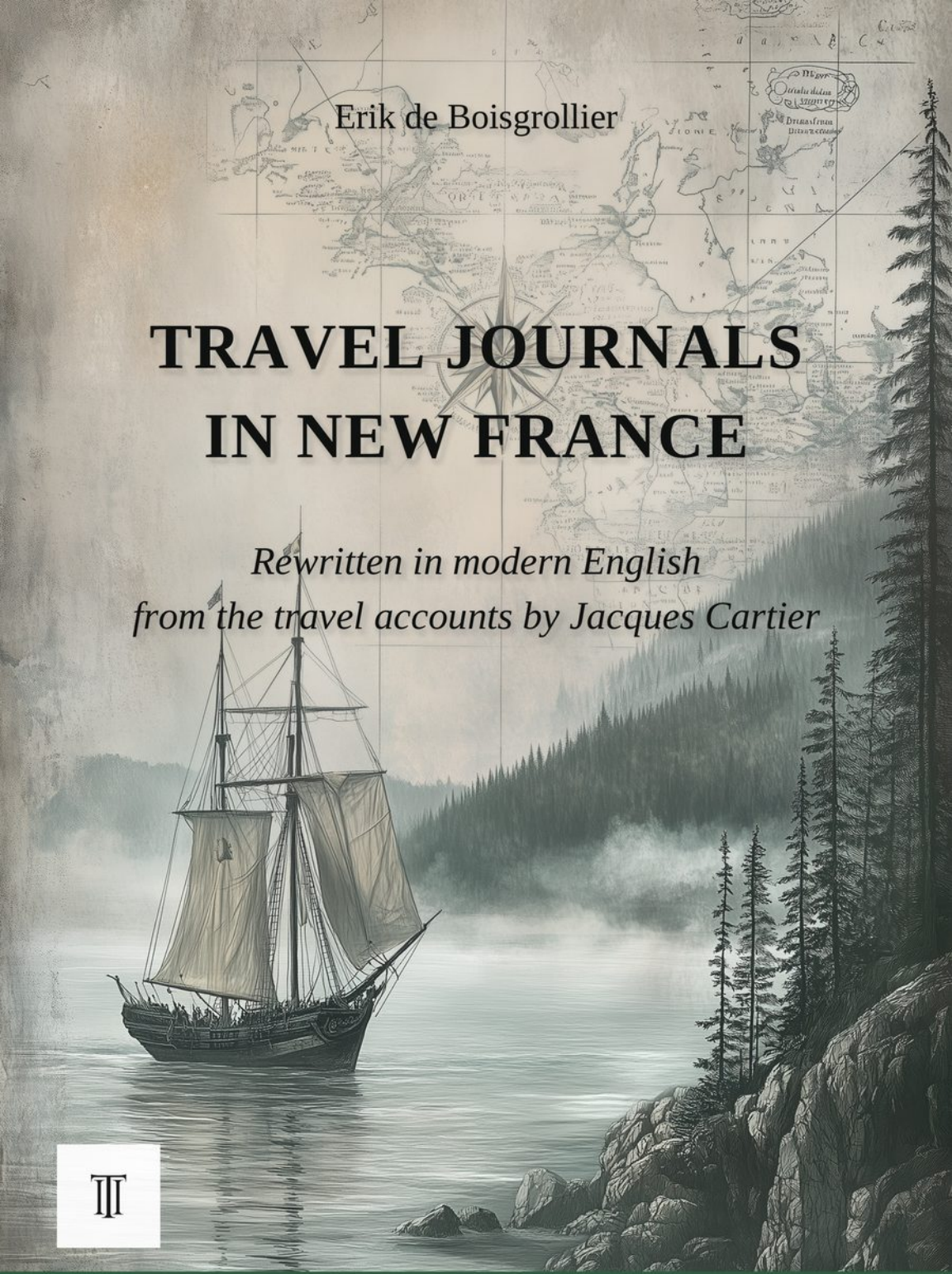
Erik de Boisgrollier

TRAVEL JOURNALS IN NEW FRANCE

Rewritten in modern English
from the travel accounts by Jacques Cartier



The first European to hear the word "Canada": three voyages, three encounters, a world overturned.

