

# A HALF-DESERTED VILLAGE OF NEW BRUNSWICK

GRACE TOMKINSON

DESERTED villages, however romantic their names may sound, are invariably mildewed and depressing:—boarded-up windows, weed-grown paths, tumbling chimneys. But a half-deserted village, which while acknowledging the ravages of the years draws its few remaining garments about it and confronts the world with some shreds of its former dignity and pride, has a definite appeal for me. All of the Maritime Provinces have too many of these sadly dwindled places for the good of the country, economically, but we cannot deny that they have something—a kind of spiritual quality which turns them almost into an asset. Their quaint charm and fragrance make them the despair of crassly prosperous boom-towns. The life which flows through them has a leisurely pleasantly melancholy flavour which puts time and material values gently but firmly in their places.

But from the inside these one-time busy little centres, forced now to mark time and live in yesterdays, are essentially tragic. Most of them—the coast towns at least—found themselves out of step with the world when the day of clipper ships passed. Then when water-ways were gradually abandoned for land-ways, they were left altogether off the beaten paths. Railways and main trunk highways could hardly be expected to go off their routes to accommodate every little point or peninsula. So what were once the up-and-coming “hubs” of their districts have been almost forgotten. As a native of one of these lost villages, I may be qualified to speak for them. One which has a particular fascination for me is Saint Martins, New Brunswick.

No stranger coming into Saint Martins over the steep ridge which shuts it off from the mainland can ever be prepared for the sudden breath-taking sight of the village slipping down to the sea, the flawless three-mile curve of bay and, across the greater Bay of Fundy, the misty blue line of the Nova Scotia shore. The red sandstone cliffs, the Cove protected by the long arms of two breakwaters, the white houses among the green masses of the trees, the shimmering cold-blue water flecked for miles with white-caps, make up a composition that is astonishing and entirely satisfying. It is never described without due reference to Naples; but

this bay is cut off a sterner pattern. The shore line, the cliffs, the white lighthouse at Quaco Head, are typically north country and severe. And the Bay of Naples has nothing remotely resembling the Isle Haute, rising boldly—a clean-cut granite monolith—out of the Bay of Fundy, inhabited by a lighthouse keeper, screaming flocks of gulls and the ghosts of Captain Kidd's henchmen. It is much more suggestive of Ailsa Craig than of Capri.

Saint Martins has few summer people, and no proper summer bungalows to rent. But there are plenty of empty houses. When we discovered the place, we moved into one which had been left sufficiently furnished for the owners' use when they came back for a holiday. It was a genuine New Brunswick homestead of the finer type, a low, spreading white house with an ell, a conservatory, gables, bay-windows, fireplaces (where we had extravagant fires of driftwood every night). The outbuildings included a "coach-house" clinging to the hillside, almost too dilapidated to house our little car, which, goodness knows, had no reason to be particular.

There were lilacs and crooked apple trees, a sweet-syringa bush and honey-suckle over the front gate. The place had been vacant for years, since the death of the old couple who had lived out their lives in it, but the lawn still showed pathetically, in the shades of the unmown grass, the patterns of the elaborate flower beds which had been so tenderly cherished in former days. A clump of tiger lilies flamed defiantly in the long grass, along with ribbon grass and live-forevers gone wild. A path led across a field to a spring of clear, cold water; and directly across the road, a few yards away, was the beach with the sea tumbling on it day and night.

It was exactly the place where one might choose to be born. It was like stepping into an idyll. Living in that old home, inheriting for two months the belongings and atmosphere of another and totally different generation, gave us a unique opportunity to go back, like the young hero of *Berkeley Square*, and re-live the old days. It made the present seem actually remote, and the business of our own lives at home like a hectic, futile existence on a roller-coaster.

The house inside kept up the illusion; flowered carpets on the floors, tacked up close to the walls, Venetian blinds, carved gilt cornices over the windows, and long lace curtains. A corner shelf with a faded lambrequin on it, trimmed with heavy metallic fringe, held a smug, stuffed owl under glass. Steel engravings—*The Voyage of Life* and *The Homeward Curfew*—hung on the walls, and an ancient print of Harvard College. Upstairs were feather-

beds in the low-eaved rooms, heavy furniture and chubby old trunks studded with square brass nails. And what a wonderful place to sleep, with the beam from the lighthouse flickering in the window at regular intervals, and the surf pounding incessantly, soothingly, on the shore!

