

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

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DR. ANTOINE VON IFFLAND IN GASPÉ

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Born at Quebec of German and French parents, Antoine Von Iffland studied medicine there and at London, Paris and Edinburgh.

He established a medical practise at Quebec in 1820 and with Dr. F. Blanchet founded THE DISPENSARY where he taught and held seminars on anatomy.

The public, learning of the way he obtained bodies for dissection by raiding the local cemeteries, rose in wrath and sacked his dwelling in 1823. He took refuge at Sorel, became interested in that town, and wrote its history. Ten years later he returned to Quebec where, in turn, he was resident doctor at the Marine Hospital, the Beauport Asylum and the Grosse Ile Quarantine station.

He died in 1876.

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EXTRACTS OF REPORT OF DR. VON IFFLAND ON HIS VISIT TO GASPE

PURPOSE OF THE VOYAGE (1821)

The Legislature having granted a substantial sum of money to promote vaccination in the Province, I was chosen by a bureau created for this purpose by His Excellency, the Earl of Dalhousie, to provide such service to the citizens of the District of Gaspé. The distance involved and the dangers of so formidable a mission led me to hope for recompense that would, at least, be equal to the loss of my wide practise which would suffer considerably during my five months absence. However, the purpose of my voyage was not mercenary, for I had long wished to visit this lower part of the Province so as to be more knowledgable as to the illnesses typical of the region.

I must record, with regret, that my expectations were almost frustrated on arrival there, since instead of making observations concerning my profession I was obliged to spend most of my time listening to and deciding legal questions, settling quarrels, soothing problems, ending family squabbles similiar to the kind of disputes that caused civil war between the various Scottish clans in the time of Bruce and Wallace. For it was observed that many of the Peace Officers of the District, either because of ignorance or the restrictions of the Administrator on their authority, exercise so little power that those who can inspire fear by physical force or menace and commit the gravest crimes with impunity.

As it is my intent to expose only the facts, I shall limit myself in this account to those that came to my attention and knowledge so that being made public they have established proof to support them.

DOUGLASTOWN

I landed at Douglastown about the 12th of May, 1821. It is a small village of some sixteen families, predominately Irish and Catholic, with the exception of Mr. Henry Johnston, the Deputy-Collector of Customs. The men are wholly occupied in fishing and

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the women use their leisure time to till the soil and plant potatoes - the only crop they raise. In going about to vaccinate the children, I had the opportunity to learn about the neighbourhood and its resources.

I found that the fishery, which consists mainly of cod, herring and mackerel, is now diminished considerably in comparison with former years (the report of the Commissioners has provided a satisfactory explanation for this decline) and that the price of fish has fallen greatly. Cod, which formerly brought in 20 or 25 shillings a quintal, now scarcely commands 10 shillings in exchange. Nonetheless, household provisions and other necessities of life are exorbitantly expensive. People often said that they were barely able to exist on the proceeds of their summer work. The merchants make great gain, selling their goods at a high price and often making more than 100 per cent profit, considering that they take fish in exchange at less than market value.

Having a copy of the report of the Commissioners appointed to examine land claims, I sought the opinion of the best informed persons in my leisure time on this report. They seemed convinced that the inquiry had proceeded in the most satisfactory and judicious manner and that the recommendations of the Commissioners for the improvement of the District, if adopted, would assure the future and survival of their families. However, they seemed to be apprehensive of delay in the award of the lands granted and were very concerned that they might be obliged to incur expense to obtain title to land, i.e. proces verbal, an indispensable document requiring the services of a land surveyor in making an exact plan of the land claimed. As I knew little about the District I couldn't advise them concerning this, but in the short time that I was aware of their situation I came to believe that the wisest plan for the Government would be to let the matter rest for the next few years. Should land be granted at this time, certain foreign individuals, who are creditors of the inhabitants, would not hesitate to seize their lands and, in view of the monopoly that they exercise, take possession of two-thirds of the land in the District. I propose to study the situation further during my visit.

GASPE

On reaching Gaspé I gave Mr. Johnston the letters of reference from my friends, Mr. Christie and Dr. Morrin, and the hospitality extended to me throughout my stay in Douglstown merits my entire gratitude. I cannot thank enough these two gentlemen and other friends whose kindness was so helpful to me in this vast land; but as the observations I make herein are intended to be of particular help to those who may visit the region, I shall not say more, other than to note how easy it is to listen to calumny - the more so as I had no acquaintance with other people of the area who were referred to daily in the most humiliating terms by my host, but whose honour and probity I had occasion to come to admire later in my travels. It did not take me long to conclude that I, in turn, might be subject to the same reputation attributed to them.

