A SOJOURNER IN GASPÉ

JEAN FALCONER

THE new road which has been recently constructed round the Gaspé Peninsula has done much to reveal the beauties of the coast to the holiday maker. Motoring, once an exciting and even a hazardous adventure, is now a pleasure. With improved hotel accommodation and other conveniences, the attractions of the place are becoming widely advertised, and every year tourists become more numerous.

But lovely as Gaspé is in summer, and there are few more delightful spots, I shall always be glad that it was my good fortune to spend two complete years there, and to experience something of the singular charm of its snowbound solitude. For when winter descends, Gaspé so to speak closes its doors, and in a great measure shuts itself off from the rest of the world. The snow comes early; I have seen the roads blocked in November, the tempestuous winds pack the dry light flakes into the cuttings, and it is useless to try to remove them, for they are at once driven back. Hills appear on level roads, and one has to clamber up and down or scramble through obstructing drifts from twenty to forty feet high. Intercourse between neighbouring towns even a mile or two apart is impeded to such an extent that each community lives almost to itself from December to April. A stranger on the street is such a rarity that his business becomes a thrilling subject of speculation. But the people are happy and contented, and there is an alluring fascination about the life which calls one back and back.

Perhaps because of this geographical isolation, Gaspé has—almost ever since Jacques Cartier made his first landing in 1534—lived an independent existence, quietly pursuing her own course, retaining certain marked individualities, and developing a large and important trade with foreign countries.

The long range of neat red-roofed warehouses, which stretch across the beach at Paspediac, are not a growth of yesterday, but have been the centre of a flourishing business since 1766 when the founder of the firm Charles Robin first visited the country. While not as old as the Hudson Bay Company by a hundred years, I think it was the second firm in Canada to obtain a charter. Cer-

tainly it comes next in active operation at the present time. But even before the days of Robin, the fish and furs of Gaspé were well known in European cities. They told me when I went to live on the coast that the best cod in the world were caught there. Making allowance for local pride, one knows them to be so good that some markets will use no other.

French fishing vessels had come to the banks from early times, but the first to develop a stationary trade to any extent was Nicholas Demys. At first the fish were taken to France in pickle, but the enterprising Demys improved on that method, and he first conceived the idea of preparing drying beaches on the shores of the western continent. It seems that to have your fish properly cured you must have very specially prepared beaches,—greves, they call them. Demys understood this so well that the ones he made are still used, and no methods superior to his have been discovered.

The story of this enthusiastic colonist is found in a publication of the Champlain Society. The translation of his letter sent to the King of France in 1672 reads like one of the roseate tourist pamphlets so freely distributed to-day to catch the fancy of prospective emigrants. Demys was very full of his beloved adopted country, and his letter was partly designed to lure settlers. In his eagerness he stretches the truth a little, especially in regard to climate. Because the new country is in the same latitude as France, he draws the conclusion that the climate is similar. "The sun", he says, "which is master of all the stars and on which they all depend, ought to produce the same effect in one place as it does in the other so far as heat is concerned." This anyone who has spent a winter on the coast knows to be an erroneous inference. A second motive of the letter was to secure protection for the traders and those who intended to make a permanent home in the country.

He found his business being continually upset and interfered with by the fighting which went on all around him. No sooner did he build up a settlement, plant his gardens and start his fishing, than some filibustering soldier of fortune would come along and destroy all the fruits of his efforts. He besought the King to make and maintain peace, because without it no people would be happy and contented. But it was not until after Canada was finally ceded to Britain that any steady trade grew up in Gaspé. That this was accomplished was due to the shrewd business sense of the young Channel Islander, Charles Robin. His journal has recently been discovered in an old box in an outhouse at Noirmont Manor, and published in the "Bulletin of the Societé Jersais."

Robin started as a clerk in the employ of Robin, Pepin & Co., in St. Aubin. The tales of what the St. Malo fishermen had done had fired his imagination, and he persuaded his firm to send him out as a scout to see if he could not capture the trade now lost to the French. He was twenty-three years old when in 1766 he sailed as a super-cargo in the *Sea Flower*. The report he carried back being favourable, he came again the next year as agent for the firm, bringing with him on the vessel articles suitable to trade with the Indians.

The very day this energetic young man arrived at Paspediac, he secured a whale boat, and at five o'clock in the afternoon he departed for Bonaventure, twelve miles away, where he expected to meet the chiefs of the tribe. When he arrived at Bonaventure at eight o'clock, he was too late to trade with the Indians. He found the shore dotted with wigwams, but no people, all having gone on to the mission to observe Pentecost. Next day he engaged an Indian to pilot him up the Restigouche, and here again found many canoes drawn up on the shore, all empty, and the owners in church. The king, as he calls the chief, very politely read the letter of permission Robin had brought with him, but declined to do business as it was Sunday. Robin found, however, that Sunday did not prevent them from stealing from him. The king invited him to a feast for which the Indians, in preparation, had eaten nothing all day. It was an appalling feast, consisting mostly of greasy soup and impossible fats, but Robin eager to please did what he could with it. The women did not come to the feast, but later danced while the men sang. Everyone smoked, even women and children of twelve, which to the stranger was a peculiar habit. The king, who lived in a wooden house and wore spectacles, proved friendly, and business was started under good auspices.

