

The book is about the earliest American history that happened in what is now the state of Maine. The Indian people were owners of the land that the French and English Kings wanted. The conflict ended with the massacre of the Norridgewock tribe and their priest, Fr. Sebastien Rale, S.J. on August 23, 1724.

In the Shadow of the Steel Cross:

The Massacre of Father Sebastién Râle, S.J. and the Indian Chiefs by Louise Ketchum Hunt

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The Massacre of Father Sebastien Rale, S.J. and the Indian Chiefs

Louise Ketchum Humt

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Penobscot design and map sketches by Louise Ketchum Hunt. The Penobscot design was created with eight crosses in memory of Father Rale and the seven Chiefs who lost their lives at the Norridgewock Village massacre of August 23, 1724.

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established several, fortified mission villages in Maine, a large area that was fast becoming part of the Massachusetts Colony governed by England.

"How is your brother, Vincent? I understand that he was at the Sandy River Amesokkanti village. Didn't he start the mission for the Pegouaki on the Saco River?" asked Père Râle. "I heard that he's with the natives at Naurakamig and the Rockamekas who live on the Androscoggin River. They want their own church there, too. Is he still building more missions? We see their Chiefs who come over here to trade and visit. They talk about everything. Now they are worried about loss of hunting and fishing where the English live along the ocean. The tribes' livelihood depends on fishing. Chief Wiwurna says they can't go to those places anymore. Many of the warriors are really frustrated and angry."

Pêre Jacques asked, "What are your thoughts on the increased buildup of settlements along the Kennebec River? The French officials in Quebec think that England will go to War against France."

Père Râle replied, "As I said, the Chiefs are holding talks among themselves. They've made raids against the English settlements already."

They returned to the cabin to talk. "Bishop Vallier⁷ remains in France. Pere Dosquet is in Quebec as coadjutor to the Bishop. He wants to know how you are doing. He receives your letters. Can I take back your correspondence to him?" asked Pere Jacques. He wondered if Pere Râle knew what happened in the recent raids on the English settlers. Some were saying that the

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 $^{^{7}}$ 1653-1727

⁸ Père Pièrre-Herman Dosquet was coadjutor to Bishop Vallier and became a Bishop in 1725.

Norridgewock Chiefs were part of the attacks during the King Philip War around Boston where many of the tribal members down there were killed or taken to the West Indies on ships. They both knew about the English law passed against the Jesuits in 1647. They had to be aware of the threat in that law.⁹

Père Jacques asked, "Do you know about the attacks that happened about a year ago at Port Loyal and Wells? Esther Wheelwright¹⁰, a settler's child, was captured. Her parents were killed. My brother, Père Vincent rescued her. She lives in Quebec with the nuns who care for many orphans and sick children."

"Yes, I learn about the raids against the settlers when I'm asked to attend the Council meetings. I understand the anger and feelings of the tribes. Their lands are being taken and given to the settlers. They signed treaties when they can't even read the English words. The people never lived the way of the English. Land ownership means nothing to them because they live in a different way of seeing things. Everyone can live, hunt fish, garden, cut trees and trap for fur pelts anywhere as long as they don't interfere with another tribe." He reminded himself that Père Jacques was not involved with the ways of the natives. He focused on getting things done like building the mission churches. "It's not right how the land was taken from them. That is why I teach them to read English and French. They can write and understand the value of English money, also. I advise the Chiefs to be wise when they go to meetings with the English. They come back to ask me what do I think about what was said

¹⁰ 1696-1780.

⁹ Vincent Lapomarda, *Jesuit Heritage in New England* (The Jesuits of the Holy Cross College, 1977), 9.

in their talks with the Colonial Governor. I have a feeling that the talks are not honest."

Pere Jacques said, "I understand. I see the results of the wars at the mission villages where I'm assigned. They are full of native refugees who have no homes. Two large towns were built by wealthy, Catholic families who sent money from France. One of them is Sillery where there is also a hospital. However, Sillery is nearly abandoned now because so many moved there until there was no land to farm. A new village called Odanak is taking many refugees now." Then, he asked, "Where is your home in France?"