Perhaps I will be reproached for not having been sufficiently appreciative of one from whom I received favours; Yes, without doubt, and I shall take, with pleasure, every occasion to extend to him my gratitude for the care and attention he extended to me throughout all of my stay with him; but duty and frankness require, truth and honour inspire and the desire to show myself worthy of the name Canadian, demands tribute to those who serve in this deserted place. Those who want to know the general character of the persons who live there, should, as I have, become aware of it through their own experiences.

THE STATE OF MORALITY

Some time previous to my arrival a person by the name of Dionne, a Grand Grève merchant, was attacked by several vagabonds who threatened him with death if he didn't hand over some of his goods. When he refused they mistreated him severely. Having escaped from them, he sought out Mr. Johnston (Justice of the Peace) so as to lodge a complaint against them. As no one would witness, as required for swearing out of a warrant, his complaint could not be acted upon. This poor chap had to live subject to the insults of those rascals, who thus profited from the weakness of justice. Later, they returned, entered his store openly, and carried off most of his goods. On my arrival, he asked me as to what he could do. I strongly advised him to appeal again to Mr. Johnston. He did so,

but his complaint had to be dismissed for the same reason as before. He thus had to endure the loss of his goods and be exposed, without recourse, to the attacks of these brigands. It is in such manner that the exercise of justice is degraded and the way left open to new depredations.

#### A FANATIC

Some time later a fanatic (religious) by the name of Hiram Lord arrived at Grand Grève as leader of a group of equal fanatics, nearly all from Jersey, the Channel Islands. For some time he preached his detestable doctrine by day and night in all liberty, not only in the Methodist chapel but in various private homes and even on the seashore. His doctrine proclaimed the wrath of God, which, he asserted, was the main purpose of his mission. He affirmed that there was no redemption for the human race; all were condemned to Hell without any remission. He had such horror of the Catholics that, helped by members of his sect, he cut off the crosses of the tombstones in their cemetery and desecrated their little chapel. For their part, the Catholics, and above all the Irish, did not remain passive and didn't hesitate to threaten total ruin to the possessions of the Methodists. They entirely demolished the Methodist chapel, broke up the pulpit and pews and mistreated cruelly the poor minister and many of his congregation. The minister had to take refuge in the storehouse of Mr. Le Mesurier to escape from the vengeance of the enraged Irishman.

These terrible deprivations were becoming so serious, and with so much to fear from this fanatic who had usurped religious authority, and from his adversaries, that I suggested to Mr. Johnston to be authorized to examine him so as to see if his mind was deranged; thinking that on the basis of my report, he might be put away in some secure place. Accordingly, having examined his character, lifestyle and former actions with particular care, it was my conclusion that he was insane, likely a maniac, and I recommended that he be sent off to Quebec. However, I considered that my report would not be more than a formality. I have had no further news since on the fate of this extraordinary apostle. But I do know, in common with all the people of Douglastown, Grand Grève and St. George's Cove, that had I not intervened in this crisis, as a government official,

the fishery and possessions of the Methodists would have been destroyed entirely by the Irish Catholics.

#### ABUSE OF ALCOHOL

As fishermen consider that strong liquor is one thing that is essential to their life, there is nowhere, I believe, that it is dispensed so freely as in the Gaspé district. The consequences of its immoderate use, which turns men into savages, are so dangerous that sober citizens live in fear of drunken brutality. Drinking sprees produce such odious scenes that not only those who interfere in quarrels are afraid, but even more, those who find themselves involved by sheer chance. At Douglastown I witnessed two or three occasions when I thought that drunken savagery would have fatal consequences for Mr. Johnston, his family and myself. One day a gang of these savages came to Mr. Johnston to try and exchange an axe for more rum; when he refused they gathered other savages as drunk as themselves and, axe in hand, threatened to massacre all of the family. They were about to carry out their threats when Mr. Thomas Johnston, a man of prodigious strength, put them to flight with the aid of several inhabitants.

To conclude my observations on Douglastown, I will cite one other example of the power and conduct of justice that I observed. Acts of injustice that are committed in this far-flung district so revolt the human mind that the reader may well conclude that the English possessions in North America are far from being entirely civilized.

