA
FROM THE DISCOVERY TO THE OPENING OF THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA

BY

CH. DE LA RONCIÈRE
HISTORIAN OF THE FRENCH NAVY

PARIS
TYPOGRAPHIE PLON-NOURRIT ET CIE.
8, RUE GARANCIÈRE — 6°

1915
WHAT THE FRENCH HAVE DONE IN AMERICA

France gave the New World its name. In 1507 at Saint-Dié, a Cosmography was published by Martin Waldseemüller and Mathias Ringmann. Impressed with the narratives of Americ Vespuci of the New World, our men of learning did not hesitate to attribute to him the honour of the discovery and to inscribe on their maps America. Here is its act of baptism: "Non video cur quis jure vitet ab Americo inventore, sagacis ingenii viro, Amerigen quasi Americi terram sive Americam dicendam."

How long is it since we first went to the New World? It is impossible to determine, for our first transatlantic voyages remain enveloped in mystery. But what suggestive perspectives certain documents recently brought to light open up to the imagination!

It is still a matter of question as to whether the Bretons were not in possession of the "secret of Newfoundland" before the discoveries of Christopher Columbus. At Paimpol, the ever-celebrated town of the Newfoundland fishers, the Monks declared the levy of the tithe on the cod fishery "in as much in the Iceland, Newfoundland as elsewhere since sixty years"; their declaration is of the 14th December 767141.
1514, which would ascribe the beginning of the cod Fishery to the year 1454.

In Brazil, were we not before Pedralvarez Cabral, who discovered it in 1500? Yes, if we trust an authentic document, the relation of a voyage of the ship « l'Espoir » of Honfleur in 1503. It bears textually that « d'empuis aucunes années », that is to say several years before 1503, « Dieppois, Malouinois and other Normans and Bretons » went to this part of the Indies which has since been called Brazil.

The New World was still only known to us by its productions, its fauna and its flora, cod-fish, wood from Brazil, monkeys and parrots, when a Norman corsair Jean Fleury brought home in 1523 veritable treasures in works of art, masks in mosaic of fine stones, gold and silver vessels upon which were engraved figures of animals, idols in precious metals, mantles in feathers so artistically wrought that silk and gold embroidered stuffs could hardly be compared to them. These objects comprised the furniture of the Palace of Guatimozin, the trophies of the conquest of Mexico that our corsair had intercepted just at the moment when Cortès was sending them away to Spain. A portion only of the Spanish booty arrived at its destination (1).

(1) References. — See the work of M. Ch. de la Roncière, Histoire de la marine française, 2e édition, Paris, Plon, 1906-1913. 4 vol. in-8° (Honoured twice unanimously with the grand prix Gobert by the Institute).
THE FRENCH SEEK AN OPENING IN THE AMERICAN CONTINENT IN ORDER TO GO INTO THE PACIFIC

Without there being any relation as between cause and effect, the very same year that the corsaire Fleury came back to Normandy with the rich spoils of Aztecs, an expedition was being prepared for the continent of America. It was organised by a syndicate of silk traders and bankers of Lyons, the Gadagnes, the Le Buatiers, the de Martignys, etc., who were seeking the shortest route to China. Not having succeeded in passing through the boreal seas of Europe, the head of the Expedition, a Florentin refugee in France named Verrazzano, reached North America of which he skirted the Coast in 1524. To the actual territory of the United States, he gave the name of Francisca or Nova Gallia. This system of naming half-Norman, half-Florentine which New France or Francisca received, betrays the native land as well as the land of adoption of the discoverer. «Diepa, Anaflor (Honfleur), Longavilla, Anguilème, Normanvilla, Vendomo... » succeeded each other with « San Miniato, La Certosa, l’Annunziata, l’Orto de Rucelay... » in memory of the Florentine marvels.

Two years later, Verrazzano went off again under the
patronage of the Admiral of France. In the whole of the American Continent which spread out before him, he did not give up hope of finding a fissure by which he could penetrate into the Western Ocean. He died at the task. But the idea was set going and so completely that a chart of sea ports of 1536 represents an interoceanic strait under the title of « el Viazo de Fransa ». The strait, in the Green Globe which is preserved in the National Library of Paris, is situated on the site of the Panama Canal.

The Isthmus of Panama, however, was not accessible to us, so rigorous were the Spanish prohibitions to approach it. In 1572, one of our most qualified pilots, author of an atlas which is the jewel of our Cartography, succeeded in exploring it, but under contraband and by main force. Guillaume Le Testu, of Havre, by a curious coincidence, met in the Isthmus one of the most celebrated English navigators, Francis Drake, who had come to take possession of Nombre de Dios. Both laid in wait for the « recoes » who were bringing from the coast the treasures from Peru. By the death of Le Testu in the attack of the Spanish escort, Drake was enabled to collect such a booty that every French and English sailor had for his share 60 000 crowns.