Père Râle¹¹ answered, "I was born and raised in Pontalier near the Swiss Alps. It's the highest town in France. The village has about 3,500 people. There are old castles and an abbey from the eleventh century. We hiked the mountains and skied in the winter. I entered novitiate in Dole, Province of Lyons, in 1670. I made my first vows in 1677 and then I went to Dole to teach in a Jesuit school for two years. After that I went to Nimes and taught Humanities and Rhetoric followed by professor in Humanities until 1684. When I had time, I worked for the poor living in the streets. I finished four years of Theology at Lyons in the Grand College of the Trinity. I was ordained in 1689. By that time missionaries were returning from Quebec encouraging us to go to the New World to bring Christianity to the native people. When I was a boy, I listened to missionaries tell of their work in New France. My parents didn't want me to leave, but I had a great desire to offer my life as a missionary."

¹¹ John Francis Sprague, *Sebastian Rale, A Maine Tragedy of the Eighteenth Century* (Sam Teddy Publishing, 2009), 39.

Chapter 3 Father Sebastién Râle S.J.

In a letter describing the Norridgewock people at his mission, Père Râle wrote, "Picture to yourself a strong man, agile of a swarthy complexion, without beard with black hair and teeth whiter than ivory."

After Mass Père Râle took off his vestments, put them away in the closet and then he placed the holy vessels in a special cupboard. He looked at the crucifix and pleaded for mercy on his precious flock. Père Râle understood the tense situation between the French and the English Crown that governed the Colonial His assignment was the governments. mission post Norridgewock on the border of a potential outbreak of war between the French and the English. Soon he would realize the seriousness of the situation. He intended to stay with the natives even though the threat of the English moving north into the lands of the Norridgewock natives was real. Père Râle's desire for salvation of souls was his motivation in his decision to become a Jesuit missionary. In his journals, he wrote that he said to the natives, "Your salvation is dearer to me than my life."

He checked the bayberry wax candles to see if he needed more of them from Joanne who knew how to make the finest quality candles. He was feeling hungry from his fasting. He returned to his dwelling to eat his usual fare of ground cornmeal, dried berries, and water mixed with the sugary sap.

When he sat at his kitchen table, he thought of the condition of the village when he first arrived. Hunger and sadness greeted him. Norridgewock was considered the largest native village in the area. He guessed that the elders had lived long years of great responsibility in their life of survival in the woods. They were tall and powerfully-built individuals. They had long greying hair and dark brown eyes. The skin was dark coppery color from

living outdoors. Père Râle introduced himself to the elders. As he listened, the elders were pleased that the priest could speak and understand their language. They gave him a good history of their lives in that area along the Kennebec River. How did they survive their many years? What did they do? Did they marry and have children? Who are their children and grandchildren now? His sincere interest was warmly received by the elders.

Each Chief introduced Père Râle to his family. This was the polite way of meeting others. First, you told who you are including where you lived with your family. Then you tell that person the same about yourself. Pauses came between comments to formulate what you could say next. You didn't interrupt each other or hurry conversation. Sometimes a pipe would be lit and smoked in silence. Père Râle had to adapt to these ways if he wanted to be accepted and given approval. Otherwise, he would be mocked and negativity would follow him.

He asked to meet with the Chiefs and elders to find out why they were in such poor physical condition. Bomazeen, one of the well-known Chiefs among the Wabanaki tribes, spoke at length about the condition of all of the Wabanaki. Père Râle came to see that a Chief dedicated his life to the good of his tribe. The people respected their Chief. Some of the tribal council meetings went on for hours. The men shared their stories of severe sickness affecting a whole tribe, bad weather and failing crops as well as the loss of many strong warriors in skirmishes with the English. They spoke of surprise attacks by the English soldiers with their Iroquois and Mohawk scouts.

Père noted in his journals that his first impression of the children was hunger¹⁹. At times the Chief would ask Père to attend a council meeting. They asked for his blessing on their

¹⁹Léger, Catholic Indians, 77.

decisions. They knew that his input was valuable coming from a different background. Pere understood farming in France. He would make it a priority to assist in an increase of their food supplies. First he would reinforce their positive ways and then work on answering the weaknesses.

Over the years, Jesuits would be sent from Quebec to check on his needs. Pere Rale made lists of food and practical items to be brought to him. French ships sailed into Canada bringing much needed goods and supplies for trade. He knew that he would receive provisions from his Superiors in Canada. However, Père Râle saw that the new trade houses on the Kennebec River were a day's journey from the village whereas the trip to Quebec took weeks. The natives would depend on the local trade houses for their goods.

