

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

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ROBERT CHRISTIE

Lawyer, soldier, Member of the Quebec Legislative Assembly for Gaspé and noted historian, Robert Christie was widely and well known in Gaspesia.

His stormy political career will be the subject of another article to be included in Volume II of GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY.

ROBERT CHRISTIE

1787-1856

The imagination is stirred by the following inscription engraved on a marble tombstone in the Protestant cemetery of Mount Hermon overlooking the St. Lawrence river at Sillery, Quebec:

"In memory of Robert Christie, Esq.

A native of Nova Scotia, he early adopted Canada as his country and during a long life faithfully served her. In the war, in 1812, as a captain 4th Batt., he defended her frontier: in peace, during upwards of 30 years he watched over her interests as Member of Parliament for the County of Gaspé; and in the retirement of his latter years recorded her annals as her historian.

He died, at Quebec, on the 13th October 1856, aged 68, leaving behind him the memory of a pure career and incorruptible character.

Integer vitae scelerisque purus."

It is of particular interest to Gaspésians to recall the career and influence of this man who not only was the parliamentary representative for the Gaspé coast for 30 years but who had a unique knowledge of the pioneer English and French families of Gaspesia.

Records of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia indicate that Robert, son of James and Janet MacIntoch Christie was born at Windsor, Nova Scotia January 20th, 1787. His father was listed in the tax rolls of Windsor as a shoemaker. Robert had two brothers, William and James and a sister Isabella.

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Windsor offered opportunity for learning at King's College, founded in the 1780's, chartered in 1803 and still a seat of learning as part of Dalhousie University. Robert Christie graduated from King's or the Royal College as it was often called. His fellow students included a lad, James Stuart, who like Christie would practice Law, win recognition as a judge and be awarded a knighthood.

The Archives of his native Nova Scotia are silent on the date and reasons of Robert Christie's move to Quebec. It is believed that he was in business in Halifax prior to that move. It is known that he was in Quebec some years before the outbreak of the War of 1812 as he read law under the noted lawyer, Edward Bowen, who was named Judge of the Court of King's Bench for Lower Canada in 1812.

There is indirect evidence that Robert Christie was in Quebec no later than 1809 and that there he met and married Mlle Olivette Doucet, daughter of an old and respected French Canadian family. This evidence is based on the obituary of the only son, Dr. Robert Andrew Christie, who died at the Quarantine Establishment at Grosse Isle in July 1837 aged 28 years.

The period prior to the War of 1812 was one of great tension and ferment in Lower Canada and must have been a most stimulating environment for Christie as a student and practitioner of Law. Sir James Craig, of renowned military reputation had arrived as Governor in 1807. Herman W. Ryland, who in the eyes of the French Canadian was "*toujours le mauvaise génie . . . un adversaire fanatique et irreconciliable*", was Governor Craig's advisor and "*eminence grise*" of the administration. Faced with a rising tide of French Canadian nationalism both in the Legislature and the Press, Craig resorted to a series of arbitrary measures - dissolution of Parliament, closing of the journal LE CANADIEN and arrest of the administration critics and direct liaison with London by the intermediary of Ryland. The British Government, alarmed both at the deteriorating

political and social climate in Quebec and concerned with the need to protect Canada in the looming conflict with the United States of America, recalled Sir James Craig and replaced him with Sir George Prevost.

It was during the period of Sir James Craig's administration that Robert Christie graduated in Law and was admitted to the Quebec Bar. He evidently established an early reputation for prior to the War of 1812 he travelled to London to plead before Lord Bathurst on behalf of Monseigneur Plessis with respect to diocesan matters and the Jesuit Estates.

Active service as a Captain, 4th Battalion, on the Canadian frontier during the War of 1812-1814, extended Robert Christie's experience and brought him into contact with fellow officers who would be prominent in the post-war period.