To Caroline, Christian, Pia and Victor

Travel Journals in New France



Wild Americas

Forgotten Travel Journals

Travel Journals in New France

Complete rewriting in modern English of the travel accounts "Voyages au Canada (Relations de 1534, 1535-1536 et 1541-1542)" by Jacques Cartier, 1534-1542

Itinerarium Éditions, 2026

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The Publisher and the Author

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Erik de Boisgrollier

A lifelong passion for history and geography has taken Erik de Boisgrollier across France, Spain, and Australia. An inveterate traveller, he has journeyed through Europe, Asia-Pacific, North America and South America. It was through the accounts of Jacques Cartier and Nasir Khusraw that he conceived the idea of giving a second life to

these forgotten texts. He heads the editorial direction of Itinerarium and works principally on the Wild Americas and The Old Orient collections.

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Introduction

On the morning of 20 April 1534, in the cathedral of Saint-Malo, a man raises his right hand and swears before Charles de Mouy, Vice-Admiral of France, to serve the king well and loyally in his charge. His name is Jacques Cartier. He is forty-three years old, his face weathered like that of the pilots who have already seen Brazil and perhaps Newfoundland, and behind him a hundred men repeat the oath, their hands upon the Gospels. Outside, in the narrow harbor that serves as an antechamber to the ocean, two ships of sixty tons await the tide. It is little, sixty tons. It is the equivalent of a Basque fishermen's barque, a small open boat. Yet it is all that Francis I has granted to go and seek, beyond Newfoundland, the isles of gold and the passage to Asia that the Spanish and the Portuguese have already divided between themselves by the bulls of Alexander VI.

The world, in this year, has just tipped over without noticing it. Cortés had burned the ships of Veracruz fourteen years earlier. Pizarro had strangled Atahualpa the summer before. Magellan, dead in the Philippines, had proved that the earth turned. Meanwhile France, which had watched the Iberians disembowel the southern continent with a polite jealousy, decides at last that it must have

a share of the New World. Francis I, come out of Pavia defeated but steadied by the Peace of Cambrai, chooses for that share a man of Saint-Malo without title, a merchant’s son, a coastal captain. Not a hidalgo, not a younger son of the nobility. A man of the quay, who knows how to bring a ship about in the fog and count his fathoms at the sounding line. It is thus, by this modest pairing of a crown and a pilot, that the French presence in North America begins, forty years behind Christopher Columbus.

Cartier would return three times. Three voyages, three Relations, three acts of a single drama. On the first, in 1534, he discovers the immense gulf into which the great river empties, plants a cross thirty feet high at Gaspé, and brings back to Saint-Malo two young Iroquoians, Taignoagny and Domagaya, sons of the lord of Stadacona, seized under the pretext of a friendly barter. On the second, in 1535, he ascends the Saint Lawrence to the foot of a hill that he names Mount Royal, and from that summit he beholds the sheet of water, the rapids, the palisaded villages, the fields of maize, and understands that he has before his eyes an entire civilization, agrarian and fortified, whose existence no European had suspected. That winter, before the harbor of Sainte-Croix, twenty-five of his men die of scurvy before Domagaya, the child seized the year before, reveals to him the decoction of the annedda tree, which saves the survivors. On the third voyage, in 1541, he comes back with five ships, colonists, a viceroy named Roberval who is slow to join him, and the illusion that the stones he has gathered at Cap-Rouge are diamonds and gold. They are only pyrite and quartz. The manuscript breaks off in the dead of winter, on the desolate words of an English translator: *the rest is wanting*.

And this notebook carries within it the misunderstanding that will found the whole encounter. At Chaleur Bay, in July 1534, the Micmacs come running along the shore, waving skins, ready to trade. It is the purest moment of the account: they exchange knives, shirts, rosaries, for furs, without a single word in common. Three weeks later, at Gaspé, the same captain outwits Donnacona, takes his two sons aboard on the pretext that they will soon be brought back, and departs. They will come back, indeed, but bearing a promise of friendship that will be betrayed. In 1536, Donnacona himself is carried off and will die in France. In 1541, Agona, his successor, receives Cartier with smiles of mere show. The scenario repeats itself: one holds out a hand, one seizes the other, one says one will return. The peoples of the river learn, voyage after voyage, that the white faces do not hold the same idea of a word once given.

The voice of Cartier, a Malouin sailor more at ease with a compass rose than with a pen, lines up his coordinates like a ship’s log, names the islands after the saint of the day, invents names that will later be taken from him (the Bay of Saint Lawrence, Mount Royal, Canada), and keeps, from one end to the other, that freshness of gaze which makes the greatness of travel journals. He marvels at the gannets, at the belugas white as marble, at the tobacco that is drawn in through the nostrils, at the burial places suspended from the trees. He describes without judging, or nearly so, which was not the habit of his century.

