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The PROCEEDINGS of the
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THE WHITE CHIEF OF THE ST. FRANCIS
ABNAKIS—SOME ASPECTS OF BORDER
WARFARE: 1690-1790

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This study is the fourth in a series by Dr. Huden, beginning with the
January, 1955, quarterly. The general theme has to do with the neglected
Indian phase of Vermont history and indirectly with the early relationships
between Canada and Vermont. The studies should be, at this point, regarded
as exploratory in character. The generous co-operation of Canadian scholars
and officials has made these studies possible. Acknowledgements in full
will be made later. Editor.

Although our story is mainly concerned with Joseph-Louis Gill,
the White Chief of St. Francis, it really begins in June 1697 at
Salisbury, Massachusetts, where a ten-year old boy named Samuel
Gill was captured by Abnakis and brought back with them to their
Canadian fort, Odanak, [see map] near the mouth of the St. Francis
River. Some time later a little girl known to us only as “Miss James”
was taken prisoner at Kennebunk, Maine; she, too, was carried
away to Odanak. Both children were adopted by Indians, baptized
in the Roman Catholic faith, brought up in the Indian manner, and
remained with the tribe for the rest of their lives. They were married
[probably around 1715] by the venerable missionary, Father Aubery.
According to one of their descendants, Judge Charles Gill, Samuel
was probably not living in 1754 as Mrs. Johnson did not mention
him in her narrative; but tradition places his death in 1758, and his
wife’s demise a score of years earlier.

Abbé Maurault (who labored among the Abnakis as their mission­
ary between 1848-1853) states that the Yankee captive Gills had
seven children. The oldest was a girl, Jeanne-Magdaleine, born in
1716; in 1735 she was married to “Mons. Hannis,” a German
[Johannes?] who had been captured somewhere in the American
colonies. Some of their children married Indians, notably Obumsawins
and Toksuses; these names are familiar even today in Vermont as well as in Canada.

In 1719, the Samuel Gills had their first son, Joseph-Louis, the central character of this article. Among “Rebel Partisans” who ranged against King George the Third in Canada, 1775–1783, the man who gave the British authorities the most grief was this son of Yankee captives. Although “of pure English blood” as Mrs. Johnson described him in 1754, Joseph-Louis (like his parents) was raised among the St. Francis Abnakis and their French neighbors; he fought under the French flag in de Beauharnais’ 1747 campaign against the Miamis; and as we shall see, he suffered greatly at the hands of Wabo Madahondo’s, (White Devils, Major Robert Rogers’) “British Rangers” in 1759. Small wonder that he cast his lot (for a while at least) with the Continentals.

Joseph-Louis was brought up like an Indian, dressed like an Indian in his early years, and like his father Samuel hunted with Indians on their peculiarly Algonkian “family preserves.” In most respects he was an Indian; so it is not strange that when he was about twenty-one, he married a daughter of the Abnaki head-chief. (Her name was given in parish registers as Marie-Jeanne Na na mag hem et; as yet, we have not succeeded in translating this Indian word, though it may mean “twice-beautiful housewife.”) Joseph-Louis and Marie-Jeanne had at least two children, possibly three; but only their oldest boy, Antoine, survived to share his father’s adventures in the Revolution. Another boy, Xavier, perished with his mother in Rogers’ retreat from St. Francis in 1759. A possible third son, “Sabatis,” (John-Baptist) was mentioned by Mrs. Johnson, who saw him frequently during her captivity in Joseph-Louis’ household in 1754. There are legends that Sabatis perished while guiding some of Benedict Arnold’s troops over the Maine Height-of-Land in December, 1775. [This story and others connected with Abnakis will be found in Kenneth Roberts’ novel Arundel; the Rogers’ Rangers’ epic is expanded in the first part of Mr. Roberts’ novel Northwest Passage.]