Twenty-four years later, Drake came to die upon the scene of his exploits. An atlas of views taken on board the Defiance, which he commanded, represents the outline of the Isthmus of Panama and the exact spot where the body of the first English navigator who went round the world, was buried at sea on the 28th of January 1596.

It is near Puerto-Bello in view of Buena-Vista, six leagues
at sea, that he reposes (1). This atlas preserved in the National Library of Paris, has so much the more interest for us as the great English navigator, charmed no doubt by the talent of Guillaume Le Testu and Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, took with him on his expedition French painters. Of his voyage round the world which took him to California, there is preserved in an English collection a unique manuscript (2) for the ethnography of the New World: work of one of these artists, two hundred «drawings, painted in natural colours representing trees, plants, fruits, birds which are found in the Indies as also the mode of living of the Indians, hunting, fishing, etc. each accompanied with historical explanations».

One of these «painters» visited the Isthmus of Panama on board a Spanish vessel which he had succeeded in stealing upon. And, for the first time, in 1600, the idea was put forth by a Frenchman that this thin tongue of Earth could be pierced. The Saintongean Samuel de Champlain wrote in these very terms: «In this spot of Panama, is gathered together, all the gold and silver which comes from Peru. It is freighted on a little river which flows from the mountains and which descends to Portovello, which is four leagues from Panama. On can judge that, if these four leagues of land were cut, one could come from the south sea to the sea this side.»

A few years before, one of our most sagacious statesman, Philippe du Plessis-Mornay, convinced that the occupation

(1) Un atlas inconnu de la dernière expédition de Drake (Vues prises de son bord), par Ch. de la Roncière. Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1909, in-8°.
(2) Sold the 15th November 1911 at London with the collection Huth.
of Isthmus and straits would assure the domination of the world, counselled Henry III to take possession of the Isthmus of Panama. Thanks to the help of the outlaws black slaves and of those indomitable Indians whose descendants still come down from their resting places in the mountains to scourge the waves which brought the conquistadors, four thousand Frenchmen and eight men-of-war would have sufficed to have given us the key to the two Americas. Was there any chance of this counsel being followed? The history of the French colonisation will tell us (1).

II

FRENCH COLONISATION

In spite of the Bull of Demarcation of Pope Alexander VI, according to which the Spaniards and Portugueses took it upon themselves to prohibit other nations access to the New World, France did not cease to attempt the creation of colonial settlements. In 1534, Jacques Cartier, of Saint-Malo, commenced a series of explorations in view of discovering "Countries where it was said great quantities of gold might be found". If he brought back from his travels a geographical error, the idea that Canada formed "an extremity of Asia on the Western side", the Malouin pilot had very perfectly discerned the "suitableness" of a country easy to cultivate. In September 1538, he submitted to King François Ier a complete programme of colonisation which required, as the first condition, the sending out of 276 men belonging to all trades. A Viceroy was appointed; and the handsome Atlas executed for king Henry II shows us the landing on the banks of the St. Lawrence, at the head of his men-at-arms, of the viceroy Jean-François de La Rocque de Roberval.

Unfortunately, this rugged breton sailor was not a dealer in precious stones. Sent to investigate the land of gold,
Cartier thought he had brought back « leaves of fine gold, as thick as a finger nail, and the most beautiful diamonds that it was possible for man to see ». But all that glitters is not gold, and false as a diamond from Canada from that moment became proverbial. The result was discredit of New France, nay even of the exodus in 1544 of all our Colonists.

In 1555, the breton vice-admiral Durand de Ville-gagnon established himself in the Bay of Janeiro, on an island which to-day still bears his name. He was the vice-roy of Antarctic France. Absolute liberty of conscience, parliamentary form of government with a council of ten, right of pardon reserved to the viceroy, seemed to assure the vitality of the Colony. But an attack of the Portuguese five years later reduced it to nothing, in the same manner as another of their aggressions had ruined our settlements near Pernambouc in 1531.

Evicted from Brazil, our sailors hoped to find in Francisca formerly explored by Verrazzano a better field for colonisation. In 1562, captain Jean Ribault and captain René de Laudonnière with their huguenots disembarked there as in the Promised Land. Singing the psalms of David, they settled on the banks of a river which they baptised « the Jordan », while to the neighbouring rivers they gave the names of the rivers of France : « the Seine, the Somme, the Loire, the Charente, the Gironde. » Three years after, they fell under the stroke of the Spaniards, singing the miserere, « Domine, memento mei ». South of San-Agustin, the place of carnage is still called the lagoon of the massacre, « Matanzas ».
Sex alia flumina à Gallis observata