Let the reader, then, embark in turn. Saint-Malo, 20 April 1534, dawn. The sheets snap taut. The tide runs out.



An illustrative portrait of the Malouin captain in sixteenth-century dress, depicting the explorer around 1540, at the time of his great voyages.

The Oath at Saint-Malo



On April 20, 1534, on the stone quay of Saint-Malo, Vice-Admiral Charles de Mouy receives the captains' oath before two small caravels of sixty tons, under an overcast Breton sky.

Isle of the Apponatz



On May 21, 1534, on the Isle of Birds off Newfoundland, the sailors land amid colonies of great auks (often called "penguins" in early accounts) and gannets covering the white, wave-battered cliffs.

The Land God Gave to Cain



June 1534. The ships sail along the coast of Labrador, bare and rocky land battered by mist and gulls, so desolate that Cartier compares it to the land God gave to Cain.

Trading at Chaleur Bay



July 1534. In Chaleur Bay, French sailors and Micmacs exchange knives and ironware for furs, the Savages dancing for joy and throwing seawater over their heads.

Chapter 1: The Oath of Saint-Malo

1534

The port of Saint-Malo was still murmuring with the last farewells when Sir Charles de Mouy, knight, Lord of la Milleraye and Vice-Admiral of France, second to the Admiral in the king’s navy, came aboard to receive our oaths. Before him, the captain, the masters, and all the companions of the two ships swore, one after another, to conduct themselves well and loyally in the king’s service, under the charge entrusted to us. Once the words were spoken, nothing more held us to the soil of France.

We set sail on the twentieth day of April of that year, fifteen hundred and thirty-four, with our two ships of about sixty tons each. Each carried sixty-one men aboard. The weather was good to us, and we made sail straight toward the west. On the tenth day of May, Newfoundland rose before us: we made land at Cape Bonavista, at forty-eight and a half degrees of latitude.

But the great quantity of ice drifting along that coast closed the passage to us. We had to seek shelter in a harbor called Sainte-Catherine, about five leagues south-southwest of the cape, each league being some four thousand paces as we reckon them at home. We remained there ten full days, watching for the return of fair weather and putting our barques (small boats) in order. On the twenty-first day of May, a west wind having risen, we left that port and were carried north, a quarter northeast of Cape Bonavista, as far as the Isle of Birds.

This island appeared to us wholly ringed by a field of broken ice, shattered into a thousand pieces that girded its shores. It measures scarcely more than a league around, and yet no one would believe, without having seen it with his own eyes, the number of birds that cover it. One would think they had been piled there by hand; and there are a hundred times more still wheeling in the air and floating on the water all about than could ever fit upon the land itself. Some of them are as large as geese, black and white, with a beak like a crow’s. These never leave the sea and cannot rise into the sky, for they have only small wings, no larger than half a hand; but with these stumps they swim beneath the water as swiftly as other birds cleave the air. And they are so fat that it is a marvel. We call them apponaths, great auks, a flightless seabird now extinct, often called “penguins” in early accounts. Despite the field of ice, our two barques made their way to the island and, in less than half an hour, loaded themselves as one would load stones. Each of our ships salted down four or five barrels of them, those casks in which meat is kept in salt, not counting those we ate fresh.

There is also found there another sort of bird, smaller, that moves through both air and water, and which is called murres, or guillemots: they crowd together and nest on the

island beneath the larger ones. Others still, larger, all white, keep apart in one part of the island; these are very hard to approach, for they bite like dogs, and they are called gannets. Although the island lies fourteen leagues from the mainland, bears swim out to it from the great land to feast upon these birds. Our men surprised one, as large as a cow and white as a swan, which leapt into the sea before them and fled. The next day, which was the feast of Pentecost, as we were making our way toward land, we came upon this same bear midway across the water, making for shore as fast as we sailed. As soon as we spotted it, we gave chase with our barques and took it by force. Its flesh was as good to eat as that of a two year old heifer, a young cow that had not yet borne a calf.

On Wednesday, the twenty seventh day of the same month, we reached the entrance to the Bay of Castles, that strait which separates Newfoundland from the land of Labrador. The wind was against us and the ice still plentiful. We were forced to put into a harbor near this entrance, called Rapont, where we remained shut in, unable to leave, until the ninth day of June. On that day we set sail to pass beyond, with God’s help. Rapont lies at fifty one and a half degrees of latitude.

