GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

REV. EDWARD PIDGEON

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1778 - 1843

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Extract from the New Carlisle Court Record for 1810-

"...Fabien Poirier, Plaintiff, of Bonaventure, Master of Schooner, and James Wright, Defendant, of New Carlisle, at present residing in the dwelling house lately occupied by the Rev. Edward Pidgeon ..."

KEN ANNETT

THE REV.EDWARD PIDGEON

INTRODUCTION

Previous articles of the GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY series have recalled the pioneer missionary work in Gaspesia of the Rev. John Mitchell (SPEC. 20 JANUARY,1987) and the Rev. John Young (awaiting publication). As the service of these early ministers to our Gaspesian forefathers had not been publicized, these articles represent a contribution to the record of the Gaspesian heritage.

The life and work of the Rev. Edward Pidgeon has likewise remained relatively unknown in the District of Gaspé. Some time ago Mrs. Earlene Gilker of New Carlisle brought to the attention of GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY the following brief and terse extract from the volume, HISTORIC SKETCHES - PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA :

"...about 1804 the Rev.M.Dripps did evangelistic work on the Bay of Chaleurs ...about 1805, Mr.Mitchell, then Independent but afterwards Presbyterian, wrought at New Carlisle, from which he toured into New Brunswick. A little later Mr.Pidgeon of the London Missionary Society travelled extensively about the Bay of Chaleurs. Not much is known of the results of these earlier missionaries..."

Thus the challenge was posed to learn more of the Rev. Edward Pidgeon.

In 1982-83 an exchange of correspondence with Mrs. Joan M.C. Carling of Halifax raised hopes, when she wrote :

"...Your shadowy reports of a missionary from the Society in London to Gaspesia are absolutely correct, and are the subject of my amateur research project ! Letters from Edward Pidgeon, written between 1804 and 1823, are the keystone of the work; annotation has required six years of research and 400 pages (so far) of manuscript. Edward's wife, Mary, was the eldest sister of Christiana Montgomery Cithbert, and his grandsons grew up on the farm at New Richmond - my middle names are Mary Campbell..."

Unfortunately for GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY, the high hopes raised by this extract remain unfulfilled as Mrs. Carling failed to reply to further letters sent to her in 1984 and 1985.

The Library of Charlottetown's Confederation Center provided interesting and helpful information on the Pidgeon and Montgomery families in the following volumes :

* FRENCH RIVER AND PARK CORNER HISTORY. 1773 - 1973.

* A HISTORY OF THE PARISH OF NEW LONDON. Thomas R. Millman

The Library also introduced GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY to the excellent book of John Webster Grant - GEORGE PIDGEON - A BIOGRAPHY, published by the Ryerson Press in 1962. Rev. George Pidgeon, descendant of the Rev. Edward Pidgeon, was a distinguished Moderator of the United Church of Canada. In response to a request to quote from Mr.Grant's book, GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY was delighted to receive the following reply (in part) from the author:

Emmanual College, Toronto, Sept.1986.

"...Since neither of us is seeking money and the book is unlikely to be reprinted, however, I shall be delighted to see a further readership secured for at least some of the book. So by all means go ahead and spread the gospel to Gaspesia..."

(Signed) John Webster Grant.

The Library of McGill University's Divinity Hall kindly permitted GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY to obtain the following text of PART 1. GRAND CASCAPEDIA from GEORGE PIDGEON - A BIOGRAPHY

GEORGE PIDGEON

A Biography by
JOHN WEBSTER GRANT

Foreword by
THE HON. DONALD M. FLEMING
With a Portrait by
KENNETH FORBES

1. *Grand Cascapedia*

By 1831 most of the desirable river properties of the Maritime Provinces were occupied. When a lowland Scots capitalist named William Cuthbert sought a site for a lumber mill and settlement, it was therefore natural that he should turn to Quebec's Gaspé peninsula. The southern slope of the peninsula offered several large rivers, and a good proportion of the sparse population consisted of Protestants, of Loyalist or Channel Island origin. Cuthbert located between the mouths of the Grand and Little Cascapedia rivers, where his site commanded two river basins covered by magnificent stands of birch and maple. To run his mill he brought out a number of fellow-lowlanders and founded the village of New Richmond.

