

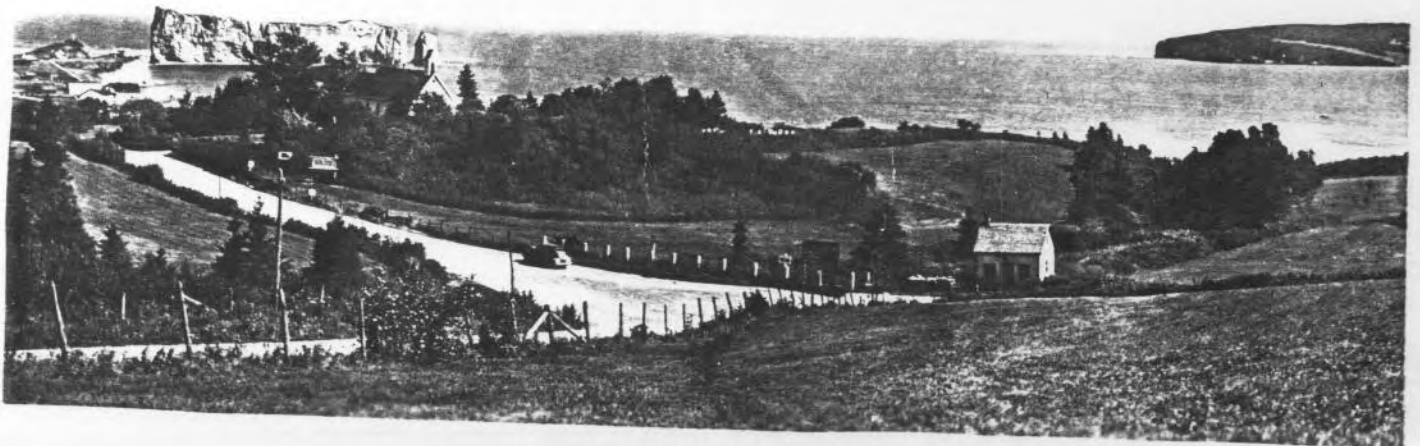
GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

PERCÉ

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From her book, "ROMANTIC CANADA",  
Victoria Hayward's account of  
Percé as she found it in the  
early 1920's.

KEN ANNETT



PERCÉA CHAPTER OF "ROMANTIC CANADA" BY  
VICTORIA HAYWARDINTRODUCTION

"THE NECKLACE", No.170 in the "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" series, presented Victoria Hayward's account of a visit in the early 1920's to the Magdalen Islands. The FOREWORD to that account commented on characteristics of romantic literature in relation to the title of the Hayward book, "ROMANTIC CANADA". These comments apply equally to the account on PERCÉ which follows.

The presentation of this account is in line with the objective of GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY in recalling literature on Gaspesia that might not otherwise be available to the reader of today.

## ROMANTIC CANADA

## PERCÉ.



NO visible connections exist between the faraway Iles des Madeleine and Percé, between Mal Baie and Baie des Chaleurs; but, in the fact that both the Bird Rocks and Percé Rock have been selected as summer homes and nesting-places by those beautiful creatures of the air, the wild sea-birds, there is a certain psychological bond of the deepest nature.

Percé Rock, according to surveyors, is fourteen hundred feet long and three hundred feet high at the highest end. It is a rock that carries in its sharp, almost cutting lines, an air of great dignity and strong personality. It is outstanding. People speak of it as "The Rock", as if nowhere around this rocky coast there were any other like unto it. And there is not. Along the Gulf it is a landmark; along the entire Gaspé shore a dominating character.

In itself it is barren and without life, more than a stunted scrub of tree and a little sprinkling of green at one place on the top. Its almost vertical sides are of a metallic, coppery hue. Its heart is burnt out. Geologically it is a mausoleum, a grave, wherein millions of trilobites were buried and turned to stone in that far away age to which the trilobite belongs. Yet it is this great heart of stone that the seabirds have undertaken to warm and have succeeded in making a thing of life, with mother hearts and baby cries, and the flashing wings of their constant coming and going.

The bird life here is a sort of commonwealth, in which the magnificent cafe-au-lait colours of the gannet predominate. "Watching the birds" is one of the pastimes indulged in by all visitors to Percé. And there seem to be more and more people here every year just "watching the birds".