Chapter 2: Isle of Birds

1534

Isle of Birds

On the tenth day of June, we brought our ships into the port of Brest to take on water and wood. I already knew that coast well. From Cape Rouge to Degrat, the point that marks the entrance to the bay, the land runs from cape to cape, north-northeast and south-southwest, bordered all along by islands so close together that one can pass between them only through narrow channels. Yet this makes for good harbors. Rapont and Degrat lie on the highest of these islands, and from the summit one can make out the two fine islands that lie near Cape Rouge, twenty-five leagues away (each league of Cartier's reckoning some four kilometers).

Whoever wishes to enter Rapont has a choice of two passages, one to the east, the other to the south. But let him beware the eastern point: there is nothing there but shoals and drowned land. One must hug the western island, at half a cable's length from the shore or more, and then hold to the south, and take further care of the three shoals that lie hidden beneath the water in the eastern

channel, those shallow reefs that rip open a hull without ever being seen. The bottom there is good, three or four fathoms (a Cartier fathom runs to about 1.6 meters, somewhat short of the standard English fathom).

Once provisioned, we rounded the bay. On Saint Barnabas' Day, which falls on the eleventh, after hearing Mass, we set out in barques (small boats) beyond the port, toward the west, to find out what harbors lay there. We made our way among islands so numerous that one could not count them, stretching for nearly ten leagues beyond Brest. We spent the night on one of them. The ground was covered with eggs, duck eggs laid by the hens of that fowl, and eggs of other birds nesting there by the thousands, and we made a good provision of them. These islands we named All Islands, for want of being able to name them one by one.

The next day, the twelfth, we pressed on further. At the far end of the archipelago opened a good harbor that we named Saint-Antoine. A league or two beyond, a very deep little river ran south-southwest between two high lands: another good harbor, where we planted a cross and named it Saint-Servan. To the southwest, about a league off, stood an islet round as an oven, ringed by several smaller ones, which serves as a landmark for recognizing these harbors. Ten leagues further on, we found a larger river, full of salmon, which we named the river Saint-Jacques.

It was there that we sighted a great ship. She came from La Rochelle and had spent the whole night searching for the port of Brest, where she meant to fish, no longer knowing where she stood. We went aboard her with our barques and brought her into another harbor, a league further west than the river Saint-Jacques. This harbor I hold to be one of the finest in the world; we named it port Jacques-Cartier.

If the land were worth as much as its harbors, it would be a blessing. But it falls far short. Rather than Newfoundland, it should be named stones and frightful, ill-hewn rocks. Along this whole northern coast, where I went ashore in many places, I did not see enough good soil to fill a cartload. Except at Blanc-Sablon, there is nothing but moss and stunted scrub. In short, I judge it to be the land that God gave to Cain, the cursed and barren portion of the first murderer.

There are people here nonetheless, of fairly good build but wild, and Savages. They knot their hair atop their heads in the fashion of a twisted handful of hay, binding it with a nail or something of the sort passed through it, and stick birds' feathers into it. Men and women alike dress in the skins of beasts, but the women are more covered, drawn tighter in their skins and girded about the body. They paint their bodies with tanned colors, that reddish brown of leather. They have barques of birch bark in which they go to sea and take great numbers of sea wolves, those seals on which they live. Seeing them, I understood that this was not their home: they come from warmer lands for this hunt and for the other things they need.

On the thirteenth day, the weather being fair, we returned aboard with our barques to make ready to sail. On Sunday the fourteenth, we had Mass sung. On Monday the fifteenth, we weighed anchor out of Brest and set our course south, to reconnoiter the land we saw on the other side, beyond two islands. Coming to the middle of the bay, we recognized that it was the mainland, showing a great double cape, one rising above the other: for this we named it Cape Double. In the middle of the bay, we sounded a hundred fathoms and found a muddy bottom; at five or six

leagues, forty fathoms. From Brest to this cape, the crossing is about twenty leagues, and the land runs northeast and south-southwest, a quarter toward north and south.

The next day, the sixteenth of the month, we followed the coast southwest, a quarter toward south, for about thirty-five leagues from Cape Double. The lands there raised very high and fearsome mountains, jagged and hollow; one of them resembled a barn, and we named this place the Mounts of Barns. Between these heights and the sea lay low-lying lands. All that day, mist and darkness had hidden the rest of the coast from us. Only at evening did a gap open in the land, like the mouth of a river, between the Mounts of Barns and a cape that lay south-southwest, about three leagues from us.