As many traders in this region seek to exchange their goods for fish, and as such goods are most often the strong liquor which is so extraordinarily craved by the fishermen, there is no trouble for such traders to exchange at excessive profit. They set up shop, fish are exchanged for liquor, and the vilest scenes of dissipation follow. At one of these Gaspesian trading posts a man named Reid, of normal size and strength, was set upon and terribly beaten up by an Irishman of giant stature and prodigious strength. It was a hot day and Mr. Johnston was sitting beside his open window. I was busy writing nearby when I noticed a man grab my notebook, which I had left on an outside window sill and hurl it at a pursuer who was out to kill him.

power of the law. The unfortunate wretch he had it in for was unable to obtain a warrant or any other help against his enemy, who lay in wait for him. Thus he was open to fresh attack and that before the very eyes of justice.

NOTE - Sections of the report on the administration of vaccine and contagious diseases have not been included here.

### GASPE BASIN

I visited Gaspé Basin towards the end of May (1821) and found it to be, in my opinion, the most beautiful and secure harbour in all of North America. The most distinguished citizens who live near the harbour are the O'Hara's, the Rev. Suddard and Mr. Stuart (Stewart), all of whom received me with the most generous hospitality and to whom I shall ever be grateful. Accepting the gracious invitation of Mrs. O'Hara, widow of Major Hugh O'Hara, I lodged at her home. The many, well-informed persons that visited with her informed me concerning the region and its resources. Salmon fishing is a side line - few persons taking more than eight or nine barrels during the season. Messrs. Janvrin have large buildings for the storage of fish and all through the summer there are ships in harbour loading cargo for foreign lands.

### MAJOR O'HARA

Major Hugh O'Hara, Deputy Collector of Customs, whose integrity many miss today, died in August, 1818. Here are the circumstances of his death. A ship, the ROYAL EDWARD, with some one hundred immigrants on board, arrived at Gaspé in July. Many of the passengers landed to seek food and water. There were a number of persons on board with a contagious fever. Mr. O'Hara, with his unfailing zeal, spared no effort to help these unfortunate persons. He caught the fever from them and died a month later. He had opened his house to many of the sick and, by his efforts, contributed greatly to checking the spread of the contagion. Despite the fact that his death resulted from his extraordinary devotion and that members of his family were also victims of the disease, the widow of this gentleman who had served as an officer of the Government with merit for thirty years, has yet to be granted a pension by the Legislature.

FISHERY AND COLONIZATION

At Gaspé, large fields of cleared and cultivated land testify to the fertility of the soil. Most of the inhabitants thus obtain an honest living. Land is generally cleared by setting fire to the woods; this I observed all summer. The losses that result from this imprudent method are so serious that the practice should be prohibited by the severest penalties. Humanity and justice would better be served for what Government allows an individual the right to set fire to his house and, as a result, that of his neighbour.

At the beginning of June, when it was very warm, and the air very dry, some persons set fire imprudently in various woodlots so as to clear land and the most terrible consequences followed. Fire consumed the woods for a league and a half (Note- 1 league equals 2.5 miles, approx.) and burned down five houses; indeed the fire was so violent that it menaced the woods of all the land bordering Gaspé Bay. The Protestant (Anglican) church was burned to the ground four hours after the congregation had met in it for Service and had it not been for the efforts of the populace, a vessel in the ship-yard would have suffered the same fate. The whole sky seemed to be on fire and many believed that the fire would spread much further. Happily, rain fell the next day, and continued to fall for a week.

Most of the people live on the West side of the Basin. The principal occupation is whaling but in the late years the price of whale oil has fallen, with the result that profits have been greatly reduced. If the situation does not improve they will be in debt; indeed I dare to predict that if circumstances do not improve for the fishermen, every last one of them will soon be bankrupt.

Having met the agent of Messrs. Janvrin at the Basin, I learned the state of that firm's fishery from him. Consequently, I can repeat my earlier observation that if the inhabitants were to be granted the land they have claimed, two-thirds of it would be shortly in the hands of outsiders. Messrs. Janvrin, in business here for a long time, and providing all things necessary to the inhabitant's life and pleasure, is the only firm giving credit. It is their experience that those who buy risk ruin. I personally observed that the income of people barely allowed them to exist and that they were

obliged to incur debt beyond the value of their land and fisheries. Should foreclosure occur, Messrs. Janvrin would become, unquestionably, owner of all their property. Such a situation would create a monopoly whereby a few individuals would become seigniors of this part of the district.

NOTE - Three paragraphs on monopolies have not been included here.

### EDUCATION

As it is education that distinguishes civilized man from the savage, and science that is the surest path to the social rights of humanity, I was often dismayed to observe the degree of ignorance prevalent in this region. I blush to say so, but persons who conduct wide-spread business scarcely know how to sign their names and, when they do write, it is by routine rather than reasoning. That is the extent of their science, but vanity, that misery common to all men, causes them to believe that they are wise even when they don't know the letters that form their name.