With a powerful telescope you can see mothers feeding the young mouths in the seaweed nests. You can see them teaching the A. B. C. of flying to youngsters yet in their pin-feathers. And you can see them on the day they almost push their young to their first take-off. And when they have taught the nestlings to fly, they must, having conquered the air, begin all over again on that even more difficult element, the water.

Out there beyond the Government Pier which the mother does not mind in the least, having somehow sensed that the same parental hand behind the old piers holds her and her brood in its protecting palm, (both Ottawa and Washington are pledged to the protection of these wild birds of the sea), she gives her brood their first swimming-and-diving lessons and afterwards, almost without telling, they learn "to fish" for themselves.

Apart from The Rock and its feathery crown of life and its raucous voice, stilled only at night, other, many human "birds of passage" have from time to time landed here at Percé.

Along the long North Beach, fenced on the West by walls of rock—Les Muraille's and beetling Cape Barre—came, five hundred years ago, the fleet-winged bateaux from whose decks stepped down that most picturesque figure of the early Canadian stage, Jacques Cartier. . . . After him came the Recollets to say Mass on the beach, and set up the parent wooden cross on Mount Joli. Years and years after these, a colony of Jerseymen from the Channel Islands was weaned from the tides that race about Jersey and Guernsey to fish in the waters of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence contiguous to Percé, and to carve out for itself homes and a footing in the business world of Nouvelle France, now merged in Canada. Side by side with the habitant homes of Percé are the places of business and the cosy homes of the Channel Islanders, now among the leading figures of the fish and general-merchant business of this shore.

The fleet of fishboats, anchoring in the little haven afforded by Cape Barre, are thus still curiously French in model and rig, notwithstanding the fact that many of their old sides and seams are tarred in sisterly fashion with the old boats of Newfoundland. Of course, Percé has its up-to-date motor boats, etc. But for all that, the heavy fishing, the big catches of morue, are still brought to the North and South Beaches by these old-timers among boats.

Of all the fisherfolk of the long Coastal road—and what a road it is—none work so late at night or so much by lantern-light as those around Percé beach. The land-end of fishing always makes a picture, wherever happened upon, but when the twinkling of lanterns lights the faces of the splitters at work about the splitting tables and the fish gleams white as it slides from the table to the tub as it does at Percé there is something Romantic indeed in the scene. Till ten, even twelve, and once as late as two o'clock in the morning, we have seen the lanterns gleam on Percé Beach and watched the black figures of the men flitting to and fro with handbarrow and cart, carrying the loads of cod into the waiting room to the hand of the salters.

No less Romantic is the pageant afforded by the boats and their lanterns upon the nights on which the men jig for squid. Squid is the bait in favour among Percevia fishermen, as clams are in the Madeleines, and bait-getting is an industry in itself, here as there.

In the darkness of the night a long line of black boats, like huge bodies of lantern-fireflies, may be seen jigging for squid, under the pale light of the stars, half a mile or so beyond the Government Pier. The effect of these queer dancing lights above the black water and the blacker boats, when seen from shore, is just as weird and romantic as the clam scene out there further, in these same Gulf waters about the Madeleine Islands. A difference lies in the fact that that scene is staged by women and this entirely by men. At Percé the men get their own bait, without aid from their women-folk, and at the same time must go out to the fishing-grounds with the morning tide; while in the Iles des Madeleines, as we have shown, it is the women who stand in the trenches of the farms-of-the-sea, turning out with their homemade forks the clam-nubbins that are the potatoes of these amphibious fields.

Along the codfishing-shores of the Maritime Provinces and in all the long line of Newfoundland-Labrador and Saint Pierre out-ports the women are co-workers with the men in this great coastal business of Cod. It is their hands that double the help on it, enabling the men to handle large catches because they can stand to the line for longer hours. The Mackerel-men of the Madeleines never have to ask where bait's to come from.

The women-folk of Percé are in no way to blame. Different conditions are here. To jig for squid one must get into a boat. And it will be noted that coastal fishwives stop at the water's edge. The most venturesome among the women, lending the strongest hand with the fish, always stops short of getting into a boat. With terra firma under their feet they are helpmates indeed. But the instability of a keel afloat shears them of all strength. One and all coastal women strange as it may seem are landlubbers of the deepest dye. So, Percevia fishermen must perforce hold up both ends, and that they do it well the splitting-tables and the flakes of both the long beaches, North and South, testify.

