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ARTICLE 19.—*The Social Condition of the Coast of LABRADOR.* By NOEL H. BOWEN, Esquire.

[Read before the Society, 19th April, 1854.]

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THE recent interest evinced by the Imperial and Provincial Authorities in the valuable fisheries of our Gulf, and the pending negotiations with the United States Government relative thereto, have induced me to select as the subject of this paper "The Social Condition of the Inhabitants of that part of the Coast of Labrador lying within the limits of the Province of Canada." The desire of witnessing these fisheries prompted me to visit that distant portion of our Province, and I cannot but look back with pleasure to an excursion replete with objects both interesting and novel. We left Quebec in a trading schooner in the month of July, and coasted along the north shore of the River St. Lawrence, our progress much retarded by a succession of adverse winds. On the voyage we visited Seven Islands, Mingan, and other of the Hudson's Bay Company's posts, and occasionally enjoyed a day's fishing or shooting in the small rivers abounding along the coast. In some of these there were water-falls that would gladden the eye of a landscape painter. On the banks of others were the relics of old Indian encampments. In many the black duck, shell-drake and other fowl had fixed their abode, fondly imagining it so secure from intrusion as scarcely to heed our approach, until

sundry murderous guns had thinned their ranks, and considerably disturbed their domestic arrangements. These rivers are mostly filled with large sized trout which eagerly grasp at a gaudy bait, and fall an easy prey even to the most unskilled angler.

Fifteen days elapsed ere we reached the Bay of Tabatière, distant about 900 miles from Quebec: this is the chief seal fishing establishment on the coast, with a population of about sixty souls; the bay is large, intersected by ten or twelve islands, and the average annual catch of seals at its different stations about two thousand. Each seal is worth a little over twenty shillings currency on the coast. This establishment is owned by Messrs. Samuel and John Robertson, sons of the late Samuel Robertson, Esquire, formerly of Quebec, the author of a valuable paper furnished to this Society in the year 1841, entitled, "Notes on the Coast of Labrador." Spar-point, the residence of Mr. Samuel Robertson, boasts of about sixteen buildings, the largest collection at any one point on the Labrador. At Petit-Havre, Blanc-Sablon Bay and Isles-aux-Bois many persons are employed during the fishing season, but these come and go yearly with the vessels to which they belong, and have no permanent habitation on the coast.

One of the first things that struck me as peculiar to Labrador was the absence of trees and vegetation, excepting an occasional shrub or bush and a few stunted pines. The ravines between some of the hills were filled with snow, which remains there from year to year, and fields of it were visible in secluded spots even in the month of August.

That part of the Coast of Labrador belonging to the Province of Canada, namely, from Mingan to Blanc-Sablon Bay, inclusively, is about 450 miles in length: it

consists of immense blocks or masses of granite, over which a thin coating of moss has in most places accumulated: this frequently hides the unevenness of the rocks, and renders walking unpleasant if not dangerous. The moss is green in the summer season, so that the shores when viewed at a distance do not appear so barren as they are found to be on a nearer approach. The face of the country is uneven, presenting a succession of hills and gullies, mountains and ravines, interspersed with innumerable shallow lakes and swamps. Huge boulder stones are likewise seen in all directions.

The dwelling houses of the people are built of wood, imported for that purpose from Quebec or elsewhere, there being no lime to encourage masonry. The late Mr. Robertson asserts that limestone is found to some extent near Mingan: if so, its proximity is not generally known, or, what is more probable, it would be too expensive to send for and manufacture the stone to supply such a limited demand. The houses are far apart, generally three or four miles distant from each other, if not more: the reason is that seal-fishing being the most important part of their occupation, the fishermen would seriously interfere with each other did not a considerable distance exist between each fishing berth or *pêcherie*. Occasionally a little patch of ground containing a few potato or turnip plants was visible in the vicinity of a house, but these do not always ripen, and, save the enclosures around such plots, no fences or hedges meet the eye.. A horse is not to be found on the coast, nor would he indeed be of much utility, for there are no roads whatever, and the possibility of making highways over such uneven rocks is rather dubious. Footpaths are not wanting to communicate from one station to another, but these are rarely used. The people, without exception,

live on the immediate seashore; their travelling in summer is performed by water, in winter by dog-train called "commetteks." There is a cow or two at several of the chief posts, but with this exception, the good fishermen can boast of no cattle, neither pigs, sheep nor goats wander around their dwellings, and a poultry-yard is a thing unknown. Those who have passed their lives on the coast can have little idea of the pleasing association of a regular farm with its varieties of cattle, poultry, &c. but if they have not the comfort neither have they the cares of husbandry, and the weather (that fountain of anxiety to the agriculturist) is merely looked upon by the inhabitants with an eye to its effect upon their piscatorial arrangements.

