Black Robe Peacemaker

Pierre De Smet

Portraits in Faith and Freedom

J.G.E. Hopkins

Black Robe Peacemaker

Pierre De Smet

by J. G. E. Hopkins

Illustrated by W. N. Wilson

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press

Print book originally published by
P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1958
188 pages in original print book edition

Cover design by Melissa Sobotta
Mapwork by Margaret Rasmussen

Revised edition

ISBN 978-1-932350-65-4

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield Street South
Bathgate, ND 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com

Portraits in Faith and Freedom

SET 5: MISSIONARIES ON THE FRONTIER

Joseph the Huron
Simon Bruté and the Western Adventure
Frontier Priest and Congressman: Fr. Gabriel Richard, S.S.
Black Robe Peacemaker: Pierre De Smet

Statement on Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Bethlehem Books is bringing back this series of biographies originally made available in the 1950's and 60's by publishers who wished to introduce young people to a wide range of arresting and faithful Catholic lives. Slightly edited now for the modern reader, these biographies present key people and events from the past that help us reflect anew on the meaning of freedom. They depict how powerfully men and women of faith have formed and influenced the world in which they live.

Web Resources

To access printable maps, a timeline, and other information, visit http://bethlehembooks.com/black-robe-peacemaker-pierre-de-smet-862

About Usage of Outdated Terms

In republishing the books that form our *Portraits in Faith and Freedom* series, the editors considered whether it would be worthwhile to update the authors' usage of words like "Indian" and "Negro." The more current preference among many is "Native American" and "African American." The editors found, however, that changing the original terms often did not work well for the context of those times. The attitudes of respect and honesty that inspired these works—written in the 1950s and early 1960s—clearly conveyed the authors' positive meaning. In most cases, therefore, we have let the words stand.