In the late nineteenth century New Richmond was still Paul Bunyan country, ideal for developing men of brawn and natural cunning. There were moose in the woods, and sometimes bears in the barnyard. Game was important to the pioneer's diet, and hunters developed unusual talents of resourcefulness in obtaining it. Peter Campbell of Escuminac, an uncle of George Pidgeon, was one who devised his own method of enlarging the bore of his gun so that it would not scatter shot, thus anticipating the widely touted choke-bore rifle that was officially invented twenty years later. Sailor, blacksmith, hunter and farmer, Campbell was a typical member of the frontier aristocracy of strength and adaptability. Unfortunately for the honest inhabitants of New

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Richmond, the salmon fishery of the Cascapedia was for many years the preserve of wealthy sportsmen and governors general, but game laws had a limited effect on the frontier.

The country that nourished the hunter was not so hospitable to the farmer. The backbone of the Gaspé peninsula is a range of mountains, the Shickshocks, and although the southern slope is the gentler, the farmer's first task was to clear thickly wooded hills. Archibald Pidgeon, a planner as well as a pioneer, made up his mind from the beginning which areas he would eventually bring into cultivation. Each summer he set himself and his boys a stint of clearing. Eventually he was clearing shorthanded, for his son George had gone off to college, but he had no thought of stopping short of his goal. At last he was able to say, "Now I have it cleared," and perhaps his work was a little easier after that. But the land can never have been the most fertile: today no one lives on the old farm, and the house has gone.

Although life in pioneer New Richmond was wholesome and usually enjoyable, it was by no means an uninterrupted idyll. A common struggle against nature encouraged hospitality and a brand of kindliness that was free from softness and sentimentality. The rough frontiersman was, however, apt to lack the habits of self-control that in a more settled society enable people to live together without too much obvious friction. His vices were those of intemperate self-expression—violence, drunkenness and profanity, or general indifference to property rights.

To the ills of a lumbering community, religion was a prime antidote. Unlike the better-known frontier of the Wild West, New Richmond never went through a period of ungodliness. The first minister arrived in 1833, and although he did not remain long, the Church of Scotland soon sent a replacement. The church was without question the social and ideological centre of New Richmond, as it was the centre of most Canadian villages of the nineteenth century. There were, indeed, no rivals. There were no movies, no radio or television, no community centre except the church porch. Government departments showed little interest in rural life except to collect modest taxes. Schoolteachers, who qualified by proving they had a tolerable writing hand, were usually in no position to challenge the intellectual supremacy of the minister. In most homes the Bible was the only book available. Christian belief was universal, and a high level of biblical literacy was maintained.

In a frontier settlement, religion played a clear and important moral role. This role was not primary, since it was a matter of first principle that "man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." The Christian life as a matter of course took into account the existence of another world more important and infinitely more lasting than this. In the circumstances, however, the truths of the gospel were most readily grasped as they impinged on the frailties of simple people.

In New Richmond the church had to contend not with doubt or disbelief or moral ambiguity, but with sin of the most obvious and carnal, although not ordinarily the most vicious, kind. Temptation was easy to recognize but not always easy to resist. The church accordingly provided strong and stable sanctions for the encouragement of honesty and respect for law, of continence and abstinence, and of kindness and neighbourliness. It also provided the strong and stable support of preaching, sacraments and discipline. The sanctions and the support were effective among those who took advantage of them, transmuting brawn into moral fibre. The immoral were in general those who neglected the practice of religion, and the efforts of the church were therefore directed more to admonishing the careless than to condemning the wicked.

The church was the isolated settlement's link with the outside world. New Richmond was in those days far from a railroad. George Pidgeon tells of one occasion when his brother Leslie took a sleigh across the ice of the Baie de Chaleur from the nearest station at Dalhousie, New Brunswick. It was late in the season, and the ice was already melting. There were signs of a fresh track, however, and Leslie decided that if another could make it, so could he. But the other outfit had started out only to turn back. The ice was in such poor condition that at every step water came up around the horse's feet. Leslie could only keep the horse going and hope for the best. He reached the other shore safely, but at the next tide the ice was carried right out of the bay. In summer even this hazardous short cut was impossible, and it was necessary to make a long drive and then take a ferry to Campbellton on the Intercolonial line.

