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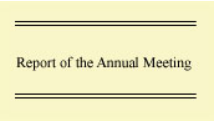

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THE TRAPPIST MONKS AT TRACADIE, NOVA SCOTIA

By A. Muriel Kinnear

Religious and political jealousies tangle the skeins of many of the tapestries of life, but as the years glide on the kinks and snarls are forgotten and only the picture remains. The threads which tell the story of the Trappist monks in Nova Scotia may be dull in hue, but they form a lasting background for their many acts of charity and devotion.

With the closing of the series of hostilities which had sprung out of the French revolution and distressed all the nations of the world for many years, 1815 is memorable for the return of peace and the brighter outlook for trade in the colonies. Nova Scotia, the scene of so many conflicts between the French and English, had now laid aside her weapons of warfare and was ready to welcome all those seeking a home within her borders. The story of the years intervening between the landing of Father Vincent at Halifax in 1815 until the urgent call in 1914, when the Germans invaded Belgium and the Trappist Order, once driven out of France in exile, was able to send a contingent of sturdy trained men from their Nova Scotia home to defend the motherland during the Great War is interesting.

One fine day in May, just 115 years ago, a ship from New York appeared off Chebucto Head at the entrance to Halifax Harbour, her white sails gleaming in the spring sunshine. The passengers on board could see the last snows of winter melting on the surrounding hills; the high flagstaff and ramparts of the Citadel towering above the tall church spires of the city as she proceeded up the harbour to her wharf, carefully tacking in and out among the transports, men-o'-war and smaller trading craft of all kinds lying at anchor. On deck all was bustle and confusion, hurry and eager anticipation for landing after a voyage lasting for fifteen days.

Among the passengers a little band of Trappist monks sat quietly waiting to disembark. Driven out of France during the terrors of the revolution they had spent years of exile in the Southern States of America, seeking to gain a sanctuary and achieve their ambition to establish a monastery, but misfortune had followed them and when in 1812, Dom Urbain Guillet transferred his community of Trappists from Baltimore to Maryland he found Father Vincent and his greatly depleted band of followers in the direst misery, having undergone severe hardships, travelling about on foot for lack of money and having no settled establishment. Following the abdication of Napoleon Father Vincent and his little community were recalled to France. Settling up his affairs he embarked at New York on the first stage of his journey home. On their landing at Halifax the white cowl of the Cistercians was seen for the first time in Nova Scotia.

In Halifax Father Vincent had great difficulty in obtaining information as to when he could secure passages for himself and his followers to enable them to continue the journey, and was compelled to spend two weeks in searching for a vessel. The town was crowded with people anxious to return to Europe and all available accomodation was taken on the ships. At last he appealed to Father Burke, then pastor of the town and afterwards the first Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese. With his assistance and influence free passages were secured for the party on H.M.S. *Ceylon,* sailing shortly for England and they embarked with all their luggage which con-

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sisted of seven trunks. Contrary winds delayed the sailing of the *Ceylon* and Father Vincent, finding waiting on board very irksome, came ashore again to do some trifling business or perhaps to say a last word of thanks to Father Burke. Suddenly the wind veered to a more favourable quarter and the captain of the transport weighed anchor and put out to sea. Later, when the good Father arrived at the waterfront to go aboard he was greatly astonished to find he had lost his passage, his companions and all his luggage. So perforce, he found himself stranded in a strange country, without money and without friends. Nothing daunted he looked upon what might have seemed the worst sort of calamity to others, as a direct act of Providence and again resorted to Father Burke requesting that he be allowed to do some work in the parish until he could communicate with his Superior in France and, if possible, obtain his permission to remain in Nova Scotia to carry on the work he had not been successful in establishing in America. He found much to occupy him. For one month he was entirely alone in the parish as Father Burke having gone to Ireland had given him charge of parochial duties. Knowing but little English made his work more difficult, but in spite of his slight knowledge he preached twice in that language in St. Peter's Church to large congregations composed principally of Irish.