Bethlehem Press

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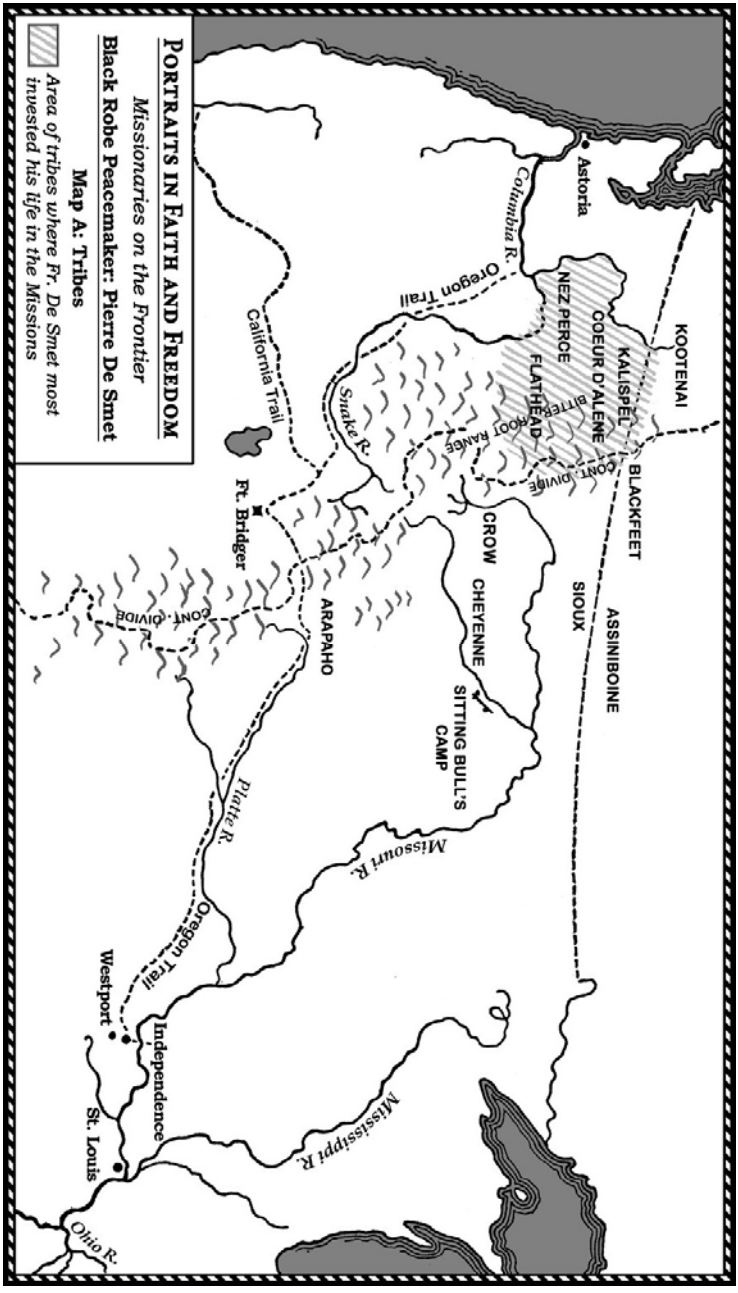
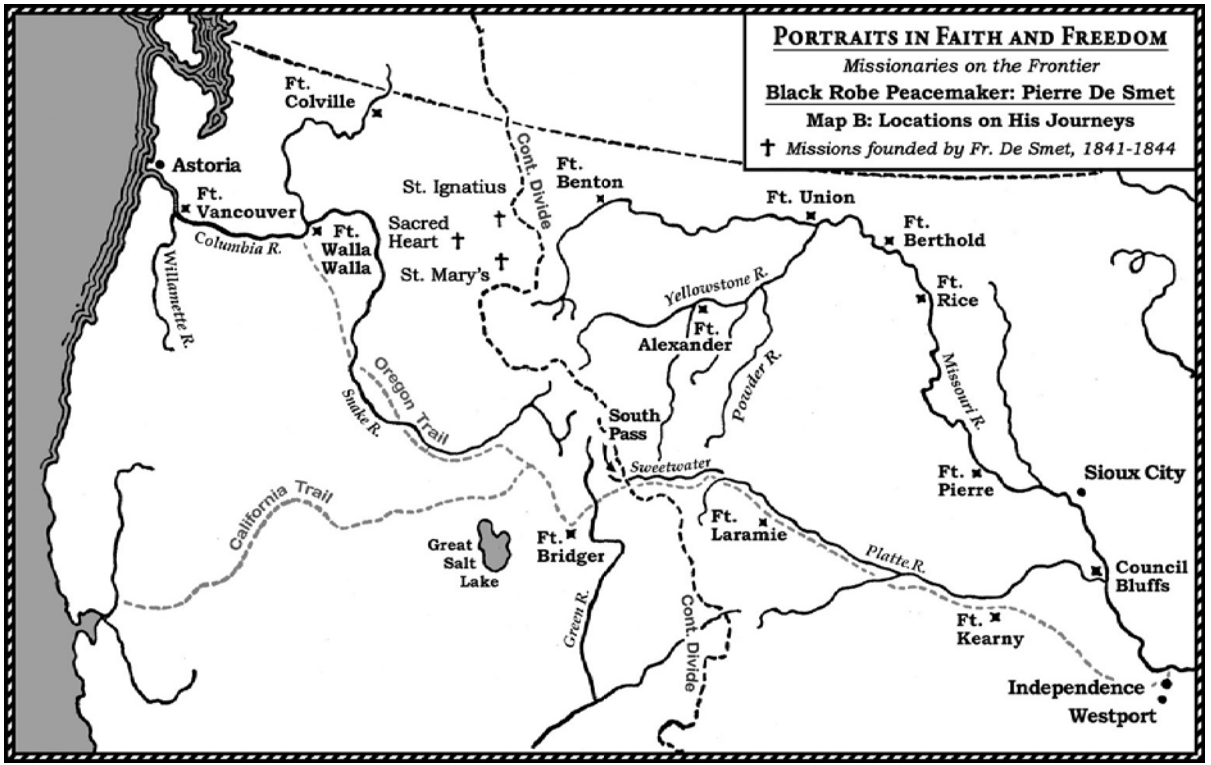

PORTRAITS IN FAITH AND FREEDOM
Missionaries on the Frontier
Black Robe Peacemaker: Pierre De Smet
Map A: Tribes
Area of tribes where Fr. De Smet most invested his life in the Missions
KOOTENAI
KALISPEL
COEUR D'ALENE
NEZ PERCE
FLATHEAD
BLACKFEET
SIOUX
ASSINIBOINE
CROW
CHEYENNE
ARAPAHO
SITTING BULL'S CAMP
Astoria
Columbia R.
Oregon Trail
California Trail
Snake R.
Ft. Bridger
CONT. DIVIDE
BITTERROOT RANGE
Platte R.
Missouri R.
Westport
Independence
St. Louis
Mississippi R.
Ohio R.