The church could do little about physical isolation, but it furnished whatever mental stimulus there was. There were no daily newspapers, so denominational magazines, and such semi-religious periodicals as the Montreal *Witness*, provided news and views on public and church affairs. Through their interest in Christian missions abroad, they also imparted a knowledge of so-called heathen lands that has only recently become widely available elsewhere. Sermons too contributed to a widening of interest. Although the ministers of New Richmond were fairly conservative, they were educated men who shared with their people the latest trends of thought at university and theological college. George Pidgeon recalls that he was familiar with the names of such German theologians as Schleiermacher and Ritschl before he had ever left the Gaspé coast.

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The Protestant inhabitants of New Richmond were almost without exception Presbyterians, heirs to the religious traditions of reformed Scotland. Presbyterianism took root with amazing speed in Maritime soil. Well planted before the home churches had established efficient missionary organization, the local church set up presbyteries and ordained ministers without much consultation with Scottish authorities. Soon it was recruiting and training its own ministers. Although still representing a tiny community, by 1846 the Synod of Nova Scotia had sent John Geddie of Prince Edward Island as its first missionary to the New Hebrides in the south seas. Anyone familiar with the struggles of larger Canadian churches to achieve independence from British subsidy and control will marvel at the vigour of these ministers and congregations, who became self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating almost from the time they landed in the Maritimes. The result of such vigour was to engender a self-confidence that could either degenerate into smugness or inspire a remarkable sense of divine mission.

Maritime Presbyterianism was dogmatically Calvinistic, and as rigid in its application of a puritanical moral code as the critics of Calvinism complain. An old-time "sabbath" was, by modern standards, forbidding to the extreme. On Saturday wood was cut and food prepared, children bathed and men shaved. On Sunday there would be no unnecessary labour and, among the stricter ones, no house-to-house visits.

Methods of maintaining the tradition were simple but effective. Sermons and sabbath-school classes were biblical in theme, doctrinal and moral in application. Children were expected to commit to memory the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly, and in earlier days ministers tested their students' knowledge by "catechizing" them in their homes. The annual communion seasons were times of self-examination and mutual examination, as elders scrutinized the records of members of the congregation. To submit one's conduct and character to such an inquisition was no light responsibility: many devout Christians postponed "going forward" until they believed themselves beyond human reproach. The same impression of seriousness was implicit in the austere solemnity of the worship itself, simple but vested with the authority of high pulpit and sparkling white sacramental linen.

Despite its refusal to compromise with the flesh, Presbyterianism as practised in New Richmond was a popular faith, maintained by kindly men and women who delighted in it. Those who condemn the old Calvinism as a tyranny of minister and Kirk session are apt to forget that the system could not have endured apart from its foundation of family worship and individual Bible reading. The true high priest of Presbyterian worship was the head of the family. It was Archibald Pidgeon himself who each day made sure that his sons did their reading, who at the end of the day called for the Book,

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and who on sunny sabbaths determined that the hay that had been rained on through the week should still remain ungathered. He was not so superstitious as to expect material reward for his obedience to divine decrees. "He lost his hay," an observer commented, "but he saved his sons."

Presbyterianism was popular too in its encouragement of theological discussion. Although its usual approach to the Bible was what we should today call fundamentalist, differences in biblical interpretation were actively encouraged. Theological debate reached its ritual climax on the Friday before communion, when on the day of the *ceisd*, or questioning, it was the responsibility of one elder to propound a theological question for discussion by other elders. The presiding minister spoke last, risking severe loss of face if he failed to improve on earlier statements. This same spirited discussion was normal in the Bible class and in the family post-mortem on the sabbath sermon. Presbyterians seldom spoke of their religion when they were with strangers, but within the family circle there was no such reticence. These discussions might lead to few radical conclusions, but they left no room for obscurantism.

