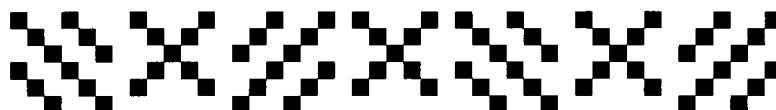


## It Was Not Smallpox: The Miami Deaths of 1732 Reexamined

*Joseph L. Peyser\**



In October, 1732, Jean-Charles d'Arnaud, a twenty-six-year-old officer in the Troupes de la Marine, was appointed by New France's governor general, the Marquis de Beauharnois, as commandant of the French and Miami Indian post in the vicinity of modern Fort Wayne. Within two weeks of his arrival at the Miami post, d'Arnaud was to participate in a chain of events that have been misinterpreted to this day, despite his observations and conclusions.

In the fall of 1732 d'Arnaud observed a mysterious illness that caused the deaths of some three hundred Miamis and related Ojibwa and Piankeshaw Indians in what is now the state of Indiana. The inception and progress of the fatal affliction and the cure of several of the victims were reported in writing in October of that year to Beauharnois by d'Arnaud. Although the report contains sufficient information to support the officer's conclusion that the deaths were the result of a "subtle poison" in the brandy that the Miamis had purchased at Oswego, in the colony of New York, the cause of the deaths has been recorded as smallpox by a number of modern historians. This article presents evidence that smallpox could not have been responsible for these deaths

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and defends the commander's conclusion that the Miamis and their relatives died from a poisonous substance in the brandy.

Despite his youth, d'Arnaud had been an officer for ten years and had served in a number of the western posts, including an assignment as second in command at Fort Frontenac on the north-eastern shore of Lake Ontario in the late 1720s. Most recently he had been at Detroit where he had performed his duty "marvelously," in the words of the governor general.<sup>1</sup> At the time d'Arnaud assumed his first command at the Miami post, the French were making desperate efforts to stop the Miami and other western nations from trading with the English, particularly at Oswego on Lake Ontario. The French feared that the trade at this post, which commenced in 1724, was "capable of causing the entire ruin of Canada."<sup>2</sup> However, the abundant and inexpensive liquor and trade goods offered there by the Anglo-Americans proved irresistible to the French-allied Indians. Hardly had the young officer arrived among the Miamis when a flotilla of their canoes returned from Oswego with a large supply of brandy. D'Arnaud related the subsequent "astonishing" events in an official dispatch to Governor General Beauharnois on October 25, 1732:

The day after I had arrived at my post fifteen or sixteen Miami canoes arrived from Oswego loaded with four hundred casks of brandy. Five or six days later they knocked one in, in which there was the complete skin of a man's hand. This news spread through the village and surprised them immensely. However, it did not put a stop to their drunkenness; after three days two individuals who were fine in the evening were buried the next day at eight in the morning. Then for more than three weeks, at least four died each day. My statements to them that they had no decent food whatever in their village, and that by dispersing in the woods they would find meat which would give them strength to fight off the disease combined with the foul air (which the great number of bodies which surrounded them created) persuaded them to go off to their winter quarters from which I have heard that several were dying from time to time but not in as great numbers as in their village. (The number of dead is presently one hundred fifty persons.)

The first did not astonish me at all; I attributed it to the excessive drinking. But the rest astonished me more. I had the dead stripped and examined, and the conclusion for me was that it was a poison as subtle as it was crafty, only taking effect after a rather considerable time. I wanted to have more certain proof of this: a war chief of this nation who had become particularly attached to me and

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<sup>1</sup> Governor General Marquis de Beauharnois and Intendant Gilles Hocquart to Minister Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux de Maurepas, October 15, 1732, Series C<sup>11</sup>A, Vol. LVII, p. 340 (Archives Nationales, Colonies, Paris); S. Dale Standen, "Arnaud (Darnaud, Darnault), Jean-Charles d'," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (11 vols., Toronto, 1966-1982), III, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Marquis de la Galissonnière, "Memoir on the French Colonies in North America," December, 1750, in Edmund B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York . . .* (15 vols., Albany, 1853-1887), X, 228.

who deserved to be saved was attacked by the sickness. I gave him a strong dose of orvietan which saved his life. In the same way I saved several with this medicine, but not having any more, those who were deprived of this help all died, and not one of those who used it perished.

