

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE TRAPPER IN GASPEZIA

The experience of John J.Rowan
from his 1876 book, EMIGRANT
AND SPORTSMAN IN CANADA.

KEN ANNETT

THE TRAPPER IN GASPESIAFOREWORD

Two of the previous articles of GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY, #232 and #318 recalled extracts on Gaspesia from a remarkable old book, THE EMIGRANT AND SPORTSMAN IN CANADA, by JOHN J. ROWAN. A rather rare volume today, this 440 page book was published in London, England in 1876. The views of the author are of particular interest to Gaspesians in that they reflect life in our region 120 years ago. For not only did John Rowan travel extensively in Gaspesia but he spent considerable time here as a sportsman and trapper.

Beyond the scope of this article are the interesting observations of the fur-bearing animals and other fauna of the Gaspesian forests. The characteristics of each and the approach for trapping reflect a profound knowledge of, and experience with, nature. Among the animals thus detailed are the - OTTER; BEAVER; ERMINE; MARTEN; MINK; FISHER; MUSKRAT; FOX; LYNX, in addition to the CARIBOU; MOOSE; DEER; BEAR; WOLF; PORCUPINE, etc.

The reader may well have seen in older Gaspesian homesteads artifacts of the trapping activities of our ancestors. These may have been traps, wire, hand-made wooden stretchers for pelts, dog-collars and sleds, toboggans and compact firearms. I recall the reminiscences of my father regarding his father, in turn, who made an annual trapping expedition to the Gaspesian forests in mid-winter. His only companion, his faithful sled-dog, would sleep beside the loaded sled the night before early morning departure. And as a treasured link with that distant time I have the compact .32 calibre rifle that my grandfather took with him on his trapping expeditions.

THE EMIGRANT AND SPORTSMAN IN CANADA.

SOME EXPERIENCES OF AN OLD COUNTRY SETTLER.

WITH

SKETCHES OF CANADIAN LIFE, SPORTING ADVENTURES, AND
OBSERVATIONS ON THE FORESTS AND FAUNA.

BY

JOHN J. ROWAN.

WITH MAP.

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THE TRAPPER.

I SUPPOSE there is no man who has more pity wasted upon him than the solitary trapper. In the opinion of those who are uninitiated in the mysteries of woodcraft he is the most wretched of mortals. For months and months, often for a whole year, he lives either quite alone in the forest or else with one comrade only. He does without the comforts of civilized life and the pleasures of society. He has no church to go to on a *Sunday*; no doctor to prescribe for him if he is ill. In fact, in the opinion of the gregarious city man, his condition of life is little if at all better than that of a prisoner in a dungeon. But there are two ways of looking at most subjects, and the trapper's life is no exception to the rule. The forest is the trapper's home; there are all his friends, not human ones, but not less dear on that account. He thinks, and I who

have tried the life fully enter into his feelings, that there is no mode of existence so enjoyable as that of the trapper in the Canadian forest. He has no church near him it is true, but it by no means follows that he has no religion. On the contrary, there is a religion in the pine forest, which appeals most strongly to a man's best nature. Nowhere else does he feel so utterly and entirely dependent upon the Giver of all good. Nowhere else can he so fully enter into the feelings of the writer of the

beautiful 104th psalm. He has no doctor to consult, but, except in cases of accident, he never wants one; there is no bad drainage in the woods, no bad smell, no bad ventilation, no epidemics; he has a daily and nightly tonic in the bracing air, and the pure water is the best of medicine; he has no time for dyspepsia and its companion the blues; his fare is simple, but his appetite is good; and on his fragrant bed of boughs, after his hard day's labour is over, he sleeps the sleep that the city man could not buy for millions. To him there is no loneliness so unbearable, no solitude so wearisome, as the solitude of a great city. True, in the latter case he sees thousands of his fellow-creatures every day, but what are they to him or what is he to them? If while gaping in amazement at the human hive he happens to get run over by a cab one or two passers by may turn round to look at him, or even say "poor fellow," but that is all. Truly in the trapper's opinion the loneliness of the city is infinitely more oppressive than that of the forest.

The trapper generally starts for the woods either on foot, with his pack on his back, or else in his canoe. The following are some of my experiences of a year's trapping expedition in the forests of Lower Canada.