The hostility to book learning so conspicuous in some frontier areas was alien to the spirit of Presbyterian New Richmond. The Scottish reformers of the sixteenth century, associating Roman Catholicism with the backward state in which they found their country, had regarded education as the natural handmaid of Protestantism. Thomas McCulloch, eager that early-nineteenth-century Nova Scotia should provide for her own ministry, had transmitted this enthusiasm for education to his struggling fellow-pioneers. The minister of the village was often its most effective schoolmaster.

The religion of New Richmond had warmth, despite Calvinism's reputation for dourness. Scots were suspicious of introspective personal testimonies and of displays of emotion, but their evangelical groups had left a heritage of religious conviction that was private but deeply felt. When in the 1880's a Baptist evangelist named Vincent set a revival in motion on the Gaspé frontier, Mr. Lindsay, the Presbyterian minister, soon assumed its leadership. When he discouraged sensationalism, some parishioners left his church in disgust and turned to the Plymouth Brethren. But most found it possible to combine Presbyterianism with revivalism, and the spiritual pulse of the community was quickened.

Although remote from urban centres, New Richmond was affected by the changes of outlook that industrialization was introducing. Church and community life were apparently unchanged, but rigid Calvinism was no longer unquestioned

and the critical re-examination of the Bible was becoming known. Already in the 1860's Methodist itinerants started a vigorous debate on the question of free will. The revival furthered the change, for it challenged the old identification of religion with accepted patterns of belief and conduct. A student named J. F. Smith was one so affected. Attending a revival meeting in Halifax with the intention of breaking it up, he was so impressed that he returned to his native coast with an openness of mind that led him to accept more new ideas than the evangelists had given him. New Richmond remained sound, but it was no longer static.

The most significant products of Presbyterianism in eastern Canada were men and women who were careful and opinionated but kindly and resourceful. A boy growing up in New Richmond would have every encouragement to gratify his desire for knowledge, and the greater his curiosity about the world, the more likely he would be to seek support and guidance from the church.

When William Cuthbert died on a visit to Scotland about the year 1847, his property was divided equally between his wife and his daughter Alice Thornton. Neither could run the mill, but fortunately Mrs. Cuthbert had a brother who had already been brought into the business. Robert Montgomery took his son, Robert Hudson Montgomery, into partnership, and the family retained control until well into this century.

The Montgomery family had long been established in Prince Edward Island—one descendant was the author of *Anne of Green Gables*. Like other settlers, they were prevented by a system of absentee tenure from securing a clear title to their lands. When they took over the Cuthbert mill, therefore, the Montgomerys invited Mary Pidgeon, the widowed sister of Robert and of Mrs. Cuthbert, to bring her family over. Several of Mary Pidgeon's children were grown sons who were anxious to farm, so on May 4, 1849, the family moved to New Richmond.

This was not the first connection between the Pidgeon family and the Gaspé peninsula. In 1798 the Reverend Edward Pidgeon had been sent to the New Carlisle area by the Antiburgher Synod of Scotland. He was the first Protestant minister known to have worked on the coast. Of Huguenot descent, he had been born in Yarmouth, England, and given his theological training in Scotland. He soon left the Gaspé peninsula and returned to Britain, only to come out again under the auspices of the London Missionary Society.* In 1805 he moved to Prince Edward Island, where he married Mary Montgomery and founded his family. In 1811 he was called to the congregation of St. Peter's Bay. Ill health forced his retirement in 1820. He died in 1843 while attending service in what is now the Geddie Memorial Church at New London.

*This is the family tradition. William Gregg states that he had come out originally under the auspices of the London Missionary Society. *History of Presbyterianism in the Dominion of Canada* (Toronto, Presbyterian Printing and Publishing Co., 1885), p. 115.

The appearance of John Geddie's name in the Pidgeon story is more than fortuitous. Geddie had conducted a Bible class for young men while still a pastor at New London. He taught his pupils so thoroughly that they were somewhat frightened of him, but the results of his teaching were to remain. Several of the Pidgeon boys were in the class, and they took their training with them to New Richmond.