PORTRAITS IN FAITH AND FREEDOM
Missionaries on the Frontier
Black Robe Peacemaker: Pierre De Smet
Map B: Locations on His Journeys
† Missions founded by Fr. De Smet, 1841-1844
Ft. Colville
Astoria
Ft. Vancouver
Columbia R.
Willamette R.
Ft. Walla Walla
Sacred Heart †
St. Ignatius †
St. Mary's †
Cont. Divide
Ft. Benton
Ft. Union
Ft. Berthold
Yellowstone R.
Ft. Alexander
Ft. Rice
Missouri R.
Powder R.
Oregon Trail
Snake R.
South Pass
Sweetwater
Ft. Pierre
Sioux City
California Trail
Great Salt Lake
Ft. Bridger
Ft. Laramie
Platte R.
Council Bluffs
Green R.
Cont. Divide
Ft. Kearny
Independence
Westport

1. From the Old World to the New

EARLY one springtime morning in the year 1812, the good people of Termonde—a Belgian town about twenty-five miles southwest of the great port of Antwerp—woke up to a noise of cheering and shouting. A crowd of schoolboys had gathered in one of the town squares, and a stocky, blue-eyed, broad-shouldered lad was making them a speech.

"We'll take the town before they know we're there," he cried. "They won't have guards out this early in the morning. On to victory!"

"Hooray," the boys shouted. "Hooray for General Samson!"

For weeks this exciting game of war had been going on. The boys of Grembergen, a neighboring village, were the Russian and Austrian enemy; the Termonde boys (in their imaginations, at least) were the invincible grenadiers of the Emperor Napoleon.

Older and wiser people might hate Napoleon Bonaparte for the bloodshed and ruin he had brought on Europe, but Belgian boys felt that they shared somehow in the military glory of his victories. They had listened to the stories told by fellow townsmen who'd followed the imperial eagles through Italy and Spain and Germany, and they longed for the day when they'd be grown up and could put on a uniform.

With whoops and shouts they followed “General Samson” headlong down the Grembergen road. Just as they reached a line of hills outside that village, the “Russians and Austrians” fell on them from ambush. Spies had been at work. The surprise attack was no surprise. For a minute or two the battle was even. Fists and sticks were busily at work. Then the Grembergen boys broke and ran up the winding main street to the church square. “Samson” and his men pursued them with cries of victory, but not for long.

It was a Sunday morning, and out of the church poured the fathers, uncles and big brothers of the defeated force. They didn’t stop to ask questions. With clubs and pitchfork handles they beat such a tattoo on the heads and shoulders of “Samson’s” army that it turned tail and ran.

The sting of defeat and a large lump on his head weren’t all that poor “Samson” had to suffer. As he and his troops entered Termonde on the double, the first man he met was a very angry father; for the next ten days he was forbidden to leave the house.

“Samson’s” real name was Pierre Jean de Smet. At the time of the great battle of Grembergen he was eleven years old, the strongest and most daring boy of his age in Termonde. No one could beat him at wrestling or foot racing. He loved to climb tall trees and swing himself down from limb to limb; he was a leader in the dangerous game of leaping from boat to boat in motion on the nearby rivers Dender and Scheldt.

“God keep him!” his father used to say when Pierre Jean repeated long tales of adventure from the books he was always reading. “He’ll never stay at home. He’ll be either a soldier or a wanderer.”

And his brother Charles, who was three years older and as sensible and careful as Pierre was heedless and wild, had his hands full keeping the little brother in line.

The father was named Joost de Smet. He was a boatbuilder and well-to-do, a stern man but a fair one. He and his wife, Marie Jeanne Buydens de Smet, had bred the virtues of piety and hard work into their many children from the cradle. Such solid families were the rule in Flanders, as the part of Belgium where they lived was called.

For centuries the nations of Europe had used Flanders as a battlefield for their many wars, but after each conflict the Flemish

people had gone to work to restore all that had been looted or destroyed. Patience and thoroughness were parts of a Flemish boy's inheritance. All during Pierre Jean's childhood, Napoleon Bonaparte had been master of Belgium; but by the time the boy was ready to go away to boarding school, the battle of Waterloo had been fought, and the fallen emperor was a prisoner on the far-off island of St. Helena.

Pierre's teachers didn't consider him very bright. He was fond of reading, and he liked to write little essays, but whatever honors he won in school were won on the playing field. There, he was first in everything. He could hold his arms straight out, tense his muscles, and defy any four of his schoolmates to bend the arms down. He seemed unaware of fear. Yet he never bullied anyone or abused his great strength, and the teachers and schoolboys all liked him for his kindness, his cheerfulness, and for his plain common sense.