I started from the settlement in the month of September, accompanied by an old Micmac, of the name of Andrew, and another young Indian, called Toma. Our destination was a lake 60 or 70 miles from human abode. Our kit consisted of 10 cwt. of flour, 2 cwt. pork (all fat), half a chest of tea, a keg of molasses, a bag of salt, a small assortment of luxuries (such as brandy, rice, curry powder, sauces, pickles, &c.), cooking utensils, blankets, guns, ammunition, axes, and four dozen steel traps. All these things were packed in bags, each bag weighing 100 lbs., in all eighteen packages. I hired a scow and a pair of horses to tow us up a river, and bought a birch-bark canoe. On the fifth day, after infinite exertion (we had to load and unload at least ten times, and "portage" our baggage round several dangerous rapids), we were stopped by a fall, or rather a tremendous rapid. Here the river flung itself over a series of ledges, and then rushed foaming for a mile through a narrow rocky gorge. I now discharged my primitive vehicle, and we proceeded to

"portage" our effects above the falls some 2 miles. Under each of the ledges I have mentioned there was a smooth round basin, in which the water rested itself for a few moments before taking a fresh plunge. These basins were literally alive with salmon and big sea trout. As we had left ourselves ample time before the commencement of the fur season, we were in no hurry to leave this charming camping ground. I was provided with rod and tackle, and enjoyed that sensation so rare in angling, of casting my fly into a virgin pool. In five days, fishing only mornings and evenings, I took sixteen salmon, averaging 20 lbs., and about eighty sea trout, averaging 2 lbs. Besides these the Indians speared thirty salmon; and all these fish we kippered or salted for winter consumption and for bait. When satiated with fish and fishing we embarked in our canoe and continued our journey up the river, having previously *cachéed* the bulk of our provisions and luggage in a "bear-house," i.e. a log hut made bear-proof, to resist the assaults of that robber, ruin.

The scenery on this part of the river was very wild and beautiful. The banks were clothed with a thick-tangled forest of cedar and spruce. In the narrows the foliage of these trees formed a canopy over our heads. In the wider stretches of the river, often dotted with pretty little islands, on which the shell-drakes had their homes, we could see, rising far over the tree tops, the rocky summits of the Shick Shock mountains. The autumn tints were in full beauty, the colouring of the forest was most gorgeous, and the reflections on the water formed an endless and ever-varying panorama. Occasionally, as a contrast to these gay and sunlit scenes, we would pass through a defile in which our stream, narrowing to a few feet in width, would bound and foam through the rocks. In such places the banks, rising almost perpendicularly to a height of 500 or 600 feet, completely shut out the sun, and presented a grand though rather gloomy effect. Here our bark canoe seemed the merest cockleshell; but Andrew and his boy were practised *voyageurs*. Twenty times I imagined that the difficulties in our way were insurmountable, but each time the ready wit of the canoe-men found a method to surmount them. Now they took advantage of an eddy; now by sheer strength and skill they shoved the dancing canoe up a howling rapid; now their keen eyes discern real danger, and our canoe is "portaged" round the obstacle. Although they have never been on the river before, instinct invariably leads them to choose the right course.

Our eyes are delighted with beaver sign all along the river. Freshly cut sticks floating down the stream, and trees cut and felled along the banks denote that the

industrious lumbermen and builders of the forest are hard at work preparing for the winter. At every well-used beaver or otter road we come to, we stop and set a trap. We also make traps for mink every here and there, baiting them with trout, that I can catch at all times by merely dropping a fly or a bait into the river.

Our progress was necessarily slow, and although the distance was only 16 or 17 miles it was noon on the third day before we reached the lake. As our bark emerges from the forest-hidden stream and glides through the unruffled waters of the lake, a flock of black ducks, who have never seen a canoe before, allow us to approach within 50 yards, and two splendid loons seem utterly unmindful of us. The lake appears to be about 10 miles in length by 2 in breadth. Close to the outlet a freshly plastered beaver camp rises out of the water, and on the pebbly beach we discern fresh moose tracks. All these signs denote that man is a stranger here, and in the highest spirits as we eat our luncheon we feast our eyes on this trapper's paradise. We would not on any account disturb this charming solitude by the noise of the axe, so for the present, putting off building a camp, we proceed to explore.

