

THE COBEQUID COUNTRY

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TO three successive races the land around the head waters of the Bay of Fundy has been a distinct entity complete in its own traditions. The Micmacs named it melodiously, "The head of the rushing water", and wove their earliest legends about it. Cobequid is the French approximation of the descriptive phrase marking the limit of the great tidal bore. Glooscap loved the Cobequid country, and his overturned kettle marks the entrance to the bay. He left this district at the coming of the white man, and he threw away his useless kettle after the great farewell feast when he told his people that another race would come, caring nothing for the Indian gods.

So far back does this story lie in Indian legend, that it may well have been at the landing of Erik The Red, when Thowald built his dragon ship on the Markland shore half a century before Duke William of Normandy crossed over to England. Year by year, as the Greenland Vikings came down to Markland for timber and tall masts for their ships, the tribes remembered how Glooscap had foretold this, and they gathered at his favourite haunt, "the head of the bounding water". These things and many others Biencourt must have heard from Membertou when he kept his gentleman's agreement with the old chief, in the face of the Church, and laid the foundation of lasting friendship between Acadian French and the Micmac tribe.

The Indians still "resorted much to Cobequid" when it became a French seigneury in the seventeenth century. Mathieu Martin, traditionally spoken of as the first white child born in the Port Royal colony, received in 1689 "The place called Cocobequy (Cobequid), which comprises all the head of the Basin of Mines, two leagues deep on each side inland, to begin opposite the mouth of the river Chicabénacadié (Shubenacadié); on the south side of the river, crossing to the west-north-west." The grant was confirmed by King Louis XIV, in Council at Versailles, 14 July, 1690. After Martin's death, when the province had passed for final keeping into English hands, rival claimants brought their case before His Majesty's Council at Annapolis. Governor Armstrong, writing from Annapolis, informed the Lords of Trade that "Mathieu Martin the seigneur of Cobequid, has lately died without issue,

but has by will devised his estate." This was disrespectful to His Majesty, and the Governor considered that the will might be set aside.

Meantime, a representative of the La Tour family was making the most of her feudal rights. Agathe de La Tour was a granddaughter of Charles de La Tour, from his marriage with the widow of Charnisay d'Aulnay. She seems to have inherited the charm and ability of that most interesting gentleman, Claude Turgis St. Etienne, Sieur de La Tour, the first of the name in America. Agathe de La Tour was twice married, and both husbands were officers of the British forces stationed at Port Royal. Widowed the second time, she persuaded her relatives and co-heirs to dispose of their seigneurial claims to her. The La Tour family, in its various ramifications, was scattered over Acadia, and a "Sieur Martin d'Arpentigny and Asprentigny, Sieur de Martignon" had married Jeanne de La Tour, daughter of the first marriage of Charles de La Tour. Having won her way with the other heirs, Agathe de La Tour probably found it comparatively easy to obtain what she wanted from the British Government. At any rate, "she sold to the King her rights in the grants of the family for the sum of 2500 guineas and a pension, but she could not claim as her right but a 35th part." "Her claims at best were but partial, and did not embrace the whole of the province." While in London she sold her property in Annapolis, "one house, one garden", etc., to the agent of Major-General Philipps, and retired—of all unlikely places—to "the city of Kilkenny, in the Kingdom of Ireland." The life of Agathe de La Tour, wife of Lieutenant Bradstreet, and of "that young gentleman volunteer", Ensign Campbell, would make interesting reading.

The Cobequid villages, the reports of their deputies, mention of their churches and their priests, occur very frequently in the records of the Council at Annapolis. Up the bay and across to the north shore lay the route to Beaubassin and Ile St. Jean. Down the bay, up the Shubenacadie river, and by lakes and portages was the route to Chebucto and Louisbourg. In 1747 Coulon de Villiers and his three hundred French came from Beauséjour, and followed along the bay and around the head of the river on their way to massacre the "Bostonnais" encamped at Grand Pré. Governor Lawrence made a strong representation to the Lords of Trade and Plantations on the necessity of closing this route. He advised building a fort at the mouth of the Shubenacadie—where a party of de Villiers's men had risked their lives by crossing the river in canoes among the floating¹ ice-cakes in January—and he advocated,

1. See *Red Snow at Grand Pré*, Dr. MacMechan.

as Shirley and Morris had done, planting "foreign Protestants;" New Englanders, "as of well-rooted allegiance"; or settlers from the North of Ireland, along the river "whose banks are already cleared."

The Government had other plans. Almost as the officers at Annapolis, secure in the priority of the oldest fortress on the continent, "prayed that that small enclosure adjoining to the Governor's Garden and the White House field, and lying opposite to the Fort gate, known by the name of the Bowling Green, shall be reserved and set apart for them and their successors. . . . for ever," preparations were being made to build a fortress on the Atlantic coast, at Chebucto, that would counterbalance the Dunkirk of America on Ile Royale.

