

THE SCENERY OF NOVA SCOTIA

J. W. FALCONER

BURCKHARDT, in his book *The Renaissance in Italy*, affirms that "the love of what is beautiful in Nature is the result of a long and complicated development." He also calls attention to the fact that among the ancients "Art and Poetry had gone though the whole circle of human interests before they turned to the representation of Nature". We are told that as late as the time of Petrarch the climbing of a mountain for its own sake was unheard of—a condition to which we may easily return if there does not soon come a revival in the pleasant art of walking. In Humboldt's *Kosmos* an attempt is made to account for this late emergence of the love for natural scenery, and three causes are assigned: (1) the animated and poetical delineation of nature in modern literature; (2) the great advance made in the art of landscape painting; (3) the descriptive works of travel now available.

Many things seem to indicate that we are now experiencing a decided awakening to the beauty of our natural surroundings in Nova Scotia, and that our people are finding a new and genuine source of pleasure and pride in our special type of landscape. It may be worth while first of all to enquire whether the reasons given by Humboldt for a fresh delight in nature have any bearing on our renaissance. We may at once set aside his second cause, since landscape painting has been rarely exercised and scantily appreciated by us. In regard to the first cause, that of poetic literature, however, the case is quite different, since Nova Scotia perhaps beyond all other provinces in Canada has a place among the Muses. The glories of our Acadian marshlands have been published far and wide by Longfellow's *Evangeline*, and it would not be easy to exaggerate the effect of this poem in arousing in us a sense of the loveliness of our wide spreading dyke lands. I venture the opinion that this poem may have directed the attention of our minor poets too exclusively to this specific aspect of Nova Scotian landscape, to the neglect of other equally impressive natural characteristics.

The third of Humboldt's "causes" should receive more extended consideration, since we happily possess valuable Descriptions of Nova Scotia from early times, which are available in the publications of the Champlain Society. Of these the most important

are the French narratives, which are very generous in their praise. Lescarbot, in his *History of New France*, describes in the following enthusiastic terms the sheet of water which we now call Annapolis Basin:—

In this Bay, in latitude 45°, is the entrance to our harbour which our friends wished to explore. There they made some stay during which they had the pleasure of hunting a moose, which was swimming leisurely across a broad sea basin which makes the harbour. On the north side the harbour is shut in by mountains which extend more than fifteen leagues north-east and south-west; towards the south lie hills, down the sides of which and of the said mountains flow a thousand streamlets which make the spot more pleasant than any other in the world.

That these closing words were not the result of mere passing enthusiasm is clear from the long poem which Lescarbot wrote after his departure. This poem, called "Farewell to New France", may be regarded as the earliest example of Nova Scotian literature, and it reflects a genuine regret on the part of the author as he leaves these lovely shores:

*Faut il abandonner les beautez de ce lieu
Et dire au Port Royal un eternel adieu?*

Denys's "Historical Trip", written in 1671, gives a minute narrative of a voyage which he made from Cape Forschu (Yarmouth) along the southern coast to Canseau. Though the main object was to make a survey of the forests and fisheries, yet his record is every here and there embellished with outbursts of delight at the charming bits of scenery through which he passed. As he comes to the Isle de Tousquet he says, "The country is of the most pleasant, and the best I have seen." He describes with much vivacity his first canoe trip to the beautiful garden of a Recolet priest on Cape Negro. Of Petite Riviere he says, "Having made six or seven leagues along the coast, there is found a little river of which the entrance is good for long boats. It does not come very far inland, but it is very beautiful, and a very excellent region." And no one who is at all familiar with this part of the country will question his judgment.

In the latest publication of the Champlain Society we have another French description of Nova Scotia; Dièreville's "Relation of the Voyage to Port Royal in Acadia or New France" (1708). His impressions of the new scene were expressed in verse; skil-

fully translated by Mrs. Clarence Webster, as may be seen by the following quotation:

From every point of view the site is fair,
 The narrow entrance easy to defend;
 Upon the heights, surrounded by
 The two small marshes, could be built
 A town which would be unassailable:
 A very pretty Place, wherein at length
 Each family might in greater comfort dwell
 And find a certain joy in life.
 Across the marshes oxen draw the Plough
 Where wheat grows for all those who live near by.
 Beyond is seen a vast extent of wood
 Where trees of divers sorts rise Heaven-high,
 And make us doubt our eyes, and question if
 They spring from earth, or drop down from the skies

It is nearly one hundred years before we come to a work in English by Captain Knox, entitled *The Historical Journal of the Campaigns in North America*. In Vol. I he writes of Nova Scotia in much less flattering terms than those used by our early French visitors. He has few words of praise for the beauty of the land, and gives voice to a very adverse opinion of our climate, starting a tradition, or let us rather say, a calumny, which has continued to our time. For two years he lived among the very scenes which Lescarbot regretted to leave; yet he speaks of this as a "desert Province" and adds, "The winters are at least seven months long, four of which are almost unsupportably severe. We are strangers here to the Spring, that delightful season of the year in other countries: the Winter being immediately succeeded by Summer, which, though of no long continuance, is as much upon the extreme for intolerable heat and close air as the other is for intense cold."