His status as a Quebec citizen is indicated by the following news item of 1817:

"At a meeting of the leading citizens of Quebec held at the Union Hotel & Coffee House, opposite the Place d'Armes in October, 1817, a committee was named for the purpose of taking into consideration the expediency of petitioning the Parliament of Lower Canada for an Act of Incorporation, among other reasons to provide for an elective corporation; to improve the police service and for the internal government of the city generally. The committee named included: Messrs Blanchet; Neilson; W. Henderson; F. Qurout; J. Langevin; H. Black; F. Romaine; Mercier; Lee; R. Christie; Fr. Durette; John McNider; Ch. Jourdain; Th. White; John Goudie."

In 1819 as Secretary of the Gaspé Lands Claims Commission, Robert Christie, with the Commissioners, J.T. Tashereau and L. Juchereau Duchesnay, opened the

first of a series of significant sessions of the Commission in Gaspesia at Douglastown in Gaspé Bay. These hearings provided Christie with the opportunity to meet all those claiming lands along the coast and to gain a unique knowledge of the state and needs of Gaspesians. The Commission Reports that he drafted and signed, and which are preserved in the Journals of the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada, are a rich and fascinating source of information on Gaspesia at that time.

That Robert Christie was much more than a competent secretary of the Gaspé Lands Claims Commission is indicated by his signature on the impressive STATE OATH of 1820, preserved in the Archives of Quebec. Those signing included the following men of influence in Gaspesia:

P.Laforce, N.P.	Gaspé
Robt. Christie, Advocate	Gaspé
Isaac Deschense, J.P.	Percé
William Le Maistre, J.P.	Paspebiac
Farquhar McRae, J.P.	Paspebiac
Thomas Mann, Sheriff	New Carlisle
Rev. John Suddard	New Carlisle and Gaspé
James Sherear, J.P.	New Carlisle
Amasa Bebee, J.P.	New Carlisle
John Gilker, J.P.	New Carlisle
Henry O'Hara, J.P.	New Carlisle
Charles Cavanaugh, J.P.	Bonaventure
Edward I. Mann, J.P.	Nouvelle
M. Le Houillier, J.P.	Nouvelle
Matthew Stewart, J.P.	Carleton
Gedeon Ahier, J.P.	Carleton
J. Pritchard, J.P.	Carleton
Hilarion Dugas, J.P.	Carleton

Because Robert Christie was well and favourably known to the citizens of Gaspesia through his work for the Land Claims Commission, we find his signature on many of the individual land deeds drawn up in subsequent years. He became a Gaspesian landowner

and summer resident himself as noted in the following extract from Mrs. McWhirter's "TREASURE TROVE IN GASPE":

"On the beautiful bank of the Restigouche most pleasantly situated at this place (Cross Point) is the Fraser Estate. This property was first settled in 1787 by Colonel Edward I. Man, U.E. Loyalist from Massachusetts. Later it was occupied by a Colonel Crawford and after him by Robert Christie, historian and representative in the House of Assembly for the District of Gaspé"

A frequent contributor to the Quebec "GAZETTE" during the time of John Neilson as publisher and subsequently to the Quebec "MERCURY", Robert Christie published in 1818: "Memoirs of the Administration of the Colonial Government of Lower Canada by Sir James Henry Craig and Sir George Prevost". This was followed two years later, in 1820, by "Memoirs of the Administration of Lower Canada by Sir Gordon Drummond and Sir John Coape Sherbrooke".

The above MEMOIRS were supplemented and expanded by subsequent writings into Christie's major opus, a six volume "HISTORY OF THE LATE PROVINCE OF LOWER CANADA".

In 1827 Robert Christie was elected to represent the District of Gaspé in the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada. Thus began one of the most bizarre and incredible political careers in Quebec. For when Christie went to take his Assembly seat he was violently opposed by the members of the French Canadian majority and expelled from the House on the grounds that he had, as Chairman of the Quarter Sessions of the District of Quebec, advised the omission of the names of certain reformers from the Commission of the Peace. Between that time and 1834 he was re-elected no less than five times by his loyal constituents of Gaspesia and again expelled each time from the Assembly. Not until the elections of 1841, following the union of Lower and Upper Canada did he succeed in taking his seat in Parliament.