I know of no pleasure so great, no pursuit so engrossing, as when the trapper and the sportsman (for the two pursuits are always associated) breaks new ground. Here we three, white man and Indians, differing in colour, in bringing up, in every respect in fact but one, meet together on common ground. We are all three sportsmen at heart. We would not give a fig, one of us, to stand at a corner of a cover, and have tame birds and beasts driven to us to be slaughtered, but our greatest pleasure is to match our cunning and skill against the wonderful instinct of the wild animals of the woods, and by untiring patience, by hard work, and a perfect knowledge of their habits and ways of life, to outmatch and capture them. I don't know that I have ever enjoyed anything so much as this first evening's paddle on our lake, on "my" lake, I may say, for this noble sheet of water and the surrounding forests for 20 miles were my own for all practical purposes, as much as the Duke of ——'s deer forest in the Highlands belongs to his grace; mine, not by right of my enormous wealth, it is true, but my enjoyment of it not the less sweet on this account.

Twenty brooks and little rivers watering twenty little valleys, discharge into my lake. As we pass the mouth of one of them, Andrew's keen eye detects a beaver, but on this our first evening we want nobler game, and spare his life for the moment. Pursuing our way swiftly and noiselessly along the edge of the lake, we hear a splashing. "Me think-'em moose," whispers Andrew, whose practised ear tells him it is not the splashing of ducks or of beaver.

Our canoe glides through the water like a ghostly craft towards the point from which the noise seemed to proceed. Hardly does the bow round the point when we see, in a little bay covered with water-lilies, a cow moose standing up to her hocks in water. Andrew instantly plants his paddle in the bottom, and holds the canoe as steady as a rock, and shooting close over Toma's head, I mortally wound the moose. Toma finishes her with his single barrel, and the reports of our guns echo and reverberate round the lake, till it would seem that we were in the midst of a general action. Ducks start and quack at the unusual sounds, musquash dive and kingfishers shriek, whilst in the forest we hear a crashing sound at which Andrew says, "Bull-moose, him go." Now that the silence has been rudely broken we pursue the beaver and shoot two of them. That night after supper as we reposed heads under the tilted canoe and feet to fire, the trapper felt as proud as any laird, as rich (in enjoyment of his life) as any millionaire. His manor was as large as a county, and cost him nothing but a little hard work, whilst he had that evening made two entries on the credit side of his account; item, fur \$9; item, butcher's bill for one month;" and as he reposed on a fragrant bed of fir boughs, enjoying his well-earned pipe, he soliloquized, "happy low, lie down; uneasy rests the head that wears a crown."

But if we had our moments of good sport and of enjoyment we had to work hard for them. For the first week we were all employed from daylight till dark in setting traps round the lake, then taking one day to build a winter camp, the Indians went down stream in the canoe to tend the traps. This trip was repeated every week during the "fall," and each time they brought back a load from the bear-house. During their absence on these excursions I occupied myself in trapping musquash, shooting beaver, geese, and ducks, and fishing for trout. What with these pursuits in addition to the necessary cooking and cutting wood I had not an idle moment from daylight till dark. Every evening I paddled to a quiet corner of the lake in a "catamaran"—*Anglicè*, little raft—and called moose.

To lure the uxorious bull moose to his death by imitating the cry of the female might at first glance seem a treacherous practice, unworthy of the name of sport. But on the contrary I know of no sport more fascinating. The stillness of the autumnal evening, broken only by the occasional "call" of the hunter and the footsteps of the approaching animal, the cloudless sky, the painting of the forest, and the reflections on the water, lend their charms. Then the amount of skill required is very great. A first-class "caller" is as rare as a first-rate tenor. Nature has not been bountiful to me in the way of voice, but a few eager moose trusted themselves within range of my rifle, and one evening I towed into camp a magnificent bull, with antlers measuring nearly 5 feet from tip to tip.

Trapping, shooting, exploring, and so on, the time rapidly slipped away. On the 20th of November, when by good luck we had just got our last load from the bear-house, winter, which had already threatened, set in for good, and froze us up in our winter home. Now we turned our attention from water fur to the sable. We made a "sable line" of about 30 miles in length straight through the woods. In this we had 300 or 400 traps, each constructed on a tree stump some 4 feet from the ground, so as not to be buried in the snow. We had a wigwam at the extreme end of our sable line and another in the centre, half-way from our main camp. All winter long we were kept busy attending this line and procuring bait for the traps. Besides, we got an occasional otter and beaver in steel traps set under the ice. As winter advanced the snow got deeper and deeper and the cold more intense, but our camp was warm and sheltered, and firing abundant. No coal bills troubled us. Every now and then, when weather suited, I used to go out on a cariboo hunt with Toma, and from time to time we shot six or eight of these deer, and hauled their carcasses to camp on our trebogens.

