

# THE CENTENARY OF PIERRE LOTI

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THE history of literature comprises a series of actions and reactions by which every generation examines and revises what the preceding one admired. But whereas formerly, and even not so long ago—these reconsiderations were effected calmly and with the slow deliberation of history, those made since the last war have often been accompanied by heated denials and even violent insults. Only quite recently people were saying, "Barrés is dating". To day they would say, "Barrés, the fossil", or something of the kind. Most cultivated minds find no talent whatsoever in the author of the finest elegy in symbolism, Samain, or in Pierre Louys, the author of this half century's finest love poem. Of course there is some ulterior motive in all this harshness. You can push yourself forward by jostling the famous. He who would not succeed in attracting public attention by the reserved acknowledgement of some rather outmoded name hopes to become conspicuous by hurling a damaging insult by the way. We have lately witnessed some of these summary executions. There has been an attempt to eliminate in this way in a few cursory and sharp words not only Barrés, but Anna de Noailles, Anatole France even, and how many more? . . . In the past they did their best to bring down Hugo. But there a rock of granite broke them.

Let us not throw our Gods on to the gemonies, nor even envelop them "in the shroud of purple in which dead Gods sleep". There are allegiances to which we must remain loyal not only for a sense of honor, respectful of what we once sincerely admired and of what really moved us, but also in the light of justice. Great and beloved Loti deserves the most constant loyalty.

In one of the most recent and best works that have been devoted to Pierre Loti, Mr. Robert de Traz writes, when speaking of his style: "This style, the make-up of which escapes us". One cannot improve on this; Loti's style is indeed indefinable, despite some characteristic features and even mannerisms, for instance many plurals in Goncourt fashion: "Devant lui passèrent des gaietés de peuple et de dimanche", or very frequently, almost too frequently, a noun placed between two adjectives: "Les

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immobiles soirs roses de Tetouan", or: "Le Senegal, une grande tristesse morne". Despite its peculiarities and faults, this fluid and rather slow style does not attract attention: it soaks into the reader like a melody that plays and passes.

Yet as soon as his work was published it compelled recognition; it was a revelation. We were passing from the most concentrated naturalism, dominated by the stalwart and honest mason's style of Zola. There had also been the nervous, somewhat disjointed style of Daudet, the pointillist style of Goncourt, and the subtly concocted style of Huysmans. Then, suddenly we found a writer who used ordinary language and yet was able to convey things better to us than the most realist of his predecessors.

In note-book style—passages from his private diary were sometimes really embodied in his novels—Loti enabled us to be present at all the sights, and visit the countries he was describing. Those wonderful descriptions by Loti, which do not really describe but *replace* the thing, the town, the desert or the sea! After artistic writing, it was natural writing. Today it may be considered too natural; it is not considered elaborate enough; to some it seems too easy, with its syntax rather careless and as slipshod as an untied belt. Gide has written somewhere: "When I read this Ionian, I felt more Dorian than ever."

There are of course two kinds of style: the style with the syntax of a La Bruyere, of a Montesquieu, and nearer us of a Gide, a Claudel; then the cursive style, the style of things seen and of travel notes, the reporting style. There is not much composition about it in Loti, but in him it is often remarkably true. Then again, his slackness must not be exaggerated; in being so true, Loti is often great and at times imposing.

He says somewhere: "L'entendue brille et miroite sous le soleil éternel."<sup>1</sup> At the risk of being considered sacrilegious, I would go so far as to say when considering the effect of these simple but immensely significant adjectives that "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis" is Loti before Loti's time.

Pierre Loti seems to have been created by decree of Providence to take pictures of a world just at the moment when it was about to disappear. His work is like an album of last hours. All the countries about which he writes have changed more in the last fifty years than they had done in a thousand. The Turkey that Loti knew and loved was the land where on Selamlic Day the highest dignitaries of the Ottoman Empire ran on foot in terror behind the tightly shut carriage of the Sultan, where the harem

1. "The horizon is bright and shimmering 'neath th' eternal sun."



of the Commander of the Faithful contained two hundred and fifty women growing fat amid pearl strewn jewelry and age-old pianos, the Turkey of the *Arabian Nights* and *Les Orientales*. And now Turkey is an austere and strong republic and its men no longer wear the fez nor its women the veil. Loti's Morocco belongs to prehistoric times, to the age of Louis Philippe and the conquest of Algeria; his Japan is the artistic Japan of Madame Chrysanthème; he had not foreseen Pearl Harbour, and even less Hiroshima. If he seems to have prophetically envisaged an India without the English, it was because he did not desire to see them there. But they were there. They are still there. But today India is divided, and the fairy kingdoms of Patiala and Kapurthala, of whose dazzling monarchs we have had fleeting glimpses, are developing with astronomical speed. Even his Iceland, where fishermen dreamed of their Breton homeland as they floated in their boats scattered about the everlasting mists—The Parliament of Iceland meets on appointed dates near its geysers.