An explanation of this remarkable political experience is contributed by the historian Lemoine:

" . . . On n'eut jamais à lui reprocher une trahison, une défaillance. La fidélité à son drapeau, pour Christie, c'était une religion. Au reste il y avait alors parmi l'industrielle et intelligente population du district "inférieur" de Gaspé une classe d'hommes inaccessibles aux appâts de la corruption électorale, également peu disposés à subir ce qu'il nommaient la dictature du FRENCH PARTY.

Les United Empire Loyalists, établis à New Carlisle, à Douglastown, à la Pointe Saint-Pierre, à Percé, au bassin de Gaspé: les O'Hara, les Sheppard, les Coffin, les Annett, les Boyles, les Murison, les Kennedy, les McPherson, les Johnston, les McConnell, les Thompson et consorts avaient leur mot à dire dans le choix d'un représentant en Chambre . . . "

For more than a quarter century Gaspesia was for Robert Christie a political "promised land", a stronghold from which he could defy the enmity of the Quebec Assembly. The fiery nationalist leader Papineau could, with dictatorial spite, order his followers to vote the expulsion of the cantankerous member for Gaspé. But Christie had only to turn to his free and independent electors of Gaspé to be assured of a renewal of his mandate as their representative. In this epic political test of wills Christie and his loyal Gaspesian supporters won out. From 1841 until 1854 he represented the interests of the Gaspé District as a sitting member of Parliament.

I have before me as I write this the copy of an interesting letter written at Quebec in September 1850 to John LeBoutillier of Gaspé by his son George, a student at Quebec. It reads, in part:

" . . . Mr. Christie desires you his best respects and is very sorry you did not come up; he would have been down himself in the "Alliance" but he was so busy terminating the third volume of

his History that he was obliged to give up the project. He is going to try a bargain with you, that, says he of exchanging his lands between Malbay and Douglastown for the house here on the ramparts . . ."

To the above personal glimpse of Robert Christie can be added that of James MacPherson Lemoine who recalls that the Christie home in Quebec was for many years on the square known today as the Jardin des Gouverneurs, the location of the Wolfe-Montcalm Monument overlooking Dufferin Terrace and the St. Lawrence and adjacent to the Chateau Frontenac. Lemoine recorded his vivid memories of Christie:

". . . le beau, sympathique et respectable viellard à la démarche grave, vetu comme au temps de nos grand-pères, parcourir, en causant avec quelques amis aussi antiques que lui, cette superbe terrasse que Lord Durham nous fit ériger en 1838, surtout le matin en été en attendant que la voix de l'orateur aux Communes ou l'hussier audiencier de Sir James Stuart au Palais de Justice voisin annoçat que la séance était ouvert . . ."

Later Christie's family home was on the street that bears his name in the city of Quebec to this day. The neighbouring street, most appropriately, bears the name of Garneau, in honour of the early historian of French Canada.

The tragic loss of Robert Andrew Christie, aged 28 years, physician and only son of Robert and Olivette Doucet Christie at the Quarantine Establishment at Grosse Isle in July, 1837, was indeed a bitter blow. The social history of Quebec during the successive cholera epidemics is replete with such tragedy and loss.

In 1854 the long political career of Robert Christie ended when he finally suffered defeat at the polls in the election of that year. The two remaining

years of his life were spent in the calm of private life and the enjoyment of his books and his accomplishments as an intimate historian of the political life of his country. During the summer season he returned to the Gaspé coast he knew and had served so well. There in his spacious home on the banks of the Restigouche he met again his Gaspesian friends and shared with them a common interest in the annual return of the salmon to that famed fishing river.

In October, 1856, he died in Quebec. The inscription that marks his last resting place in Mount Hermon Cemetery was contributed by Judge J.B.Parkin, an eminent confrere in Law and family friend.