So it happened that, by a sort of magic, we were able to go back and trace the story of one of these forgotten villages, to live with it intimately through its early beginnings, its spectacular rise and the slow twilight of its decay. The first name of Saint Martins was Quaco. The story goes that the Indians, forced out of the place by white invaders, turned on the rise of ground west of town and laid fierce curses on the new settlement. The word used sounded to the jeering white men like "quaco". Years later their descendants were to wonder if the shrill imprecations of the savages had been quite impotent.

The importance of Saint Martins in the old days is no myth. Early histories rank it as the third town in the province (after Saint John and Saint Andrews) with every promise of a great future. The first mention I find of it is in Hollingworth's *Present State of Nova Scotia With a Brief Account of the Canadian and British Islands*, published in 1787. The place "Quako" had then about six hundred persons. It is described as suited for agriculture, but as having "no place fit to shelter vessels from southerly winds."

We can form some idea of those first settlers. The King's Orange Rangers, a corps raised in Orange County, New York, in 1776-77 and commanded by Colonel John Bayard, were the founders of Quaco. This regiment saw service in various places from Halifax to the Carolinas during the Revolution. Colonel Edward Winslow says of them: "There is not a provincial corps in his Majesty's service more capable of distinguishing itself by a performance of military service and manoeuvres than this:—nor is there a better body of men." When the war was over, these paragons with their families were shipped north on British transports. The original grant of land at Quaco, registered in the Crown Lands Office in Fredericton, November, 1796, contains sixteen of their names:

George Rogers  
Gaspar Maybee  
William Carnell  
George Price  
Daniel Vaughan  
Mathias Moran  
George Hute  
Isaac Springstead, Sen.

Allan Maclean  
Isaac Springstead  
Catharane Jacobs  
Michael Ambrose  
James West  
Roger Welsh  
Jacob Berry  
William Moran

These grants were subdivided with others who should also be classed as first settlers, the Browns, Bradshaws, Vails, McCumbers, Carsons, Cochranes, Howards, Floyds, Smiths and Melvins.

The village has no written history, but we may imagine those unlettered soldiers, used for years to anything but a settled existence, trying to adapt themselves to peace and domesticity in the wilderness. The country about them was thickly wooded to the water's edge, and inhabited only by Indians. But the fish were amazingly plentiful. Tall white pines for masts for the King's navy were in great demand, and eventually all kinds of lumber. The place began to prosper at once. More settlers came, and as everyone wanted a site on the waterfront, the village was strung out around the shore. Among the early-comers was a German doctor, who felt the need of a butcher and a baker. He sent back home for them, and the butcher's descendants follow his trade in the place to-day.

Then ship-building began. The versatile redcoats put on ship's carpenter's aprons and became pioneers in one of the most colorful and highly profitable industries of the Atlantic coast. We were shown the spot at Hodsmyth's Corner where Daniel Vaughan in 1805 found a tree shaped by nature to give the first vessel built on that shore the proper curve from keel to gunwale. The story of the launching of the *Rachael* (named for Mr. Vaughan's wife, who had prompted him to build her) became a saga. When the entire population had gathered in high expectation to see her take the tide, the schooner refused to budge. Since the whole business was something of an experiment, there must have been plenty to say. "I told you so!" But her ways were re-set, and she was given another trial. Her anchor was buried deep in the ground, with heavy timbers piled on it, so that if she did happen to start she could not go far, since by this time it was low water. But when she decided to move, there was no stopping her. She tore up her anchor, scattered the timbers and landed on her side in the mud, far down the beach. No damage was done, however, and when the tide came in she floated, with her builder aboard as captain.

The "know-it-alls" predicted that she would be the last vessel to be built at Quaco, for where would they ever find another stick of exactly the right crookedness for a keel? Then the idea of putting the frame together in sections came in, and before she knew it, Quaco, under the more high-toned name of Saint Martins, was building her own ships—brigs, brigantines, schooners—and sailing them on the seven seas.

