

JOSEPH RENVILLE OF LAC QUI PARLE

In 1835 a band of missionaries left Fort Snelling and plunged into the wilderness that stretched unbroken, save for scattered trading posts, from the Mississippi River to the Columbia. Their objective was "Fort Renville" at Lac qui Parle, where they had been invited to establish a station by Joseph Renville, the resident fur-trader.

When the missionaries arrived at the fort bearing the name of its picturesque master, they found him "living in barbaric splendor quite like an African king." His stronghold was a stockade, within which stood a hewed log house; and in a room of this building Renville, seated on a chair with his feet crossed under him, received the missionary delegation. Sprawling on a bench that ran around almost the entire room were Indian braves of Lac qui Parle who composed his bodyguard. To these retainers Renville explained the purpose that lay back of the coming of the visitors; and the redmen readily gave their consent to the establishment of a mission among them. Indeed, the mere fact that the trader, who ruled over them as with a hand of iron, desired this consent was doubtless decisive in bringing it about.¹ Clearly Renville possessed more than the splendor of an African chief. He was a man of power and of personality, whose character and achievements deserve historical study.

This frontier figure was "somewhat past his prime" in the middle thirties, though he was "still a man of great energy." He seems to have been born about 1779, probably at Kaposia,

¹ Stephen R. Riggs, *Mary and I. Forty Years with the Sioux*, 63 (Boston, 1887); Mrs. Mary Huggins Kerlinger, "Reminiscences," 67, 76, 77. The Minnesota Historical Society has a photostatic copy of the Kerlinger manuscript, the original of which is in the possession of Miss Callie M. Kerlinger of Oakland, California.

since his mother was a Sioux of that band.² His color was that of a native Indian, according to Lawrence Taliaferro, the federal agent at St. Peter's, who adds that Renville's manners and intelligence set him apart from the redmen. There is evidence that Renville, when among the Indians, represented himself as of unmixed Indian blood, but that he told the whites he was a half-breed.³ His name was of course French; and it is possible that his father was a canoeman named Joseph Renville, who accompanied a Canadian brigade westward to Mackinac and Green Bay as early as 1775. The name itself probably is a variation of De Rainville, a well-known patronymic of early Canadian history. One historian believes that Renville as a boy was taken to eastern Canada by his father and there given instruction in the Catholic religion.⁴ He seems indeed to have had early instruction in that faith, but later he became a ready convert to Protestantism. He was thoroughly at home in spoken French, though he never learned to read the language easily. This difficulty about reading, coupled with certain other circumstances, has caused some people to question the claim that the trader actually received early Catholic training in Canada. Dr. Thomas S. Williamson, one of the Lac qui Parle missionaries, in fact asserts that Renville learned his French, not in Canada under the tutelage of a priest, but in the West while associated with the family of Colonel Robert Dickson, the noted fur-trader; and that Renville, save for a brief period when he joined

² Edward D. Neill, "A Sketch of Joseph Renville," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:198; Samuel W. Pond, *Two Volunteer Missionaries among the Dakotas*, 91 (Boston, 1893).

³ Taliaferro Journals, October 19, 1835, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. Stephen R. Riggs thought that Renville was three-fourths Sioux. See his *Mary and I*, 53.

⁴ "Abstracts of Indian Trade Licenses in Canadian Archives, Ottawa, 1768-1776," made under the direction of Wayne E. Stevens in 1925, no. 58, 1775; Neill, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:198.