On the whole, Robin got on well with both Indians and the French; but he was accused of illicit dealing, and bringing in prohibited goods. Both of those charges, he declared, were falsehoods. Then his ships were seized, and he found it very hard to haul to the wind to avoid two vessels which but three weeks before were his own and his pastime. He also had to escape to the woods at times. He went to Jersey for a winter, and when he returned found his home burned and all his possessions destroyed, except one pair of trousers and some things which had been put out to wash.

By 1769 he had built up such a prosperous trade that he chartered a vessel and sent a cargo of salmon to Spain and another of furs to England, but the American war sent him back to Jersey,

and it was not until 1783 that he returned and opened up in his own name. Charles Robin brought his apprentices from Jersey. He never married, and he employed only unmarried men, or those willing to leave their wives at home. He chose his men from the country districts, so that they would not miss the pleasures of town life. Owing to this policy, the English-speaking population more particularly of the county Gaspé, where the firm is largely established, are almost entirely of Channel Island origin. All their associations are there; when they speak of home, it is to these Islands they refer, and their speech still retains some of the ancient idiomatic phrases. Another result has been introducing to that portion of Quebec a very strong Protestant population, and in almost every village there is a neat but tiny Anglican church. The firm which now bears the name of "Robin Jones & Whitman" has latterly relaxed its celibate policy, and the present manager's house is conducted in a most gracious manner by a lady, but I believe she is the first who has ever lived there.

The Indians with whom Robin became so friendly were a branch of the Micmac tribe. Father Le Clercq, a Recollect priest who came out to Canada in 1675, has written a good deal about them in his *Nouvelle Relation de Gaspesie*, which also has been translated by the Champlain Society. He calls them the "Cross Bearers," because he found that symbol was held in great respect by them. It was embroidered on their clothes, tattoed on their persons and carried with them to all important tribal meetings and discussions. Doubtless Father LcClercq exaggerates in many places, but he was much impressed by the reverence in which the Christian symbol was held by these pagans. He explains its entrance into their ritual by an old story that had come down to them from their fathers. In a time of a great plague which had devastated the tribe, some of the oldest and wisest of their chiefs saw in a dream a beautiful stranger who showed them a cross and told them to hold it in great respect, and they would come to the end of their troubles. Father LeClercq, and one who perhaps had the story from him, are the only writers who emphasize this supernatural feature of the religion of the Gaspesians. It has been suggested that it may be a totem sign, perhaps originally a bird which may have gradually lengthened its wings and tail until it assumed the shape of a cross, or perhaps it was introduced through some indirect Christian influence.

Father LeClercq's chief contribution to the Gaspesians was the hieroglyphics which he invented to help them to remember their prayers. They could neither read nor write, of course, and

he found them making marks on the birch bark to help their memories, so he invented a system of picture writing with which the prayer books were annotated. These prayer books were adopted by other priests; and some of the books, much worn and tattered, are still found in parts of Cape Breton. A friend of mine told me of being shown one by a Roman Catholic priest in his Cape Breton parish. But the Micmacs are fast disappearing, and those who are left have received some sort of education, so that the pictures are no longer needed. The books are a curiosity even now.

The "Bay" railroad, which carried the first expeditionary force to Gaspé Harbour in 1914, and which was taken over by the Canadian National Railway two years ago, was built by British capital. I heard it boasted that the building of it caused the failure of the Charing Cross Bank. Certainly it never paid large dividends. It follows the line of the Bay Chaleur, skirting the cliffs so closely that at times it is necessary to summon all one's fortitude to view with composure the enchanting waters of the Bay tossing at one's feet. The roadway has often been menaced by waves, and I remember seeing men at work removing it to safety several feet inland.

With the sea on one side and the Shish Shocks, the local name of the range of hills which runs the full length of the peninsula, on the other, the journey is very delightful, and here and there it develops into extraordinary beauty. The train leaves the main-line of the C. N. R. at Matapedia, and follows the Restigouche until it widens into the Bay Chaleur somewhere below Campbellton. There is an Indian Reservation at Cross Point, and a large monastery and church under the care of the Capucians. It has been stated that the only paper printed in the Milicite Language issues from this Reservation. A little below this, just about the head of the Bay at Point a la Garde, the last naval battle between the French and the English for the supremacy of Canada was fought, and the remains of six or seven French vessels are said to be sunken off the shore. When Lord Stanley was Governor-General of Canada, he was so charmed with the beautiful Cascapedia River that he built a fishing lodge on its banks. I overheard two gentlemen on their way back from a fishing trip talking on the train, and one of them said that the second largest salmon ever caught by hook had been taken in the Cascapedia, the other coming out of the Tay in Scotland. The figure which remains in my mind is sixty pounds, but it is some years ago now, and I may be mistaken.