Like most men of his times Joseph-Louis had to go to war. In 1747, Miami Indians were threatening to massacre the inhabitants of the French outpost at Detroit; Mons. de Beauharnais was sent against the Miamis from Lower Canada (Quebec), at the head of a party of Abnakis and French-Canadians. One of the members of this expedition was Joseph-Louis; some time during the march he was put to a rather severe test by some of his Indian companions. A m’teoulin (medicineman) caught a live rattlesnake, and challenged
Joseph-Louis to demonstrate his bravery by biting the serpent. Without hesitation the twenty-eight year old white warrior-hunter crushed the rattler's spine with his teeth, then ripped open the snake's underbelly, tore out the squirming reptile's pulsating heart and swallowed it without a sign of repugnance. Upon the return from the Miami campaign Joseph-Louis was elected Sògmô (Sagamore) of the Abnakis; in this capacity he (with four other chiefs) addressed a letter to the canons of the cathedral in Chartres, France. In this missive the Abnakis reaffirmed their thanks for certain church ornaments which the Chartres fathers had sent the Abnakis nearly half a century before; especial thanks was given for a beautiful silver statue of the Virgin Mary. The Abnaki chiefs told the Chartres authorities that their gifts were spiritual ties with France, and begged that their tribe "continue to be regarded as spiritual children" of Chartres. This may have been a gentle hint that new church ornaments were needed and that gifts would be welcomed.

Joseph-Louis signed the letter as a Chief, but he could have added that he was also "chef de la prière," a sort of head layman, interpreter, prefect of discipline and liaison-officer between the missionaries and the Indians. Such was the man who had "purchased" Mrs. Johnson in 1754, taking her to live in his home as a sort of maid-of-all-work. Such was the man who was bereaved at age forty by Rogers' Rangers in 1759. According to family tradition he was then about five feet, ten inches in height, all muscle, probably weighing about 160 pounds; definitely blond Yankee-English in appearance, in spite of his weather-tanned countenance and rough Indian hunting costume. He was not rich, but was well-to-do after the manner of his times. Mrs. Johnson said (in 1754) "he kept a store (supply) of goods and lived in a style far above the majority of his tribe." Through his father's Indian foster-parents Joseph-Louis had probably inherited a share in the old Abnaki hunting-grounds described by Chief Stephen Laurent in the July 1955 VHS meeting. Of course, he knew Abnaki and French very well; his position as chef-de-prière demanded great fluency in both these tongues. Probably he knew considerable English, as Mrs. Johnson has indicated, and as letters (in the Dartmouth College Archives) from Eleazer Wheelock to Joseph-Louis graphically testify. Upon this versatile, prominent citizen of the dying New France regime Rogers' Rangers' expedition came as a saddening blow, to say the least. This raid came in retaliation for many cruel deeds ascribed to the St. Francis tribe. Probably General Jeffrey Amherst planned it, but Major Robert Rogers—
Wabo Madahondo, The White Devil—executed it. Here are the salient facts which advance our story:

Major Robert Rogers and his Rangers burned Odanak, the Indian village east of St. François-du-Lac, Quebec, early in October 1759. To get there, Rogers traveled along the Vermont side of Lake Champlain from Crown Point northward to Missisquoi Bay, thence overland to Red Rocks Ford (Makuapska sik) several miles southeast of the Abnaki stronghold. Arriving there around dawn on October third, by seven o'clock in the morning their work of destruction was completed (or so they thought); so they set out for Lake Memphremagog via Alsigontikuk, the St. Francis valley. With them they took the Silver Virgin and other ornaments (from the Odanak mission church) which the Chartres canons had sent from France more than half a century before; more important still for our story, they had several prisoners, among them the head-chief's daughter Marie-Jeanne (Joseph-Louis' "twice-beautiful housewife") and their little sons. Joseph-Louis himself was probably away hunting when the Rangers fell upon Odanak, as it was customary for the Abnakis to go after meat and furs early in the fall. "Indians cannot be expected to keep together like British troops, nor can they ever do so after the beginning of October, because of the hunting season," wrote Colonel Guy Johnson; possibly this knowledge of Abnaki schedules prompted General Amherst to select early October for Rogers' attack.