Following his interest in the native Indians he journeyed about the country to outlying districts and spent much time in the Micmac camps, teaching and instructing them. Finding a large number of Acadians settled at Chezzetcook he was naturally drawn to them and often went there, either by sea or overland on horseback. On one occasion when at Chezzetcook during the Feast of St. Anne, which is a great festival among the Indians, he records in a diary, he kept over 200 Micmacs, coming from a circuit of ten to fifteen miles, assembled at the church, making a very imposing spectacle in their beaded costumes and bright coloured shawls. The church being too small to hold them all they grouped themselves outside to listen to the service.

Later, on the return of Father Burke, Father Vincent was sent further afield and given charge of three parishes composed of Acadians. Having received the necessary permission from France to remain in Nova Scotia he left for Tracadie, which with Pomquet and Havre au Bouché comprised his parish, situated on the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the northeastern part of the province. Making Tracadie his headquarters and place of residence, he purchased a large tract of land in a beautiful valley about twenty miles from Antigonish in 1818, where he built a house. At Pomquet he found a numerous colony of negroes, descendants of the Maroons brought to Nova Scotia from Jamaica in 1796, who had escaped from the main body when they were deported to Sierra Leone and were now living in scattered settlements. Here Father Vincent found a vast field in which to exercise his zeal. The Negroes, he reported, " being in a most deplorable condition." There was also a large camp of Indians.

The name Tracadie is Indian meaning " place of residence ", and was used to denote any particular place or camping ground. The original Micmac word was " Telegadik," converted by mispronunciation into the Tracadie of the present day. There is a tradition that the name was derived from one Jacques Tracady, the captain of a crew who came to the harbour for the purpose of buying cordwood and trading with the Indians, but as the name is given to so many places where the Indians had large camps the Micmac origin is more acceptable as correct. The islands in Tracadie harbour were settled by the Indians long before the white man ever took possession of Nova Scotia; the beauty of their groves of magnificent trees

and the convenience to land and sea proved them a veritable happy hunting ground for the red men. The earliest permanent Acadian settlement was about 1773, when some of the exiles of the Expulsion returned from the Island of Miquelon and settled on the shores of St. George's bay in what is now one of the four divisions of Antigonish county.

In October, 1821, Father Vincent wrote his Superior in France that his work was progressing favourably and that he had obtained permission from the Mother Superior of the Congregation at Montreal to send three of the young girls from his parish to receive instruction, gratis, in the Community of Notre Dame. They were Anne Cotié and Marie Landry of Tracadie and Olive Victoire Dorien of Pomquet, all Acadians whose ancestors had come from St. Malo, Dinan and Granville to settle in New France. The following June he wrote to Father Plessis of Quebec from the Magdalen Islands where he escorted the girls on the way to Montreal, that he is sending them on to Quebec with Captain Doucett, " whose crew are all honest men."

Realizing the need of schools in his parishes he petitioned the Congregation of Notre Dame to send two or three Sisters to open a school, but they were unable to do so. After a year's novitiate the three novices returned and Father Vincent at once settled them at Pomquet until a residence could be built for them at Tracadie. Here they followed the Community life and instructed the Indian and Acadian girls. At the same time he had secured the services of John Steven, a well educated Catholic-Irishman, as master of the boy's school.

The next year, just when everything was going well, a letter came from France advising Father Vincent that it would be better for him to arrange his affairs, give up his parish in Nova Scotia and proceed to Kentucky where Bishop Flaget wished him to locate. This was a tremendous blow. Once more he appealed to Bishop Plessis, explaining the value of the work he was doing and asking that he intercede on his behalf. The Bishop replied that as he had accomplished so much in the five years he had been in Tracadie it would be well for him to go to France himself, explain the situation to his Superior and obtain the support necessary to establish his Monastery. Acting on this advice Father Vincent left his parish in charge of Mr. Hudon and sailed for France. After an absence of two years he returned, provided with full permission to carry on his project and accompanied by Father Francis, a native of Freiburg, and three lay-brothers.