Dickson against the Americans in the War of 1812, spent his entire life with the Sioux.⁵

That Renville was thoroughly acquainted with the habits and customs of the Sioux is beyond question. He married a Sioux woman, though it should be noted that the marriage, which occurred at Prairie du Chien, was performed by a Catholic priest. He became a kind of chief among the Sioux.⁶ Probably, however, the paternal influence accounts for his interest in fur-trading. Notwithstanding Dr. Williamson's assertion, Renville was associated with white men long before the War of 1812. In 1797 — when he was about eighteen years old — he wintered with Dickson and Jacques Porlier on the Mississippi near the site of Sauk Rapids. Later he entered into partnership with these men and other Canadian traders. Trade west of the Mississippi became increasingly difficult for them under the rule of the United States. Two years after the purchase of Louisiana a proclamation was issued forbidding subjects of a foreign power to trade with the Indians in that region. Although it was not enforced on the upper Mississippi an effort was made to exclude British traders by charging them high rates of duty. This policy of exclusion naturally made traders under the British régime rebel against the United States; it was one of the causes that led Renville to join forces with the British when the War of 1812 broke out. He was also concerned about the welfare of his children and the relatives of his Sioux wife. These Indians had a strong partiality

⁵ Samuel W. Pond, "The Dakotas or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12: 333; Thomas S. Williamson to David Greene, June 12, 1834, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives, Boston. The Minnesota Historical Society has typewritten copies of the material of Minnesota interest in these archives.

⁶ Adrien G. Morice, *Dictionnaire Historique des Canadiens et des Metis Français de l'Ouest*, 244 (Quebec, 1908); Joseph Tasse, *Les Canadiens de l'Ouest*, 1: 295 (Montreal, 1878).

for the British, who had given them more liberal presents than had the Americans.⁷

The British commanded Dickson to arm the tribes of the Northwest against the Americans, and he gave Renville the rank of captain.⁸ As leader of the Wabasha, Kaposia, and other bands of the Sioux, Renville restrained these Indians from engaging in horrible depredations such as were committed by the Chippewa, Pottawatomi, Miami, and other tribes. In 1813, during the siege of Fort Meigs on the Maumee River, Renville was summoned to the camping grounds of the Winnebago. He found that these Indians had roasted the body of an American captive and were dividing it among the various tribes. Renville was indignant at this inhumanity, and when Colonel Dickson was informed of the outrage its instigator was turned out of camp.

Renville also served as interpreter in the war, an important position, since in this capacity he carried official orders to the various bands of Indians and instructed them in the part they were to play in the siege of Prairie du Chien. The officer in command of this fort reported after its capture that Renville and another interpreter "absolutely prevented their Indians committing any outrages in a plundering way."⁹ After the declaration of peace every precaution was taken to prevent Indian hostility to the terms of the treaty. Guns were ready

⁷ Louis A. Tohill, *Robert Dickson, British Fur Trader on the Upper Mississippi*, 16, 27-32 (Ann Arbor, 1926).

⁸ William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Sources of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnipeek, Lake of the Woods, etc., Performed in the Year 1823*, 325 (Philadelphia, 1824). Renville had been appointed lieutenant by the British commandant on the Mississippi "in consequence of the Uniform zeal & activity shown by Interpreter Renville of the Indian Department in the various services in which he has been applied." Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., "The Bulger Papers," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 13: 33 (1895).

⁹ Keating, *Narrative*, 412, 413; Douglas Brymner, "Capture of Fort M'Kay, Prairie du Chien, in 1814," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 11: 266 (1888).

to be fired at the Indians outside the meeting house at Prairie du Chien, in case they should try to disturb the assembly. At a solemn council each paragraph of the treaty was interpreted to the various tribes. Renville presented the pipe of peace to the chiefs, who by smoking it in silence pledged themselves on behalf of their tribes to conform to the conditions of peace.¹⁰

After the war Renville resided in Canada and received the pay of a retired British captain. Later he traded for the Hudson's Bay Company at the head of the Red River. He remained with this company until 1822, when he became "dissatisfied with their employ." Evidently, he left under conditions not wholly creditable to himself, for many years later the Hudson's Bay Company reminded him that it had lost money through his operations at Pembina. Renville's desertion of the company should not be charged against him, according to one writer, since there were grounds for complaint on both sides.¹¹

Renville's post near the source of the Red River was located on United States soil. In order to retain it and secure a trader's license he was compelled to become an American citizen, and in taking this step he relinquished his pension as a British officer. Because he wanted to be independent, he organized the Columbia Fur Company. This firm consisted of only a few individuals who were licensed by the Indian

¹⁰ Alfred E. Bulger, "Last Days of the British at Prairie du Chien," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 13: 162.

