

THAT WASP'S NEST, PLACENTIA

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BEAUTY is a definite asset to any town. So is a romantic historical background. But there is not much either can do for a place when times are bad—unless it can be turned into a popular tourist resort. Placentia, Newfoundland, is too far off the beaten holiday trails for that. St. John's has a railway and a fleet of steamers docking regularly. But Placentia is eighty miles from St. John's. Its boats are fishing schooners, and its railway was taken up in 1921 and moved to Argentia,—once, ironically, little Placentia—because of the silver mine development there.

In the old days Placentia was the proud French capital, with all the leaders of New France embarking and disembarking there, along with Franciscan friars and fishermen from half of Europe. After the Treaty of Utrecht it had a resident English garrison for nearly a century, an Anglican church, built with the help of that lively Prince William Henry, and later, an old stone convent, where young ladies have been educated for over eighty years. It developed, in an atmosphere of flags waving and bugles calling, a taste for refinement and the amenities of living. It was, from the first, an important fishing centre, and in the ship building period saw many fine vessels launched in its harbour.

The town has always been divided into two parts by a narrow Gut. The Irish and French lived originally on the Town Side and the Jersey fishermen on the Jersey Side. The former had the churches and other advantages and the latter the railway. The ferry service which connected them has now been discontinued, and all traffic between them and the outport settlements beyond, which must go through them, is dependent on fishing dories. This would be serious if the Gut were a narrow placid stream. But it has a deep channel and a fourteen-knot tide running through it, which at times makes crossing an adventure. The Commission of Government is confronted with too many problems in Newfoundland just now to consider a bridge for Placentia. So the Gut, which adds immeasurably to its picturesqueness, remains the town's major problem.

With the fisheries falling off and markets dwindling (due to Europe's unrest) there was not much left to Placentia but beauty; its narrow streets and little houses, set close to the sidewalk, in old-world fashion; its ruined forts and rusty cannon; its history

and its spectacular scenery. The little Anglican church was closed, and the only one in use was the Roman Catholic. The district is famous for its salmon pools and its sandy beaches, rare on this coast. But these attractions are a little way out of town, and the summer people who come to them affect the town very slightly.

Placentia began to find itself in a distressing situation, with shrinking resources and dubious prospects for its young people. Then, when everything seemed at its lowest ebb, a small group began to face the fact that the past was gone, and to look toward the future. With the whole country in a serious depression, they had nowhere to turn but to themselves. They decided, shrewdly, to commence by conserving what they had left and working from it.

One of their first moves was to organize a branch of the Co-operative Society, sanctioned by the Government, and to form Study Clubs. At the same time a Jubilee Guild was organized for the women. These Guilds were launched in the Jubilee year, 1935, to fill a place in Newfoundland outports and Labrador similar to that of the Women's Institutes in Canada and England. Their slogan is: "Feeding and Clothing the Family from Local Resources." Cooking, canning, hand-crafts, poultry-raising, everything to improve home life, comes within their scope. The work has grown so that a year ago the Commission of Government asked the Guilds to take over the direction of women's work throughout the island, as a part of their Rural Reconstruction program. There are now fifty-four Guilds organized, and Field Workers are sent out to give them instructions.

Since sheep are generally kept, weaving has been their special interest. The men in the outports are able to copy the loom used for demonstration, and the only local expense is for reeds and heddle wires which are supplied at landed cost by the Government. Lady Walwyn, the Governor's wife, is the President. She herself has a loom at Government House, and has learned to weave. The attractive costumes she wears, made from cloth woven by herself, out of wool from their own sheep, and colored with local dyes, is an effective advertisement.

The Jersey Side Guild first put on an entertainment to raise money for a wool carder, a loom and materials for handwork. They hired a room for their meetings and learned weaving, leather-craft (glove-making) and cooking, during the first winter. Recognizing their town's historical background as one of its most important advantages, they formed an additional group, known as the Historical Committee, made up of eighteen

representative men and women. They set themselves to recover what could be found of the Placentia of the early days, not only for their own satisfaction, but with the hope of making the place more interesting to outsiders.

