

GASPE OF YESTERDAY

THE LE COUTEUR FAMILY

Recall of members of this Jersey family
in Gaspesia and review of the JOURNAL of
Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot
Regiment.

Ken Annett



John Le Couteur

LE COUTEUR FAMILYBACKGROUND

A significant reference to the Le Couteur family of Jersey and Gaspesia has been provided by the Hudson's Bay Company magazine, THE BEAVER, in the issue of August/September 1994. There, a book review by Robert Saunders entitled MOST READILY TO WAR, recalls "The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur of the 104th Foot Regiment" as edited by Donald E. Graves, Carleton University Press, Ottawa. 1993. 308 pp. illus. At the request of GASPESIE OF YESTERDAY the Editor of THE BEAVER, Christopher Dafoe, has kindly given permission to use this book review for the information of Gaspeians. Mr. Dafoe, in addition to his role as Editor of the long-established magazine, THE BEAVER, is Vice-President, Canada's National History Society.

Lieutenant John Le Couteur was born at St. Aubin, Jersey in 1794, the son of Captain John Le Couteur and his wife, Maria Dumaresq. The Le Couteur family name was widely known in Gaspesia as evidenced by the following typical references in Mrs. Marion Turk's book on Channel Islanders, THE QUIET ADVENTURERS IN CANADA (Harlo. Detroit. 1979 :

- * Philip, son of Edward and Nancy Le Couteur, born Jersey in 1805 and died at Bonaventure Island in 1892.
- * Henry and John Le Couteur, possibly brothers of Philip, at Bonaventure Island in 1831.
- * John Arthur Le Couteur, Cod Merchant at Fox River. Died c.1871
- * Edward John Le Couteur and Emma Hamon, his wife.
- * Catherine Le Couteur, wife of Henry Ridley Du Val.
- * Susanne Le Couteur, wife of Francois Perchard.

Other references to Le Couteur family members in Percé, Cape Cove, Miscou, Shippegan, Arichat etc.

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Most Merrily to War

By Robert Saunders

**MERRY HEARTS MAKE
LIGHT DAYS**

**The War of 1812 Journal of
Lieutenant John Le Couteur,
104th Foot**

Edited by Donald E. Graves.
Carleton University Press, Ottawa,
1993. 308 pp., illus. \$17.95

For most of us, mention of the War of 1812 conjures up memories of stories in our schoolbooks of gallant Brock charging up Queenston Heights to his death or Laura Secord hastening through the woods to warn of an American attack. Few who are not well versed in the details of the campaigns are likely to recall one of the most dramatic episodes of all — the march of the 104th Regiment from Fredericton to Kingston in the bitter winter of 1813.

We can, therefore, be grateful to Donald E. Graves for the skilful and painstaking manner in which he has edited the journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, a young subaltern from the island of Jersey who had joined the 104th Foot in Canada the year before the march. Although he wrote his journal some years after the event, it is clear that Le Couteur based it on a diary he kept at the time but which has since been lost. He was only nineteen years old in the winter of 1813 and so it is not surprising that his account retains the zest and high spirits that belong to youth. Despite that — or perhaps because of that — it is intensely moving.

The 104th Foot had its headquarters in Fredericton. Since Massachusetts and the other New England states

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opposed "Mr. Madison's War" there was little need for New Brunswick to fear an attack and so when, early in 1813, a fresh American invasion of Upper or Lower Canada seemed imminent, the regiment was ordered west. On 16 February the regimental headquarters and the grenadiers company marched out of Fredericton and another company started on each of the next five days. Le Couteur's company was the last to



John Le Couteur

leave, its bugles playing "The Girls We Leave Behind Us".

"The company," Le Couteur recalled in his journal, "presented a most unmilitary appearance as it marched without arms or knapsacks, in Indian file, divided into squads, so many to each Toboggan, the rear of it being nearly half a mile from the front".

It was an unusually cold winter and enough snow kept falling to make it necessary for each company to break trail afresh. This created difficulties, as Le Couteur noted.

"We frequently lost our narrow snow-shoe track and, if careless, were precipitated into deep snow. One man getting a fall of this kind caused a halt to all those in his rear for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, until he had scrambled out from his cold bath. The inconve-

nience of keeping all the rear at a halt was found so great that it was agreed to march on and leave the straggler to regain his place when he could, which was by no means an easy matter, and made officers and men careful not to fall if they could avoid it, from fear of having to march some distance in the deep snow."

The march would begin at day-break but would continue only until the mid-afternoon so that camp could be made before dark. For the first few days the troops were able to sleep in houses and barns, but once they had left the settlement behind, they had to erect shelters in the woods and sleep closely packed around their fires for warmth.

By the beginning of March, as the regiment struggled towards Rivière-du-Loup, many of the men were suffering from severe frostbite and food was starting to run low. On 4 March Le Couteur recorded that "when we got to the end of our day's march, the cold was so intense that the men could scarcely use their fingers to hew down firewood or to build huts and it was dark before we could commence cooking, if sticking a bit of salt pork on the end of twig and holding it in a fire could be so termed".

As they got nearer to Quebec City, however, they found they were marching along a good, snow-beaten road and food was plentiful again so that "our last seven days passed away merrily under the cheering smiles of the worthy Canadians". Le Couteur adds that "our merry bugles were quite a novel treat to the Canadian lasses". He always had an eye for the girls.

On 15 March the tail of the regiment reached Quebec City where they were greeted by "an immense concourse of people who appeared to consider us quite the lions of the army after our unexampled march". Each company had managed to complete the difficult journey of more than 350 miles in 24 days.

