

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

HERIOT ON GASPESIA

From his "TRAVELS THROUGH THE CANADAS"
George Heriot, Deputy Post Master General
of British North America from 1800 to
1816, recalls travels in Gaspesia.

KEN ANNETT

HERIOT ON GASPESIA

FOREWORD

Several articles of the "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" series have featured the observations and impressions of visitors to Gaspesia across the years. The background and interests of such visitors varied greatly as a brief recall of early articles shows:

- . Sir James McPherson Lemoyne, distinguished historian, who wrote of visits to Gaspé Basin, Point St.Peter, New Carlisle and other Gaspesian communities.
- . Dr. Von Iffland whose vivid account of his 1821 visit to Gaspé was published in an early issue of SPEC.
- . Lieut.-Colonel Sir Richard Bonnycastle, R.E., who has left us a fascinating account of his visit to Gaspé with Lord Aylmer, Governor-General.
- . Captain Bell, A.D.C. to General James Wolfe, whose JOURNAL describes the GASPEE EXPEDITION of 1758.
- . Dr. John M. Clark, whose books on Gaspesia are a precious literary heritage, has recounted the interesting history of Peninsula Point and other topics.
- . Sir William Logan has left us accounts of his historic geological work in Gaspesia.
- . Thomas Pye of New Carlisle left the unique volume of his "GASPE SCENERY"
- . Captain Justus Sherwood, ardent and intrepid Loyalist has reported as an early Gaspesian "tourist".
- . The early missionary, Father C. Le Clercq, contributed a remarkable volume on Micmac Indian life in Gaspesia.
- . Rev. George Milne has left a detailed and faithful account of parochial life in his DIARIES.
- . Lady Dufferin has recalled for us the pleasures of visits to Gaspé's famous salmon rivers.

FOREWORD (ctd)

. Lieut. Frederick Henry Baddeley, R.E., has left us a priceless account of his Gaspesian travels and the people he met there more than a century and a half ago.

Such a listing could continue and would reflect other visitors who have been recalled in the more than 250 articles of "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" completed to date.

GEORGE HERIOT

This article introduces yet another visitor, George Heriot, senior civil servant, landscape artist and author, whose book, "TRAVELS THROUGH THE CANADAS" reflected his visits in Lower and Upper Canada in the first decades of the 19th Century.

George Heriot was born at Haddington, Scotland, in 1759, the eldest of four children of John and Marjory Heriot. His father was a Sheriff's Clerk. George had a sound classical education at Duns Academy, Coldstream Grammar School and the Royal High School of Edinburgh. From 1774 to 1777 he lived in Edinburgh to study drawing and painting. He then went to the West Indies for a period of four years, returning in 1781 to enter the Royal Military Institute at Woolwich as an Officer Cadet. There he studied under the eminent topographical artist, Paul Sandby.

It was as a Clerk of the Board of Ordnance that George Heriot came to Quebec in 1792. Many of the scenes he sketched in the Quebec City region were exhibited at the Royal Academy, London, in 1796, when he was back home on leave.

Promoted assistant storekeeper general in 1797 under John Craigie, Heriot's career was marked by his appointment as Deputy Post Master General for British North America by the Prime Minister of Great Britain, William Pitt. It is of interest to note that the appointment was to be effective when the post became vacant by the removal of Hugh Finlay. It will be recalled that Hugh Finlay had interests in Gaspesia - including a land grant in Bonaventure.

GEORGE HERIOT

(ctd)

Heriot assumed office as Deputy Post Master General in April, 1800 and set to work in a determined effort to improve a primitive mail service. To that end he travelled widely on inspection visits over the vast territory of British North America, including visitation of Eastern Canada in 1807. His illustrated volume, "TRAVELS THROUGH THE CANADAS" reflects his observations and impressions.

Heriot's many talents and attributes were offset by his lack of tact and diplomacy in dealing with his superiors in government and administrative service. He tangled, in turn, with Governors Milne, Prevost and Drummond. Finally, in 1816, he resigned the post and returned to England. He died in London in 1839.

Those seeking more information on Heriot will find the 1983 biography of him by G.E. Finley, "GEORGE HERIOT-POST MASTER PAINTER OF THE CANADAS" of interest.

HERIOT ON GASPESIA

"...A vast inlet, penetrating into the country for a great many leagues to the westward, is called the bay of Chaleurs, which being advantageously placed for carrying on fisheries, has, on its borders, a considerable number of inhabitants. Jacques Cartier, in 1534, sailed into this bay and from the heat which he there experienced in the middle of summer, gave it the name which it still retains. Notwithstanding the more northerly situation of this bay the cold is not so intense here as at Quebec, being moderated by the sea air. The depth of snow in the woods during the winter season is from six to eight feet; but varying according to the different situations, and the degree of severity in the weather. It is not before the beginning of May that the influence of the sun upon vegetation is here materially felt; nor is it before that time that the woods are entirely cleared of snow.