The French were the first to see the value of this location. In 1662, after the close of the Spanish War, Louis XIV determined to establish a fortified base at the entrance of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence to protect Canada from attack, and Placentia, already known to the French as a fishing base, was chosen. A force of one hundred and fifty men landed there and began to fortify the harbour. The first fort, later Fort Frederick, was built on a point of low land, so close to the Gut, on the Town side, that, as Le Hontan says, "ships grazed, so to speak, upon the angle of the bastion." Later another *redoute* was built on the Jersey Side, and in 1670 an English report says that it had "ordinance, a Garrison of Soldires and Chainé" (across the Gut). It had a royal Governor named Gargot, who, poor though he was, might have been better than no Governor at all.

The French fisheries at that period were at their peak of prosperity. Merchants of La Rochelle, Morlain and St. Malo sent out nearly three hundred vessels a year, with some 20,000 men, and almost monopolized the Mediterranean markets. The new fort, named Plaisance, supposedly by the Biscayans, after the Spanish city, was well situated, for both military purposes and the fish trade. It had a commanding view from Castle Hill, a sheltered harbour, free from drift ice in spring, which made for an earlier season, and plenty of herring for bait. It was one of the few places in the colony where early settlement was not only permitted but encouraged. Masters of ships were allowed five livres for every man and three for every woman they carried to Plaisance. Newfoundlanders were offered one year's free subsistence, which later was increased to three. When the Dutch raided the French fishing fleet in 1676, taking "90 to 100 sail", the town had two forts, thirteen guns and fifteen families (four of them English); but by that time France, at war with the Dutch, was too busy elsewhere to trouble about Plaisance, and the forts had been neglected. Five years later they were in ruins.

When Frontenac became Governor of Canada, things changed. He saw the value of the location, and ordered the fortifications to be strengthened. A large battery was placed high on Castle Hill and a military Governor, de Brouillon, appointed. It was the only settlement on the island at this time with a year-round French population of any importance. It had a resident doctor

early in its history, and what is believed to have been the first hospital in Newfoundland, which was maintained for years. Bishop St. Vallier came from Quebec in 1689, and formally established the Franciscan Friars. There was a small chapel and at least one missionary priest in residence. We can find out something of what the town looked like from the maps and pictures of the period, with its wooden palisades, huts and fishing-stages, and curious beasts (*bestians*) roaming over the hills. In one old drawing, what would appear to be a full-sized sheep is placidly grazing on the thatched roof of a small building.

Plaisance now became the privateering base from which the French made the lives of the English settlers a constant nightmare. At last in 1690, the English Government was driven to sending out a strong force under Commodore Williams to put an end to it. Three sixty-ton frigates and two sloops of sail, a formidable array for that time and place, were brought up under Fort Louis, with its garrison of fifty men, supplemented by seamen and merchantmen off the vessels in port. Williams studied the situation and decided cannily to remain well outside. His bombardment, at that distance, did little damage, and he finally turned about and went back home.

The French were naturally encouraged to keep up their good work, and their raids had such disastrous effects on the English fisheries that in 1703 another attempt was made to get rid of this "wasp's nest". Admiral Graydon came out with a large fleet and land force. But he, too, lost heart when he had seen the guns frowning down on him from the formidable height of Castle Hill. He reported, when he went home, that an attack had been "impracticable", but his discretion resulted in his dismissal. Admiral Hovenden Walker was another who attempted to take the place—or rather failed to make an attempt—in 1711, with a force of fifteen ships, nine hundred guns and four thousand men, if we can believe the records. Little wonder that he was ridiculed at home, especially after it came out that the little garrison was in want of supplies of all kinds, that their re-inforcements had not arrived, and that their only armed ship had been lost.

In the meantime Plaisance had become bold enough to attack the English stronghold, St. John's. This place was so well adapted naturally for defence from attacks by sea, that it felt quite secure. The possibility of the French undertaking to march on them by land from Placentia seemed impossible. So when they were surprised by D'Iberville, who came over land from Bay Bulls, in 1696, they were lost. The town was destroyed and every house and the boats in the harbour burned.

