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The Wreck of the Belle, the Ruin of La Salle (Number 48: Centennial Series of the Association of Former Students, Texas A&M University)

Robert S. Weddle

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Robert Cavelier de La Salle: daring explorer, empire builder, shaper of history—and shameless schemer who abused his followers and deceived his king. In *The Wreck of the* Belle, *the Ruin of La Salle*, acclaimed historian Robert S. Weddle reveals how La Salle and his closest associates spun a web of secrecy and falsehood about their travels, dissembled their objectives, and put their own spin on his exploits by suppressing other would-be diarists. Weddle's study represents a major revision of the story of La Salle and his times as they have been traditionally understood, with few of the major characters in the epic tale emerging unscathed. Even his death was misreported by survivors of the French colony in Spanish-claimed territory as they sought to save themselves.

This book had its genesis in the Texas Historical Commission's 1995 discovery in Matagorda Bay, along the Texas coast, of the wreck of *La Belle*, the last of four vessels that La Salle brought to America on his final mission. Artifacts salvaged from the ship shed new light on the efforts of La Salle and his two hundred colonists to establish the first European settlement between Florida and Mexico, a settlement that has been erroneously labeled Fort-Saint-Louis.

As history provided the clues that led to this archaeological discovery, so archaeology now fills in the blanks of history, raising a host of new questions about the ill-starred colony. Weddle marshals the evidence to answer those questions, reframing the old picture of one of France's premier American explorers in the light of new discovery and setting the record straight.

Weddle's exhaustive research has resulted in a work not limited to La Salle's final misadventures in Texas. Rather, he chronicles the explorer's activities throughout his travels in North America, drawing on several unpublished sources to provide a more accurate picture of La Salle, both as private individual and as legendary explorer.

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