A character often encountered on the North beach is the old lobsterman who, too old for the boats, has taken to lobster-pots. No greater picture is made from the pierhead than that made the moment he in his little punt pushes out on the silver-gray sea against the projecting headland of the great Rock about which the wheeling sea-birds circle and cry.

Another beach character is the man with the ox-cart, who comes to gather seaweed for the fields. Deadweed and other seaweeds washing in all around this Gulf coast create an atmosphere all their own, coming as they do in deep drifts along the shelving beach, themselves the "crop" of many an undersea garden near and far; a voluntary contribution to the land-gardens that are enough of sea-salts themselves to understand and appreciate the sprawling, dragon-like motif thrown up by the sea.



And as the seaweed cart goes geeing and hawing along the Percé main streets to some hinterland farm, no fragrance seems so tangy and refreshing as that thrown out by the dying weed, blindly obedient to the laws governing the great Epic, spelled by Production.

It would indeed be strange if the superlative coastal scenery of Percé—its rare cliffs and rocks so magnetic to the scientist, both Geologist and Zoologist—had not drawn to itself the artist, the man or the woman to whom line and color are as meat and drink. An occasional figure, solitary on the pierhead, holding palette and brush, essaying a group of schooners and boats clumped against the pierside, may make a figure in your morning picture of the Gulf and the riding boats flanked by the bronzy rock cradling the birds. But these figures are rare—one or two in a summer perhaps. Of these Mr. James is still the outstanding figure and his is—"a dead command."

James came to Percé twenty-five years or more ago. A landscape artist of note, he hailed from Philadelphia. Percé in the individuality of her headlands and cliffs, sharp as edges of broken china, in the towering Mount Sainte Anne, in the spaciousness of the Amphitheatre facing toward the mountains that the geologist says are the vertebrae of the continent, in her homing birds, in the sprightly boats continually going and coming, wound about his artistic soul all the magic of her spell. He built himself and wife the home that so gracefully sits on the top of Cap au Cannon. From here he sallied forth day after day with his canvasses. Home here he brought them metamorphosed, replicas of the beach, the cliffs, the vanishing roads, the great Rock. Home, too, from his many jaunts and his many friends among the country-folk, he brought the wonderful gems that go to make up the valuable and interesting James collection of old Lustreware. Both Mr. James and his wife became a part of the Percé life. At his death Mrs. James continued to live in the home on the cliff. The poor of Percé speak of her as "Our Lady of Percé", playing on the word Mercy. For the poor and needy have in her an understanding and helpful friend indeed. From her husband's paintings she has had postcards made and with the proceeds keeps many a lone old woman under the wing of comfort, whom the dark days of a bitter Gulf winter must otherwise pinch.

It was Mrs. James who sponsored Marie's little tea-house five miles out along the Coulie toward Corner o' the Beach. Every summer tourist knows "Marie's" where the tables ranged on the grass are enclosed with windshields of sweet smelling spruce trees cut and stuck into the ground and weighted down with wild strawberries and country cream.

And speaking of "Marie's" reminds us that the wayside oven and the big French loaf are characters of the Percé highway—reminds us that here *la vache* wears a neckyoke as in Les Madeleines.

Percé boasts the spinning wheel, with Madame, second to none of her habitant sisters up and down the whole Province, in her mastery of *laine*.

Among its quaint maisons Percé has an unique figure, happened upon by us nowhere else—the Beachmaster's Cottage. The Beachmaster as a "character" was unknown to us till we crossed his "stage" at Percé.

Bonaventure Island, too, lies three miles offshore—Bonaventure Island that harbours the memory of Peter Duval of buccaneer fame, skipper of a privateer named the Vulture. How he did harry the French coast during the war with Bonaparte! Who knows but Captain Duval was a connoisseur in Lustre ware, who knows but many of the beautiful pieces in the James collection and others in many a home of this shore crossed the seas at his instigation? At any rate, Bonaventure Island, which was his last "ship", is now skippered by kindred spirits, the wild sea-gulls whose ancestors may many a time have snatched of the crumbs that washed astern from the Vulture's tables.