¹¹ Keating, *Narrative*, 325, 326. Some writers say that Renville was thrown out of work by the amalgamation of the Northwest and the Hudson's Bay companies in 1821. See Hiram M. Chittenden, *History of the American Fur Trade in the Far West*, 1: 323 (New York, 1902). Mr. Rollo Keithahn has adopted this interpretation in his study of "The American Fur Company in the Upper Mississippi Valley," 10, a master's thesis prepared at the University of Minnesota in 1929. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy. For comments on Renville's account with the Hudson's Bay Company, see Alexander Christie, chief factor of the company, to Renville, June 13, 1834, Sibley Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

agent at St. Peter's to trade with the Indians south of the international boundary. The company traded over a tract of country extending as far west as the Missouri River. The firm, which was legally known as Tilton and Company, did not have a very large capital; yet its rivalry considerably disturbed the American Fur Company, which was endeavoring to monopolize the trade of the Northwest. The president of the American Fur Company reported that the Columbia Fur Company did his business "an annual injury of ten thousand dollars at least."¹² In order to do away with this competition, the American Fur Company in 1827 bought out its rivals and then, through its agent, Joseph Rolette, advanced credit to Renville. In 1828 the latter erected a dwelling house at Lac qui Parle, where he had been trading for two years.¹³

In the fall of 1834 Henry H. Sibley took charge of the department of the American Fur Company in the upper Mississippi Valley known as the Sioux Outfit, and the next spring he and Rolette entered into agreements with Renville with reference to the fur trade at Lake Traverse and at Lac qui Parle. It was agreed that Renville was to manage the post at Lake Traverse and that he would receive half the profits or bear half the loss. The company would advance the necessary supplies and goods and retain the ownership of all the property involved in the business at Lake Traverse; it was also agreed that the company was to engage all the clerks and men needed at the post. Sibley and Rolette reserved the right to discontinue the arrangement at the end of a year.

The agreement relating to the trade at Lac qui Parle was for a period of five years from July 1, 1835. By its terms Renville was obliged to obtain from Sibley all articles needed for the trade at the post and also for the use of himself and

¹² Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, 323-325.

¹³ Keithahn, "American Fur Company," 16; Stephen R. Riggs to S. L. Babcock, November 19, 1850, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

of his family. He promised to trade only with the Indians who lived within the Lac qui Parle district and not to encroach upon the trade of any other outfits that had been organized by the company.¹⁴

The business of the Lake Traverse post soon involved Renville in a series of quarrels with Joseph R. Brown, a prominent Minnesota pioneer. Brown appeared at Lake Traverse under instructions not to interfere with the trade as managed by Renville, though at the same time he was to use his efforts to prevent any losses in that trade. Renville considered Brown's authority limited to that of a bookkeeper, but Brown himself acted upon the assumption that he had wide powers. Against the wishes of Renville he proceeded to employ an interpreter and to act upon other matters.¹⁵ Among other things, he collected furs from Indians who were in debt to Renville, asserting that Renville himself did not take the trouble to call in the furs that were due him. The bickerings with Brown did not lead to a sharp break, however, and in 1838, when the post at Lake Traverse was about to be abandoned by the American Fur Company, Renville coöperated cordially with Brown in quieting the Indians, who were restless and dissatisfied.¹⁶

The late thirties were years in which there was sharp competition for the Indian trade. Prices were low and the muskrats appeared to be less numerous than they had been in previous years. Renville estimated that in 1837 he lost between three and four thousand dollars. That the company enjoined upon him a policy of strict economy is evident from a

¹⁴ The agreements are filed under date of June 6, 1835, Sibley Papers.

¹⁵ Agreement between Henry H. Sibley and Joseph R. Brown, June 17, 1835; Brown to Sibley, September 28, 1835; Renville to Sibley, October 4, 1835, January 8, May 6, 1836, Sibley Papers. Complaints of Brown's conduct were made to the Indian agent. See Taliaferro Journals, June 17, 1836.