RIVERS OF FLORIDA, CHARENTE, GARONNE, GIRONDE

Miniature by Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues executed in America in 1564.
To these aspirations of France towards the New World, a Queen thought of giving a direction and an development until then unknown, as if she had foreseen the great part which the American Continent in future would be called upon to play one day. It is only quite recently that the secret of the Queen has been revealed. At the same time that she sent as viceroy to Newfoundland her page Troïlus du Mesgouez, marquis de la Roche-Helgomarch, Catherine de Médicis gave to her cousin Philippe Strozzi letters of mysterious provisions, establishing him « viceroy, without it being necessary to specify more plainly, in any particular spot whither the said sire was making his way ». It is ascertained to-day that Strozzi had the secret order to take possession of Brazil. It was there that he was going when he was killed on the 26th of July 1582, at the naval battle of Azores.

The impulsion given by Catherine de Médicis was followed by numerous military reconnoitring parties resulting in the creation of little colonies. In the island of Maranhão, North of Brazil, François de Razilly founded Equinozial France, the capital of which San-Luis still exists, although Equinozial France did not live more than four years; it was conquered in 1616 by the Portuguese, as Antarctic France had been a century before.

At this moment, the famous work of Raleigh, The Discovery of the large, rich and beautiful Empire of Guyane, turned the activity of our explorers towards a mysterious Eldorado, where the last Inca, fleeing before Pizarro was supposed to have buried the treasure of his ancestors. From this fable, originated in 1602 the only one of our
colonies which has remained firmly established in South America, La Guyane.

It served as a base for the French colonisation of the Antilles, which were said to be "the outskirts of India". Founded in 1626 with a capital of 9,000 dollars, the Company of St. Christophe desired to populate the still unoccupied Islands of the Antilles between the 11th and 18th degree of north latitude. And its efforts were crowned with such success, that our possessions soon counted fourteen islands divided up into three sections, with St. Christophe, Guadeloupe and Martinique for numbered chief towns, and there was even at Bahama the barony De Caen. After three centuries, the French flag continues to float over several of these islands, at the entrance of the gulf of Mexico and of the Panama canal, time not yet having ruined the work of the contemporaries of cardinal de Richelieu, Roissey, Poincy, Dyel du Parquet.

The respect of the liberty of others, one of those qualities which distinguish only the leading nations, had won over to us many aboriginal tribes. No matter from whence they came, the natives who came in France received a most affectionate welcome: such as the Indian from the south, Essomericq, who came in 1504 with Paulmier de Gonneville so initiate himself in the mysteries of civilization, was so charmed with it that he founded a family in Normandy; again, the sons of a Huron chief became the inseparable companions of Jacques Cartier.

The 1st of October 1550, when king Henry II with great pomp visited Rouen, scenes of Brazilian life were enacted before him. Savages whose faces were "streaked" with
MARANHÃO AND ANTARCTIC FRANCE IN BRASIL

Map drawn by Jacques de Vaux (1613).
emeralds, ran after monkeys and sagoinis, parrots flew wildly about; meanwhile, to the deafening noise of a horn made of the bony shell of an armadillo, to the sound of a dry gourd filled with stones, the Tabajars, in war costume, buckler of tapir skin on the arm, a disc of ostrich feathers round their waist, threw themselves on the peaceful Tupinambas, who were swinging in hammocks at the door of their reed-cane huts.

Half a century later, in 1613, Tupinambas, Tabajars, Tapuias and Long-Haired of Para, specimens of the divers Indian tribes, came to swear allegiance to the king in a solemn audience at the Louvre, where one of them pronounced a harangue in tupi. To each of his new vessels, Louis XIII handed the necklace of Saint-Louis, after having had them sumptuously attired in crimson garments and castor hats whith white feathers.

They were received as distinguished guests. In Canada they treated us as allies.

In the regions of New France, in Canada, in Acadia and in Newfoundland, our progress had not ceased since the day when the page of Catherine de Medicis had for the second time hoisted our flag there. One of our Basques, Martin de Hoyarsabal published in 1579 the first pilot-guide book of Newfoundland, where all information necessary for insular coasting were to be found. Chauvin, Lieutenant of Troïlus Du Mesgouez, founded in 1600 the station of Tadoussac on the St. Lawrence. Five years later, Port Royal sprang up, which to day is Annapolis, this was the act of the viceroy Du Gua de Monts.

Finally, in 1608, Samuel de Champlain, the father of
New France, cast anchor in the narrowest part of the St. Lawrence, where a few oxidized cannonballs, a wall in ruins testified to the stay there of Jacques Cartier. A warehouse on the banks of the water, three main buildings surrounded with galleries, a little fortress with a deep moat all around, such was the capital of New France, Quebec. The fine maps of Jean-Baptiste Franquelin show us what at the end of the century it had become when thousands of immigrants, Normands, Poitevins, Saintongeans had reinforced the primitive colony (1).