At Council meetings he would offer advice and encourage their decisions on strengthening the village. For example, after the burning of the village, more wood logs were needed from the forest to strengthen the stockade. Four strong gates were built at each side of the stockade for safety in escape should they be attacked. Père Râle had good health in those early days. He was able to get a large tree cutting saw and big axes from a saw mill downriver to make cutting logs easier. He located shovels, also. His knowledge of housebuilding in France gave him direction in seeing that the stockade and cabins would be well made. Soon, he found a source of wood-burning pot-bellied stoves for the cabins. He worked with the Chiefs to send a letter to the Colonial Governor to request help in rebuilding the village since his soldiers did the damage. Very little help was sent to them.

Pere Râle was always the pastor. When he realized that periodic migration to other areas was necessary to avoid hunger, he went with the people. Sometimes they traveled to the ocean and other times they would journey to hunt and fish in the rivers and lakes in the deep woods. He brought with him a portable

chapel and those sacred vessels for daily Mass. As they began their journeys away from the village, Père Râle would pray:

Our Father, thou knowest us and thou knowest that we are in need of provisions. We have been able to give the last work to our fields and we have no other resource, until harvest, but to go to the shore of the sea in search of food----It would be hard for us to give up our Prayer; therefore we hope that thou wilt be disposed to accompany us. ²⁰

At the village, he advised the women to air out their dwellings and shake out the bedding and floor mats to cut down on sickness. Mosquitoes, black flies, and ticks could spread infection. The interest and cooperation of the people was beneficial in their return to good health. An ordered way of prayer, work, and enjoyment was felt by all. A high corn crop yield and less sickness became the norm. Their gardens required daily attention especially during times of drought. He was able to get pea seeds from English settlers hoping to introduce more interest in their garden. As time passed, the trade houses had dried corn for sale in bushels. This availability of corn cut down on the need to grow their own fields of corn. However, some of the people continued to grow their own crops. At first, all seemed to be going well.

Père Râle arrived in Quebec during October, 1689. Bishop De Laval assigned him to live with the Algonquin tribes in Illinois. After two years he went to the Catholic Jesuit Mission villages at Sillery and Becancour. During these four years he used his gift of speaking languages to understand and speak the Wabanaki language. He studied the Wabanaki and Algonquin

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²⁰ Ibid 78

languages and the differences that are called dialects. He began to write his dictionary of the language with translations in English and French.

His religious training of many years in the French Jesuit seminary made Père Râle an excellent teacher. He worked hard to teach the foundations of Christianity to the natives. At first he found difficulty in getting the natives to change their ways. Sometimes he thought that they were lazy and not interested in what he had to say but gradually many of them began to change. He wrote in his journals that forgiveness was the most difficult virtue for the people to understand. If wrongs were done to them, they would not forgive their enemies. The natives had long memories of what their enemies did even generations ago.

During his first years with the Norridgewock people, he found that they had a desire for the sacraments. Now he was teaching the second generation of children. The good example of their parents made education of their children easier. Sometimes, he longed for conversation with his fellow Jesuits so that they might be able to share their similar experiences.

Another Jesuit brought a cartload of goods from the mission at Sillery. Père Râle enjoyed those times when he could talk with one from his country. This time Père Guerin came from Quebec with a French man who drove a small horse-drawn cart filled with furnishings for the school. Père Guerin was happy to greet his friend from France. "Comment allez-vous?"—"How are you?" he asked.

Père Râle gave a big hug to Père Guerin. "How long did you take to get here?" He called for some men to help unload the wagon. He asked them if their wives would bring some food for the visitors. After a rest Père Râle took Père Guerin for a walk by the river. "How is your family back in France?" he asked.

Père Guerin assured him that they were very well. Then he mentioned that more priests and brothers were coming from

France to Quebec. "We see advancement of the English soldiers from New York towards Quebec. The Iroquois and Mohawk are working with them. They could be coming this way to Quebec, also"

They discussed the latest happenings at the Jesuit Provincial House in Quebec. He asked, "Do we have an increase in missions? Where are they now? Was there news from their families back home in France?" Père Guerin handed him letters. Père Râle was pleased to see a letter from his brother Pierre. He had a list of needed church supplies for Père Guerin to take back with him to Quebec. He commented, "The school was rebuilt after the raid. I was worried about replacing the items that we need for the classroom."

In his letters and journals he admitted that these concerns were central in his mind. Père Râle knew that the Bishop was concerned about his safety at the Norridgewock Village, also. After the last raid by the English in 1722, the Bishop wanted him to return to Quebec for a different assignment. A number of families were moving away from Norridgewock because of the advancement of English soldiers and he encouraged Father Râle to move also. However, Père Râle couldn't leave his people who wanted to stay at Norridgewock.