Henceforth, Halifax was the capital and garrison city. The foreign Protestants were settled in the shadow of the Citadel. Annapolis, the centre of French life, and for more than half a century the seat of English government, had been in close touch with all the old French country that lay around the Bay of Fundy waters. Its prestige was gone; the centre of interest was now on the Atlantic seaboard, and in that change all the country reached by Fundy tides was involved. The Cobequid country was left alone, and became known as "a resort of disaffected Indians."

In the tragedy of 1755, the Cobequid Indians fought side by side with the French in a desperate attempt to drive back the English from the Petitcodiac river. "About two hundred and fifty buildings were burned along the sides of this river; and, while they (the soldiers) were firing the Mass House there, the Indians and French rallied and attacked the British soldiers and killed and wounded about thirty of them, and drove the remainder back to their ships." At Cobequid village was "their chapel, of 100 feet in length and forty feet in breadth, which contained a large heavy bell." English settlers ploughed up the molten metal, and named their settlement Masstown. Across the bay, "Old Barns" is a reminder of two buildings that escaped burning, and were long preserved by the English settlers. A chapter could be written of the traditional stories of refugees from all the Bay of Fundy country who collected at Cobequid and took the old road to the north shore and thence to Miramichi.

For five years, the only inhabitants of the Cobequid country were Indians and escaped Acadians who took refuge with them. In 1759 a terrible storm swept the bay. "The tide was supposed to have been raised six feet perpendicular above its ordinary level. The storm broke down the dykes on the Bay of Fundy everywhere, and the marsh lands now deserted were overflowed and deteriorated." The desolation was complete.

The following year British settlers came, Ulstermen and Lowland Scots. "The race had come originally from Scotland, and had been since the reign of William III settled in the North of Ireland. The new settlers retained and brought with them the creed and virtues derived from their Scotch ancestry. They were fully instructed in the elementary branches of learning, and they strove to maintain in the second country of their adoption the principles and habits which had distinguished them in the first."

They had not come without assurance of favourable conditions of settlement:

On the 12th October, 1758, a proclamation was adopted in Council, relative to settling... as well the lands vacated by the French as every other part of this valuable province..... A description of the lands was ordered to be published pursuant to the foregoing proclamation, which consist of..... intervale plowlands, producing wheat, rye, barley, oats, hemp, flax, etc. These have been cultivated for more than a hundred years past, and never fail of crops, nor need manuring. Also..... upland cleared, and stock'd with English grass, planted with orchards, gardens, etc. These lands, with good husbandry, produce often two loads of hay per acre. The wild and unimproved lands adjoining to the above are well timbered and wooded with beech, black birch, ash, oak, pine, fir, etc. All these lands are so intermixed that every single farmer may have a proportionate quantity of plow land, grassland and woodland, and all are situated about the bay of Fundi, upon rivers navigable for ships of burthen.

Upon requests for more detailed information, it was announced that townships would contain one hundred thousand acres, to include the best land and the rivers of the vicinity, to front on the sea, etc. These settlers would be exempt from impressment—a very important provision in the eighteenth century. The government of the province was to be modelled on that of Virginia, the oldest royal province. Freedom of worship was guaranteed to Dissenters. Lawrence was criticized for giving free grants of great areas of land, on which pioneer work had been done generations before, to men who were well able to pay for it. "Many of them are rich," it was said, "and bore the cost of their own transportation." *Rich* is a comparative term, but Lawrence was anxious to settle on these choice lands men who would be able to stock their farms and restore the devastated countryside to its old prosperous condition as soon as possible.

In 1776, Commodore Arbuthnot (son of that Doctor Arbuthnot who was associated with Pope and Swift and Bolingbroke) was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the province, in command during the absence of the Governor, and he set out to visit the British

settlements on the Acadian lands. In August of the same year he writes to Lord George Germaine:

My Lord,

I have taken an opportunity to visit the greatest part of the township of this province. . . . and reviewed the volunteer militia in each, under the command of Colonel Francklin. Your lordship will conclude I embraced these opportunities of being acquainted with the magistrates and bettermost people, by dining together. After which, I proceeded up Cobequid Bay, and landed at Londonderry, Onslow and Truro, three townships inhabited by Scotchmen and Irish people, who have been brought out here soon after the place began to be settled,—a strong, robust, industrious people. I found full 500 men capable of bearing arms, the finest men in the province, settled on the best land, and the most flourishing because they are the most industrious.

One infers that Arbuthnot dined well in the Cobequid country.