I report here an example of the science of one of the most prosperous fish merchants. During suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act he came to Mr. Johnston's home and, with the eloquence of Cicero, hands on hips, he said, with authority: "Sir, as you read all the papers, is it true that in the Old Country they have suspended the HICUS POCUS Act?". Mr. Johnston told me of this himself. One day the same chap stopped me to inquire the reason for my visit. To try and rid myself, I felt obliged to reply to all of his inept questions. Aware that I was a doctor, he said: "You must talk Latin then."; to which I replied, "PRO TEMPOR !"

There had been a schoolmaster at Douglastown in recent years but he left following differences of opinion with the local people. His school does not seem to have been a success because only eight or nine pupils attended, and then only in winter. I observed that in summer every child old enough to walk is put to some useful task in the fishery. Only families that have some means send their children to school in summer; in the case of Douglastown that applies only to Mr. Johnston's sons. The schoolmaster to whom I have referred, a man named McNeil, is presently at Gaspé, where, owing to the distance between homes and the bad state of the roads for most of the year

is virtually impossible for him to teach school. I cannot undertake to predict how education can be promoted, given the present state of things.

#### OTHER SETTLEMENT

Behind the Basin, on the south side of the Bay, is a little cove called L'Anse aux Cousins, inhabited by two or three families that live on the produce of a few small farms. Messrs. Boyle, the best known and most successful whalers of the whole Gaspé district, have furnaces there with enormous cauldrons in which they melt down whale blubber after it has been cut up into pieces. I judged the construction to be crude though I was prevented from making a close examination because of the stench and pollution.

Opposite this cove, to the north-west, live several families; others as well near Gaspé. Fishing is the main trade of all. I cannot record any particulars of these settlements - they form part of the area I have described above.

Not far from Douglastown, as already mentioned, is Grand Grève, including St. George's Cove. To the right is Little Gaspé, while to the left are the premises of Messrs Janvrin and other prosperous traders who handle much fish. The men who are employed in these stations are almost all from Jersey, but during the summer some one hundred Canadiens come there from the parishes (those along the St. Lawrence east of Quebec) to work. They take back 1000 LOUIS (French coin worth some 17 shillings) to a parish such as St. Thomas where there is little in the way of business.

There are two small churches there; one for the Catholics, who are predominately Irish, and the other for the Methodist Jerseymen.

There is little cultivated land because the mountain slope lacks soil and also because most of the people are busy at fishing.

As long as the river (the St. Lawrence) is open many ships come to load and unload; this is profitable for the local folk. These traders have a stock of dry goods and other necessities and provide competition for the resident merchants. Trade has so expanded in recent years that, were it not for the fact that the inhabitants are bound by indebtedness

to the resident merchants, they could purchase all kinds of goods at less ruinous prices. The main reason for the sale of such trader's goods is the difference of their prices in comparison with those charged by the resident merchants. Some of their prices are little above market value. For example, they sell a sack of flour for four "piastres", while the resident merchants charge twelve; molasses for four shillings a gallon while the local price is nine and ten shillings; shoes for six or seven shillings while the local merchants charge much more. It is unfortunate for the inhabitants that these traders do not bring in salt, which is indispensable for fishermen, and which they must buy locally at an exorbitant price.

En route from Grand Grève to Saint Peter, a distance of four leagues, I didn't see much of interest except a little settlement named Seal Cove where two or three families of fishermen live. In time this spot may become more populated; a number of "emigres" are already clearing land and building fishing shacks. The cove has a very narrow entrance but runs well back into the woods. It is a snug harbour for fishing boats and like craft.

Saint Peter has five resident families and Mal Bay, half-a-league distant, has more than forty families of various nationalities.

[ An account, "MAL BAY BEFORE 1801", by Doris and David McDougall, was published on September 2, 1981, by SPEC ]

In certain places the soil is fertile but only potatoes are grown. Messrs Janvrin had an extensive fishing station at Saint Peter but, having decided to sell all of their property in the district, they sold out to Colonel Johnston. This gentleman, who at one time owned nearly all of Saint Peter, has now no more than half of it. He has a good house there but does not live in it. It belonged formerly to his father-in-law, Mr. McPherson, and is completely furnished with things obtained as a result of extensive business.

The residents, in general respectable folk, employ many persons, particularly Canadiens from the parishes. At Mal Bay, in particular, where there is an extensive fishery, they provide work for many Canadiens, who are valued as skilled fishermen. Some are paid wages; others fish at "half-line", which is to say that half of the catch goes to the owner of the land and boat and the other half to the

fisherman. Mr. Bond, a very well-informed man, lives at Saint Peter. His home is sought out by travellers as all those who visit Saint Peter regard his hospitality highly. Despite the fact that Mr. Bond has much more talent than most of the government employees of this district, he has no official position. His son-in-law, Mr. Buckley, has the same distinguished qualities.

