

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

"THE NECKLACE"  
\*\*\*\*\*

From her volume, "ROMANTIC CANADA",  
Victoria Hayward's account of a  
visit to the Magdalen Islands in  
the early 1920's.

KEN ANNETT

## "THE NECKLACE"

### FOREWORD

Some sixty-five years ago a book, "ROMANTIC CANADA", by Victoria Hayward, illustrated by Edith S. Watson, was published in a de luxe edition by Macmillan of Toronto. This interesting, but now rather rare, volume was far from the run-of-the-mill travel literature. As its title aptly describes, its emphasis is one of romanticism with regard to accounts of the various regions of Canada from Atlantic to Pacific.

Two chapters of "ROMANTIC CANADA" are of particular interest to Gaspesians. The first of these, relating a visit to the Magdalen Islands is recalled here.

The characteristics of romantic literature have been well identified by such literary critics as Cowardin and More in their, - "STUDY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE". Taking as example of romantic writing the widely known, "KUBLA KHAN" of Samuel Coleridge, these authorities point out that romanticism -

"...shows the working of an imagination more than normally unrestrained. The pictures it gives us are not unlike many others which the new romantic writers have produced..."

"THE NECKLACE" evokes a mood and memory of a life-style of yesterday. Time and tide have changed much of that. Today's visitor to the Magdalens may find but little of that mood and life-style. But unquestionable this article recalls the impressions of a visitor to the Magdalen archipelago some six decades ago.



HAVING met some notable woman, Queen or Court lady, and been charmed by her graciousness, and having recounted some of the qualities which are component of that grace, one's thoughts turn naturally to memory of her adorning jewels. It is like that with Quebec.

Quebec's outstanding jewels are *Les Iles de Madeleine* in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The earliest French navigators seeing the islands for the first time were so impressed with their beauty, they called them, in the poetic language so natural to those gentlemen-explorers of the sixteenth century, "The Necklace". Time has substantiated the courtly compliment. For that is just what they are—Canada's "Necklace of Pearls" on the bosom of the Gulf.

The pearls of the Necklace are small, and there are not many of them, only six or seven in all, but each is of the finest quality, handsomely strung together on long threads of creamy sea sand—embryo pearls-to-be perhaps—circling to partly enclose an indicated rather than attained roadstead where navigation may find a little shelter from the fury that at times strides about the Gulf.

The Madeleine Islands, though in the path of passing ships, are seldom approached directly except by the staunch little sea-boat of the "Pro Patria", "Lady Sybil", or "Amelia" type, that once a week brings and takes the mails, freight and such passengers as chance affords.

The "Amelia" is a rugged character, a wayward "bird of passage", at one with the unbroken spirit of the Islands she serves. We do not know what Madeleine would do without her. Variations which she chooses to make in the matter of "first ports of call" on the weather wisdom of her skipper, but add to the charm of voyaging in her to these remote objectives.

Coming thus to the "Magdalens" from Pictou, it is in the early morning, when the summer sun tips above the Eastern horizon of waters, that one beholds the first speck of land. Unfolding before you as the Amelia proceeds, a curiously-rounded beehive hill appears above a stretch of land tapering to a long sand-spit edged with curling sea-wrack. Approaching yet nearer, other fair, rounded, treeless hills complement the first. These hills, exclamatory remarks of fellow passengers soon enlighten one, are "Les Demoiselles". They, with the sand-bars, miles in length, are the chief physical characteristics, as it later turns out, of these remote islands.

Then, after coasting miles along, the Amelia picks up an opening between a sand-bar and an island and comes alongside the Government pier at Havre Aubert on Pleasant Bay, Amherst Island.

Of course, we "put up" at Shea's Hotel. It sounds very commonplace, as names go, but Shea's is the heart of the Madeleines. The proprietors are three, (or is it four?) unmarried sisters of what may be briefly summed up as "the land-mark type". Their father before them kept a cottage boarding-house, so the past is theirs as well as every detail of present-day island life. In addition to her work at the "hotel", Miss Mary keeps a little shop on the shingle between Mount Gridley and Amherst and Miss Johanna, beside bringing the palatable food from the kitchen to the table, is the telegraph operator.

"Shea's", too, is the rendezvous of all the "drummers" of Canadian trade on these islands. So that although the Islands have no newspapers, one is here in daily touch with a remarkable ebb and flow of world news, all the more vivid and impressive because of the dramatic, human touches which each raconteur puts into the telling.

But the Madeleines are places where the out-of-doors is constantly offering attractions to win one to wander near and far. The views everywhere reward one's walks. There is, too, a daily excuse to hunt mushrooms on the smooth rounded hills and grassy cliffs which few find themselves able to resist. In this intimate way one comes to know La Demoiselle.

La Demoiselle appeals to the imagination. It is one of those rare spots which remains a high-light of memory. One never forgets climbing over it, following the sheep-paths, feasting on its insular and marine outlook, or watching the rare sunsets, almost tropical in their richness, which are the lord of the day's parting salute to these sea children.