The earliest work in English which I have had the opportunity of reading, where any adequate attention is given to the scenery of our Province, is a book by John McGregor, entitled *Sketches of British America* (1832). Speaking of the land in general, he says: "Yet the aspect of the whole, if not romantically sublime, is exceedingly picturesque, and the scenery in many places is richly beautiful." He gives the following specific case, "A high hill called Ardoise mountain, lying between Halifax and Windsor, is considered the most elevated land in Nova Scotia, and commands a more extensively beautiful view of picturesque prospect of land and water than any other part of America that I have seen, except the heights of Cape Diamond above Quebec." Haliburton does not include any description of scenery in his well known History.

But perhaps I have given undue space to the "causes" which Humboldt has suggested; and must now proceed to discuss what appeals to me as characteristic in the beauty of our Nova Scotian scenery.

II

We must freely confess that the quality of sublimity is seldom manifest in Nova Scotian landscape; and there are large stretches of barren and dull country which have long since lost any claim to beauty they may once have had, because of the pitiless ravages of our forests by axe and by fire. Nevertheless we have a great variety of genial pastoral scenery, where loveliness of form blends with richness of colour made most attractive by the clearness of our atmosphere. Job's verse on "the bright light which is in the clouds" might be appropriated for our skies.

But the most distinctive and unforgettable feature in our Province is the manner in which land and water are always in close conjunction. Herein we resemble ancient Greece, which gloried in the extent and beauty of its shore-line. Nor was it strange that a people who reaped such benefits from the deep should think of the ocean as the healer of all the ills of mankind. So intimate is this conjunction, in our case, and so deeply is the land pierced by inlets, that no part of our Province lies beyond the call of the ocean. There is not an inland hill-farm unvisited, at least now and then, by whiffs of the sea fog; or over whose dwelling there does not pass at times some sea bird on its lofty flight. Our Atlantic coast has not only noble sheets of water of the ample proportions of St. Margaret's Bay, surely one of the most enticing bays to be seen anywhere; but there are also innumerable smaller bays and little harbours. Some of these are protected by steep, rugged cliffs, washed day and night by Atlantic waves; others have ledges which run out to slender points and even into sunken reefs. Here few signs of vegetation can be seen, unless it be a few stunted spruce trees carrying on an ever losing struggle with the wild tumult of south-eastern gales. How pleasant it is, on some calm evening in summer, to visit such little harbours as Peggy's Cove, or Baccaro, or Cheticamp; to admire the mingling of land, sea and sky; and to watch the small fishing boats as they return laden with the riches of the deep.

Nor must we pass by the islands; not only those that abound so plentifully in Mahone or Chester Bay, but also those scattered along our shore at a greater distance from the land. These lonely,

yet alluring, places can be visited only when the sea is calm and when the fog has cleared away. Here the landscape is usually rugged, bold and rocky, with but a few small fields whose meagre extent is atoned for by the exceeding greenness of the grass. Yet such is the charm of these solitary homes that the dwellers there become so exceedingly attached to them that they are seldom willing to leave. Not long ago I visited one such remote island which had been swept by winter storms that destroyed its wharves and carried away some of its buildings; yet the inhabitants listened with disdain to any proposal that they should seek security on the mainland.

Another feature is the extent of sand beaches which run like a chain of gold along our southern shore; the sand so closely packed that cars can be driven upon it, and kept scrupulously clean by flocks of unresting gulls and sand-pipers. At certain places, Round Bay for example, one can stand above the shore line on the barrier of stones, and gazing southwards watch how

the white line of the running surf goes
booming down the beach:

while turning north we look upon an inland lake, dark, yet very shallow, about whose edges the reeds rustle vigorously, and never more beautifully than in the golden light and the breezes of early September. Why has this beauty not stirred some of our poets to song? We are a sea-faring folk, and feel like exiles when compelled to live far from the salt waves. Our very speech has the flavour of the ocean, yet we have scarcely any poetry to give form to these deep emotions of our people.

Our rivers, too, must not be quite forgotten, flowing—as they often do—from deep secluded valleys and lakes. I once asked a friend, who had recently returned from a visit to England, what had been the impression made by British landscape as compared with ours; and the reply was, “I missed most of all the running streams that meet one everywhere in Nova Scotia.” Joseph Howe called attention to the same feature:—

In joy and gladness on they go
My country's pleasant streams,
And oft through scenes as fair ye flow
As bless the poet's dreams.

He chose the Stewiacke river as the theme for a poem, hoping to stir others to follow his example. How is it that someone in the rival valley of the Musquodoboit has not taken up the challenge

long ago on behalf of that equally lovely stream? There are rivers in Nova Scotia with long stretches of still water, flowing past uninhabited banks, whose remote sources are seldom visited, and where one can paddle in a canoe all day long without meeting a craft of any description, and enjoy the pleasant sensation of remoteness such as belongs to explorers in virgin lands. These rivers sometimes lead one into broad lakes where wooded hills slope down to the very margin of the water, another example of the unity of land and water of which I have been writing in this paper.

But my space is running out, and I must leave to others the task of describing fresh aspects of our scenery. Enough, I hope, has been said to make it manifest that we do not need to cross the ocean or the Continent to find natural scenery of a very high order. It is right beside us, even within walking distance of Halifax; we need only the opening of our eyes. And are there not great and healing powers in the sympathetic contemplation of Nature? Beneath the ample skies in the quiet forests, or looking down from a height upon the sea, we may learn to forget for a while the anxieties of the passing hour, and regard more calmly the troubled course of life. We may forget self in the presence of the tireless labours and glories of Nature, who thus becomes a guide, a guardian of the heart. Emerson used to say that a walk in the woods was one of the best ways of dodging old age.