Loti saw and described the world on the eve of its tremendous metamorphosis, and because he felt it changing, this man with his moments of nostalgia bordering on tears and his inconsolable melancholy before the swift passage of time, was so sad. It is because he was so sad that we, his brothers and fellow dreamers, succumb to his charm. What Fontanes used to say of Chateaubriand, we have all said of Loti: he too was the charmer. It was impossible to resist his charm. Everyone was conquered, even those who were very different from him. A distinguished woman who was the ardent admirer and counsellor of Anatole France, once said to him in my presence with great frankness: "There are only you and Loti". The writer of this article did not escape from the spell, and on the occasion of a celebration in Loti's honor wrote the following poem:

#### A PIERRE LOTI

Tombes de marbre au flanc des vallons égrenées  
Devant Stamboul en or parmi les cyprès hauts,  
Sables du Sahara blancs comme un lait de chaux  
Innombrable saphir des Méditerranées,  
Mers d'Islande heurtant leurs glaces entraînées,  
Frileux pêcheurs en fleur des vieux Kakemonos,  
Coteaux basques montrant entre leurs bleus créneaux  
L'argent fantomatique au loin des Pyrénées,

Vous vous êtes pechés sur le monde Loti,  
D'un voile que broda de perles Taiti,  
Qu'Ispaham parfuma du sang de mille roses,

Vous avez essuyé, poète aux doigts pieux,  
Véronique d'un temps qui ne croit plus aux dieux,  
Une sueur d'angoisse de la Face des Choses!<sup>2</sup>

Every two or three years each of Loti's books added a new note to the sad melody that the world inspired in the author. I would insist on the words *note* and *melody*, because there is something musical in his work where melancholy, languor and humanity, seen through a dream, produce an impression akin to that of music. Furthermore, as for musicians, the world is interior for him. He did not in fact describe the different countries he visited, but the emotions these countries aroused in him. He is neither colourist, luminist, nor drawer, and even less photographer. He is a musician, he is the musician of the world at the time when it is going to be engulfed like the symbolic cathedral.

He is the Debussy of words, the Chopin of horizons. If not a nocturne, his work is at any rate a twilight, which was still spangled with the stars of the former poetry, but which was the harbinger of the great night that seems to be spreading over the world and into which we should all plunge in despair, were we unable to hope with the unceasing surprises of history and of men basing their acts, prudently upon wisdom, away and above our anxieties and fears, for the birth, still possible, of a new dawn.

2. "To Pierre Loti."

Marble tombs strewn over valley sides by Istambul, all golden mid tall cypresses, sands of the Sahara white as milk of lime, the myriad sapphires in the Mediterranean, seas of Iceland with their crunching, drifting ice, sensitive flowering peach-trees in old Kake-monos, Basque hillsides revealing twixt their blue battlements the ghostly silver of the distant Pyrenees—you gazed upon the whole world, Loti! With a veil embroidered in the pearls of Tahiti, and perfumed with the essence of Ispahan's thousand roses, O poet, with pious hands, Veronica of an age that believes in the gods no more, you wiped away the sweat of anguish from the Face of Things!

# THE SETTLEMENT OF THE GERRIORS

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THERE are various legends associated with the name of the Nova Scotian settlement of Tracadie. In 1631 Samuel Champlain, the French Explorer, mentioned this place as "Tregate" (Tragata). The Micmacs, who were camped in numbers in the region at this time, called it "Telegadik" (Camping Ground) or "Tulukaddy" (place of residence). When the English penetrated into this district, they called the road or track leading into the Indian settlement, Tracadie.

Another legend is that upon sailing into the little harbour that reaches into the land like a tongue, the early French explorers were so enchanted with the serenity and charm of the country encompassing it that they named the place, as they had the entire country Arcadia. A credible legend, too, for here, long ago, many were the distraught sailing vessels lashed by Atlantic gales—as well as rovers of the sea intent upon eluding pursuers—that sought safety in the sheltering harbour. It was Arcadia to the distressed.