On one of these hunts I met with a mischance, which might have been attended with serious consequences. Contrary to my custom I went out alone and unprovided with axe or provisions. I soon came on fresh tracks and became intensely absorbed in hunting them. After a long and tedious stalk I came up to the cariboo and shot one. I then for the first time remarked that the sun had become obscured. Hastily cutting the liver out of the dead cariboo, I endeavoured to take a line through the woods to the edge of the lake, which was at most 2 miles distant. After an hour's hard walking I came upon my own tracks, not 100 yards from where I had shot the deer. In fact, I was lost in the woods, and the day was all but done. It may be asked, "Why not have taken your own back-tracks?" Because a man who has unwittingly walked a circle as I had done becomes utterly stupefied and cannot distinguish out-tracks from in-tracks. This was an awkward position, 3 feet of snow, 40° or 50° of frost, and worst of all, no axe. I saw that I was doomed to spend the night in the open, and I set about preparing for it with a will. Fortunately I found some dead stumps and poles which I managed to pull down and collect before night-fall. Then I was no longer alarmed. I dug a hole in the snow some 6 feet square, using a snow shoe as a shovel. In this pit I lit my fire, and by its light broke fir boughs for my couch. It was not quite a case this of "happy low, lie down," for when I heard during that long night the

trees cracking with reports like rifle shots all around me, I shuddered to think what my fate would have been had fortune not directed me to the dead wood. Next morning the sun rose bright, and at ten I was breakfasting in camp. Andrew remarked jocularly, "Suppose two nights man no come home, sartin he dead." There are two things essential to safety which the solitary hunter should never be without, viz. a box of matches and a pocket compass. With these articles added to a little knowledge of woodcraft he runs little danger.

I do not know a more fascinating study than that of woodcraft. The forest is a perfect library. There is hardly a day or a night in which the student may not learn something new. Signs invisible to the unpractised eye are as legible as the largest type to the old woodsman, who, besides being a close and keen observer, must be a thinker too, for every day he has to match his reason against the wonderful instinct of the animals whose senses of hearing, smelling, and seeing are many times more acute than those of their two-legged hunter. Woodcraft enables him to live in plenty and even in comfort, under circumstances in which the man unread in forest lore would miserably perish.

The mysteries of trapping, though they are my delight, might not interest my readers, so I shall only make a few general remarks about them. For all fur-bearing animals the wood-trap, or deadfall, is the surest. There are as many varieties of these traps as there are fur-bearing animals. They have to be set with the utmost nicety and precision, so that while the deadfall shall come down surely on the devoted back of the animal for which the trap is set, yet

that a lesser bird or beast shall tug at it with impunity. There is one animal and one only that completely baffles the trapper, and that is carcajou, surnamed the "Indian devil." This evil beast if he strikes upon a sable line goes calmly from one end of it to the other robbing every trap. For some animals traps are baited, for others, as for example otters, they are set unbaited in their roads. The baits used are various, fish, flesh, and fowl. Then again the trapper must be a *connoisseur* of scents—not Rimmel's nor Lubin's—but of those that attract fur. The castor bag and the oil bag of the beaver seem to possess a universal attraction. Valerian has charms for some, rum for others, so have pepper, onions, aniseed, asafoetida, &c. In my trapping days I carried a bottle loaded with a mixture so potent that when the cork was drawn everyone sneezed within a radius of 50 yards. Even the steel trap requires skill in the setting, for instance it is quite useless to catch a beaver by the hand or fore foot, the trap must be set in

such a way and in such a position as to catch him by the hind foot. In fact the secrets of trapping are endless and can only be understood by practical experience.

When the fur season ended (about the 1st of June), I was quite sorry to say goodbye to the old smoke-stained camp that had been my home for nearly ten months, and on my return to civilization I felt as shy as a beaver, and often caught myself involuntarily looking on the streets for "tracks." To this day I look back upon my year's trapping with the greatest satisfaction. On that year I solved the problem which has puzzled many a vagabond, viz. to make both ends meet. Besides skins, trophies, &c., that I kept or gave to friends, I sold upwards of 100% worth of fur