¹⁶ Brown to Sibley, November 30, 1836, Sibley Papers; Williamson to Greene, May 10, 1838, American Board Archives.

letter in which Renville wrote to Sibley, "I will obey the orders of the company. I am determined not to give one inch of blankets this year. I expect to have trouble, but God be blessed."¹⁷

Notwithstanding the fact that the Indian hunts were successful in some seasons and that the American Fur Company gave Renville an extension of eight thousand dollars in 1838 on account of lost credits, in 1843 he owed the company forty-two hundred dollars. His indebtedness seems to have increased as the years went by and the company continued to supply him with goods, its generosity perhaps based upon the advantage that it gained through retaining in its behalf Renville's influence among the Indians.¹⁸

In addition to his activities as a fur-trader Renville gave valuable service to explorers as a guide and interpreter. Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, who engaged him in 1805 on an expedition to the headwaters of the Mississippi, praised him for his knowledge of the Indian country and recommended him as interpreter for the United States government in the Minnesota region. The explorer described him as "a man respected by the Indians, and I believe an honest one." Renville acted as interpreter for Major Stephen H. Long, who led an exploring party up the Minnesota River in 1823. According to William H. Keating, the chronicler of this expedition, Renville contributed valuable information concerning the Indians and was agreeable to every person in the party. Since he had visited many of the Sioux villages, he was able to help Long compile an estimate of the number of Sioux Indians on the upper Mississippi and its tributaries. Giacomo C. Beltrami, the Italian explorer, who traveled with Long's expedition as far as Pembina, was pleased with Renville's demonstration of

¹⁷ Williamson to Greene, May 10, 1838, American Board Archives; Renville to Sibley, October 24, 1838, Sibley Papers.

¹⁸ Renville to William H. Forbes, December 30, 1841, Sibley Papers; Riggs to Greene, February 14, 1844, Williamson to Greene, October 15, 1844, American Board Archives; Keithahn, "American Fur Company," 89.

skill in shooting buffaloes and regarded him as an expert hunter.¹⁹

While living at Lac qui Parle, Renville built up a reputation for hospitality. Taliaferro wrote in his diary: "Many of our citizens and officers have partaken of his hospitality and have spoken generally in terms of high commendation of his attentions & politeness." Among the more renowned persons who praised Renville's "liberal and untiring hospitality" was the explorer Joseph N. Nicollet. He met Renville and his band while the latter were on their way to Fort Snelling and they invited the explorer to visit Lac qui Parle after their return to that village. Later when Nicollet accepted this invitation he sent a message to the village announcing his arrival in order to allay any fears the Indians might have as to his intentions. This enabled Renville to send a group of mounted warriors to meet the explorer. On a hill two miles from Lac qui Parle, they awaited his arrival. Upon his approach they descended at a gallop, stopped some distance from him, dismounted, and marched forward in files, singing their war songs. After meeting Nicollet they entertained him with dances and gave him a royal welcome. The explorer spent a night and a day near the village. During that time Renville gave him such luxuries as soap and sugar, and he later asked Sibley for fresh supplies. Nicollet was grateful for the kindnesses he received and wrote to Sibley: "I beg to thank Mr. Rainville for the assistance he has given me through his son." Joseph Renville, Jr., who acted as Nicollet's guide, offered the explorer the use of his father's cart, which, Nicollet felt, the Renvilles themselves needed at the time.²⁰

¹⁹ Zebulon M. Pike, *Expeditions to Headwaters of the Mississippi River*, 1: 242 (Coues edition—New York, 1895); Keating, *Narrative*, 326; Giacomo C. Beltrami, *Pilgrimage in Europe and America Leading to Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody River*, 2: 333 (London, 1828); Williamson to Greene, June 12, 1834, American Board Archives.