Gold flowed into the mariners' pockets. A sea-going man, confined for months at a time to a tiny cabin and a few feet of deck,

may be pardoned for wanting to expand a little when he gets on land. The old sea captains' homes all the way from Newfoundland to Boston are known to be roomy and pretentious. For their day they were palaces, and their owners in Saint Martins brought home luxurious furnishings in their vessels, silky mahogany, carved teakwood, hand-beaten Indian brass and the first pianos. Their women had thin Canton china for their corner cupboards, heavy crepes, Indian shawls so fine they would pass through a ring. The men dressed well too, but they were a thrifty people and made their clothes last.

"A good English broadcloth," I was told, "would do a man twenty years. It might turn a little green perhaps, but it would still be a good suit." It was not uncommon for a man to be laid out, after a long life, in his wedding suit.

Their early highways were all on the water, but in 1827 Saint Martins had its first road to Saint John, thirty miles away. It was of the corduroy variety, and all streams had to be forded, so it could not have been much of an asset. In 1840 a second one was built. A stage-coach began to make weekly trips, then semi-weekly, in 1854. It was not till 1870 that there was a daily mail service, and the journey to Saint John was not one then to be taken casually. One or two trips a year were made to do the family shopping. The old people recall their mothers coming back from them, laden with marvellous purchases, perhaps ten pairs of shoes, as many hats, bolts of "stuff goods" or print-cotton, lace mitts, stays, cravats and a new framed picture of the Queen in her widow's weeds or the latest thing in a Rogers group. There were important social events in the town now demanding fine clothes—big goose and turkey suppers, and high teas. The launching of a new vessel was always a gala event for the whole countryside.

In 1873 a tremendous wave of excitement swept the whole coast because of the steamer *Albert*, which began making weekly trips between Saint John and Albert, calling at Saint Martins. No one seems to have stopped amidst the general jubilation to consider that this inroad of steam would eventually write an elegy for canvas and for Saint Martins. A little later the town was puffed up with pride over having its own steamboat making three trips a week.

That was the heyday of the town's prosperity. All the prophecies concerning its great future seemed to be coming true. There was no telling where it would stop. Imposing new houses went up. The shipyards rang with the clatter of hammer and adze and axe. In 1863 the townspeople, strolling complacently along

the shore of an evening, could count the masts of twenty-six large ships on the stocks at once, built at an average cost of \$75,000 apiece. The profits from one voyage might be as much as \$10,000. And in those days that was money! Saint Martins skippers pushed the noses of Saint Martins-built ships through all the oceans, matched profanity with leather-faced traders, probed the iniquity of tropical ports, and came home to drive sleek horses behind canopy-topped buggies, and to march solemnly into church beside the stiffly crinolined silks of their wives and daughters.

There were fine churches in the place then. Among the new industries was a Spool and Bobbin Factory, a thriving concern, financed by English capital, built in 1875. Then in 1878 the dream of all ambitious towns of that day was realized. The railway was built.

But this answer-to-a-village's-prayer was not the unqualified triumph it was expected to be. Instead of being connected directly with Saint John, Saint Martins was, for reasons not quite clear now, put on a meandering branch line from Hampton. It was a real calamity, for with even a one-horse train service, other means of travel were bound to dwindle. Saint Martins woke up to find itself being pushed politely off the map.

The ship-building business was failing fast. What looks like a last gallant attempt to save it was made when the keel was laid for the largest square-rigger built on Saint Martins beaches, the *Kismet*, a barque of 1,030 tons (in contrast to the little thirty-ton *Rachael*!) She seems to have been ill-starred from the beginning. The firm who began the work got into financial difficulties, and had to let another company take her over. She was launched with due ceremony, and made her maiden voyage to Liverpool in December, 1882, with a cargo of deals. The next August, on her way to Callao, Peru, carrying coal, she was abandoned on fire and her promising career was over.

No more square-riggers were built at Saint Martins. The steps in the town's decline are easily traced from here, though few saw their significance at the time. The Union Baptist Seminary, opened in 1888 in a fine group of new buildings, had to close in 1894 for lack of funds. The Spool and Bobbin Factory changed hands. Its English owners became bankrupt, and it finally went out of business. The men who had come to work in it had to move their families away. But as long as the plant was there, people hoped, as people foolishly will, that the good old times would come back, and the factory would be re-opened or put to some use. While they were waiting for the depression to lift,

the climax of disaster came in the big fire of 1900. It started in a saw-mill a few miles from the village, burned through the woods and seized on the town. Some sixty buildings went, including the Spool and Bobbin Factory.

