

Pierre St. Germain (1790-1843?)

Of the fifteen hired men on John Franklin's first land expedition, Pierre St. Germain has been the most underrated. Although a rogue, a rebel, and a troublemaker, he was the strongest, most resourceful, and most versatile man on the expedition. The journals of John Richardson and George Back, as well as the Red River records and Robert McVicar's unpublished Fort Resolution journals, shed considerable new light on the character of this hunter and interpreter.

St. Germain, part French and part Indian, served in the Athabasca district for the North West Company from 1812 to 1818. In 1819 he joined the Hudson's Bay Company at a wage of 2,000 Montreal livres (£100) per annum and served as an interpreter at Fort Resolution, Great Slave Lake. His previous service with the larger, rival North West Company was referred to by Governor George Simpson in his letter of 26 January 1821 to McVicar: "St. Germain is out of a bad nest and I trust we shall soon be able to shake off this Fraternity. I expect a few attached English half-breeds into the country next season and then we shall be more independent of N.W. renegadoes."

On 5 June 1820, Colin Robertson wrote McVicar, giving permission for St. Germain to join the arctic land expedition under the command of Lt. John Franklin. On 25 July 1820, St. Germain entered into an agreement with Franklin for wages of "3000 Livres per annum until his return to Ft. Wedderburn." This £150 was two-and-a-half times the amount Franklin offered a French Canadian voyageur.

St. Germain's employers recognized his ability but also his independent ways. Robertson described St. Germain as "an intelligent young man" and on 5 June 1820 wrote "I have given up an excellent Chippeyan interpreter, St. Germain." McVicar considered him indispensable, mentioning how he could travel without either a blanket or provisions, but also noting his liking for alcohol. When St. Germain delayed his departure from Fort Wedderburn, opposite Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca, until after the New Year's celebrations of 1820, McVicar remarks that "his long stay shews a complete contempt for the interests of the concern." Later, McVicar wrote of "that scoundrel's machinations . . . a dangerous man." McVicar noted on 2 July 1820 that "St. Germent has joined the service of the Expedition and has taken up his quarters in the N.Wt. Fort."

Richardson considered St. Germain to be one of the most reliable men on the expedition and the one with the most influence on the accompanying Copper Indians. St. Germain was intelligent, determined, and when reasonably fed, indefatigable. He made the preliminary trip to Point Lake with Back and Hood, 29 August-10 September 1820. During the winter of 1820-21, he snowshoed 440 km from Fort Enterprise to Fort Resolution, bringing back the two Eskimos, Augustus and Junius. Strong, resourceful, practical, a man of great stamina, St. Germain was also exceedingly dexterous, evidenced by his use of a made-down canoe to cross the Burnside River on 9 September and, five days later, to ferry Franklin across Belanger Rapids. St. Germain alone had the ability to improvise that allowed him single-handedly to convert the fragments of "painted canvas" or "oil-cloth" into a cockleshell that would

finally transport everyone across Obstruction Rapids on 4 October, after nine days of crucial delay.

One can sense the varying degrees of Richardson's regard for St. Germain as he calls him, in turn, "Pierre," "Pierez," "Perez," and "Pieresh." He even uses the affectionate diminutive "Pierrot" after St. Germain had been particularly helpful. This use of "Pierrot" confused Franklin greatly; working from Richardson's journal after losing his own in the rapids, Franklin twice in his published narrative ascribed actions to the voyageur Ignace Perrault that Richardson's journal credits to St. Germain. One of these was the sharing of an extra portion of meat with the officers on 14 September, an act of generosity singled out for special mention in Louis Melzack's Introduction in Hurtig's 1969 reprint of Franklin's journal. The second was the crucial killing of a fine caribou on 15 September, when they were starving.

As a troublemaker, St. Germain gained the enmity of both Franklin and Back. As early as 23 March 1821, St. Germain expressed his concern about the dangers involved in the proposed arctic explorations and shared his views with Akaitcho's Copper Indians. Because of this indiscretion, Franklin that day described him as "an artful man" and said he was "perfectly satisfied of his baseness."

Franklin suspected St. Germain and the Indian hunters of lessening their efforts, hoping that poor hunting would prevent the expedition from getting under way, and Franklin threatened to "convey him to England for a trial if the Expedition should be stopped through his fault." At the mouth of the Coppermine on 19 July, the two native interpreters, Adam and St. Germain, "made many urgent requests to be allowed to return with Mr. Wentzel." Franklin denied them because the two interpreters had already proved to be the party's only skilled hunters. To prevent their "plan for eloping," they were in fact conscripted: "lest they should leave us by stealth, their motions were strictly watched . . . the rest of the men knowing that their own safety would be compromised had they succeeded, kept a watchful eye over them." George Back's as yet unpublished journal tells of St. Germain's attempts to persuade him to accompany him as navigator and to press ahead of the straggling party on their tragic return trip across the barrens.

By September 1822 — the Franklin expedition over — HBC Chief Trader Alexander Roderick McLeod engaged St. Germain at Lake Athabasca to serve in the capacity of interpreter. According to "A List of People having Families Supported at the Company's Establishments in Mckenzie's River District," St. Germain resided with his wife at Fort Perseverance (Fort Norman) in 1823-24. In the Northern Department Abstracts of Servants' Accounts for 1825-1826, he was listed as being 35 years of age. He continued to serve the Company as an interpreter in the Mackenzie River District until 12 September 1834.

St. Germain then retired to the Red River Settlement, where he purchased 50 acres of land on 13 April 1835. The Red River census returns dated 31 May 1835 list him as a Roman Catholic, with two acres of land under cultivation. Living with him were his wife, one son above the age of 16, one son below the age of



Aerial view of Obstruction Rapids in June, looking south. Lake Providence is in the background.

16, and two daughters below the age of 15. The 31 March 1840 census returns listed a third daughter and gave his age as 40 years, though more likely he was 50. Perhaps he died soon after this, but his son Pierre, born about 1817, lived on a river lot in St. Boniface and together with the third generation Pierre, born about 1846, signed the 29 November 1869 petition opposing formation of a Provisional Government by Louis Riel.

Although too independent to fit easily into naval discipline, Pierre St. Germain was an indispensable man. Without his hunting and craft skills, Franklin, Richardson, Back, and Hepburn would have perished. Without him, Franklin's first arctic land expedition, like the 1845 disaster, would have had no surviving officers and no published accounts. It was a close call indeed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Mrs. Shirlee Anne Smith and Judith Hudson Beattie, Hudson's Bay Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, for assistance far beyond the call of duty. Mary Black-Rogers and John C. Jackson have helped in tracing some of the many St. Germaines in the Northwest, Red River, and Oregon, who offer great potential for confusion.

FURTHER READINGS

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