No church or chapel rears its tall spire towards Heaven, no consecrated building invites the fishermen to assemble for the Worhisp of God, yet there is no lack of religious feeling amongst the people, and the Sabbath seemed to be everywhere strictly respected. Could not a Missionary be spared to visit this portion of the Province occasionally? He might embark in the vessel despatched every year for the protection of the fisheries, and establish himself at Blanc-Sablon Bay, where the population in the summer season exceeds 200, chiefly Jersey men; he could then visit the other posts from time to time, as circumstances permitted, and return to Quebec in the autumn by the same vessel. Surely the labors of a faithful Missionary in such a field would be abundantly blessed. From there being no resident clergyman, many of the marriages which take place on the coast are not legally solemnized, and a statute will be required for their relief similar to that obtained for the people of Gaspé through the exertions of Robert Christie, Esq., their able and indefatigable representative.

The neatness found in the dwellings even of the poorest class is worthy of note: they possess few articles of furniture, but all is clean and has a homely appearance. I could not help remarking that a gaudily painted time-piece adorned nearly every cabin, testifying to the perseverance with which "Brother Jonathan" finds a market for his goods, even in the most distant portions of the continent.

Several American schooners are in the yearly habit of frequenting the coast, to barter their *notions* for fish, oil, and other produce: this they are enabled to do with immense advantage to themselves, as we have no Custom House Officers at Labrador; consequently the Americans, paying no duty on their imports, find themselves in a better position than traders from any British Colony, and are enabled of course to undersell them. Captain Fortin exposes this circumstance in his "Report on the Fisheries of the River St. Lawrence," furnished to the Provincial Government in the month of May last. He suggests that one or two officers should be stationed on the coast during the summer season, charged with the collection of Customs on all dutiable articles of import. The revenue derived from this source would probably cover the salaries of the officials, and Colonial traders be thus placed at least upon an equal footing with foreigners.

The people of Labrador are happy and contented, their manners affable, their habits temperate, and their hospitality sincere. In shooting excursions I have roamed about the coast for days, stopping wherever inclination led me, and invariably received a hearty welcome from the honest fishermen with the best of their frugal cheer; one only feared to trespass on their kindness, for they would not accept of any remuneration.

And here I would notice the fact that the number of females is quite disproportionate to that of the sterner sex, as may be gleaned from the last mentioned Report, which shows that in 1852 there were 364 men settled on the coast and but 62 females. This is of course detrimental to the prosperity of the place, and should be remedied by emigration or otherwise. Any plan which would alter the existing state of things must confer a boon on the country, because the more the coast is settled the better are its natural resources developed, and the miseries suffered by ship-wrecked mariners, proportionately diminished. The fisherman's wants are few, and he can easily support a wife; moreover she could assist him in his calling as much as one of his own sex, and it often happens that the larger a fisherman's family becomes, the better are his prospects. The residents of the coast are supplied with beef, pork, flour, and other necessaries by the schooners from Quebec and elsewhere, employed in the export of fish and oil, but, like the ant or humming-bee, they must lay up their store of luxuries during the summer season, impenetrable barriers of ice excluding communication with the outer world during about seven months in the year.

Labrador is essentially the field for sportsmen: such fishing and shooting are not found in any other part of Canada during the summer months. Large sea-trout and salmon swell the streams, while sea-birds of every name and description, as well as ducks, geese, curlews, &c., abound on the shores. Among the sea-birds are *Mermettes*, *Moyocks*, Gulls, *Murrhs* or *Calculots*, *Turrhs*, *Paraqvets*, Penguins, and divers others. The Bird Islands, which are numerous along the coast, consist of barren rock, sometimes of considerable extent, and generally three or four miles distant from the main land: they literally