It was, on top of everything else, a paralyzing blow. People were moving away, not only from the village but from the farms "in back". It had never been a farming country. There were no ships on the stocks, and nettles grew tall in the shipyards. The fishing amounted to nothing, and when any sort of craft made into the harbour, the whole town ran out to look. Everyone seems to have lost heart, for when there was a movement to start a cheese-factory, the scheme fell through because not enough farmers could be induced to promise a given amount of milk regularly. Yet the place was not quite dead, for in 1907 someone had the initiative to start one of the few literary magazines the province has ever had, the *New Brunswicker*, published by W. E. Skillen. Its advertisements describe the attractions of Saint-Martins-by-the-Sea as a summer resort in superlatives—not, of course, omitting Naples.

Its pride had come down to that. There was obviously nothing else left. It was about that time that the project of a palatial summer hotel on the hilltop, overlooking the village and the bay, was broached. A group interested in promoting the tourist trade of the province arrived to hold a meeting and unfold the plan. It looked like a Heaven-sent inspiration, till the local people found that they would be expected to subscribe something like \$100,000. It was not that they lacked the money. The fortunes made in better days had not quite petered out. It was the idea of laying out hard-earned cash in frivolous things like bowling-greens, tennis courts, golf links, an esplanade that, as they might have put it, "stuck in people's crops". They bristled with a fine independence.

"If outsiders wont come here without all that tomfoolery," they said, "let them stay away! We don't want that class here. It would be the ruin of our people. It would take away their ambition."

So that dream of returning prosperity faded. The war brought another false revival, when two schooners were built and launched on the bay, the *Selina K. Goldman* and the *Quaco Queen*. After that, the place settled into stagnation again.

It is quite easy to probe with a pleasant detachment into the disintegration of a village which means nothing to you; but another matter to be bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh, and to be forced to sit helplessly by and watch it go to pieces. It is one thing to tear up one's roots from dearly loved soil, but something more

disastrous to have the soil give way underneath them. Leaving sentiment out of it, one feels such a thing as a physical tie to the locality where one's feet have worn paths from childhood, where one's eyes have rested gratefully, year after year, on tree and cliff and the wide, tossing sea. It is an attachment never actually measured till the region is threatened. Only those who happened to be born in one of these endearing forgotten places can know the heartbreak of seeing them doomed to slow decay, of refusing to believe that something will not turn up to save them.

Saint Martins is a place to inspire a passionate attachment. We could see that even before we had spent nine weeks exploring its quaint streets, swimming on all of its beaches, fishing in its still forest lakes, or picking blueberries, wild raspberries and rock cranberries on the hilltop looking directly down on the roof of our own house. Afterwards the fact that the world had really no place for the village now, no need nor appreciation of its startling loveliness, seemed as incredible to us as to the native-born. We knew how the men and women left must have looked at the empty, peeling houses, the deserted shipyards, and thought of the dreams of their fathers with infinite sadness. Is anything more affecting than the sight of fields, cleared and cultivated by a pioneer generation, with unbelievable hardship and patience, beginning to show a thick, persistent growth of tiny saplings—the wilderness reclaiming its own with no one to care?

If the fortunes and the importance of the place have crumbled, it still has some of its first families left, and comfortable homes with that flowering of culture and refinement which cannot be grown in one generation. And you meet old men with weather-tanned faces and a roll in their gait who can tell jovial stories of their young days, when a lad went off to sea at fourteen with his wooden sea-chest and canvas bag, when the fare was salt horse and hard-tack, and a sailor's life was no picnic. They may be induced to take you into their front parlours to see the carefully preserved spoils of their voyages, an African bow-and-arrow, a blown ostrich egg, a creamy guana-skin rug from Argentine, a lump of lava from Vesuvius.