²⁰ Taliaferro Journals, October 19, 1835; Joseph N. Nicollet, *Report Intended to Illustrate a Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper*

Renville gave shelter to travelers and wayfarers and assisted visitors to Lac qui Parle in many ways. Martin McLeod, a trader, enjoyed Renville's hospitality for several days while on a long and wearisome trip from the Red River settlements to Fort Snelling in April, 1837. A party that was sent to Kentucky by the Hudson's Bay Company to obtain sheep for the Red River settlements stopped at Lac qui Parle in 1832 during its return journey. When it left this place, Renville followed to make arrangements for safe passage through the Indian country.²¹

One visitor to Lac qui Parle found fault with Renville — George W. Featherstonhaugh, the irritable English traveler. He gave the following account of his reception: "Renville, the half-breed, who acted as agent for the Fur Company, supposing we were come on a rival trading expedition, shewed his unfriendly disposition by not coming down to the landing place to meet us. . . . On reaching the fort, Renville advanced and saluted me, but not cordially." Featherstonhaugh claimed that Renville tried to take advantage of him in selling horses and he asserted that the trader checked the influence of the missionaries over the Indians as much as possible. Williamson was at a loss to understand Featherstonhaugh's denunciation of Renville, who "endeavoured to entertain him as well as was in his power."²²

Far from checking the influence of the missionaries over the Indians, Renville worked toward the same ends as the mis-

Mississippi River, 12 (26 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Documents*, no. 237 — serial 380); Nicollet to Sibley, June 15, 1838; Renville to Sibley, August 3, 1838, Sibley Papers; Nicollet Diary, July 11, 12, 1838. The Minnesota Historical Society has a photostatic copy of the original diary in the Library of Congress.

²¹ Grace Lee Nute, ed., "Diary of Martin McLeod," *ante*, 4:416; Robert Campbell, "Driving Sheep from Kentucky to the Hudson's Bay Country," in *Annals of Iowa*, 15:243-253 (April, 1926).

²² George W. Featherstonhaugh, *A Canoe Voyage up the Minnaw Sotor*, 1:340, 343 (London, 1847); Williamson to Greene, October 15, 1835, American Board Archives.

sionaries. He tried to keep peace and organized among his followers a form of civil government. Since the village of Lac qui Parle was far removed from a military post and contiguous to the land of the Chippewa, he was obliged to retain a group of braves for protection. These Indians guarded his property and made it possible for the missionaries to carry on farming and cattle raising.²³

As far as he was able Renville restrained the Indians from committing depredations. When the trader was away from Lac qui Parle in August, 1840, the Indians planned to drive the missionaries away and kill their cattle, but when he returned, all was quiet. Later in the year, however, the Indians killed some of Renville's cattle. He may have aroused their enmity because he sought to destroy their superstitions. Another possible cause of their hostility was the diminished price of peltries.²⁴ The population of Lac qui Parle must have been difficult to control, for it was composed of people of Yankee, French, Scotch, Irish, half-breed, and Sioux origin. A visitor described this heterogeneous group as a "higgledy-piggledy assembly" which reminded him of the dish called hodge-podge.²⁵

Besides trying to maintain law and order, Renville endeavored to introduce the arts of civilized men among his people and he himself set an example. He met with opposition, however, for "the traders were displeased to have the Indians adopt civilized habits."²⁶ Renville established for himself a stationary abode by building a store and a dwelling house; and he owned seventy milch cows and as many sheep. He was glad to have the missionaries give instruction to his sons in

²³ Taliaferro Journal, October 19, 1835; Williamson to Greene, August 5, 1835, American Board Archives.

²⁴ Renville to Sibley, August 24, 1840, Sibley Papers; Williamson to Greene, May 28, 1840, American Board Archives.

²⁵ Extracts from Peter Garrioch's Journal, made by G. H. Gunn of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, from the original in his possession. The Minnesota Historical Society has a typewritten copy of these extracts.