In those days marriage was almost unthinkable for a farmer without land. That may explain why the Pidgeon sons all went to New Richmond as single men, although the eldest was thirty-nine. The family first took land on a point at the mouth of the Grand Cascapedia River. Later most of the boys bought sections of the Cuthbert holdings further up the river, although Hugh settled in the village of New Richmond.

Archibald, the youngest son, was seventeen at the time of the move. Still unmarried after Confederation when the Intercolonial Railway was being built, he secured a construction job near Campbellton, New Brunswick. Now and then he returned home on a visit; the distance was too great for a single day's travel, so he was grateful for the hospitality of John Campbell, who kept open house for travellers at Aboyne in the Escuminac district of Quebec. Archibald Pidgeon married Mary Campbell in 1871.

John Campbell, a stone-mason, had brought his wife, Elspeth Sutherland, to Aboyne about 1830. Of Roman Catholic background, he and his wife belonged to the established Kirk but later joined the Free Church. Like the Pidgeons, the Campbells were devout Christians and well-instructed Presbyterians.

Archibald Pidgeon took his bride to a farm not far from the mouth of the Grand Cascapedia River. The house was on top of a hill, and in typically Scottish fashion it was located almost a mile from the road. Archibald had bought the farm from his cousin Mrs. Thornton, and he was still paying for it when he married. Mrs. Thornton then asked him to take over another farm four miles up the river. He did so, and for many years took hay off the intervale, but thieving settlers prevented him from claiming much of the lumber. He cannot have pressed his rights very hard. Later, when his son Hugh John had taken over and brought one of the trespassers to boot, the comment was, "He's not nearly as fine a man as his father."

George Campbell Pidgeon was born on March 2, 1872, the eldest son of Archibald and Mary Pidgeon. Leslie followed in 1873, Elsie in 1874, and Hugh John in 1876.

In a pious community Archibald and Mary Pidgeon were people of exceptional piety. It is only natural, perhaps, that

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George Pidgeon should recall his parents as people altogether out of the ordinary, for most children think of their parents in these terms. Most significant in the son's recollection, perhaps, was his conviction that what gave his boyhood home its special character was the combination of two different but complementary influences. Dr. Pidgeon best describes his parents in his own words:

> Mother was the most intensely religious person I have ever known. God was in all her thoughts. Her prayer life, her knowledge of the Bible, her vigorous thinking and strong convictions we felt every hour. Her claim for us was for a higher moral level than that of the community around us, and for a thoughtfulness that took in all the experiences of life. We always felt that it would have killed her if any of us had fallen into the vices of so many around us in that primitive community. She was a Calvinist in her theology, a theology based on the New Testament. But it was our birth into the life of Christ that was the passion of her soul.
>
> Father was possessed with his father's love of learning. As a young farmer he would provide for the care of his stock in winter while he went to school. The learning which he thirsted for, but had never been able to get, he claimed for his children, and especially for me. The only time I ever heard him come into the house irritated and complaining was one evening after he had failed to get the little school reopened for us. . . .
>
> Father read the Bible thoughtfully. He faced the problems honestly, never shirking its difficulties. One day Leslie came in and found him and Uncle Peter Campbell with their heads together, deeply wrapped in a Bible problem. They were discussing the fate of Jephthah's daughter.
>
> What a boon modern learning would have been to them!

Dr. Pidgeon adds that despite the lack of "modern learning" the father had renounced the older Calvinism, finding its harsh predestination incompatible with the neighbourliness of New Richmond life. The mother was apparently a simpler and more conservative person, but her exceptional moral stamina left an indelible mark upon her children.

As the family of four grew up on the Cascapedia farm, the church with its high pulpit played an increasingly important part in their lives. Although the farm chores had to be done on Sundays as on other days—despite Calvin!—the parents always succeeded in taking at least one of their children for the five-mile drive and slow ferry run that took them to eleven o'clock service. In the afternoon there would be a brief visit. Then, after an hour spent with the father learning by heart a question in the Shorter Catechism, the pair would end the day with a quiet walk through the fields under the westering sun. Dr. Pidgeon recalls his Presbyterian sabbaths at home with obvious pleasure.