Legends tell us that Joseph-Louis came home to get a fresh supply of gunpowder a day or two after Rogers' raid, and that he set out at once on the trail of the Rangers. He got as far as "Deadfall River" [probably Vermont's Nulhegan; Nulhegan is an Abnaki word meaning deadfall, or wooden trap] where he met a group of French-Canadians who had gone out in pursuit of the Rangers. The Canadians told Joseph-Louis that his wife and their children had either died of hunger or fatigue or exposure, or had been murdered by their "British" captors. [My guess is that the deaths occurred somewhere in the vicinity of Guildhall, Vermont, and that starvation and exposure were the causes. J.C.H.] Abbé Maurault and Father Charland give several variations of this sad story. M. Maurault says, "Among the prisoners were the wife of Joseph-Louis Gill and their two children, Antoine and Xavier. The wife was killed by the Rangers; later, the two children were liberated and returned to St. Francis." Father Charland writes, "Among the prisoners taken by Rogers was the Indian wife of Joseph Louis Gill, named Marie-Jeanne, daughter of the Abnaki head chief; and their two children, Antoine and Xavier."
Judge Charles Gill, a descendant of Joseph-Louis by the White Chief’s second wife (a French woman), states that it is certain that Marie-Jeanne, Na na muqhem et, perished in captivity as did her son Xavier. He gives another horrible variant—that Marie-Jeanne was killed, her body cooked and eaten by her Indian captors (possibly Stockbridge Indians brigaded with the Rangers) who forced the two little boys to eat some of their mother’s flesh. Judge Gill has declared that in his youth he often heard this gruesome tale from old people. In any case, Marie-Jeanne died; probably Xavier died, and we know that little Antoine was given into the custody of Mrs. Suzanne Willard Johnson (who some years before had been a captive at his home in Odanak) when the Rangers reached “Number Four,” now Charlestown, New Hampshire.

So Joseph-Louis lost his home, his beloved Indian wife and at least one child on that dread October third of 1759. Odanak was a pile of cinders and rubble; the mission church was totally destroyed. The Silver Virgin, gift of the Chartres Cathedral, was “carried away to New England,” and perhaps now rests at the bottom of a Clyde River bog. From a historian’s standpoint the loss of Odanak church records is a distinct handicap—from Joseph-Louis’ point of view, Rogers’ raid was a catastrophe.

It is probable that Joseph-Louis became acquainted with the Upper Connecticut Valley in the fall of 1759, if he had not done so before then. Perhaps he was in the raiding party which captured Mrs. Johnson at “Number Four” (Charlestown, N. H.) in 1754, although she does not make this statement. Many clues from Mrs. Johnson’s Narrative have led us to the Canadian Archives at Ottawa; and the end is not yet.

In November of 1763 New France was in the throes of becoming Upper and Lower Canada, dependencies of the English crown. Joseph-Louis had been widowed for four years; he was slowly repairing his broken life, and had won the love of Suzanne Gamelin-dit-Chateauvieux, daughter of the French Captain Antoine Gamelin. Accordingly, they were married, six sons and two daughters were born of this union, and from them are descended poets, jurists, clergymen, statesmen. Six years later, the Gills inherited a considerable amount of land from the Gamelin estate; so the eve of the Revolution found them fairly well fixed in goods, in land and in influence.

Again we must summon family tradition to fill gaps in the chain of evidence. There is reason to believe that Joseph-Louis was one of “two Abnakis from St. Francis” who attended a great council of
chiefs at “German Flatts” (in the Mohawk Valley west of Amsterdam, New York) beginning July 15, 1770. It was here that “Canadian Indians” complained to Sir William Johnson (in charge of Indian affairs) that they had not been treated well; they “intended to wait on him at his home on their way” back to Canada. Sir William agreed to meet them; as “he had something particular to tell them.” This may have referred to the complaints entered by the Missisquoi Abnakis at Isle la Motte in 1766, but since nothing had been done to correct the grievances as late as December 9, 1772, the best guess in this connection is that Sir William Johnson had been apprised of the “Boston Massacre” of March 5, 1770, in which five men (including Crispus Attucks, part negro, part Abnaki) had been killed: and that Sir William wanted to sound out his somewhat disgruntled Canadian “red brothers” in the face of the gathering storm.

Our legends state further that the second “Abnaki of St Francis” who attended the German Flatts parley was Tok-sus, alias “The Corn-Pounder” or “The Pestle” or “The Mill.” Tok-sus may have been a descendant of the great Taxous, an Abnaki chief of the late 1660’s. He was probably related by marriage to Joseph-Louis. At any rate, in the Revolutionary years 1775–1783 Tok-sus shows up as a guide, a scout, an explorer (or spy if you please) along the Bayley-Hazen Road, at Crown Point, at Number Four, and even at Boston. Of course, Tok-sus was a fairly common Indian name; several Abnakis of this clan had summer dwellings along the Otter Creek when Rowland Robinson (Ferrisburg’s famed blind author) was a boy.