swarm with sea-birds, and the approach of a boat or the firing of a gun in their vicinity is enough to set the whole living mass in motion; rising in the air the birds fly around at no great distance in countless thousands, uttering incessantly the most piercing shrieks; they move with such velocity that it requires a good marksman to bring down his bird at every shot, but are so numerous that if you miss the one aimed at you often hit another in his wake. These Bird Islands are invaluable to the fishermen, who supply the want of poultry by collecting boat-loads of eggs in the spring, and packing them for consumption during the remainder of the year. The eggs of the *Mermette*, *Penguin* and small Divers are considered the best: they all have a slight fishy taste scarcely perceptible when cooked, and the beaten yoke forms an excellent substitute for cream in tea or coffee. The birds inhabiting these islands are not considered eatable except when very young: then indeed their flesh is tender, and a sea-pie of young gulls is not to be despised. For years past the Americans have frequented these islands in numbers during the early part of June, when the birds lay; being armed they keep possession of the islands by force, and do not suffer the inhabitants of the coast to approach until they have fully laden their schooners with eggs. It is to be hoped, however, that the vessel devoted to the protection of the fisheries will prevent such depredations for the future. Guano has accumulated on these islands to some extent, and if its manuring properties are not seriously injured by the winter's snow, might surely be turned to account. The plumage of the birds is soft, and suggests the possibility of profitably collecting and curing feathers on the coast for exportation to foreign markets.

During the month of August "Curlews" afford much sport, and are excellent birds for food. In size they resemble the wild pigeon, their plumage brown, with orange breast, and have much the flavor of woodcock; they frequent the beaches at low tide, at other times you must seek them on the flats and marshes. Some families salt and pack them for winter use. In the bays lobsters are procured at low-tide, from crevices in or under the rocks: they are caught by thrusting in a long pole which the fish seize with their powerful clutches, suffering themselves to be dragged out rather than relinquish their hold. As to fruits or berries there are none on the coast excepting cranberries and another small berry called a "bake apple," somewhat resembling the pigeon-berry: when ripe the colour is of a bright orange and the flavour luscious. I never saw this berry elsewhere. There are few rare shells or stones on the beaches, but the Labrador feldspar is often picked up, especially in the Bay of Tabatière, whose chief station, "Spar Point," owes its name to the beauty and variety of its feldspars. Reefs of red and white coral are known to exist in some places, and pieces of it are occasionally fished up in nets. The wharves or landing places in use here are called stages: they are not solid as with us, but formed of opened stakes driven firmly into the banks or shore, which allows the sea to break on them in rough weather with less violence than if solid, often preventing their being dashed to pieces by the fury of the waves.

During the winter months reindeer afford fine sport to the hunter, and form (with the ptarmigan or white partridge that visit the coast in thousands) the only fresh meat procurable. Moose and cariboo do not roam so far north. Frequent social meetings take place at this season of the year, where dancing and singing serve to while



away the lengthy evenings, and where the hardy hunter loves to recount his exploits to an appreciating audience. Winter travelling is performed either on snowshoes or in trains drawn by the celebrated Labrador dogs, which are prized by the residents much as we would value favorite steeds. These dogs are by no means friendly to strangers, and their fierce wolf-like heads inspire considerable respect. They plunge into the icy sea as readily as though it were their native element, and are invaluable to their owners in hunting and shooting excursions, no less than in travelling across the snowy deserts. They are stout and well made, are fed principally on seal and blubber, and are so hardy that six or eight of them tackled to a heavily laden sledge or "commettek" will travel as much as twenty leagues in a day. These dogs have an odd peculiarity: about midnight they set up an unearthly howl (each dog having its peculiar note) which lasts sometimes for an hour, sometimes throughout the whole night. From habit the residents do not heed the noise, but a stranger is distracted, and finds it impossible to sleep.

The boats used on the coast are of American construction, sharp at either end, have two small poles or masts, and are called "barges:" they sail swiftly and are said to weather a storm even better than our pilot boats. American schooners coming to fish carry several of these boats, and at the close of the season willingly sell them to the fishermen: their value is about L9 currency.

During my stay on the coast I chanced to meet with some of the Esquimaux tribe, who have almost quite deserted that portion of the Labrador south of Blanc-Sablon Bay. These Esquimaux had adopted the dress and habits of the fishermen, and the only original articles seen in their possession were ki-yacks or seal skin boats, which are quite worthy of notice. A ki-yack is made of

seal skin sowed over a light frame work of wood, having but one round hole for ingress in the centre: the skin is previously freed from hair, steeped in warm water and sewed with a peculiar double seam; when dry the skin contracts as tightly over the wooden frame as the head of a drum, is well oiled, and made impervious to water, and the boat is so light that a single person can carry it with ease: its dimensions are about 20 feet long,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet broad and one foot deep in the centre, tapering off to a sharp point at either end; it holds but one person at a time, who sits in the centre, all below his waist being invisible. These boats when manned draw but two or three inches of water, are sensible to every ripple, and though extremely dangerous to a novice have been known (when managed by Esquimaux) to live through storms in which many a schooner foundered. They are propelled by a double-bladed paddle some ten feet long, whose centre rests on the boat, and the blades are dipped alternately from side to side urging on the boat with astonishing rapidity.