Plaisance's Governor declared that "the English were asleep and fools." The French went back home and the next spring the English sent out a large squadron to rebuild St. John's.

Plaisance must have been well-manned in 1705, for along with raids on the smaller English settlements around the coast, the Governor set out again, in January, to march on St. John's with four hundred men. (Their expeditions by land had to be made in winter to take advantage of the ice on the rivers). After a journey which only the hardest soldiers could have endured, they again surprised St. John's, burned it and took two hundred prisoners home with them. It was during this time that the French and Indians from Plaisance kept the whole of Trinity and Conception Bays in terror with disastrous effects on the fishing. In 1708 its garrison made another January attack on St. John's, captured it, and this time remained in possession till March, when they departed with a \$35,000 ransom and some prisoners, including the Commander of the garrison.

Plaisance continued to resist attacks, but it was not without its troubles. We are able to piece together some of the details of life there, from the correspondence of the period which has survived. In a letter of Sieur Gautin, the missionary, written in 1711 (a copy of which is in the Nova Scotia Archives) he tells, among other details, of a very alarming epidemic which caused the death of three hundred men in the garrison. The civilian population somehow escaped.

The "Gibraltar of America", as it was called, continued to cause heartbreak to the English planters. In 1705 the fishing fleet had shrunk to a mere score of vessels. But there was no relief till the Treaty of Utrecht. Then the impregnable little fortress found itself, through no fault of its own, in English hands, and its people—or all but "idlers and vagabonds"—urged to gather up their belongings and go to a strange land.

So on September 2nd, 1713, we see de Brouillon, whose name is so intimately connected with Plaisance, sailing from France on the *Semslack* (a vessel captured from the Dutch ten years earlier) to take possession of Isle Royale (Cape Breton), and putting into Plaisance. There he and Costabelle, the Governor, decided that, to avoid hardship, the evacuation of the place might be put off till spring. The next summer they embarked, officers and men and their families, with their "meagre stores", to found Louisbourg. The rest of the inhabitants straggled along in the Fall in their own fishing boats.

Our sympathies go out to the ordinary people in those days of alternating French and English supremacy. The exiles

from Plaisance ran into bad weather on their difficult voyage. Some were lost at sea, and all suffered hardship. The stores taken with them included some of the cannon, a few pounds of steel and sixty axes. These last must have been the most useful, for the newcomers found Cape Breton a wilderness, boasting twenty-five Indian families and one lone Frenchman.

Some did not leave Plaisance, including, possibly, all the English. The French had offered regular inducements to English settlers, and could give them protection and a Government. The English settlements on the island were a prey to every enemy, and had no Governor and no form of justice except what was administered by the Fishing-admirals. This was partly due to indifference, but more to a policy of retarding development. These people who stayed behind formed the nucleus of the new Placentia.

Stripped of its military importance and most of its population, the town settled down to play a minor rôle in history. Since it had always been reckoned by the French as one of the forts of Acadie, along with Port Royal and Fort La Tour, the English blandly continued to regard it as a part of Nova Scotia. It was given a Governor of its own, who had nothing to do with Newfoundland (which still had no Governor). A small English garrison moved in, and some of the guns were replaced. But it was some time before the town settled down to English ways, and it still has its distinctive atmosphere. In 1744, when Louisbourg was planning an expedition to re-take the place, it is said to have consisted of "pickets, a battery in bad order and a garrison of forty-five soldiers and three officers". During the Seven Years War it was re-inforced by English troops from Newfoundland and Louisbourg, but the Treaty of Utrecht closed the chapter of its active military history.

In 1774 it was important enough to have a fine new courthouse. It still had the fisheries, but their value was already beginning to diminish. Writers of the time, who were materially, if not piously, interested, bewailed the slackness of the Church in relaxing the rules for the eating of fish on fast days and through Lent. Fish days crossed off the calendar meant less prosperity for Placentia. And, though fishermen continued to come in great numbers, the Newfoundland waters were no longer "richer than the silver mines of Peru", as in Francis Bacon's day.