Between 1760 and 1775 (the fifteen-odd years just prior to Lexington, Concord and Ticonderoga) Vermont had a great influx of settlers. Many of these were veterans of the French and Indian wars; many had come to “The Hampshire Grants” in the full knowledge that restless Abnakis at St. Francis were still capable of making raids, although none had been attempted after the summer of 1760 when a number of St. Francis tribesmen fell upon Charlestown, N. H., to avenge Rogers’ 1759 expedition against Odanak. The Indians captured several Johnsons and Willards, relatives of Mrs. Suzanne Willard Johnson who had been a prisoner at Joseph-Louis’ home. Two children taken at this time died on the way to Canada, but all the other captives were released in Montreal. After the British had completed their conquest of Canada, Abnaki raids on New England came to a halt for at least fifteen years.

Following Vaudreuil’s surrender of Montreal (Sept. 8, 1760),
General Amherst divided Canada into three martial-law departments. British forces were billeted in the principal villages: “the soldiers were not an unmixed blessing for the parishes.” The Odanak mission was totally upset by drunken, disorderly troops. General Haldimand transferred most of his soldiers to Maskinonge late in 1763; so from then until 1775 things improved somewhat in Canada. Because of this state of affairs, sullen remnants of New England tribes were constantly seeking chances to move to Canada or to upper New York. As evidences of this unrest, the Iroquois chief Seriowhane told a meeting of the Six Nations with Sir William Johnson at Johnson Hall, Johnstown, New York, on July 9, 1774, (Sir William died suddenly that afternoon) that the Senecas were willing to give the Montauk Nation (natives of the east tip of Long Island, New York) a piece of land “to which the Montauks might retire and live peaceably hereafter,” a direct slap at English mismanagement. The year before this, Sir William had written to the Earl of Dartmouth (via Governor Tryon) giving the numbers of Indian fighting men in his jurisdiction. It would appear that the Indians, though dwindling in numbers, were still of considerable war strength; Iroquois and Algonkians alike were suspicious and restless. English military officials and Colonials both made every effort to win and to retain the support, if not the friendship, of Indian tribes from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. As the shooting phases of the Revolution drew nearer, it was apparent that there would be no hard-and-fast Algonkian-versus-Iroquois lineup, although most of the Iroquois were pro-British. Some Hurons, some Mohawks, some Abnakis fought for the Colonies; others fought for the Crown. In this way the Indians were just as inconsistent as (or no more consistent than) their white contemporaries.

From 1765 to 1768 the famed Mohegan Indian preacher, Samson Occum, was in England gathering funds which he presumed would be used to enlarge his old patron’s (Eleazer Wheelock’s) Indian school at Lebanon, Connecticut, or to start a new one on the east end of Long Island, New York. However, Wheelock by 1769 had “lost confidence in his Christian Indians”; so in 1770 he moved the school to Hanover, New Hampshire, where it was incorporated with Dartmouth College. Among Wheelock’s Indian students at Lebanon, Connecticut, was the celebrated Mohawk Thayendanega (Joseph Brant, brother of Molly Brant, common-law wife of Sir William Johnson.) Thayendanega [this name is sometimes translated “Two Arrow-Shafts Tied Together” and sometimes as “He who umpires”]
remained at Lebanon until 1763; he taught Samuel Kirkland (later founder of Hamilton College) the Mohawk language. Brant was very fond of his schoolmates, red and white, as well as of his preceptor, Dr. Wheelock. There are many who believe that Brant's influence as a British army officer and Mohawk war-chief kept the Iroquois out of "Dartmouth College Neighborhood" (the Upper Connecticut Valley) during the Revolution. (Some Mohawks did get to Royalton.)

When Benedict Arnold led his army from Maine to Quebec in 1775–1776, he was almost successful. The other prong of the Colonials' Canadian invasion was more fortunate; for a while it appeared that British General Sir Guy Carleton would be captured along with Montreal, but Sir Guy managed to escape and reached Quebec, where he holed up until reinforcements appeared in May, 1776.