The most picturesque spot on the Labrador is the Bay of Bradore, situated about half way through the Straits of Belleisle, and opposite St. G enevi e Bay, Newfoundland, which is visible from Bradore in clear weather. Captain Jones is the chief occupant of this post, from whose residence on a slightly elevated ground is obtained a fine view of this magnificent bay, studded with islands, and having a background of bold and lofty hills. The waters of the bay are enlivened in the summer season with brigs, schooners and fishing smacks from different parts of the world, but belonging chiefly to Jerseymen and Americans. Near to Captain Jones' residence may be seen mounds of earth and rubbish in all directions, the ruins of the ancient post or town of Brest. This town

(it is generally believed) was commenced by the Basques, inhabitants of Spain, who resorted thither for fishing purposes in the early part of the sixteenth century, and who congregated for defence against the Esquimaux and other hostile Indian tribes. When the country fell into the hands of France the town of Brest reached the height of its prosperity, and Robertson cites authorities to prove "That towards the close of the sixteenth century it was "the chief town of New France; could boast of some 200 "houses; was the residence of the governor, almoner, "and other public officers; and that the French drew "from thence immense quantities of furs, cod-fish, whale-fins, train oil, &c." When the Indian tribes became more civilized, and ceased to molest settlers, the French finding superior fishing grounds, gradually scattered themselves over the coast, and the deserted town of Brest, or as it is now called "Bradore," slowly crumbled away, until a few mounds and stone foundations alone mark the site of its former prosperity. Mayhap some Canadian "Layard," searching amid the ruins of Brest, may yet discover much that can throw light upon the early history of our country. The climate of Labrador is healthy and salubrious, with frequent fogs; sickness and disease are scarcely known, and the people enjoy robust constitutions. The chief occupation of the inhabitants is fishing, as divided into the seal, cod, salmon, mackerel and herring fisheries, the seal fishery being the most considerable. Whale fishing was formerly carried on successfully in the Straits, but is now abandoned, whalers being seldom seen in those waters. Occasionally the waves cast upon the beach a carcase pierced by harpoons, but such precious gifts to the fishermen are rare. Captain Fortin reports that the resident population of our portion of Labrador was 648 (all ages and sexes included) in the

year 1852, the value of whose united annual produce was £16,576 10s., without taking into account the immense value of the fish carried from our shores by strangers. Since that report was made an Act, (16 Vic. cap. 93,) has passed the Canadian Legislature, having for its objects the regulating of the fishing limits at Labrador, from which much good is anticipated. In an able lecture, lately delivered by M. H. Warren, Esq., before the Mechanics' Institute of St. John's, Newfoundland, that gentleman established the yearly value of fish taken from our waters at £3,000,000 currency, and upwards: this includes the Colonial and Foreign fisheries both at Newfoundland and Labrador, and presents a mine of wealth far more lasting and profitable to us and to the world at large than all the golden fields of California and New South Wales. And yet, knowing the riches with which a bountiful Providence has lined our shores, and having this countless treasure within grasp, will it be believed that not ever one vessel sails hence during the year to participate in these fisheries? The ships of other nations flock to the banks like vultures around their prey, while we look on with shameful indifference. Are we then too rich or too indolent to appreciate our natural advantages? The subject needs enquiry, and, if expedient, bounties, direct or otherwise, should be granted by the Government to persons willing to embark in the enterprise.

In the foregoing remarks I have endeavoured to show the actual social condition of our people on the Labrador, the advantages and disadvantages under which they live: doubtless, they may suffer some privations, but they have many comforts in return, and a man may fare worse than to be doomed to pass his days in the midst of these worthy fishermen. Nay more, the people cling to their rugged coast with all the patriotic sentiment of Scotia's bard, when he sang:—

"Breathes there a man with soul so dead,

"Who never to himself hath said

"*This is my own, my native land*"

They would not exchange their peaceful homes for all the luxuries of the town, and when business calls them to it, they never cease to pine for the bracing air which surrounds their cherished homes on the rocky coast of Labrador.

Quebec, 18th April, 1854.