When Newfoundland had been given its first Governor, in 1729, the British Government decided that Placentia might, after all, be a part of the country, and the new official was declared

"Governor over the Island of Newfoundland and the forts and garrison at Placentia!" But another grave blunder had been made at Utrecht which affected the west coast for many years. French fishermen still came to cure their catch on the flat beaches there before taking them back to the Old World markets. According to the bargain of 1713, the French were allowed to retain all their fishing rights in Newfoundland if Louis XIV would release his Huguenot galley-slaves at Queen Anne's request. It was an excellent thing for the galley-slaves.

The Treaty of Versailles strengthened the French position. It confirmed their right, not only to dry their fish on these shores, but to order the British fishermen (including the regular inhabitants) to remove their fishing gear and sheds. When the lobster fishery began, and this involved the tearing down of factories, the question became even more acute. But the West Coast people had no legal justification for their complaints at having their property destroyed and their means of making a living seriously handicapped. England was determined to conciliate France at any cost.

The early history of Newfoundland is not exactly a bright page in the story of British colonial administration. This country was always the step-child or Cinderella of the Empire. She was, from the time of Cabot's landfall, considered chiefly as England's fishing-station anchored conveniently near the richest waters in the world; and later as God's gift to the West Country merchants. Settlement and cultivation of the soil were forbidden, as they might interfere with the monopoly of the fisheries by the few who hoped to control them, and it was only a little more than a century ago that the last of these bans was lifted. The fiction originated, which is slow to die, that the country was too barren, too icebound and fog-bound for habitation. Most of the outports of to-day sprang up illegally, and grew in defiance of the restrictions. Newfoundland's wealth continued to go out of the country, and she was left neglected and impoverished, like Cinderella in the cinders.

The injustice of the French Shore question has long been a deep seated grievance. The situation went on, incredibly, till 1904, when the French were induced to give up their concessions in exchange for a slice of West Africa, and all of Newfoundland belonged for the first time to Newfoundlanders. There are still old people living who can recall seeing the French fishing-vessels arrive in the spring with peremptory demands that the native-born remove their fishing gear and buildings—and sometimes not waiting to see it done, but doing it themselves.

Because of this and other short-sighted policies, along with tremendous geographical disadvantages, Newfoundland developed slowly. Roads were long in coming, and waterways are still the highways in most of the island. But finally Placentia had a road connecting it with the rest of the Avalon Peninsula, and St. John's—a road, which, by the way, could still stand some improvement. And in 1885 it was given the privilege of a railway and was really on the map—for just thirty-six years. In 1867 it was selected as the terminus of that much-discussed innovation, the cable from North Sydney.

It had, before that, another brief, glamorous interlude, in the reign of George III, when Prince William Henry (later William IV) landed in the country as Commander of the *Pegasus*, in 1786—at about the same time that his brother, the Duke of Kent, was bestowing an aura of romance on Halifax for future recording. We can understand the Prince taking a fancy to Placentia. The Anglican cause had gone down there, and the original church, the Chapel of Our Lady of Angels, had disappeared. He used his influence to have a new one built, and gave fifty guineas towards it. Two years later he sent it a handsome solid silver Communion set, which is temporarily in the Cathedral in St. John's for greater safety. His father, George III, gave it a Royal Coat of Arms.

While in Placentia the Sailor Prince presided, as Surrogate, “in the noble courthouse of the ancient capital.” It would seem that some of his decisions might have been questioned, for one man who was given a sentence of eighty lashes was found next day (after he had had them) to have been the wrong man. Before he left Placentia, he honored it by selecting one of its boys for His Majesty's Service. A less happy result of his visit was that the justices, in a burst of loyalty to the Protestant succession, issued a decree that no more Roman Catholics should be buried in the Protestant graveyard. This ended well for the Catholics, for in 1787 they were allowed to have their first burying-ground, on the site of their present church.

When the Historical Committee began their attempt to recover Placentia's past they found, as in most places of that age, that a good many of the traces had been lost. They still had the little Anglican church piously built by Queen Caroline (the Prince's had been burned), and a number of well preserved old tombstones, including some erected to Basque fishermen in the seventeenth century, with quaint carving and legible inscriptions. They had also the handsome Coat of Arms and a tipstaff (which

was used to summon witnesses in Court) that had also been presented by George III (another result of his son's presiding in the courthouse), and also adorned with his coat of arms. One other memento of the Prince's visit which was treasured in the town for years, called the King's Chair, cannot be found, and is believed to have been picked up by some visiting collector.

