

La Corne St-Luc

The
"General of the Indians"

by

W. D. Lightball, F. R. S. C.



Montreal

1908

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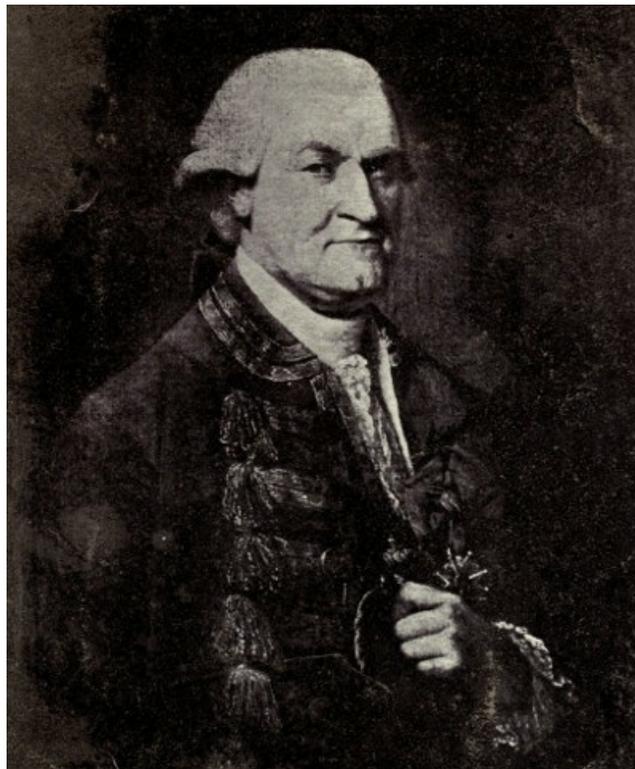
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THE "GENERAL OF THE INDIANS"

By W. D. Lighthall, F.R.S.C.



Perhaps the most brilliant of the sons of old French Canada was the Chevalier Luc de la Corne St. Luc. He was certainly the perfect type of the noble or gentleman, not alone in bearing, wit and pride, but in honor and courage; nor did he lack in solid ability.

Parkman styles him "this bold and enterprising chief" and he was a favorite friend of the chivalrous Governor Dorchester and of Haldimand. Among some antiquities and pictures which I possess, the most prized is a portrait of La Corne, which is a fine work of the English School of the eighteenth

century.

More than one judge contends that it is a Gainsborough (of the early Bath period before 1768): others agree that it is at least worthy of his hand. But leaving such questions for future settlement the picture presents a living man of strong and original character and some of its qualities are imperfectly shown in the photographic copy which illustrates this article, but a photograph necessarily fails in rendering color and the more subtle effects of portraiture. The painting appears to have been made during his first visit to England, in 1763 or 1764, when he was about fifty three years old; as another apparently made in 1778 during his last visit there, shows him aged and shrunken, a man at least a dozen years older,—differences which afford some clue to the date. The La Corne family was a branch of the Chapt. Colonel Luc de Chapt de La Corne St. Luc, chevalier of the Military Order of St. Louis is to be distinguished from his father—a veteran of the Western posts who lost an eye in the French service in Canada and is generally known as the Chevalier La Corne of Acadia. The father died in 1731, leaving a widow with seven boys and five girls. Colonel La Corne was born at Quebec in 1711. He had a distinguished career in French times as described in Parkman and Kingsford, and, from being the officer in command of the savage allies under Montcalm, was known as "the general of the Indians". As such, he led them at the capture of Fort William Henry in 1756, when he was accused of permitting the massacre of the prisoners, but apparently, he was helpless to aid. In 1759 he was wounded at Oswego. After the conquest of Canada in 1760, he tried to sail back to France with others of the Canadian gentry but suffered a terrible shipwreck on the vessel "l'Auguste" off the lonely Gaspé coast, on which occasion he was one of only seven survivors and suffered fearful miseries from frost and hunger in a long tramp to Quebec. He related the thrilling story in a small work published by Mesplet at Montreal in 1778. It is also told in De Gaspé's well known and interesting historical romance, "Les Anciens Canadiens". Returning, he entered the British service and was very grateful for the manner he was treated by Governor Murray. He visited England and France "in 1763 or 1764, soon after the Cession" according to his own statement quoted in De Gaspé, and again in 1774-5, and possibly on other occasions between those dates, as De Gaspé says he was a shrewd and successful importer of velvets, lace and other articles of French costume, although he was a military officer of the Indian Department. He relates an amusing story of how he passed the customs officers in England by representing his costumes as those appertaining to his positions as honorary chief of several tribes: and to prove it, he harangued the customs men, in Iroquois, Algonquin, and other tongues. De Gaspé, who was his relative, quotes a letter of his from Paris, of the 20th March 1775. In this, he speaks with feeling of his sentiment of gratitude to Britain. He was the principal adviser of Governor Dorchester in the preparation of the Quebec Act, to assist in the passing of which he was sent to London, in 1774, by Dorchester, to testify before Parliament on the subject, with his son-in-law, Charles Tarieu de Lanaudière, Michel Chartier de Lotbinière and others of the seigneurs, that Act being the embodiment of their feudal and ecclesiastical ideas. In 1775, he was appointed a Member of the first Legislative Council. In 1775, his son, La Corne *fils* , was one of the officers who defended St. John's on the Richelieu against General Montgomery, and was taken prisoner at the fall of the Fort. In 1777, the father, anxious to show his loyalty to his adopted king, commanded the Indian allies, who accompanied General Burgoyne's army, from Canada to Saratoga, where the army was defeated and surrounded. Burgoyne, afterwards, in order to clear himself of his own carelessness, accused him of deserting the cause, but the old officer defended himself with sound counter-charges. In the autumn of 1777, he went to England again, returning to Canada the next spring. His death occurred in 1784, as appears from the Memorial of his widow to the Government. The words of his reply to Burgoyne bear the impress of truth:

"Respecting the reason for having deserted the army, you should recollect that it is you who were the cause of my departure; for, two days after the savages had left, you saw your error, and Brigadier-General Fraser had already foreseen the consequences of your conduct in regard to the savages. You then sent for me to come to the Brigadier's tent, and you asked me to return to Canada, bearing despatches to General Carleton, praying his excellency to treat the Indians with kindness, and to send them back to you. This I did, and I should have joined the army, had not the communications been interrupted". And he proceeds in manly terms:

"Be it as it may, notwithstanding my advanced age, sixty seven years, I am ready to cross the ocean to justify myself before the king, my master, and before my country, from the ill-founded accusation that you have brought against me, although I do not at all care what you personally think of me".

The sincerity of these loyal words is proved not only by the gallant conduct of the old commander in taking the field and an arduous duty as he did, at his advanced age, but accords with the private letter to his family concerning the American Revolution written from Paris in March 1775 and quoted by De Gaspé:

"Remain neutral like the Netherlands and grateful for the kindnesses of the Government; my principle is not to fail on our side, *and ingratitude is my horror*".

Burgoyne at his own trial in 1779 referred to La Corne again in terms which are interesting, however malicious:

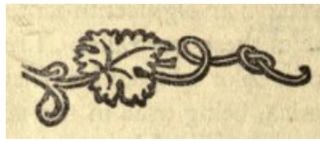
"Sir, a gentleman has been in London the great part of the winter, who I wish had been called to your bar. It is for the sake of truth only I wish it, for he is certainly no friend of mine. His name is St. Luc La Corne, a distinguished partisan of the French in the last war, and now in the British service as a leader of the Indians. He owes us indeed some service, having been formerly instrumental in scalping many hundred British soldiers upon the very ground where, though with a different sort of latitude, he was this year employed. He is by nature, education, and practice, artful, ambitious and a courtier."

La Corne was married three times, to ladies of well known Canadian families, and had two daughters who married British officers; one Colonel Campbell of the Indian Department, the other Colonel Lennox, son of the Earl of March & Lennox. The latter was married a second time, to Commandant Jacques Viger, first mayor of Montreal, an early antiquarian of note. Another daughter married Charles de Lanaudière, aide-de-Camp of Dorchester.

The countenances of all these officers look down from the walls of the Château de Ramezay.

My picture, which is the best and original portrait of him, came down in the family through his daughter Madame Viger, and afterwards became the property of Mr. Raphael Bellemare, Provincial Revenue Inspector of Montreal, and President of the Historical Society; after whose death it was purchased by me at the sale of his household effects, in 1906. Mr. Bellemarre was related to Mr. Viger and was his executor.

The Colonel is represented three quarter face, with a wig, and wearing a green uniform, with heavy gold braids and tassels. On his left breast is the small cross of a chevalier of St. Louis. A *cordon rouge* across his shoulder and breast has been painted out, but before that was done,—which must have been some time later, for the repainting is over a dry surface,—a copy was taken which is now in the Château de Ramezay. There is also a kind of copy in Laval University at Quebec which is the later picture above referred to, representing him in the same costume and *Cordon Rouge* but as a much older man. It is by a fair painter, but totally different from the first and far inferior in execution. The De Beaujeu family have an eighteenth century miniature copied from one of these portraits. The green coat appears to be of a color adopted for officers of British service in America, being used in the famous Royal American regiment. The left hand is shown grasping the hilt of his sword. The usual white collar is worn. The light and skilful touches by which the transparent lace *jabot* falling from the neck point is painted, the lace at the wrist, and the life-like soft flesh of the hand, are remarkable. But the skill of the artist is displayed best in the treatment of the face. He was evidently fascinated by the noble figure and strong character of the veteran himself. In the firm, free brush work, the felicitous rendering of the expression, the delicate silver-grays of the shaven chin, and the strong and refined coloring of the middle face, this master renders consummate justice to the keen and versatile soldier. He has unconsciously given us, in the brilliant, confident, scornful, but attractive, La Corne, the complete embodiment of the Old Regime, the inspiring spirit of the Quebec Act, that consecration of the old feudalism and ecclesiasticism which so enraged New England and helped to precipitate the Revolution.



Transcriber Notes:

Obvious minor typos and punctuation have been corrected.

page 2: subtitle: appears to be correct as written.

page 3: an which accasion he was → on which occasion he was

page 6: instumental in scalping → instrumental in scalping

page 7: the Chateau de Ramezay. → the Château de Ramezay

page 7: Bellemarre → Bellemare

[The end of *La Corne St-Luc* by William Douw Lighthall]