"La Demoiselle" was the expressive name given this hill by those same early French adventurers who first called the whole group the "Necklace". They had the imagination and fancy which pictured the land as a woman, and these fair hills, as the pulsing breasts of the sea-maiden sunning herself, with her sand-spit body awash in the waves. O Canadian sculptor behold a "figure" to hand in Les Madeleines.

Not the least attractive feature of the scenery are the ashes-of-roses colours acquired by some parts of the cliffs, especially those west of la Demoiselle. These colours are wonderfully effective when contrasted against the gray sea, or the velvet greenness of the cliff grass. It was while rambling along these cliffs a few summers ago that Seumas O'Brien, author and sculptor, happened by chance upon an outcropping of clay of so fine a nature that he later took some back with him to "Shea's" and there, in a little studio improvised in the vacant cottage that was the former hotel, he soon had several charming "figures" to his credit, among them, "The Head of a Child" and "An Irish Troubadour", one of those quaint Irish figures of village and road who entertain with stories to the accompaniment of an old fiddle.

The inhabitants of the Madeleines are of Acadian-French descent. The life which centres in the scattered cottages reveals unspoiled the Acadian spinning-wheel, the ponderous loom, and handicraft that takes the raw wool direct from the sheep's back grazing out in the eye of the wind on Les Demoiselles, and converts it into homespun garment, sock, or *tapis*.

The handiwork of the Madeleine spinners and weavers reaches its highest achievement in the *catalogne* or bedspread. Not alone is the work fine but the favourite white ground forms just the right contrast needed to bring out the sweet colours employed in the motif. Not even in the heart of Quebec have we seen any weaving to compare with these *catalognes* of the Madeleines. They catch added character, it often seems, from the looms on which they are made. At Havre Maison, on Alright Island, we once happened on a Madame weaving at an old loom made from the flotsam and jetsam pieces of wood which had at different times been salvaged from the sea—here an upright out of an old mast, there a bar from a broken oar. Madame, with shuttle

from the same source, rudely shaped, in her hand, was working as under the fire of inspiration, her bobbins and wools all scattered about her on boxes and on the floor, the while the attic window by which she sat looked out upon the barachois or lagoon enclosed by sand, and beyond that to the far-stretching gray waters of the Gulf.

In *Les Iles de Madeleine*, catalogues and tapis are heirlooms. Once at Grindstone Island an old gentleman seeing our interest in these fruits of the Island looms, bade his daughter take us into the attic and show us those which his mother had made. There were several sea chests full. And each was of sufficient beauty to justify the old gentleman's pride in them.

Wool is an indispensable raw material in the home economy of the housewives whom circumstances have set down on these islands so far removed from marts of the "ready-made". That is largely the reason why so many sheep are seen everywhere, there being seldom a family but owns one or more. And what fine, clean wool it is! And what excellent flavoured mutton comes to the Shea table via a boat-market from Entry Island.

The chief industry of the Madeleines is mackerel fishing, with cod running it a close second, and lobstering employing a number of old-timers whose day of fishing is done.

The waters about the Madeleines are the magnets of sealers in the Spring. But it is mackerel which chiefly magnetizes the life and sketches the characters especially Madeleinian.

Sprightly white, clinker-built, skiff-like boats are here, boats with long and graceful lines, eager in sailing but of sufficient "beam" to carry the "catch". These harbour in haven-pools which seem to have been scooped out of the waves for just such a purpose. One of these little harbours is called La Bassin, a name which speaks for itself.

The waters about the Madeleines have a curious way of throwing up a sand-bar some distance away from, and parallel with, the beach itself, between the bar and the beach there being a long strip of water of differing widths. This lagoon is called a barachois, and each island seems to have at least one of these. The mackereling appears to centre around the Barachois, perhaps because there is something in the set of the Gulf currents which brings the marine food of the mackerel in their direction, or because the mackerel-boat, with the Barachois behind her, is never without a way of retreat in case of being overtaken by a squall. So, wishing to catch the atmosphere, one has to go down to the Barachois at dusk when the boats begin to come in. Then are seen women coming from all directions in their two-wheeled island-carts with flashing lanterns casting a flare and flicker of light, now brilliant, now dim to extinguishment, as the horses step into a rut or sink in the yielding sand.

The boats, one or two at a time, come hurrying in from the Barachois, unstepping their masts and sails and simultaneously burying their bows in the wet and heavy sand of the landwash. Then is witnessed, a spirited bit of action to be seen nowhere else in Canada. The women pass the supper they have brought to the men, and while these hungrily consume their evening meal on the sands, Mesdames having taken the horses out of the carts, hook the traces on to the boats and before M'sieu can come to their aid, first one and then another has "clucked" to her horses, the reins in the strong hands are taut, the horses are straining and

floundering in the shifting sand, madame or sturdy demoiselle skillfully keeping her own feet and admonishing "*les chevaux*" with a commanding "*Marche donc!*" "*Marche donc!*" which would make any horse obey. Thus is attained the lively progression of the boat up the beach, to the appointed place of safety above the reach of the high tide, however angrily, through the night waves may curl and foam.