The Miamis are not the only victims of this poison. The Ouiatanons came one hundred thirty strong to perform the dance of the peace pipe. The brandy was not held back from them, but after their return home, the same sickness overtook them and several letters from that location informed me that almost all of them had died.

After their departure the Piankeshaws also came to visit the Miamis. The number of dead being considerable, I told them about the desolation we were experiencing, informing them at the same time that we were undergoing this disaster only because of the brandy that my Indians had brought from the English. I added that coming to celebrate with their brothers it would be unfortunate if they were to place themselves among those whom we were obliged to mourn daily, and that the way to avoid it was not to stay long, but considering their expressions, the brandy was a bigger chief than I, and thus they did not escape the sickness, since I have received word that every day some of them were dying.<sup>3</sup>

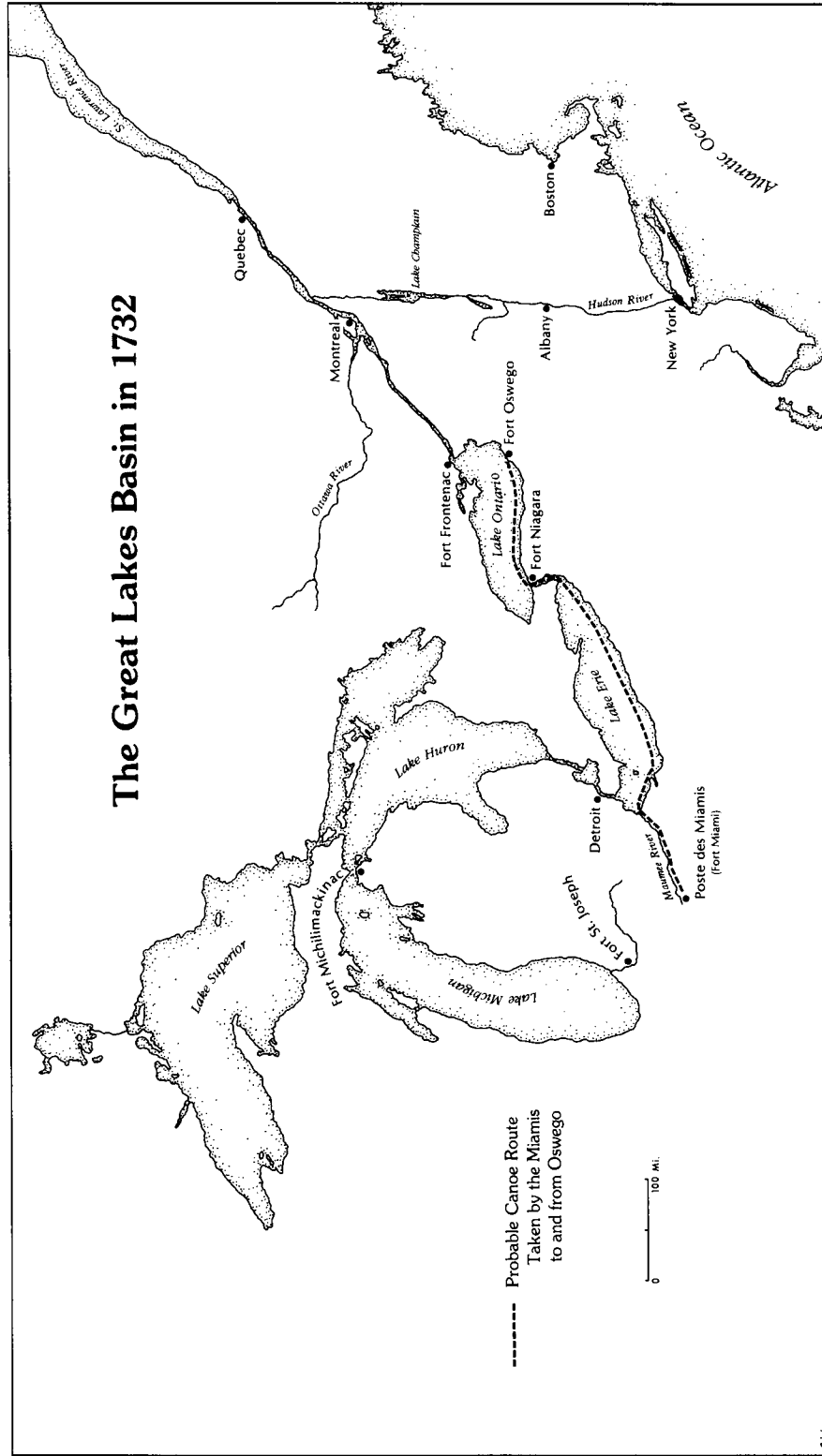
Several modern historians familiar with d'Arnaud's report and findings have concluded nevertheless that a smallpox epidemic decimated the Miamis and their relatives, the Ouiatanons and the Piankeshaws. Including her translation of d'Arnaud's report in her "Ouiatanon Documents," Frances Krauskopf writes: "The Miami, Wea, and Piankeshaws all suffered many deaths in 1733 [*sic*]. Although the commandant at the Miami blamed the casualties on a subtle poison which the English had added to four hundred kegs of brandy the Indians had brought from Oswego, it is much more probable that they died from smallpox, which was reported to be raging among them."<sup>4</sup> In a footnote to her translation of the report, Krauskopf reiterates: "Probably the many deaths were caused by a smallpox epidemic; at any rate the reports for the following year talked about the ravages of the disease in the Miami country."<sup>5</sup> Referring to d'Arnaud's conclusion she concedes that there is a possibility, although unlikely, that poison was responsible for the deaths of almost three hundred Miamis and their relatives. Her judgment is based on official correspondence from Governor General Beauharnois written in 1733, which unequivocally reports the spread of smallpox from the Five Iro-