²⁶ Kerlinger, "Reminiscences," 112.

farming and to his daughters in spinning and weaving. The daughters lacked interest in this work, however, because they believed that their relatives, who were traders, would provide them with better clothing than they themselves could make.²⁷ Renville wanted his children to learn English. Williamson undertook to teach them and used novel methods of instruction. When he began to teach English words, he would smooth the ashes on the hearth and draw the letters by means of a pointer. Thereupon the Indians would imitate him.²⁸ By October, 1836, some of the more advanced scholars of the mission school, including Renville's children, sometimes read portions of the Bible in English at the Sabbath meetings. One of Renville's sons and three of his daughters who had studied English were given the task of copying an English-Sioux vocabulary compiled by Mrs. Riggs. After Renville's daughters had been trained sufficiently, they assisted in teaching the Indians. The group taught by one of the daughters had the largest attendance of any class in the village. When the missionaries were unable to conduct the school at their station, this daughter taught at her father's house. As compensation for their services two of Renville's daughters received two dollars a scholar per quarter from the missionaries, the amount being paid in goods. In 1844 Williamson requested his mission board to make some further allowance to the Misses Renville, "especially as owing to reverses in the trade, their father with all his family is now reduced to straitened circumstances." On the whole the missionaries looked upon Renville as a "staunch and influential friend" of education among the natives.²⁹

²⁷ Williamson to Greene, May 16, 1836, American Board Archives.

²⁸ Extract made by Dorothy H. Huggins from Frances Huggins Pettijohn, "A Family History," 2. The Minnesota Historical Society has a typewritten copy of the extract from the original document in the possession of Miss Callie M. Kerlinger.

²⁹ Williamson to Greene, October 1, 1836, April 3, 1844; Riggs to Greene, February 24, 1841; "Ninth Annual Report of Lac qui Parle

Renville was as much concerned about the spiritual welfare of the Indians as he was about their education. "Mr. Renville was active in persuading those under his influence to attend religious meetings," writes Riggs. A year after the mission was established, Renville undertook the responsibility for opening and closing each Sabbath meeting with a prayer in French or in Dakota. A chance visitor to Lac qui Parle has left an interesting picture of him in this capacity:

The morning service was concluded with prayer offered in the Sioux language, by Ran Vielle, the present master of Fort Ran Vielle. Nothing could be more interesting than to see the savage of the wilderness assemble with the sons and daughters of the Lord in the places appointed for prayer; to hear the wild and rude sons of the forest sing the praises of their Maker and Saviour, in their own uncultivated and barbarous language.³⁰

These meetings were well attended until Renville came to the conclusion that the missionaries were injuring his trade. Then he and his family absented themselves from the devotional meetings and by their example led others to stay away. Riggs thereupon explained that the missionaries had interfered with the trade only to the extent of purchasing a few deer skins from the Indians for moccasins. Renville and his family resumed their attendance at the meetings and Williamson discouraged the Indians in their desire to have another trader who would oppose Renville. That the trader needed to be approached diplomatically, however, is evident. He took offense, for example, when the missionaries declined to receive some of his children at the church communion. The reason offered by the missionaries was that the spiritual knowledge and religious attitude of the children were not satisfactory.³¹

Missions School for the year ending June 30th A.D. 1844," American Board Archives; Riggs, *Mary and I*, 60.

³⁰ Riggs, *Mary and I*, 73; extracts from Garrioch Journal, 1.

³¹ Williamson to Greene, May 10, 1837, American Board Archives; Renville to Sibley, April 1, 1839, Riggs to Sibley, May 23, 1839; Williamson to Sibley, August 16, 1839, Sibley Papers. Another possible explanation

Before the missionaries went to Lac qui Parle, Renville had taught his children to read the Bible. According to Riggs, the volume that was used bore John Calvin's signature on the fly leaf. If this was a family Bible, one is tempted to suspect that Renville may have been descended from French Huguenots. His wife attributed her conversion to instruction that she had received from her husband. The missionaries attested that he had more religious knowledge than could have been expected of one who had never heard a Gospel sermon and understood the French of the Bible and prayer books with difficulty.³²

