

Preface

The idea of writing a biography of Joseph Nicollet came to me some fifteen years ago when I had occasion to study his map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River and the extraordinary report which accompanied it. I felt then that I knew the man, that these official documents were as personal and moving as any I was likely to find. The facts of his life as given in various standard dictionaries were sketchy and, as it turned out, none too reliable, but they suggested the dimensions of a heroic saga which Nicollet, with artless intensity and inimitable style, had already told. His singleness of purpose had become clear to me as, I was to discover, it had become clear to all who met him during his eleven overburdened years in the United States. Because of this quality, casual acquaintances became devoted helpers and affectionate friends.

A fine assessment of Nicollet's work apart from the map was written forty-eight years after his death by Newton Horace Winchell in the *American Geologist*. The quality of the man had touched Winchell as it had touched all those I knew who were more than superficially acquainted with Nicollet's reputation and accomplishments. In badly strained metaphors, the normally prosaic Winchell attempted to express his feelings about this frail stranger on the rough frontier — "an exotic plant" which had "bloomed [and] drooped . . . leaving to us a remembrance of a bright soul, a gleam of pure character — a weary firefly struggling into the tempest." I began to hope that I might give a more solid interpretation of the life which had inspired such heartfelt hyperboles.

The official Nicollet papers in the Library of Congress and other sources of letters and notes in the United States and abroad contained, as I anticipated, no startling personal revelations. The frequently mentioned private journals could not be found. The whole story, with certain important corrections, was the official story. But what a magnificent one it was, and how neglected it has been! Not only was Nicollet's work an essential link in the mapping of the continent, but his many and varied associations and the wide range of his thought give him an indisputable place in the intellectual and cultural history of the early nineteenth century.

Before an interpretive biography could be written, however, it was necessary to bring to light the journals of his

expeditions, so full of insight and reflection, and to place within reach of the general reader the mass of material upon which any interpretation must be based. I am grateful to the Minnesota Historical Society for publishing the two volumes: *The Journals of Joseph N. Nicollet, a Scientist on the Mississippi Headwaters with Notes on Indian Life* (1970) and *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies* (1976). My more personal thanks go to June Holmquist, associate director of the Society, and to the editorial staff for continued interest and encouragement during dark hours in the preparation of this biography.

Any assessment of Nicollet's contributions to geology would have been impossible without the help of Dr. George W. White, Research Professor of Geology of the University of Illinois, who read and revised the passages of my manuscript dealing with this subject. My sister, Constance Richardson, not only read proof with me for many hectic days, but helped to smooth the awkward phrases, over which we all too frequently stumbled. I can now express also my appreciation to all those friends who must have thought this book would never be published but who never said so. They will recognize themselves, I am sure.

Finally, I am grateful to the American Philosophical Society for an initial grant to write this biography and for publishing a book about a man who is relatively unknown even in that region of the country which is the center of his work. The help of my husband, who well knows that without his substantial labor and patient support this whole enterprise would long ago have been abandoned, is recognized in the dedication of this volume.

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