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Charles d'Arnaud to Beauharnois, October 25, 1732, C<sup>1</sup>A, LVII, 348-50 (Archives Nationales). This report is translated by the present author, as are all other quotations in this article from French-language sources, unless otherwise noted. Frances Krauskopf has translated this report into English and analyzed it in her "Ouiatanon Documents" (*Indiana Historical Society Publications*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2; Indianapolis, 1957), 131-234. In Krauskopf's translation, "Chouéguen" is rendered incorrectly as "Albany" (p. 187), but she correctly referred to the New York post as "Oswego" in her narrative (p. 146).

<sup>4</sup> Krauskopf, *Ouiatanon Documents*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.



quois Nations to the Miamis, Oujatanons, and Potawatomis—in particular ravaging the Miamis, “the hardest hit” of the French-allied nations.<sup>6</sup> However, Beauharnois himself and the Ministry of Marine took d’Arnaud’s evidence and conclusions seriously.<sup>7</sup> John D. Barnhart and Dorothy L. Riker repeat Krauskopf’s opinion in *Indiana to 1816: The Colonial Period*, concluding that the Miamis, Weas, and Piankeshaws were all victims of a smallpox epidemic in 1732.<sup>8</sup> In his article on d’Arnaud in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, historian S. Dale Standen includes the commandant’s report on the tainted brandy in his documentation but ignores the possibility of an actual poisoning: “A smallpox epidemic in 1732 decimated the Miamis and their relatives, the Weas (Oujatanons) and the Piankeshaws, causing most of them to disperse.”<sup>9</sup>

What evidence, then, justifies reopening this case to challenge the smallpox theory? The first bit of evidence is the nostrum that d’Arnaud administered to the Indians he saved. He specifically named the medication “orvietan” in his account of the disaster, which Krauskopf translated merely as “a very strong nostrum.” Hoping to discover the nature of the illness that d’Arnaud said orvietan cured, this author located and examined a number of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early nineteenth-century pharmacopoeias describing this medication.<sup>10</sup> The *Pharmacopée Universelle* published in Paris in 1697 presents orvietan as “a kind of opiate or a famous antidote which takes its name from Orvieto, a city in Italy where it was first made and used; the dosage is from one scruple to one and a half drams.”<sup>11</sup>

The author of this compendium, Nicolas Leméry, described his orvietan formula as “one of the best,” having been “selected over the others in 1694 by the master apothecaries of Paris.”<sup>12</sup> It is quite possible that d’Arnaud’s orvietan was the type mentioned by Leméry. Orvietan was well known in France, where d’Arnaud was raised. It was hawked in the streets by charlatans practicing medicine, surgery, and pharmacy. During their street-theater

<sup>6</sup> Beauharnois to Maurepas, October 10, 1733, C<sup>11</sup>A, LIX, 4-5, 18-19 verso, 37-38 verso (Archives Nationales).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5; Report on the Indians, October 10, 1733, C<sup>11</sup>A, LX, 446 (Archives Nationales).

<sup>8</sup> John D. Barnhart and Dorothy L. Riker, *Indiana to 1816: The Colonial Period* (Indianapolis, 1971), 84.