The new settlers repaired the dykes and aboiteaux. They built churches—the first Presbyterian churches erected in Canada—and sent to Scotland for their ministers. They applied to the Government for help in building a road to Halifax. Two brothers built a mill at the place now known as McClure's Mills. They found a millstone in the brook, and built on the French site. One of the owners wrote in 1786, to a brother in Belfast, Maine—the family had come from Belfast, Ireland—telling him "how well he had prospered in worldly things since he settled in Truro. That he was now owner of 1650 acres of good land, 31 head of cattle, 3 horses and 14 sheep." Two sons owned, between them, seven hundred and fifty acres of land.

As the settlers grew more prosperous, they became slave-holders. When the newly arrived Scottish minister in the struggling pioneer settlement at Pictou visited Truro, he was horrified to find that even the minister in that village was a slave-owner. He published a remonstrance in the form of a *Letter addressed to a clergyman on the subject of a black girl whom he holds in slavery*. The Truro clergyman, "a mild man, of easy temper", made no reply. It was, in fact, a difficult situation, for the house servant in question had been presented to him as a gift. However, a brother minister in another Cobequid village undertook his defence. He issued an answering publication, giving indisputable proof from Scripture that slavery was sanctioned by divine authority. This assurance was doubtless pleasing to the slave-owners.

When slavery was abolished in British dominions, negroes settled on "The Island" west of the town. To-day, there is only

the name to remind us that the tides of the bay once surrounded this area. Savage's Island, and the curious little round hills, shaped like overturned bowls, are reminders that the work of reclaiming land went on for generations before the upper end of the bay was confined in its present narrow channel. Less than one hundred years ago Truro was a port, and to-day only the name of "The Board Landing" Bridge shows that the ships unloaded their cargoes here. Dairy farmers will feel that the rich hay lands compensate for the loss in picturesqueness, but lovers of the sea will always regret that the town turned its back on the Cobequid tides in the era of railroad building.

The part played by the Cobequid country in the great days of ship building is a story in itself, and much of it has been told, but perhaps few people realize the standard of living maintained in every little country village around the shore. A few years ago a lumber merchant found that walls of the old house he had taken for the use of his workmen were covered with that costly imported pictorial paper of which only a few specimens have been found in all America. A short time ago a village church, as a means of raising funds, arranged a museum of local antiques gathered from the nearby countryside. The published list showed eighteenth and early nineteenth century articles that could have been found only in very prosperous households.

During shipbuilding times, workmen gathered. Sometimes they bought small places near the shipyards, and became a permanent part of the population. Long before this, other settlers, less fortunate, had gone into the back country and cleared their own lands.

In these back districts there long survived a body of folklore and legend, transplanted from its homeland and easily oriented in the Cobequid hills. More than half a century ago a local writer told in verse the story of "The Witch of the Shubenacadie River," whose boat was an iron kettle in which she came down the tide and sailed across the bay. There she would take the horses out of the stables and ride them all night long, as the owners knew when they saw the stirrup hairs in the mane next morning. Like Robin Goodfellow, she would "bootless make the breathless housewife churn"—ancient lore of the English countryside familiar to Shakespeare in his time. A red-hot horseshoe dropped in the churn would invariably dislodge her. By this devious reasoning the housewife arrived at the same result as the modern dairyman when he raises the temperature of the cream. The dancing light of the will o'the wisp has always been recognized by Celtic people as the restless

spirit of the departed. In lowlands near the river they saw these spirits, as they had seen them hovering over the Irish bogs. It is generally believed that family ghosts, family curses and ritual dancing are indigenous to a locality, and never cross the seas to a new land. In this district, however, there is the story of a curse that could not be left behind, but remained with the family until the specified number of generations had suffered. The tale was used—with fundamental modifications—as the motif of a story,¹ a few years ago. In its original form it suggests a very ancient folk tale mentioned by Scott in one of his antiquarian studies. In that case the curse was said to have resulted from intercourse between mortals and “the little people”. It is a strange, and undoubtedly a very ancient, tale. Put into print it is an incredible story, but one who has been privileged to hear it told as it has been handed down, even to unconscious cadences of the voice, will feel that a glimpse has been granted at the mysteries that lie far back in the history of the race.

Here too survived songs and dances of earlier times, and many who sang *Barbara Allan* and other ballads that had been handed down from generation to generation never knew how historians value these old songs.

In these villages along the shore there are still traditions of the days when Ben Church raked the bay and harried the French in the name of religion; the days when a pirate crew wintered on its shores; when American privateers plundered, and British frigates took by right of their necessity. There is the story of the brigantine “Enterprise”, built of Cobequid timber and manned by Cobequid sailors. “In May, 1844, this vessel was loaded with plaster at Pitchbrook, on the east side of the Shubenacadie river. . . . sailed from Spencer’s Point, on the north side of the Bay, on May 22nd, 1844, and has not been heard from since.” On board were the wife and child of one of the owners, and his twenty-one year old niece.

But these stories of the bay deserve a place by themselves, as do also the stories of the social life of the town.

1. *Joan at Halfway*: Grace Macleod Rogers.