

Pierre-Esprit Radisson, explorer, fur trader (1636-1710)



Pierre-Esprit Radisson was born in France in 1636 or 1640—his exact age is unknown—and he moved to New France (now Quebec) in 1651, following his half-sister to presumed adventure in Trois Rivières.

That same year, while Radisson was out duck hunting, he was captured by an Iroquois band and adopted by them. This experience afforded Radisson a wealth of knowledge about First Nations life, customs, and their intimate knowledge of the geography around them. He learned their language, their way of life, and even joined them in battle when they were warring with other tribes. In 1654 while on a hunting mission, Radisson and a fellow captive Algonquin killed their Iroquois captors and attempted to escape. After being discovered by another hunting party, Radisson was tortured until the Iroquois who initially captured him

secured his release. He later fled his Iroquois “family” and escaped to Albany, New York where he served as an interpreter.

The reason is unknown, but he sailed to Amsterdam with a Jesuit priest in 1654 and returned to New France late the same year. What he did there is unknown, but when he returned to Trois Rivières he found that his sister’s husband had died and she had remarried to **Médard Chouart des Groseilliers**. He lived in New France for the next four years, making one trip back to Iroquois territory near Albany as part of a Jesuit mission that ultimately failed. At 21 years of age, Radisson had already experienced much in the way of adventure and hardship.

A year later, Radisson took up the fur trade in partnership with his brother in law des Groseilliers. In 1659, they spent the winter in Sioux country, southwest of Lake Superior, and it was during this time that the two were told of Hudson Bay and the near limitless population of beaver that called it home. They collected many beaver pelts during this mission and in the spring traveled to Montreal, where their furs were confiscated due to their expedition having not been sanctioned by the companies that laid claim to that geographic region.

Following this debacle Radisson and des Groseilliers decided to operate based out of New England and did so from 1662 to 1664. During this time they tried unsuccessfully to convince financial backers to cover the cost of their proposed expedition to Hudson Bay. In 1664 they were persuaded that financial backers in London would be more receptive to their proposal, and they set sail there in 1665. When they arrived they arranged to meet with rich and powerful Londoners, and proposed to them a plan to bypass the St. Lawrence River and Great Lakes to reach the west, and instead to reach the West by navigating to Hudson’s Bay, of which they had been informed in the Sioux territory years before.

Radisson and des Groseilliers began planning an expedition to prove that this path to the West was practical and possible, and set sail in 1668. Des Groseilliers led with a vessel called the *Nonsuch* while Radisson commanded the *Eaglet*, which was forced to turn back from the voyage. Radisson therefore remained in England while des Groseilliers completed the voyage. The *Nonsuch* successfully traversed Hudson Bay, wintered in James Bay, and returned to England in October 1669 with a cargo of fur that served as proof that the fur trading path to the West through Hudson Bay could be profitable.

As a result of the success that des Groseillier and Radisson’s expedition to Hudson Bay experienced, the British government chartered Hudson’s Bay Company on May 2, 1670. After the company was chartered, Radisson was sent back to North America to establish the company’s Nelson River post and served as a senior guide, translator and travel adviser.

For reasons unknown, in 1674 Radisson and des Groseilliers became dissatisfied by HBC and defected to the French fur trade after being made a lucrative offer from France to do so. However, Radisson had married an English woman whose father played a key role in the 1628 English capture of Quebec, and he was never fully trusted. He served as a French midshipman from 1677 to 1679, and in 1682 was hired by French rival to HBC the Compagnie Du Nord to challenge the English monopoly of fur trading in Hudson's Bay. He traveled down the Nelson River and destroyed the post that he had helped to create. He then created a new post called Fort Bourbon for the Compagnie Du Nord and left it in the command of his nephew & des Groseillier's son.

After receiving what he thought was inadequate compensation for his work from France, Radisson defected back to England in 1684 and was promptly re-hired by Hudson's Bay Company to assist in restoring their control over fur trading in Hudson's Bay. He convinced his nephew to surrender Fort Bourbon to HBC and then served as its director of trade from 1685 to 1687. Experiencing difficulty working with other senior officers there who knew of his changing allegiances, Radisson left Fort Bourbon in 1687 and retired to Westminster, England, where he married two more times and had several children.

Despite his changing interests and allegiances, Radisson is an important figure in Canadian history because his expeditions opened up the West to lucrative fur trading that was previously unthinkable, and because he and des Groseillier's expeditions led to the foundation of the iconic Hudson's Bay Company, and they are credited as its founders as a result.