The children were reaching adolescence when the religious revival was at its height, and George especially was affected for life by its evangelical emphasis. Indeed, George Pidgeon must have been a boy of exceptional religious sensibilities. He has written an account of the decisive season when he went forward as a communicant in the church, an event that took place while he was staying with his Uncle Hugh and Aunt Lorina in order to attend the Black Cape school:

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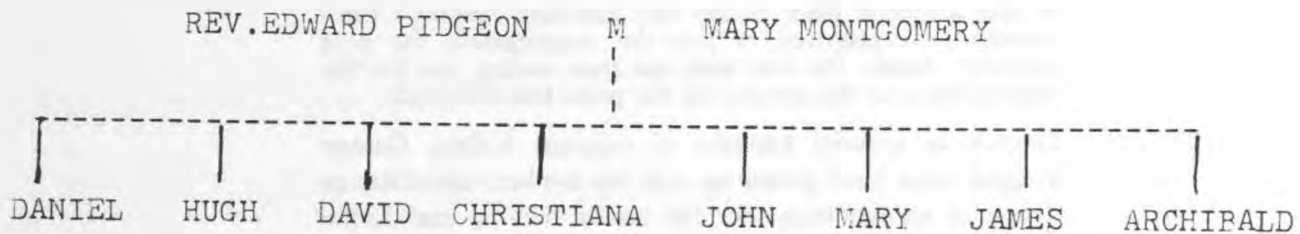
They left me to myself that Saturday evening as, in the light of the lamp, I read again the account of that first communion service in preparation for my own first communion. As I read the story of Jesus' sacrifice I seemed to be going with him step by step through the trial and the mockery and the suffering of death for me. Then the service the next day. But even that service led by our minister whom I revered seemed to take a second place beside that Saturday evening's communion as I prepared to join the congregation the next morning. Surely He was with me then sealing me for the communion and the services of the years that followed.

Despite an unusual intensity of religious feeling, George Pidgeon must have grown up with his brothers and sister as a boy of normal impulses. He recalls that he and Leslie were impetuous and eager, always embarking on new and sometimes impractical adventures. Elsie provided the balance, although younger than either, having a sense of reality that sprang from strong conviction rather than from lack of imagination. Hugh John was, of all of the children, the one who most readily understood the father. It was he who eventually took over the farm, and when ill health compelled him to leave it, the father was heartbroken.

Even in childhood, the pattern of the future was beginning to emerge. The four used to play a game that was probably common enough then, although now out of fashion, that of re-enacting the Sunday service. George was always the preacher; his pulpit, the family wood-pile behind the house.

FAMILY CHART - REV.EDWARD PIDGEON



NOTES

- Edward Pidgeon, of Huguenot descent, born at Yarmouth, England in 1778.
- Took theological training in Scotland and came from Scotland to Gaspesia (New Carlisle) in 1798.
- Returned to Britain but came again to Maritime Canada and was in Prince Edward Island in 1805
- Married Mary Montgomery in P.E.I. c.1810.
- In 1811 inducted into the Pastoral Charge of Cove Head, St.Peter's and Bay Fortune, P.E.I.
- Ill health forced his retirement from the ministry in 1820 and he settled on a farm at French River.
- Died on Sunday, September 10th.,1843 while attending church. "Being seized while attending Public Worship at New London. He turned pale and fell during the opening prayer, was carried out, but never spoke again."

- Mary Montgomery Pidgeon was the daughter of Hugh and Nancy Penman Montgomery and a sister of the Hon. Donald Montgomery.
- Her sister, Christiana, married William Cuthbert of New Richmond.
- Her twin brothers, William and Robert Montgomery, moved to New Richmond.
- Upon the death of her husband the Widow Mary Montgomery Pidgeon moved to New Richmond. She lived to the age of 82 years and was buried at Maria in 1870 with her sons Daniel, Hugh, James and Archibald as witnesses. Her daughter, Christiana, predeceased her and was buried at New Richmond in 1864.