At Paspediac, midway between Metapedia and the outer terminus at Gaspé town, are the headquarters of the Robin's Co.;

and beside the warehouses and the homes of the officials, there is a large store at which almost anything may be obtained. For the remaining hundred miles, fish as an article of commerce dominates the coast. It obtrudes itself upon every sense, fishing boats are pulled up on the beaches or dotted over the bay, men in overalls are preparing the night's catch on the greves. Split fish in various stages of drying are stretched out on the frames, or piled up, ready to be carried away.

But no story of the Gaspé Peninsula is complete without mention of Isle Percé. Successive storms of centuries have drilled a hole through the thinner end. Hence its name. It has been described as a long precipitous wall, 288 feet high and about a third of a mile long, connected with the mainland at low tide, but quite an island at high water. To others it suggests a fortress guarding the entrance to the Bay. Sir Gilbert Parker uses it in one of his romances *The Battle of the Strong,* and sends his escaping hero to the top, where he is able, with the aid of the dauntless heroine who follows him, to withstand a siege and repel the attack of his enemies. This remarkable feat could not be accomplished to-day. The sides are too steep to be ascended, and the top is inaccessible to any creature without wings. It remains a stronghold, garrisoned only by the sea birds. This rock and the island of Bonaventure nearby are bird sanctuaries.

It is one of the chief entertainments to row round the island and visit the nurseries of the cormorants, gulls and gennets. The best time to see them is when the babies are young and cling in long quivering rows to the ledges and crannies of the cliffs. The apprehensive parents patrol the coast looking for trouble, and the rash visitor who dared to tamper with their offspring would have to reckon with a violent assault from outraged papas and mammas, as well as be liable to the stern hand of the law. The steep cliffs of Percé and Bonaventure Island are quite unusually marked, the bright red and grey stone mingling in a distinctive way which is very striking. Geologists delight in their formation, and have come great distances to study them. The Indian accounted for their appearance in a way of his own, rather at variance with the scientific method. He said that far back in the mountains lived an ogress with a passion for collecting and killing girls, carrying them about in her apron. With her seven-league boots, she thought nothing of stepping across to the Island, where she washed her apron and hung it to dry over the cliffs. The bloodstains of her victims streaked the rocks red.

Behind the village a winding path leads to the top of Mt. St. Anne, where there is a shrine to the patron Saint, which on

the feast of its dedication draws processions of worshipping pilgrims. This hill top must have a charm to awaken devotion; for when the Recollect fathers arrived with their Christian message, they found that the Indians on the first of May journeyed thither to greet the sun with elaborate religious ceremonials.

Besides the habitants and Channel Islanders, there is a considerable sprinkling of Scottish people, and there are some descendants of the U. E. Loyalists. These are found more in the country of Bonaventure. There was one hardy specimen of the former whom I shall always remember. His name was Sandy, and he sold me what fresh meat I was able to obtain during the closed season. Others might be unable to force their way through the drifts, but there was seldom a storm too great to prevent old Sandy from fulfilling his promise. Covered with snow, icicles dropping from his eyes and nose, almost breathless from contending with the wind, he would stamp into the kitchen with his "western beef."

But one day he did not come, then another and another, and I began to grow uneasy. Then I got a message that he was ill, and with a friend I went to see him. The house was spotless; his wife, a little faded wisp of a woman, seemed very insignificant beside her forceful husband. Poor Sandy looked very pitiful and out of place in the little wooden bed drawn up to the window, and his pathetically faint voice was touching in the extreme. This was the first time in his seventy-nine years that he had ever been confined to bed. Once he had smallpox, but he had not let it get the better of him. Driving home from Gaspé at Pabos he called in at the hotel and told the landlady that he felt ill, but she suspected smallpox and told him that he could not stay, as then her house would be "flagged" and she would lose her customers. So, giving him a lunch and a cup of hot tea, she advised him to go home. He felt a little weak about the heart, but he had a "dandy horse," and saying "Sultan, take me home" he threw down the reins and trusted to the discretion of the animal. When the doctor saw him, he confirmed the landlady's suspicions and "flagged" the house for forty days. But Sandy utilized the time hauling his winter's wood. He never brought me any more meat, and I missed him very much.

The town of Gaspé has always cherished the hope that it might become a winter port. All things are possible, but at the present time it seems unlikely. The improved means of transportation may do a great deal to advance the Peninsula as a summer

resort. I do not see how the winter can be conquered, and I for one would not have it other than it is. Never shall I forget the shining brightness of the snow, the dazzling sunlight, and equally brilliant moonlight, the darting snappy Aurora Borealis scurrying across the heavens like broken rainbows. Or again, the diversified beauty of the Bay Chaleur, at the lower end never quite frozen over, grey and sulky one day, the next vivid azure blue, or opalescent in the peace which precedes the storm, or dark and lowering as it is under heavy menacing clouds, or whipped into spray by the wind, or glowing in the superb magnificence of a radiant sunset. Yes, it is in winter that one learns the majesty of its vast and lonely space, and the penetrating influence of its solitude.