<sup>9</sup> Standen, “Arnaud,” 16.

<sup>10</sup> Nicolas Leméry, *Pharmacopée Universelle* (Paris, 1697), 604-605; Jean-Baptiste Boyer, *Pharmacopoea Parisiensis* (Paris, 1758), 86-88. See also *Pharmacopoea Universalis* (Weimar, 1840), II, 339-40.

<sup>11</sup> Leméry, *Pharmacopée Universelle*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.

presentations, which at times incorporated marionette shows, most of these operators touted orvietan and "the marvelous efficacy of this infallible antidote for all poisons and all venoms." Several tests of orvietan's effectiveness as an antidote were recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, but the judging and the procedures (administering poison to a pair of dogs and then giving orvietan to one of them as an antidote) were of questionable character. One such instance in 1771 seems to have demonstrated orvietan's success, while another in 1697 proved inconclusive.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the five orvietan formulas examined in this research differ widely in their composition, ranging from twenty-five ingredients in the 1697 *Pharmacopée Universelle* to over fifty in the 1758 *Pharmacopoea Parisiensis*. Four of the five, including Leméry's, contain an opiate. If the orvietan used by d'Arnaud did indeed contain an opiate, the success of his cure may well have been in controlling nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, which might have been caused by a toxin or poison in the brandy.

A second piece of evidence appears in the commandant's report about his examination of the stripped bodies of the dead victims. Obviously he was looking for skin lesions or other external signs of a disease. The French in 1732 were well aware of the mortal danger of smallpox in the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes region because of the periodic epidemics during the preceding one hundred years. It is quite clear that d'Arnaud stripped the dead in order to search for indications of this dread disease.

If smallpox had been the cause of the deaths, d'Arnaud would have observed its unmistakable symptoms. After an incubation of about twelve days, a moderate case of the disease is characterized first by a very high fever (102 to 106°F), headache, severe backache, abdominal pain, and vomiting. Three or four days later the focal eruption begins with painful ulcers on the mouth and macules (reddish spots) which appear first on the face and forearms. These macules rapidly become papules (pimples) which increase in number and spread from the face and distal extremities to the trunk. In three or four more days the papules progress to vesicles (blisters) which become pustular a few days later. The fever recurs with the formation of the pustules, which dry into foul-smelling crusts and scabs that usually fall off three weeks

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<sup>13</sup> E. Guéguen, "L'Essai de l'orvietan," *Revue d'histoire de la Pharmacie*, LI (September-November, 1963), 172; E. Guéguen, "Le Procès peu édifiant d'Avril Lescot," *Revue d'histoire de la Pharmacie*, XLV (March, 1957), 66-67.

after the beginning of illness, leaving small scars or deep pits.<sup>14</sup> The first paragraph of d'Arnaud's report indicates that he wrote it *more than three weeks* after the onset of the malady. Had smallpox been raging at his post, d'Arnaud would most certainly have recognized the disease after observing the deaths of one hundred fifty Miami Indians.

It has been suggested that the French officers might have covered up an outbreak of smallpox; however, the official correspondence previously cited shows otherwise. Governor General Beauharnois's communiqué to the minister of marine, Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux de Maurepas, on May 1, 1733, not only reports the spread of smallpox from the Iroquois to the Miamis and Potawatomis, but adds that "the brandy that they had gone to get from the English also contributed to their loss, and I must, My Lord, inform you of what was communicated to me by the commandant of the Miamis about the extraordinary effects of this drink."<sup>15</sup> Further, d'Arnaud himself reported a smallpox epidemic among the Miamis and Ojibwas on May 30, 1733, a message that Beauharnois transmitted to the minister of marine on July 24, 1733, and again on October 10, 1733.<sup>16</sup> There are no indications of a cover-up by the officers. Since the fort commander observed no classic smallpox or other external symptoms, since a poison antidote saved all the sick treated with it, and since an opiate such as orvietan could not have saved smallpox victims, the historians' distrust of d'Arnaud's report is unjustified. Even if smallpox did strike the Miamis *after* the events described by d'Arnaud, a mass poisoning in 1732 cannot be ruled out.