If you come here in the early morning, as many as sixty or seventy boats stand gunwale to gunwale on different parts of the long beach, answering the roll call of a great industry.

But it is on the north shore of Amherst, about the sand bar joining Amherst with Grindstone and partly enclosing Basque Harbour, that one sees still other groups and figures essentially of the Madeleines. Women and children, horses and carts, and dog-carts here appear far out from land, afoot in the low water that washes for miles the undersea sandbanks. Women and children and lassies with Breton caps, stand ankle-deep in the water with hand-made three-pronged forks, like the trident of a sea-god, in hand, digging and digging clams for bait, piling them into the receiving baskets and pails, and thence into the waiting carts—the carts in which island horses doze between the shafts, the rising tide lapping their fetlocks. It is a rare sight this clam-digging in the Madeleine barachois! And so far as we know one not duplicated anywhere in America. It occurs only at low-tide and it is therefore possible to pass any number of times at full tide and not see anything of it. But should it once be chanced upon, it will never be forgotten. Never was there a "piece" with so much atmosphere and action. While the tide is still ebbing the women wade far out to the edge of the clam line and begin their uncovering of the mollusc harvest. Even after the tide turns and begins to come in, they still hold their own with a bold front, retreating a few inches only, at a time. Atmospheric indeed is the effect produced by all these people, the horses in the two-wheeled carts, and the tiny dog-carts, when they are half shrouded in a soft wet fog creeping in from sea. Then it is as though Nature wished to reiterate that 'tis she who is the Great Artist, composing Aquamarines that no mere human artist can ever hope to touch.

Sometimes the low tide happens at night. And at dusk one meets the women driving in their carts, the lighted lanterns beside them, lanterns which later in the evening will appear to one looking off to the barachois like so many amphibious fire-flies dancing above the waves and lighting up the restless waters and the night gloom with a ghastly flare.

This night-scene is of even rarer quality than that screened by the day. Certainly this is exclusively a Madeleine canvas.

But the clamming is a serious industry. On it hangs the success or failure of the mackerel-fishing. Only so can M'sieu start out in the little boat early in the morning to fish. Only so can the "Mackerel from the Madeleines" arrive in Halifax to keep busy caulkers and brine-boys, and keep flowing the stream of Canadian export trade in fish.

But not until one passes on the highway at Grindstone some morning when it is too rough for the "Amelia" to make her call at Etang du Nord, and mets the procession of island-carts with their loads of barrels going overland to the public wharf on the lea-side of the island, does one carry any idea of the vast number of "Number Ones" which actually go out from here to Halifax, and thence, to the tables of the world.

It is on "shipping days" that one realizes that Madeleine, no less than Evangeline, is a sport, risking all her business success on the turn of the "barrel".

But fish is everywhere—a summer trade. And summers pass all too swiftly. It is in winter that Madeleine is thrown in upon herself; cut off from the world by the ice for six months of the year.

It is then the Mesdames of the islands—Amherst, Grindstone, Alright, Coffin, Grosse Ile and Entry—settle down to the loom, take the old spinning wheels between their knees; and make the Catalognes, the Catalognes, the equals of which are seen nowhere else in all Quebec. It is in winter the island-artizans choose and blend the colours that make the prettiest "couverts" to use and to lay away in the old sea-chests.

In winter, spinning by the window, madame looks out upon long endless stretches of ice-imprisoned sea, solid masses of the Gulf ice that closes navigation and separates herself and family from habitant families ashore. Yet because "the Sea" is in their blood not one of these Islanders would change places with the people ashore. "What of adventure," inquire they, "is there in inland lives compared with ours, literally held in the sea's hand? *Mais, non.*" The Amelia makes her last trip a few days before Christmas. But even so, although no one can get off the islands after that, news still comes and goes by way of the Telegraph Cable and "Miss Johanna" becomes a figure in the limelight, as operator.

\* \* \* \*

Lying to the North and somewhat apart from the main pearls of "The Neckiace" are "The Bird Rocks".

On the largest of these a lighthouse stands, an aid to navigation. It is a very lonely spot and no one except the lighthouse keeper and his family live there. But these desolate rocks have a claim on Romance through the thousands of wild sea-birds, who in summer make them their habitat and nesting-place. These sea-birds, chiefly the beautiful cafe au lait coloured gannet, have three major haunts in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, at these "Bird Rocks", at Percé Rock and at Bonaventure Island off the Percé-Gaspé shore.

The first signs of human life the lighthouse keeper sees in the spring are brought by the Sealing ships coming into the Gulf after seals that frequent the ice pans.

Usually the keeper of the Bird Rock Light is a Madeleiner from Grindstone or House Harbour. Once, spending a week at Havre Maison we boarded with a widow whose husband had been a keeper of this lighthouse. Graphic indeed were her tales of the weirdness, loneliness and yet fascination of the life. She told, too, what happiness was theirs on seeing the first birds coming in the spring.