In order that the Indians might be given religious instruction, it was deemed necessary to translate the Bible and some prayer books. The missionaries spent two years, with Renville's aid, in translating the Book of Genesis, the Acts of the Apostles, the Book of Revelation, all of Paul's Epistles, and a third of the Psalms. The following procedure was adopted by the missionaries in the work of translation: a verse was read in French, Renville repeated it in Dakota, and the missionaries wrote it down as he spoke. After each verse was finished it was read aloud to Renville and corrected if necessary. Sometimes the missionaries did not manage to write down all the words of Renville's translation. In such cases the trader repeated. It must have flattered him to know that he could do this for the missionaries. It was said that he showed by the twinkle in his eyes a consciousness of superiority. But the missionaries did not object. The process, Riggs said, "was of incalculable advantage to us in helping us to decide upon many terms proper to be used, as well as in learning the language."³³

of Renville's absence from the meetings was that he expected a Catholic priest, whom Nicollet had promised to send. Riggs to Greene, March 26, 1839, American Board Archives.

³² Williamson to Greene, May 4, 1836, American Board Archives; Stephen R. Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kon, or The Gospel among the Dakotas*, 165 (Boston, 1869).

³³ Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 2: 204 (Mankato, 1908); Alexander Huggins to an unknown person, January 18, 1838, in

The work of translation demanded a great deal of labor and patience. One of the greatest difficulties was that the Sioux language lacked words that convey certain of the concepts of the Christian religion. It is very likely that at times Renville misapprehended Williamson's meaning or that the missionary failed to write as Renville spoke. Translations by the missionaries might have been more literal, but their lack of an idiomatic knowledge of the language would have made a Sioux version by them inferior to that offered by Renville. Although his translation was not literal, he succeeded in conveying the sense of the original. He communicated with his own people in language that was considered "truly elegant."⁸⁴ By July, 1841, the missionaries were finishing the translation of the Gospel of John, which they looked upon as better than any in the preparation of which Renville had aided them earlier.

In letter after letter Williamson expressed his indebtedness to Renville for his aid. Not only did he help in the work of translation, but he also donated a hundred dollars for publishing the results of this work. This gift must have meant a considerable sacrifice, for he never had much money. In 1841 Riggs asked the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, under which he worked, for a hundred and fifty or two hundred dollars to pay Renville for his services during the past year. Riggs suggested that Renville should not be allowed to feel independent of the missionaries, for he might then withhold his assistance. As a result of this suggestion the American Board paid Renville two hundred dollars for past services, but it was not in a position to promise him

the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society; Stephen R. Riggs and Thomas S. Williamson, *Sketches of the Dakota Missions*, 42 (n. p. 1873). The Minnesota Historical Society has a typewritten copy of the latter item made in 1909 from an original in the possession of Mrs. Moses N. Adams of St. Paul.

⁸⁴ Riggs to Samuel W. Pond, January 2, 1841; Williamson to Pond, February 10, 1849, Pond Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

an annual grant. After his death in March, 1846, the American Board honored Renville by publishing an obituary in its organ, the *Missionary Herald*.⁸⁵

In commenting on Renville's service as an interpreter, one writer states: "Reinville had that energy and independence which enabled him to decide for himself and act upon his decisions." This characteristic was invaluable in his activities as a leader of the Indians in battle and as a fur-trader. His position, Indian blood, and influence frequently enabled him to obtain concessions from men, and he was not accustomed to contradiction. Though it was said that his "talents, decisive measures & Success have made him enemies among both white & Red men," the missionaries bore him no malice.⁸⁶ He shared their interest in educating and civilizing the Indians. Whatever they accomplished along these lines was due in considerable part to the aid of the untutored but inherently virile and intelligent Renville.

GERTRUDE W. ACKERMANN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

⁸⁵ Williamson to Greene, November 8, 1838; Riggs to Greene, July 17, 1841; Greene to Williamson, July 17, 1846, American Board Archives.

⁸⁶ Williamson to Greene, June 12, 1834, American Board Archives; Taliaferro Journal, May 16, 1836; Pike, *Expeditions*, 40 n.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).