Whether the origin of the name Tracadie be a corruption of "a track in Arcadia", or "Indian camping ground" the appellation is fitting for, after over 300 years of known settlement, this quiet little harbour and countryside retains to a large extent the simplicity of its early state. It is a pleasant rural community where the people are grandly heedless of the outside world; of the cars that hurry along the highway—that now bisects the the ancient farms—on their way to the Straight of Canso and Cape Breton Island. To the inhabitants, tourists are like the rushing wind passing through.

Glancing back into the early days of Tracadie, one discovers that it was best known round about as the Settlement of the Gerriors—as a Gerrior was the first settler to take root there. He was John Joseph Gerrior (nicknamed Beaulieu, meaning John or Joseph of the fine place, or wood, after his former homestead in the Annapolis valley.)

During the banishment of the Acadians from the Annapolis valley, John Joseph rose upon the captain of the ship that was bearing him and a great number of his people into exile and headed the ship back into the river St. John. Here, the returned and bewildered people fled to the woods to escape their English pur-

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suers, but John Joseph, with his family, made his way by boat along the jagged coast of Nova Scotia until, coming upon the protected haven of Tracadie harbour, he sailed in, there to remain remote and safe from the hue and cry of English soldiers; a hue and cry that did not cease until all the well-tilled lands of the Acadians, including his own fine place (Beaulieu) in the Annapolis valley, were given to immigrants from the New England colonies and the old world.

Then, when John Joseph at last realized that he was exiled forever from the ancestral land that he loved, he settled down to create a new home for himself on the Tracadie Road. And here, after some years, in this harbour that had given him refuge in his distress, he was to meet death by drowning.

The little harbour afforded a charming and comfortable safe heaven for the sorely tried refugee, cutting in as it does from St. George's Bay, with a channel deep enough to admit small sailing craft, but too shallow to allow the entry of warships. Dotted with thickly treed islands, no larger, at first glance, than women's hats, the inflowing water from the Atlantic was supplemented by miniature rivers and trout and salmon laden brooks. All round lay the wooded shores, and the peace and quiet of Acadia.

In this hiding place supreme, the Micmaes camped in numbers for the sea trout fishing along the Tracadie River and beside the harbour shore. John Joseph made friends with them, and they did not oppose too much his intrusion into their domain. The waters teemed with fish, the woods with game. Here, after a time, John Joseph's bitterness against his English oppressors lessened somewhat, but not enough, however, to prevent him from cutting timbers and laying keels for light swift vessels and trimming his sails beyond the headland to prey on English shipping.

This was in the day of pirates and privateersmen and it may be assumed that one who had taken an English troopship would not hesitate to take his toll of the ships in the Bermuda trade. Thrust as it is, 300 miles out from the mainland into the sea, the province then, as today, sat on the sea lanes of commerce.

Gradually, this first Gerrior in Tracadie, John Joseph (Beaulieu), assisted by the few other Acadian refugees who followed him, pushed the woods back from the harbour shores and tilled the land. The Gerrior men, however, dominated the little settlement. They raised cattle and hogs and sheep and horses. The Gerrior men were noted in later years for their fine breed of horses—trotter and carriage horses—and they were horsemen superb. As an old

resident put it many years ago, "The Gerriors were born in the saddle, and they cut their teeth on the stirrups."

The tradition of the Gerriors, however, was the sea. The salt sea was in their blood and farming, successfully though they pursued it, was a minor occupation—an occupation of necessity. Their calling was ships, which they laid and finished and sailed into the open seas. Twenty-one was then a common age for a man to have built his own ship and to captain and sail it. It is on record that a young Gerrior at the age of 16 cut timbers for a vessel, built it, and steered it to distant ports.

In time, with the softening years, the Crown granted John Joseph (Beaulieu) Gerrior and his sons, and the few other settlers, the land that they had cleared along the Tracadie Road and upon which they had set up their log houses. There, upon these ancient lands, some of their descendants live today.

The Gerriors (a corruption of Girouard) were a hardy, ruthless breed, intolerant of restraint—especially the men. Even to this day, in the Gerriors there persists a toughness of character a strength of purpose, and intelligent ability that even the constant dilution of the strain with milder blood cannot weaken.

This dominant strain in the Gerriors is not surprising for they are descended from Charles de La Tour—that swashbuckling Governor of French Acadie (his name is on a tablet in Government House, Halifax), who for so long and against terrific odds held the colony of Acadie for France—and the noble house of D'Entremont.