Brigadier General Wooster of the Continental Army wrote to Colonel Seth Warner at Montreal on January 6, 1776, that the Canadians "are not to be depended upon, but like the Savages are fond of chuseing the strongest party." This fact Sir Guy Carleton had already discovered to his sorrow; when he ordered the Canadian militia to muster "fifteen out of each hundred men" in the summer of 1775, he was not obeyed. People like Joseph-Louis' Indian neighbors and French friends were just "waiting to see which way the frog would jump." Just before the Continentals' attack on Montreal in November, 1775, Sir Guy's Indians deserted, and once again the Canadian militia refused to obey his summons.

The Canadians sold supplies to both sides—for hard money. When the aging Ben Franklin (heading an important diplomatic mission) arrived on the south bank of the St. Lawrence in April, 1776, he had to pay the ferry man cash in metal before he was set across. Yet though "the Canadians would sell to both sides," they had little zeal for either. From the Continentals—the despised Bostonese—the French Canadians feared robbery; from Sir Guy Carleton, the British commander, they feared rigour for treason. The residents of St. Francis were, in general, no exceptions, but we know that Joseph-Louis Gill, the Abnakis' White Chief, had good reason to hate the British. There were others, too, notably Frenchmen who hoped for the independence of Quebec, or for reunion with France. For a while (during the initial successes of the Colonial Rebels) American Congressional propaganda had great success in the Province of Quebec at St. Francis-Odanak. The American invaders threw out British officials and installed the most zealous partisans of the Revolution. One of these, Joseph Traversey, was named Captain of Militia.

[ 206 ]
by the Americans; another, Joseph Despins, openly espoused the Colonial cause.

But when reinforcements reached Carleton in Quebec City during May, 1776, the tide turned. Remember Baker had been killed by Indians; Ethan Allen had been captured by "an Indian," and Tryon wrote triumphantly to the Earl of Dartmouth that "The Indians are firmly attached to the King's interest. . . . They have chosen Peter Johnson, the natural son of Sir William Johnson (by an Indian Woman) to be their chief. He is intrepid and active, and took with his own hand Ethan Allen in a barn, after his detachment was routed near Montreal." 81

The American General Montgomery had been slain. Continental soldiers retreated in disorder from Quebec to Three Rivers, to Montreal, and down the Richelieu. By the fall of 1776 American lines had fallen back to Ticonderoga; so Sir Guy Carleton went into winter quarters in Canada, confident that the next year's campaigns would crush the Rebellion.

Brunswickers from Germany (some of whom were to fight at Hubbardton) were billeted in and around St. Francis, Yamaska and Nicolet [see map]. The presence of these mercenaries meant forced labor for the inhabitants. Many Abnakis just oozed southward over the 45th parallel, but people who owned homes could not do this as readily. Those who had given the most aid (or the most open encouragement) to the Americans were the least spared; among these stalwarts was Joseph-Louis Gill, *Maggua-widom-bawit*. Born of American parents, with painful memories of British-inflicted tragedy in 1759, one can easily understand why he sided with the Rebels against England. 82

It is probable that Joseph-Louis spent a good share of his time in 1776 going back and forth from St. Francis to the Upper Connecticut Valley. According to Jonathan Elkins, 83 General Jacob Bayley of Newbury (Coos, Cohos) was empowered by Congress "to cut a road from Newbury through to Missisquoi Bay so that troops and stores could be got through to Canada"; in July, 1776, the road "was so forwarded that waggons had come on as far as Peacham," but sad to say, "all at once our joy was turned to mourning . . . .

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Disasters brought the melancholy news that the Britsh had drove our army . . . . out of Canada." The whole north country, including the Peacham Elkins family, "retreated" to Newbury and started to build a fort. "The Indians that was in the habit of visiting the place all flocked in, for they took alarm also. General Bayley wrote immedi-
ately to General Washington for advise . . . . suggesting to Washington to treet the Indins with all kindness possable which was approved by Washington."