A document from a Jesuit missionary in Kaskaskia (in the Illinois Country) may provide additional evidence on the mass deaths. On April 28, 1733, Father Jean-Antoine Le Boulenger reported in a letter to Louisiana Governor Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville that "there was a high death rate last autumn and last winter which was a very severe one; more than 200 Miamis

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<sup>14</sup> George W. Thorn, et al., eds., *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*, (8th edition, New York, 1977; orig., 1950), 1017. A form of this disease, "smallpox *sine eruptione*," is recorded, but while death may occur before the eruption of pustules, other prominent symptoms are present. Patients have a fever, are toxemic, and bleed readily. If they live, bruises will be visible. It is difficult to believe that none of the Indians had marks on their bodies if all had died from smallpox *sine eruptione*, and even more difficult to believe that all would die from an uncommon form of the disease. See Paul Biddulph Wilkinson, *Variations on a Theme by Sydenham: Smallpox* (Bristol, Eng., 1959), 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> Beauharnois to Maurepas, October 10, 1733, C<sup>1</sup>A, LIX, 5 (Archives Nationales).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 37.

died in three villages under Mr. de Vincennes' command."<sup>17</sup> The letter, detailed in other respects, fails to identify the cause of death; the severe winter cannot account for the autumn deaths. This may be an additional corroboration of d'Arnaud's report.

An intriguing detail reported by the fort commander that adds to the likelihood of toxin in the brandy is the presence of the complete skin of a man's hand in one of the brandy kegs, suggesting that someone had tampered with the liquor. Most of the liquor traded by small merchants and Indian traders at Oswego was obtained from numerous distillers in New York (whereas the rum supplied by the major New York businessmen came from the West Indies).<sup>18</sup> The brandy could, therefore, have been contaminated at a New York distillery. More likely, however, is the possibility that the contamination occurred at Oswego, where most of the New York traders added large amounts of water to the liquor after its arrival in order to make up for the high cost of transporting the loaded barrels in the wilderness.<sup>19</sup>

This author consulted medical authorities who were unanimous in concluding that it was highly unlikely that the skin as a contaminant could have produced the catastrophic effects. Further, infectious or contagious diseases appear not to have been involved, and the introduction of a toxic substance into the brandy remains the most likely cause of the Miamis' deaths. D'Arnaud intimates that the poison ("as subtle as it was crafty") was intentionally introduced into the kegs by the English ("we were undergoing this disaster only because of the brandy that my Indians had brought from the English"); however, there is no conceivable reason why the Anglo-Americans would want to kill their good customers, the Miamis, who were becoming increasingly friendly with them and ever more disenchanted with the French.

On the other hand, the French in Paris, in Canada, and at their Great Lakes posts were irate about the success of the Oswego post. By drawing the western Indians and their furs away from the French, the new English post was jeopardizing New France's economic base. In 1727 Governor General Beauharnois ordered

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<sup>17</sup> Father Jean-Antoine Le Boullenger to Governor Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, April 28, 1733, C<sup>13</sup>A, XVII, 286 (Archives Nationales). The Vincennes referred to here is François-Marie Bissot de Vincennes, commandant of Fort Ouiatanon and later of the Wabash River post located near the city now bearing his name.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas E. Norton, *The Fur Trade in Colonial New York, 1686-1776* (Madison, Wis., 1974), 89.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 113; Johnson Gaylord Cooper, "Oswego in the French-English Struggle in North America, 1720-1760" (D.S.S. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1961), 93.



the English at Oswego to demolish the post and subsequently began to assemble an army to attack it. The attack, however, was prevented by orders from the French court in 1728 not to take any *overt* action against Oswego to destroy the English trade there.<sup>20</sup> While Louis XV had ruled out a military response to the Oswego menace, the French in North America took both official and clandestine measures to try to keep the western Indians away from the New York post.

To counter the cheap liquor available at Oswego, French traders began selling brandy at Fort Frontenac and Fort Niagara, despite the threats of the French colony's religious leaders. Strict regulations on the sale of liquor to the Indians were relaxed. The French had to lower the price of their merchandise at these posts at considerable cost to the merchants and to the Crown. In addition to the French-allied western Indians, French traders surreptitiously brought their furs to Oswego for the low-cost English trade goods available there. To prevent illegal French traders from reaching Oswego and to persuade Indian convoys to return, the Quebec government built two sailing vessels to patrol Lake Ontario.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout New France the "disaster" of the Oswego post engendered in both officials and traders feelings of apprehension and "continuing hatred," which finally took the form of a threat to the French-allied Indians who traded there. The New York colonial records of the 1730s reveal some of the extremes of the economic warfare waged by the French against their non-cooperative Indian allies. On February 8, 1731, the Indian commissioners wrote that the French "raised a Report in their Country that the Plague & Small Pox (w<sup>ch</sup> is full as dreadful to the Indians) raged at New York," which caused the Commissioners to propose sending agents "amongst the far Indians in order to contradict & convince them of the falshood [*sic*] of these Reports."<sup>22</sup> On July 30, 1736, an Oswego resident wrote that "some Miamis Indians who were arrived at Oswego complained that the French had stopped them at Niagara & forcibly taken from them part of their Goods." And, most significantly, the same letter stated "That a Great Sachem of the Ottawawa [*sic*] Nation had been there &