The Committee have gone to some trouble to discover the old wells, sites of the early schools and the old French hospital. They have made a study of the early history of the fisheries for which Placentia was famous, of local place names, of folk lore and folk songs. The latter are particularly interesting on this coast where the Irish element is strong. They discovered, among other first things, that the first British soldier to give his life at Gallipoli was a man from Placentia district named Viscount. One of the most pretentious of the old buildings left is the Blenheim house, a mansion built over a century ago by the Irish merchant, Sweetman, who carried on a large fish trade with the Old Country.

The Committee's best work has been in finding, marking, and to some extent, restoring the forts. They were easy to find, once interest was aroused. The foundations were there, and parts of the earthworks, but the guns had disappeared. Gradually a number were uncovered. One of the old French cannon was found submerged under water. The guns on Castle Hill had all fallen, with the crumbling earth, over the wooded side of the cliff, and were half-buried among the rocks and spruce trees. The day we were rowed across the Gut by a small boy, and climbed the Hill to see Fort Louis, was magically clear. We had an unforgettable view of Placentia spread out like a carpet, far below us, on both sides of the Gut, of the lovely old town, the beaches, the landlocked harbour, and around to the West, the vast blue sweep of Placentia Bay.

It was easy that day to see why the French chose the site, and why the English ships lost heart when they saw the formidable height of Fort Louis and the town's location. We made our way, with a good deal of difficulty, down the steep hillside, to find the rusted cannon and to look on them for the King's mark. It was after that that the Committee managed to have the seven guns brought up and set in their original positions on ramparts, pointing out across the Bay.

In addition to the valuable service done the town by the Historical Committee, there are now three co-operative groups on the Jersey Side, with ten young men in each, studying navigation, agriculture, woodcraft and fishing problems. They have

also formed a Credit Union. The "Little Flower" Guild is made up of girls at the Convent, and specializes in fine needlework. The Jersey Side Guild has now thirty-seven women working on a program of homecrafts.

Last Fall at the All-Newfoundland Agricultural Fair in St. John's, one exhibit which drew a lot of attention and was described in detail in the city dailies was the work of the Jersey Side Guild, a "historical quilt". It was more than a quilt. It was a picture into which had been worked all the glories of Placentia's past. Seventy-five different designs, in appropriately colored linen, were appliqued on it, representing the contribution of the French and English, the Franciscan friars and Irish missionaries, the Biscayans and other voyageurs to the life of the town. They included needlework sketches of the harbour, Castle Hill, the forts and the Gut, and a fishing scene. The old churches are there and the varied craft, galleons, frigates and trim modern boats, which have moored there.

The plan of this "Newfoundland tapestry", as the papers called it, originated in the group. None of them are artists, but the president, Mrs. Murphy, who had taken drawing as a girl in Littledale Convent (and made good use of her time), was responsible for most of the designs. She admits that she spent most of one winter reading up on the various periods. Every stitch in the quilt is by hand. It required four-hundred-and-fifty hours of group sewing to finish it. The result is an *objet d'art* which deserves a place beside the fine craftsmanship of the Mediaeval Guilds, where each one worked for love of his trade. But it has more significance than that. The idea of these women labouring patiently together to create an artistic record of their town—actually a museum piece for coming generations—is a unique expression of local patriotism. In every stitch they have affirmed their faith and pride in the place, and their hopes for its future.

Some day the Newfoundland Government will awake to the commercial value of historic shrines such as Placentia possesses, and it will have a museum to hold the priceless mementoes of the past which it is collecting. Even now, since it began to put its house in order, it has a good deal to show tourists which cannot be found anywhere else. The fates may be against it, and Placentia may never again recover its old importance. But it still has its atmosphere. And as long as its people believe in it so passionately and show such initiative in declaring so, it seems certain that this ancient town can never be permanently down.