For anyone wishing to retrace this route, here is how it runs. Setting out from the point of Degrat to enter the bay, one steers west a quarter toward northwest, and rounds two islands that lie to port, on the left hand as one looks forward. The first is three leagues from the point; the second, flat and low, appears to be joined to the mainland and lies seven leagues from the first: I named it Sainte-Catherine. Give it a wide berth, for to the northeast, a quarter league off, lie reefs and foul bottoms. From Sainte-Catherine to the port of Castles, it is fifteen leagues, north-northeast and south-southwest; from the port of Castles to the port of the Mounds, which is the land at the north of the bay, twelve leagues and a half; and two leagues from the Mounds, the port of the Whale. Across this port, at a third of the way into the bay, one sounds thirty-eight fathoms, a muddy bottom.

From the Whale, one makes west-southwest to Blanc-Sablon, keeping clear of a shoal that breaks the surface to the southeast, and that from a distance one would mistake for a boat. Three leagues offshore opens a cove with no

shelter from the south or the southeast, and to the south-southwest of this cove, two islands: the Isle of Wood and the Isle of Birds. On this last one nest great numbers of godets and richards, those puffins with red beaks and red feet that dig their burrows like rabbits. Past a cape a league from Blanc-Sablon, one finds a harbor and a passage named the Islettes, which are better than Blanc-Sablon and where the fishing is plentiful. From the Islettes to the port of Brest, in the same direction, ten leagues. Brest lies at fifty-one degrees, forty minutes, and fifty-five seconds of latitude, amid islands; and along the coast, more than three leagues offshore, there is nothing but low islands for more than twelve leagues, above which the high lands can be seen.

Chapter 3: The Coast That God Gave to Cain

1534

The Coast That God Gave to Cain

The last cape we left behind us was worn away at the top, and at its base it tapered into the sea in a point that the swell battered without respite; for this reason we named it Cape Pointu. To the north of it, a league off, a flat island laid its grey line upon the water. We wished to survey this entrance, to see whether some good anchorage lay hidden there, some harbor where we might take shelter; so we lowered our sails and spent the night there, waiting for daylight.

It did not come as we had hoped. The next day, the seventeenth of June, the sky filled from the northeast and fell upon us in a tempest. We had to heave to, run before it and lie to under close-reefed sail, that maneuver by which one shortens canvas to withstand the wind without seeking to advance further, the ship laid over and braced against the sea. The gale drove us thirty-seven leagues to the southwest, until Thursday morning found us off a bay strewn with

round islands. They were so perfectly rounded that from a distance one might have taken them for those tall stone dovecotes raised in the countryside; we therefore called them the Dovecotes, and the bay, Saint Julian Bay. From there, seven leagues further south, a quarter southwest, stood a cape we named Cape Royal; and to the west-southwest of it another still, worn away at its base and rounded at the top, with a low island half a league to the north. That one we named Cape Latte. Between the two stretched low lands, and beyond them one could make out, far off, very high lands cut through with gaps where rivers seemed to run.

Two leagues from Cape Royal, the sounding line gave us twenty fathoms of water, and there opened the greatest fishery of large cod one could ever encounter. While waiting for our companion vessel, which was slow to rejoin us, we cast our lines to pass the time: in less than an hour, more than a hundred cod were aboard. The sea that refused us a harbor offered us this, with both hands full.

The next day, the eighteenth, the wind turned contrary again and blew hard. We returned toward Cape Royal, hoping to find shelter there, and lowered the barques to search the coast between that cape and Cape Latte. Beyond the low lands a great bay opened, very deep, scattered with islands; to the south, these low lands closed it off and formed one side of the entrance, Cape Royal forming the other. But these low lands ran out to sea for more than half a league, flat and with poor holding ground, and an island stood squarely in the middle of the passage. The bay lies at forty-eight and a half degrees of latitude. That day again we found no harbor to put in at, and had to hold the night offshore, bow to the west, the ship given over to the sea.

It was not the affair of one night. From that day until the twenty-third, which is the eve of Saint John’s day, we were tossed about by tempest, contrary wind, and a fog so thick it walled us in. Not a shore, not a landmark. We had to wait for the day of my lord Saint John, the twenty-fourth of June, before a coast at last appeared. It lay to the south-east of us; by our reckoning, it stood some thirty five leagues southwest of Cape Royal. The weather remained hazy and hostile, and we could not approach it. But because it was his day, we gave the cape we had glimpsed the name of Cape Saint John, and we left it behind in the mist without ever setting foot upon it.