This was not to be the end of their marathon, however. They were on their way to Montreal when orders came through that they were to go straight on to Kingston in Upper Canada. The regiment learned of this on 1 April and some of the men professed to believe it was all an April Fool's joke. But, as Le Couteur drily observed, "the 2nd of April undeceived us; we were off to Kingston".

The arrival at Kingston was dramatic. "On 12 April we were marching up a gentle ascent and, just as the head files were rising it, there was a general exclamation of 'The sea, the sea! ... The ships, the ships!' The whole of us spontaneously broke and ran to witness the novel and interesting sight ... There lay before our astonished and delighted view the town of Kingston, the magnificent Lake Ontario and, what was far more surprising still, a squadron of ships-of-war frozen on its bosom".

In 1831 Le Couteur, now retired and living once again on the island of Jersey, submitted his account of the winter march to the New York newspaper *The Albion* which published it in November of that year. Nearly a century later, in 1930, the *Albion* piece was reprinted in the *Canadian Defence Quarterly* (Volume VII, No. 4) with annotations by Major M.A. Pope.

The remainder of the journal has not hitherto been published. Although there is nothing else in it as dramatic as the Fredericton-to-Kingston march, there is much that will be of interest to historians of the war, especially those parts dealing with the campaign in the Niagara Peninsula in 1814. The whole of the journal deserves to be widely known and it is good, therefore, to have it available in so attractive and readable a format.

Le Couteur relied heavily on a diary he kept continuously from 1812 in writing his journal, which he likely intended to serve as his autobiography. The diary for the years 1812 to 1815 has, unfortunately, been lost but we still have the part dealing with Le Couteur's time in Canada from late 1815 to 1817

and from this it can be seen that many passages in the journal were simply transcribed almost verbatim from the diary. In 1970 Le Couteur's descendants donated the manuscript of the journal to the Société Jersiaise at St. Helier, Jersey. The previous year Joan Stevens had made use of the journal in writing *Victorian Voices*, her biography of Le Couteur.

The journal has a two-fold interest, military historians will welcome it as a first-hand account of army life at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the general reader will have the pleasure of discovering in its pages a fresh and attractive — albeit minor — figure in Canadian history.

The journal gives us few new insights into the higher policy and strategy of the war for the simple reason that Le Couteur was never in a position to learn much about such matters. His was a subaltern's war. What he does provide is an eyewitness description of Canada at war that, in the words of Graves, "is a testament to the courage and discipline of the forgotten victor of the forgotten war — the regular British soldier".

This goes to the heart of the matter. Historians have long maintained that the War of 1812 was won by the professional soldier but this has never been the conventional view. It has, on the contrary, been an accepted part of Canadian folklore that it was boys from the farm and the forge — "the gallant and loyal militia" — who rallied around and, with virtually no help from the regular army, flung back the American invaders. More than a generation ago C.P. Stacey took direct aim at this myth. In an article in *Ontario History* (Summer, 1958) he wrote that although the militia did play an essential role in the war, it was still only a secondary role. It was, he pointed out, the handful of professionally-trained British troops who not only supplied the leadership in the war but also did the lion's share of the actual fighting.

Not long after Stacey's article appeared, another well-known military historian came to the defence of the militia. In an essay in *After Tippecanoe* — studies in the War of 1812 edited in 1963 by Philip P. Mason — George F.G. Stanley argued that in the first year of the war, when the regulars in Upper Canada were few in number, militiamen were the major component of the forces which defeated the enemy at Detroit, Queenston Heights and Ogdensburg. Stanley, however, agreed with Stacey that in the final outcome the militia did not play the dominant role. Nevertheless, what Stacey called the Militia Legend persists and it is to be hoped that the publication of Le Couteur's journal will play a part in setting the record straight.

Military history aside, the chief value of the journal lies in the insight it affords into the character of Le Couteur himself. The portrait of him reproduced on the cover of the book shows a young soldier with an intelligent, sensitive face, kind eyes and a mouth that seems on the verge of breaking into a smile. The title Graves has chosen for the book — *Merry Hearts Make Light Days* — is taken from a sentence in the journal and it perfectly expresses Le Couteur's personality.

Anyone wanting to know what kind of a man Le Couteur was need only read his account of finding and befriending a starving kitten when his regiment was stationed at Queenston in the fall of 1814. It is a vivid and humorous sketch, somewhat in the manner of Frederick Marryat and complete with the racy dialogue of the officers' mess. (Le Couteur had an ear for the vernacular that a novelist might envy.) A summary of the incident would not do Le Couteur justice. Suffice it to say that it ended with the grateful kitten, now fully restored to health, following Le Couteur wherever he went and even accompanying him onto the parade ground, much to the amusement of the troops.

It is no wonder that a man such as Le Couteur was strongly opposed to the terrible floggings that were stan-

hard punishment in the army at that time. He preferred to devise milder forms of discipline rather than report his men to higher authority and thus subject them to courts martial and the lash. His compassion and good sense paid off and, he says, his "kind and devoted soldiers ... understood my meaning perfectly and appreciated it — their honour was mine". Once, when he called for a few volunteers to accompany him on a dangerous mission, every single one of his men stepped forward.

He sounds like an altogether estimable young man and it is pleasant to learn that when his military career was over, he returned to his beloved Jersey and there lived a long, useful and happy life, dying at last as Sir John Le Couteur in 1875 at the age of 82. By that time, the young man of the portrait had acquired a flowing white beard.

Graves has written an introduction supplying details about the journal and sketching Le Couteur's career after leaving Canada. Copious notes at the end of each chapter identify nearly everyone mentioned by Le Couteur. There is a good selection of portraits, woodcuts and drawings, although some maps — especially one of the famous march — would have been helpful. ◆