Here, as in most other parts of the region, travellers face many problems on account of the roads which do not always permit travel from one settlement to another. Travel can be expensive when trips must be made at a time when the boats are out fishing. Since two fishermen can catch three or four quintals of fish worth eight or nine "Piastres" in a day, it is incumbent on the poor traveller to make his trip worth their while. If he is not prepared to pay the shot he could be held up at a given settlement for most of the summer.

### PERCÉ

Before reaching Percé, which is some ten miles from Saint Peter, the traveller is struck by the sight of this enormous rock in the sea, a little to the north. Its height is close to one hundred and thirty feet...It is remarkable for its two arches or openings pierced through the lower part. Boats can pass through these at times. Many species of birds make their home on its summit and seem often to cover it. Few persons have been able to reach the top of this prodigious rock. I was told, however, that two or three had made the climb with the aid of ropes and ladders. Among them was Mr. Moriarty, who remained there a considerable time. If I recall correctly, he collected some five hundred dozen eggs and hoisted a flag at each end of the rock. He also found good hay growing up there.

Percé is divided into two parts - North and South. To the North is a fine hill called Mont Joli, from where there is a panoramic view. As this hill overlooks the sea, many people visit it for picnics on fine summer days. They take tea and enjoy the salubrious air. The young find it a pleasant place for a Sunday stroll.

Because of its location, extensive fishery and trade Percé ranks as a commercial center. I find it difficult therefore to understand why the Government has established the Customs at Douglastown, some eight leagues distant. It would be much more convenient for the

European and other foreign traders arriving by sea to have the Customs at Percé. It would save them a long circuit to obtain Customs clearance which is required to load or unload their vessels. This trip to Douglastown is inconvenient for the traders and bad for business. If ships were to be granted free access to all ports it would enable a quicker turn-around and help commerce. Several captains of ships from Caraquet, dealing in oysters, told me on more than one occasion, that having gone to Douglastown for the required papers, they found it impossible to leave because of a change in the wind. Such delay cost them their cargo.

### APPLICATION OF JUSTICE

To say that Percé is the least policed place in the district is not exaggeration. In my opinion the nomadic North American tribes at the time of discovery did not exhibit such striking lawlessness as can be seen daily in this little corner of the world. The danger of travel by night in these parts is beyond imagination. Travellers, no matter who they may be, are often insulted and, what is worse, threatened with the loss of their lives and possessions. There are a number of places in the district where those charged with crimes in foreign lands have settled and continue to carry on their depredations. The barbarous acts that have occurred here are sufficient, I believe, to justify the action of Mr. Fox, who, for more than fifty years, was the nemesis of such vagabonds.

This respectable man, a worthy peace officer, has been obliged often to act, not only as Judge, but also as Bailiff, in apprehending and holding in fetters of his own construction, those guilty of criminal acts that he could vouch for. He even had a place made where he could personally whip such criminals. These measures, arbitrary though they were, had a salutary effect. The law here, due to the weakness of its agents, is sometimes obliged to let known crimes go unpunished.

I am persuaded that such punishment was necessary in most cases for the common good of peaceful citizens. But it is too degrading for a magistrate to have to actually punish such villains. For any man is open to error when he acts on his own. A fatal error may result from false zeal. Sometimes partisanship or particular interest may influence

an administration of justice in spite of the best of intention.

There is a Catholic chapel at Percé and while I was there a missionary arrived to serve it. (Rev.C.Aubry 1821-1823) Two hours after Mass, however, the roads were full of drunkards.

A nice Protestant chapel is presently under construction at little expense. [ NOTE - The Rev.C.E.Roy, in his book, PERCÉ, states: "Apparently the first Anglican church in Percé was built by the Rev.Knagg in 1820...It was erected in the center of Cap Canon beside the small enclosure which served as a cemetery...It was named Christ Church and the faithful called themselves the Protestant Episcopal inhabitants of Perce" ]

The Percé fishery is almost entirely in the hands of Messrs Robin, Captain Boucher and Mr.Flynn. They employ a number of Canadiens.

I must not neglect to record here that many of my comments on Percé are based on conversations with Messrs Déchene, Fox, Moriarty and Flynn. They receive strangers with the greatest goodwill and are, I consider, the most respected residents of Percé.

Facing Percé, at a league's distance, is Bonaventure Island, inhabited by several traders, principally from Jersey. They have an extensive fishery there.

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