It may be observed as a curious circumstance, that for six, eight and ten leagues from the shores of this bay, in proceeding into the woods, travellers and huntsmen frequently meet with spots of about two or three acres in surface, entirely bare and yet surrounded with seven or eight feet of snow, which, in times of bad weather, melts as it falls, both on those situations, and on the trees, to which they afford growth. Those spots, in their relative position to the head of the bay, extend from east to west, being usually found in that direction; and their denudation of snow may probably be occasioned by subterraneous heat, which approaching nearer to the surface of the ground, produces the effect which has been described.

Neither minerals, nor mineral waters, have yet been discovered in this district. The timber which grows here consists of spruce fir, white and black birch, beech, elm and oak, which being porous, is of little value.

BONAVENTURE

The island of Bonaventure is about a league from the north shore of the entrance into the bay, and a small number of persons winter on it, for no other purpose than to retain possession of their fisheries. About twenty-one leagues up the bay there is a parish of the same name with the island.

INDUSTRY

Cod-fish, salmon, and herrings, are the only productions of commerce derived from the bays of Gaspé and Chaleurs. Ship-building has of late years been here tried with success; but whether or not it will answer in time of peace, is uncertain. (The author was writing at the time of the Napoleonic Wars the maritime effects of which were felt in distant Gaspesia) There are about three hundred families settled all along the coast of the district of Gaspé, who are chiefly of the Roman Catholic religion, and whose sole occupation is fishing. The produce of their industry is transported to foreign markets in from eight to ten square-rigged vessels, besides smaller craft.

MICMACS

The natives of this district are of the Micmac tribe. A few Malicites come thither at times, from the river Saint John and Madawaska. Upon the banks of the river Ristigouche, which empties itself into the bay of Chaleurs, and about eight leagues from its mouth, there is a church and an Indian village. At Tracadigash, and at the settlement of Bonaventure, there are likewise churches, besides some chapels in the smaller settlements, where the ecclesiastical functions are performed by two, and sometimes by three missionaries.

FARMING

Agriculture is uncommonly neglected, and in an entire state of infancy. It has of late years been somewhat more attended to than formerly because the want of salt, an article ever scarce in those parts in time of war, and other causes, gave to the fisheries a temporary check, and obliged the inhabitants to secure the means of subsisting their families by tillage and husbandry. But it is probable they will, as they have ever done, resume the hook and line as soon as they have a prospect of encouragement in that their favourite pursuit.

[The importance of a supply of salt for the Gaspé fishery is reflected in several reference by David Lee in his book, "THE ROBINS IN GASPE. 1766 to 1825". As example, on pages 73-74 Lee writes : "Selling fish in Sicily also allowed the Robins to diversify their sources of the salt which was so important to

them in the dry fisheries. Often, when no other Mediterranean products were available in Sicily, the Robins had their ships load up with salt at Trapani, not far from Palermo; the captains would then sail directly back to Chaleur Bay...It is not surprising that three of the ports most frequently visited by Robin ships - Palermo, Lisbon and Liverpool - were close to three of the largest saltworks in Europe - Trapani in Sicily, Setubal (St.Ubes) in Portugal and Cheshire in England. It was important to the Robins to have alternative sources of salt when war could quickly close one down."

TRAVEL

The roads of intercourse between the adjoining settlements are very indifferent; but, wherever there is any interruption, by extensive, unsettled parts of the coast, the traveller must have recourse to water communication.

Three different routes are pursued by those whom business obliges to travel to Quebec in the winter season. One of these is by the coast of the Saint Lawrence, the other two by the river Ristigouche. In adopting the second, the traveller ascends that river about twelve leagues until he reaches the river Matapediach, which empties itself therein, and whose course he traces upwards to a lake of the same name, from whence it derives its source; hence he continues in the same direction about ten leagues along an Indian path to the river Mitis, flowing into the Saint Lawrence. The third route is by ascending the Ristigouche to near its source, as far as a brook called by the natives Wagancitz; and from thence by crossing the land to the Saint John about eight leagues above the great falls; by following this river until its junction with the Madawaska and the latter river to Lake Tamiscuata; and by proceeding along that lake to the "grande partage" or road opened by the late General Haldimand, through which, after walking about thirty miles, the traveller gains the river Saint Lawrence near the riviere des Caps, two leagues and a half below the parish of Camourasca. The first of these routes is the longest and may be computed, from the middle of Chaleurs bay, at about one hundred and forty leagues to Quebec. The two latter must be nearly equal; it would appear, however, from the courses, that the road by Matapediach must be somewhat shorter than the other. The distance of either, from Carlisle in the middle of the bay to Quebec does not exceed one hundred and twenty leagues.