At the college of Alost, which Pierre entered in 1818, it was the same story. He held his own in studies but excelled in all sports. He never seemed to care what he would do in life, however, and his father was beginning to wonder if this strong, smiling, easygoing dreamer would ever amount to anything. Business didn't interest him, or any of the professions, and, when he left Alost to enter the preparatory seminary at Mechlin, he was not even sure he wanted to be a priest.

Although not outwardly "pious," he was a good young man and felt drawn to the service of God. Still, he could not be sure where he might best serve Him. Joost de Smet would shake his head when some of this uncertainty appeared in the letters that Pierre wrote home from the seminary.

In 1821 a stranger came to stay a few days at the seminary—Father Charles Nerinckx, an adventurous Belgian who had gone as a missionary to the United States in 1804. He and another priest had all Kentucky for their parish. Now he'd come back to his native land to beg for money to build churches and mission stations. He was recruiting young men for the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, who desperately needed priests in the United States.

The seminarians crowded into the lecture hall to hear Father Nerinckx tell of his long journeys in the heat of summer and the winter cold, fording rivers on horseback or swimming them when necessary, to serve a parish larger than all France. Thousands of

Catholics in the older states were losing their religion, he said, because there were so few priests to hearten and instruct them. Out on the frontier, the settlers wondered and thanked God whenever a priest rode up to their cabins in the forest clearings. And beyond the frontier were thousands upon thousands of Indians—whole tribes and nations—who were ignorant not only of God but of everything that might raise them out of savagery.

"Napoleon found millions of men ready to sacrifice their lives to ravage nations and destroy them," Father Nerinckx concluded sadly. "I cannot find even a handful of men eager to save entire peoples and extend the reign of God."

Many of the young men who sat listening were deeply moved by the missionary's words, but Pierre Jean de Smet felt that they had been spoken directly to him. He had always liked to read travelers' tales about the gloomy forests and broad rivers of the American West, and he had dreamed of seeing them someday. Now Father Nerinckx was giving him a noble purpose for his dreaming.

His quick imagination called up images of dark faces streaked with war paint, of fearless hunters in wild pursuit of buffalo over the vast plains. All along he had felt that his life was not meant to be lived in placid Belgium but where and how his strength of body and love of adventure might serve some worth-while end had never before occurred to him.

There was no doubt about it, he thought, as he sat in his room searching his soul—God was calling him to preach the Gospel in America, to work among the Indians, to be a Jesuit. He had studied the history of the Jesuits; they were men after his own heart. Peter Canisius had won half of Germany back from Lutheranism. Edmund Campion had confounded the wise men at Elizabeth of England's court, even as he stood in the shadow of the headsman's ax.

In the New World, Isaac Jogues and Jacques Marquette had broken trails through the very wilderness where he could see himself ranging. Like them, he would make it his business to study and understand the strange and savage red men—and to love them because they also were children of God.

Many of the seminarians at Mechlin went to Father Nerinckx and offered to go with him to America. Only nine were accepted.

Pierre de Smet was one of them.

But there were difficulties in his way. The Dutch government wouldn't allow any Catholic missionary to leave the country if it knew the purpose of his journey. The nine seminarians would have to make their way secretly to Amsterdam and conceal themselves there until their ship was ready to sail.

Pierre had no money, but that problem was solved by the sale of some of his books and clothes and by gifts from charitable folk who wanted to help him. The chief difficulty lay inside himself. How was he going to break the news to his father? Joost de Smet was certain to look on his son's decision as just one more example of heedlessness—another rash act of a headstrong boy. There might be hours, even days, of wrangling if he went home and told his family what he intended to do. And since he meant to go anyway, what was the point in wasting words?

In the end, he decided not to visit Termonde. Once his ship was beyond recall, he would send a letter of farewell and explanation back with the pilot. Many of his friends might consider him heartless, but he preferred to remember his family as he had known them, rather than go from them in bitterness.

The last week of July 1821 was hot and sultry. As he waited in the garret room where all the young missionaries lay hiding until the time of their departure, Pierre Jean's spirits sank lower and lower. It was bad enough having to skulk like a criminal here in Amsterdam; it was worse not to be able to get his family off his mind. Surely they had discovered his absence by now, and who could tell what meaning they might give to it? How hurt and puzzled they must be!

At times he was tempted to risk everything and send his father the long letter he had prepared. Yet if he did so, his father would find some way of detaining him. It was too much to hope that the old man would keep his temper long enough to study all the good reasons that the letter gave for his son's action.

Pierre Jean tried to read, but he couldn't fix his attention on a book. In the little room where the young men huddled, the air was stifling. He felt he must get out and walk, even if the police should collar him. But surely the police of a great city had more to do than prowl about with eyes peeled for one young nobody from the country.