<sup>20</sup> Norton, *The Fur Trade*, 166-68; W. J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier, 1534-1760* (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1983), 143-45; Cooper, "Oswego in the French-English Struggle," 51-58, 60-61.

<sup>21</sup> W. J. Eccles, *France in America* (New York, 1973), 110; Norton, *The Fur Trade*, 172.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Wraxall, *An Abridgement of the Indian Affairs . . . Transacted in the Colony of New York from the Year 1678 to the Year 1751*, ed. Charles H. McIlwain (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), 182.

given information that the French had been among the far Nations & told them they were detirmined [*sic*] to cut off Oswego & *kill all those Indians who should go there to trade*" (italics added).<sup>23</sup>

It is obvious from the foregoing that a motive existed for disgruntled French traders or agents to kill some of their erstwhile trading partners to discourage other western Indians from going to Oswego. If the French poisoned brandy or rum from that post, two ends would be achieved: first, the Indians would be afraid to drink (and trade for) English liquor; and second, the blame could be assigned to the English, not the French.

While hard evidence for intentional poisoning is lacking, there is sufficient documentary evidence to establish a motive for such an act, and d'Arnaud's contention cannot be lightly discarded. At the same time, one cannot disregard the possibility of an unintentional contamination of the brandy due to the undoubtedly unsanitary practices of the Anglo-American traders, who regularly diluted the liquor at Oswego, so that sometimes the jugs contained nothing but water.<sup>24</sup> This possibility is strengthened by Peter Wraxall's record of the Iroquois's statement in 1737 that "they think there is some Poison at Oswego for many have died there (meaning that it is an Unhealthy place)."<sup>25</sup>

Whether the poisoning was intentional or unintentional, Governor General Beauharnois did not hesitate to turn d'Arnaud's report to his colony's economic and political advantage, as recorded in 1733 by an aide to the minister of marine in France:

M. de Beauharnois sent to all the missionaries in the upper and lower countries [i.e. the Great Lakes basin and Canada] a copy of the letter by which Sieur d'Arnaud reported this news in order for them to inform the Indians to turn them away from trading for brandy with the English. The copy to the missionary at Miramichy produced the desired effect. The Indians to whom he had it read decided to no longer trade with the Acadians who have English merchandise and asked him to thank M. de Beauharnois and to ask the governor general to send a large boat to them every year for trading, since they no longer want to do business with the English.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, seventeen years later Beauharnois's successor, Marquis de LaJonquière, upon taking office, cautioned the western Indians as follows: "My children, if you are faithful to my words, you will no longer taste the Englishmen's brandy. It is a poison which will take your lives without your knowing it, and further-

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper, "Oswego in the French-English Struggle," 93n.

<sup>25</sup> Wraxall, *An Abridgement*, 204.

<sup>26</sup> Report on the Indians, October 10, 1733, C<sup>11</sup>A, LX, 444 *verso* (Archives Nationales).

more they are only seeking to seduce you to make themselves masters of your land and to treat you like slaves."<sup>27</sup>

In sum, a review of the evidence supports d'Arnaud's conclusion that the Miamis died of a toxin in the brandy purchased at Oswego and not from smallpox, as other historians have written. At best, the contamination occurred as a result of the unsanitary practices of unscrupulous Anglo-American traders at Oswego; at worst, French agents, working for economic and political ends, brought about the catastrophe that struck down hundreds of Indians in what is today the state of Indiana. But whether or not the poisoning was intentional, the case against smallpox as the cause of the deaths is convincing. D'Arnaud's report is worthy of far greater credibility than that which historians have assigned to it thus far.

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<sup>27</sup> Speeches of the Potawatomis of the St. Joseph River and the governor's replies, Montreal, June 29, 1750, C<sup>11</sup>A, XCV, 250 *verso*, *ibid*.