1. The Warriors

Pere Râle began to recall the details of an unpleasant incident that occurred not long after he arrived at Norridgewock. That incident set in his mind the potential danger of living at Norridgewock. About twenty-five English soldiers were sent from one of the new forts below Cushnoc. They were exploring the land for stands of timber which they recorded on their maps.

At the same time five Norridgewock warriors were travelling through an area of woods as they often did to hunt and fish or to meet up with others to talk. The warriors were armed with knives and hatchets that hung off their belts as was the custom. They didn't talk when they walked. It was important to listen to the sounds of the forests for anything that would set them on alert for human enemies or dangerous animals. Neither did they want enemies or animals to hear them and know they were there. Etienne put up his hand which meant there was danger. They dropped to the ground not breathing until they all heard the pounding of feet on the ground coming closer. Etienne motioned for the warriors to divide when they saw the soldiers coming up the path towards them. There were twenty-five soldiers carrying muskets on their shoulders and pistols in their belts. Etienne put up one hand with fingers spread out to motion for each warrior to take five soldiers when the attack came, as they knew would happen.

It was too late as the soldiers saw them. Before the soldiers could ready their firearms to shoot, they had to defend themselves with bayonets and pistols. The five Norridgewock warriors screamed their familiar war cry, "We are dead. But we will not go dearly!" With a knife in one hand and a hatchet in the other, the warriors killed, slashed, and maimed the soldiers until only a few were able to escape. The warriors went to the nearest stream to clean up their wounds and rest. They talked about their

success in not getting killed in the fight. They knew that more soldiers and settlers were coming closer to live not far from them. Travelling alone was now even more dangerous. Over the years, several of their tribe had actually disappeared.

The warriors were still shaken when they got back to the village. Only one of them had a serious wound that was cleaned and dressed. Pere Râle listened to their story and soothed them with words that were meant to ease their minds on how it was to kill another even though it was in defense of their own lives. These young warriors were the second generation of those fighting for their lives against the English soldiers and the local militias. The formation of forts and settlements along the river and ocean front towns doubled. Sometimes the Chiefs and warriors saw Mohawks scouting for the redcoat English soldiers as they marched further inland. Pere Râle sensed that this young generation would have great difficulties in their lives.

2. Sak

Listening to the crackling logs in the stove, Père Râle fell asleep in his chair. Suddenly, he awoke with someone pulling him up and shouting, "Get up! Get up!" It was Sak.

"What's happening?"

As Sak pulled the priest towards the door, he said, "Midgee is warning everyone to get out and hide in the woods. He saw soldiers coming here. If we move fast enough, we can hide."

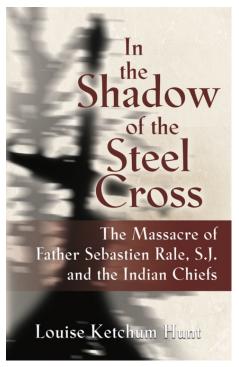
Père Râle limped along as fast as he could with the help of Sak. He asked, "Is everyone getting out?"

Sak replied, "Yes, Agnes and Anna are helping grandmother and the little ones. They know to be very quiet."

Soon they heard gunshots and soldiers shouting to scare the people. He feared for their safety as he prayed for protection. They followed a path in the snow to the edge of the clearing and

into the woods. The pine trees were thick next to the clearing. He moved further into the woods near a big tree. The bed of pine needles under the trees concealed his tracks. He still had his blanket which he put over his head. He stood very still as he heard footsteps crunching the snow. Footsteps came closer. He knew that he would be shot if they saw him. Then, the steps moved away in another direction. Thank God!

When he felt safe enough to move from the tree that hid him, he smelled smoke coming from the stockade that was on fire. He waited until Midgee scouted around to see if the soldiers were gone and it was safe. Dark skies crept over that winter village. They came out of hiding to see the church and school burning. They put water on the stockade that was burned just in a few places. Smoke was everywhere. They were scared, but not injured as they stayed close together gathering food and blankets to spend the night in cabins with each other. Like the attack of 1702, the damaged school, church, and village were rebuilt. The fatal attack would not happen for two more years.



The book is about the earliest American history that happened in what is now the state of Maine. The Indian people were owners of the land that the French and English Kings wanted. The conflict ended with the massacre of the Norridgewock tribe and their priest, Fr. Sebastien Rale, S.J. on August 23, 1724.

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