NATURAL CURIOSITY

The only object in this part of the country which may be considered as a natural curiosity is the rock called Percé, perforated in three places in the form of arches, through the central and largest of which a boat with sail set may pass with great facility. This rock, which at a distance exhibits the appearance of an aqueduct in ruins, rises to a height of nearly two hundred feet. Its length, which is at present four hundred yards, must have been once much greater, as it has evidently been wasted by the sea and by the frequent impulse of storms.

SHELL-FISH CAUTION

The shell-fish procured in the month of August from the rivers and from their mouths near the coast, in the vicinity of Chaleurs bay, are so highly impregnated with poisonous quality as to occasion almost instantaneous death to those who eat them. The cause of this circumstance remains yet to be ascertained. Not only in the district of Gaspé, but in most settlements on the Gulph of Saint Lawrence, similar effects have been experienced. The period of the year has apparently no other share in producing them than by the reduction of the quantity of waters which generally takes place in summer. The greater the diminution of waters the stronger, of course, becomes the proportion of poisonous matter with which these waters are endowed; and this being imbibed, especially during ebb tides by the shell-fish, they are thus productive of consequences fatal to those who use them as an article of food.

SEA-BIRDS

Not only the Bird isles (previously referred to-relative to the Magdalen Islands) but the island of Bonaventure and Percé rock abound in summer with ganets, which, in prodigious flocks, arrive early in May from the southward. They lay and hatch their eggs, not only on those islands, but on various parts of the coast, where adventurous sportsmen, often with considerable risque, ascend and plunder their nests, amid the steep and threatening cliffs. These birds, at that period very fierce, will sometimes, by the severity of their bite directed chiefly at the eyes of the despoiler, force him to retreat.

The bay of Gaspé is more than two leagues in depth and its coasts are inhabited by settlers engaged in the fisheries.

The Gulph of Saint Lawrence is about eighty leagues in length; and when the winds and currents are favourable its passage does not usually exceed twenty-four hours. The Saint Lawrence is one of the greatest, most noble and beautiful rivers and at the same time the furthest navigable for vessels of a large size of any in the universe. From its mouth to the harbour of Quebec the distance is one hundred and twenty leagues; and vessels from Europe ascend to Montreal, which is sixty leagues higher up its course.

Cape Rosiers, at a small distance to the northwards of the point of Gaspé, is properly the place which limits the farthest extent of this gigantic river; and it is from thence that the breadth of its mouth, which is ninety miles, must be estimated. They who pretend that its width is one hundred and twenty miles measure it apparently from the eastern extremity of Gaspé. The mouth of the Saint Lawrence is separated into two channels by the island of Anticosti, extending from south east to north west about a hundred and twenty miles, and in its utmost breadth about thirty miles. The north channel is little frequented, although safe and of great depth; it is much narrower than the south channel which is sixteen leagues wide at its entrance. The island is of little value; the wood which grows upon it is small, the soil is barren and it possesses not a single harbour where a vessel may with safety enter. The country is flat towards the coasts, rising a little in the centre, but no where into hills. Flat rocks extend at each extremity to a considerable distance from the shores, rendering the approach hazardous. A few savages sometimes winter here for the purpose of the chace (sic). On passing this island the land becomes visible on both sides of the river.

THE COASTS

The mountains of Notre Dame and Mont Louis are part of a chain on the south side of the river, the vallies between them which are occasionally frequented by savages. The environs of Mont Louis afford lands fit for cultivation, and some families are there settled. On the northern and opposite coast of the river the bay of seven islands is placed where a fleet under the command of Admiral Walker was, in 1711, lost on an expedition against Quebec...

Cape Chatte, on the south shore, exhibits a bold appearance; between this and a point on the north coast, which terminates the bald mountains, the channel of the river becomes considerably contracted.

Two conical elevations, upon a mountain, called "Les Mammelles de Matane", about two leagues distant from the coast, present themselves to view. No country can exhibit a more wild aspect than that which here extends on either side the river. Stunted trees, rocks and sand compose the inhospitable and desolate territory which cannot boast of an acre of soil capable of yielding any useful production. Birds and wild animals are indeed here to be found; but the chase is practicable only to savages.

...The small island of Saint Barnaby is placed near the south shore opposite to an inconsiderable river upon the banks of which is a settlement called Rimouski. From Mont Louis to this island the distance is forty leagues, throughout which, there is neither on the south or the north shore any station which can have the merit of being termed a harbour...