Most of the young people to-day have to leave, but in summer all who can come back. And their roots, it seems to me, strike deeper into their native soil than they would in more prosperous or successful communities. But love of country, like any form of affection, is notably perverse, and never in proportion to the deserts of the place. The boys and girls of Saint Martins have a fierce, protective kind of pride in their heritage. We sat at dusk on the

long pier, while the harbour-light at the far end of it went creaking up to its place, or later in the evening, around huge, crackling bonfires on the beach (with the old ships' ways buried in the sand beneath us) and listened to their tales of the old days; of the great storm which swept away the harbour-light and twisted and warped the breakwater so that it still has a tipsy cant; of the three-top-mast schooner *Arcana*, from Maine, that was wrecked, beating down the Bay of Fundy in a blizzard fifty years ago; how seven of the crew reached the tiny island off Quaco Head and all but one perished there, not knowing the lay of the land or that they might have waded across the race to the mainland at low tide. Their bodies were found next morning, encased in ice. The sailors' burying-ground, where most of the shipwrecked unknowns who have come to Saint Martins lie, is on a sightly spot, overlooking the bay.

Beside their true yarns these youngsters had an extraordinary fund of folk tales. The sea, of course, breeds wonder and mystery, but the fog helps too. Any bush, behind a thick wall of sea-mist, might be an Indian, a bloodthirsty pirate or a peddler's ghost. So Saint Martins takes its folklore seriously. If you doubt it, take a look at the hilltop gouged out after dark by treasure-seekers. One of our neighbours got up one morning to find a great cavity in the earth in front of his store where a boulder had been removed by some trusting soul in the night. All this effort because this particular shore and the Isle Haute are believed to have been well upholstered with Captain Kidd's doubloons!

Many of the legends we heard there were variations of those current elsewhere. The phantom ship, which sails up the Bay every seven years with all its masts and rigging ablaze, may bob up anywhere from Marblehead to Gaspé. But it is more interesting here because it is real. Reliable persons told us of seeing it. They described its appearance gravely, and where they were at the time—on Razorback or over West. When I asked if they actually believed in it, they said very sensibly: "No, we don't believe in it. We just see it."

Living near to the past and in close touch with the supernatural may go together. It is easy to fancy demure poke bonnets or hoop-skirts going up the walks of those stately old houses. The very air of the village is sleepy and reminiscent. When one of us happened to be ill, we were delighted to find there was still a place left where the family doctor arrived on foot, carrying his little black pill-satchel. The old men gather in groups about the general stores and recall the time when the waterfront was a forest of masts

and spars, and the fish swarmed into the Cove, running away from sharks, "so plenty you could scoop them up with your bare hands." They can put in quite a bit of time speculating on things; why, for instance, the fish have turned against the place so that it is an event when someone brings in a small catch of herring or a mackerel or a few codfish. Some put the blame on the sardine weirs at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy.

"The herring's all caught before they get the chance to grow any size."

"It's the pulp mills," another says, "that are the curse of the country, stripping it of its timber. They fill up the harbours with sawdust and choke the fish."

They go back again and again to the question of why the bottom had to fall out of Saint Martins.

"As long as people were satisfied to build their own schooners," they declare, "there was good money made here. It was when they got to speculating, seeing how little they could build a vessel for and how much they could get out of her, that the business went to pot."

Change comes, and we make the best of it. But these lost villages do seem to have had circumstances and luck both against them. Most of them have no hope left unless it be summer visitors. But it will be some time before the tourist business affects Saint Martins much (for which we may be selfishly grateful). Its people are not of the type to pose or to "cater" to tourists. They could never understand the methods which high-salaried publicity experts (employed to speed up the tourist traffic) suggest, because they could not comprehend the motives behind them. Money is acceptable everywhere, but it can never be the incentive to frenzied effort and the complete derangement of an easy-going pattern of living, in a place where a man's needs are as simple as in Saint Martins—simple without sacrificing gentility, or, in any important way, the standard of living.

There cannot but be an undertone of sadness about these forgotten villages; but Saint Martins does not waste time pitying itself. A life rich and full enough to satisfy some places for centuries has been packed into its hundred and fifty years. If it is a long way from its Arabian Nights prosperity, it is also remote from the hard times of to-day. Depression blues cannot do much to a place that has been depressed so long it has become a habit. Here is a group who have learned to adjust themselves to leisure, to feel at home with it and to accept adversity. Then in Saint Martins, if life gets too difficult, one can always climb to the wind-

swept hilltop for a lifting, strengthening glimpse of far lands and water. And if a people cannot look forward, what is there for those who are left but to look backward?

Harbour and quiet shore, the hard-cleared fields  
Now going back to woodland, this gaunt row  
Of vacant houses staring out to sea,  
This failing remnant of the pioners,  
What have they left to boast of now but ghosts?