The Elkins family moved back to Peacham in October, 1776. "The friendship showed to the Inds brought numbers of thair cheafs in to talm if it was true what they heard of our kindness. The Indins made [my father's Peacham house] thair home, all of our [Green Mountain Boys] stopped thair, in fact it was a place of randeviews for scouts, Indins and Desarters . . . . The cheaffs from the Cagnawagah tribe [Mohawks, Iroquois] came here also, and every friendship was showed that was posable for us to do. Gill the Cheff of the St. Francis Tribe came to our house [in Peacham, probably in fall of 1776] and stayed nearly a week. He could speak but a few words of English. [Italics mine. J.C.H.] I understood many words of the Indin dialect and between us we could make each other understand so that he appeared quite happy." [Perhaps Joseph-Louis preferred not to speak English? He got along well enough in New England, and had experienced no difficulty in conversing with Mrs. Johnson, the Yankee captive from Charlestown, N. H., to whom he had boasted of pure English blood, and an English heart. In fact, his Indian name (probably a nickname given in jest) was Magwa widom bawit, "English-lover." These conversations occurred before his bereavement in 1759; so before 1759 he was, apparently, fairly conversant with the English tongue.]

NOTES ON MAP ACCOMPANYING JOSEPH-LOUIS’ STORY

I The main sources of this special VHS illustration are the Haldimand papers, and William Hall’s Map of a Part of the Province of Quebec, etc. dated 1791. (Negative No. 1179, courtesy of Canadian Archives at Ottawa.)

Apparently Hall’s map was compiled from fragmentary, often erroneous notes collected by British authorities in the 1770’s and 1780’s. Some of the errors have been emphasized in this work, so as to show why Haldimand, Riedesel, Crofts, Schmid and other British officials were so often disappointed in their search for Hazen’s Road, etc.

II Whoever compiled William Hall’s map (mentioned in I) certainly did not know where General Jacob Bayley’s Newbury headquarters were located. It was Newbury (Coös or Lower Coös, Lower Cohass, etc.), not Waterford or Gilman or Guildhall which marked the southern terminus of the Hazen Road. (Chemin Hazen, Bayley-Hazen, etc.) The name of Newbury did not appear on Hall’s map, although Dartmouth College further south was correctly identified. VHS has inserted the name of Newbury for convenience.
This map, prepared by Dr. Huden, brings together data not available on Vermont maps or in any volumes of Vermont history. It is useful for reference purposes in its relationships to places and place-names mentioned in Dr. Huden's preceding articles in addition to those which are to follow.
III The northern end of the Bayley-Hazen Road was correctly indicated in mountains west and south of Lake Memphremagog (which, by the way, was spelled Mem sa ha be geck!), but Hazen's Notch was not named. The British mis-conception of Hazen's Road is shown by a string of small squares. Note that Riedesel at one time believed the road to extend west as far as Missisquoi Bay, the vicinity of present-day Swanton, Vt.

VHS had indicated the approximate actual course of Hazen's Road, from Newbury to Hazen's Notch, by means of a broad diagonal made up of horizontal lines.

IV The faulty information fed to Haldimand's officers by the Vermont troops [and Joseph-Louis?] is further demonstrated by the other "roads" shown on the William Hall map. Of course, parts of these roads did exist, but they were not the finished military routes Hall portrayed. VHS has indicated two such highways by means of chains of small triangles. One follows Indian trails from the confluence of the Wells, Connecticut, and Amonoosuc Rivers in Eastern Vermont to the mouth of the Winooski just north of Burlington; another was supposed to have gone from "Cohass" to the mouth of the Mississquoi River.

(Another main highway partly finished, but not directly connected with this article went west of the 73d meridian from Manchester northward through Wells, Poultney, and Castleton to Missisquoi Bay.)

V Legend

W-1 The approximate location (Peacham?) of the hunting-grounds where Joseph-Louis and "the good Indians" captured Major Whitcomb.

W-2 Here Major Whitcomb escaped.

3. Present-day Swanton; western end of supposed west stretch of Bayley-Hazen Road. (Abnaki village here until 1783?)

4. Mouth of Winooski River, northwest tip of Burlington city limits. (Mohican village here until 1650?)

5. Where British supposed General Bayley had his headquarters. (Probably a Penacook village here until 1760?)

6. Here is where Joseph-Louis surrendered to Schmid.

7. The Falls.

[The second part of this study will appear in October. The map, also the notes on the map, will be reprinted. Complete footnotes will be added.]