A great swordsman La Tour was, as one would expect of a man in whose veins ran the hot blood of the royal houses of Europe—France, Italy, Spain—a ruthless ruler; a ruler who, when he was recalled by the King of France and a warship was sent to convey him to the Royal presence stood in his strongly fortified fort on the St. John river and turned his guns on the man-o-war. His forts dotted the coast. He was Governor of Acadie and Governor he would remain.

With the coming of the railroad, and with steamboats rapidly replacing sailing ships as cargo carriers, the Gerriors had to depend more and more upon the land for a living, though their fishing business remained a valuable asset.

Always through all the vicissitudes of the troubled times, however, the Gerriors were their own men, working for themselves—their own masters—until the New England States began calling able men to its factories and fishing ports and lumbering camps. There never had been a time since the days when Charles de La Tour, the Governor of Acadie, and Governor Winthrop of Boston,

exchanged amenities and the merchants of Boston received from La Tour cargoes of furs and fish in exchange for the commodities that he needed in Acadie, when the people of these two countries (except during the period of the taking over of Acadie by the English) had not been on the friendliest footing.

Now the stalwart young Gerriors began migrating to the "States", some to sail out of the fishing ports of Gloucester and Salem and Marblehead, some to work (under masters and for the first time in their history) in the factories, and some to go to the lumbering camps. For a time, however, these brawny Gerrior men were not completely absorbed into the American "melting pot." With hard earned American money secure in the pockets of their flannel shirts, they would return in summer to their own loved land—so tenacious was the breed—to cut and store their hay (in their absence, the women and children cared for the stock and cultivated the gardens), and in winter the fishing men would come back for wood-cutting.

Into their long strips of woodland they would go to cut and haul, not only wood for winter burning, but logs to the sawmills for conversion into lumber for barns and other necessary farm buildings. Stout timbers they cut, too, for ship building, for never did the Gerrior men forsake the sea completely or give up laying keels for vessels which they continued to employ in the coastal trade.

"There are very few of the Gerriors left in Tracadie," said the village priest, when asked about them. This is true. Their roots have been hauled up and planted afar from their ancestral land. Their names are to be found in the directories of New England cities and the Southern American States. As Americans many of the Gerriors are exhibiting leadership in the political and social life of the United States. They are doctors, superintendents of nurses, college professors, bankers and many have made names for themselves in the field of letters, arts and sciences. They have, at last, been thrust into the great American "melting pot."

On a tip of land jutting sharply into Tracadie harbour there is an ancient burying ground, grass-grown now and neglected. The hand carved headstones are buried in the earth and cows browse above the forgotten dead. In up-turning these stones, one discovers the names of the numerous Gerriors. There, on a lovely marble headstone, stands the name:

Angelo Joiroir  
Died Mar. 20, 1852  
Wife of Nicholas Geroir  
Age 96 yrs.



Nicholas was the son of John Joseph (Beaulieu), that first Gerrior in Tracadie, and Angelique D'Entremont. Their son, Captain Joseph Gerroir, built the first frame house in Tracadie. This was also the first school house in the settlement. Father of eleven children, he was a man of importance not only in the settlement, but throughout the county of Antigonish. He had great tracts of land, and on these eventually he built, or caused to be built, for each son a fine commodious frame house, giving each also a substantial area of farm and woodland—enough to maintain himself and his family independently. Several of these houses stand today, foursquare against time, testimonial to the man of wide authority who extended and cultivated his land, built ships, sailed them, or sent them on far voyages conveying cargoes of goods to and from many ports, yet all the while bringing virgin woods under cultivation to create the "Settlement of the Gerriors."

There was formerly, when the Acadians who escaped to Tracadie ceased to be hunted, a little log chapel built on the point of land that juts into the harbour (Chapel Point). Before this, a priest cruised at long intervals into the little harbour to say Mass and attend to the spiritual needs of the few inhabitants. This chapel—as does the newer church, St. Peters—stood on what once was Gerrior land.

One cannot wander through the old forgotten burying place in Tracadie, so colorfully overgrown with blue vetch, red timothy and wild daisies, pause at the graves of the Gerrior dead, glance down the length of the sheltering harbour that received the "first" Gerrior only at last to claim him in death, or admire the beauty of the Arcadian countryside, without remembering with envious wonder and admiration that first defiant and fearless Gerrior in the settlement, John Joseph—nicknamed Beaulieu.

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