The next day, the twenty-fifth, the weather remained bad, dark, and windy. We ran west-northwest for part of the day, then in the evening lay to until the depth of night, before getting under way again, the wind having shifted to the northwest. Running then southwest for fifteen leagues, we saw three islands rise before us. Two of them, small, stood straight up like walls, sheer and impossible to climb; a narrow channel threaded between them. And all three were as full of birds as a meadow is of grass: they nested even inside the rocks. The largest was white all over with gannets, those birds larger than geese; another bore just as many, the third swarmed with murres, and at the foot of it stood still more murres and great auks, often called “penguins” in early accounts, like those we had already slaughtered in such numbers on the Isle of Birds. We landed on the smallest and killed more than a thousand of them; we loaded the barques with all we wanted, and one could have filled thirty of them in an hour. These islands we named the Gannet Islands.

Five leagues further west, another island awaited us, some two leagues long and as much across. We stopped there for the night to take on water and wood. It was

fringed with sand, set upon a fine bottom where one could pass everywhere at six and seven fathoms, and it was the finest land we had yet seen: a single acre of it was worth more in my eyes than all of Newfoundland. Fine trees covered it, meadows, fields of wild wheat, peas in flower as thick and as fair as ever I saw in Brittany, as though some plowman had sown them. There grew in abundance gooseberry bushes, strawberry plants, and red roses like those of Provins, parsley, and other good herbs of powerful scent. All about roamed great beasts like large oxen, which carry in their mouths two teeth like elephant tusks and which live in the sea. One of them lay sleeping ashore, at the water's edge; we pushed the barques toward it to try to take it, but no sooner were we upon it than it threw itself into the water and vanished. We also saw bears and foxes there. That island we named Brion Island.

In these waters, great tides ran toward the southeast and the northwest, strong and regular. From what I have seen, I presume there exists some passage between Newfoundland and the land of the Bretons, that Cape Breton which our fishermen already frequent; and should this be confirmed in the course of this voyage, it would be a great shortcut, in time as in distance. Four leagues from the island, a fine cape closed the horizon: we called it Cape Dauphin, for it is there that the good lands begin.

On the twenty-seventh of June, we ran along this coast, which trends east-northeast and west-southwest. From a distance it appears to be nothing but dunes, so low and sandy are its lands. The wind was coming from just that quarter, straight against us, and we could neither come alongside nor set foot ashore; we contented ourselves with following it for some fifteen leagues that day.

The next day we followed it ten leagues more, as far as a cape of red earth, all worn away. This side of it opened a cove running northward, over flat country where a bank of sand and stones separated the sea from a pond. From this cape to another there were four leagues: between the two, the land formed a half-circle bordered by sandbanks laid out like a ditch, and beyond stretched marshes and ponds as far as the eye could see. Before the first cape, two small islands huddled against the coast; five leagues from the second, to the southwest, a very high and pointed island stood alone, which we named Alezay. The first cape we called Cape Saint Peter, because we arrived there on that saint’s day.

From Brion Island up to this point, the bottom had remained fine sand, and the sounding regular, decreasing as one drew near the land: twenty-five fathoms at five leagues, twelve at one league, six close to the shore, everywhere on clean holding ground. Wishing to better survey these waters, we lowered our sails and lay to, drifting gently.

Then, on the second-to-last day of the month, the wind shifted to the south, a quarter southwest. We ran until Tuesday, the last day of June, at sunrise, without sighting any land; but when evening came, at sunset, a coast appeared, seeming to be made of two islands, some nine or ten leagues to the west-southwest. We made way west the whole of the following day, some forty leagues, and as we went we discovered that these two islands were not islands at all: it was a single mainland, running from south-southeast to north-northwest as far as a very fine cape. That one we named Cape Orléans.

Chapter 4: Brion Island and Chaleur Bay

1534

The Land Without a Harbor

All this land was low and level, the loveliest that could be seen, covered with fine trees and meadows. And yet, however far we ran along it, we found no harbor there: it is low, flat land, bordered everywhere with sand, where the sea nowhere deepens enough to shelter a ship. We went ashore at several places with our barques (small boats), and among others in a fine river of little depth. There we caught sight of barques of Savages crossing it from one bank to the other; it was because of them that we named it the River of Barques. But we gained no further knowledge of them, for the wind was coming off the sea and driving onto the coast, and we had to withdraw in haste to our ships.

We ran to the northeast until the next day, at sunrise, the first day of July. At that hour mists came on and the weather closed in; we kept our sails low until about ten o’clock, until the sky cleared. Then we recognized this

End of the excerpt

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