In November, 1826, Father Vincent petitioned Sir James Kempt, then Lieutenant-Governor of the province, for leave to carry on his work and establish a Monastery of the Cistercian Order at Tracadie; cultivate the soil and instruct the people under his charge and protection. The petition granted, his real work began.

The house he had built at Tracadie became known as the Monastery of Petit Clairvaux and he himself was its first Prior. At this time three more lay-brothers were admitted, two from Halifax and one from the United States. They observed all the rules of the Order, having spiritual exercises with studies, solitary reading and meditation. They went about their daily tasks in silence, clothed in habits of coarse cloth bound by wide leather straps or wooden girdles and slept, fully dressed, on hard straw mattresses in dormitories where each had a separate cell partitioned off from the others. They lived on a vegetable diet with cereals and milk, no fish, meat or eggs being allowed except in cases of illness. Possessions of the Monastery were common property; there was no " mine " or " thine," for being of one

heart and soul they never referred to any possession as personal property, but shared all things in common. There was never a holiday in the routine, even Christmas and Easter being spent as ordinary days. Idleness being considered injurious to the mind, they were fully occupied with manual labour in the fields and with hours of devotion. Being most hospitable a warm welcome was always accorded any guest seeking admittance.

With the passing years the work went slowly on. In 1839 besides the French, Irish and Scotch in his schools, Father Vincent had some negroes and one Indian, "the latter," he states, "making fine progress in Latin." He reports the Community of Sisters as equally edifying, their work extending to other settlements. They were occupying the Convent house at Tracadie. Having many boarders among the pupils the house had become too small so an addition was built, the records say, in nine days. This was known as the Convent of Notre Dame de Grace at Tracadie. The Sisters numbered eight or nine and taught sewing, embroidering, the making of artificial flowers as well as the usual school subjects. They also laboured in the fields, milked the cows and attended to the stock on the farm.

In 1837 Father Vincent relinquished his three parishes to concentrate his efforts on the growth and welfare of the Monastery. His capacity for work was immense. Never appearing in a hurry he accomplished his manifold tasks with masterly ease. The old people of the parishes recounted his innumerable acts of zeal and devotion, venerating him as a Saint and firmly believing that no harm could befall him. Not only his own congregation, but the whole community benefitted by the example set by the Prior of Petit Clairvaux, whose life was lived for others.

Once into the quiet, industrious life of the Community peeped romance, unexpected but none the less alluring. Every day, with beating heart and eyes peering from beneath his cowl, one of the brothers watched the slim figure of a village maid come up the road to collect her can of milk and pats of yellow butter. Demure and shy was she—one would not have guessed that she too was seeking out with bright eyes the figure of one especial white-habited worker in the fields. But so it was, and, at last through the wordless telegraph of heart and eyes and unable to continue his duties, the brother confessed to his Prior that he had come to love the girl and wished to relinquish his habit and marry her. The Prior being sympathetic and there being no rule to prevent, accepted his resignation and the one-time brother left the Monastery, settled down in the village as a benedict and, as in all true romances, lived happily ever after.

The Monastery was now a snug brick building with cut stone facings and having a regular monastic quadrangle in the centre. One of the Monks made several trips to Europe between 1858 and 1862, returning each time with recruits from Westmalle and Saint Sixte to increase the strength of the community. The small pioneer mission had developed into a flourishing establishment with one of the finest farms in the province and having grist, saw and carding mills attached to it. Under Father Vincent's wise guidance the Monastery had grown to a splendid institution and when, on New Year's Day, 1853, he was called to his reward, the people sadly mourned him. He had been born at Lyons, France, the 29th day of October, 1763, son of Charles Merle, a much respected physician of that place. In April, 1798, when the Revolution was terrorizing and devastating France, he was privately ordained by the Archbishop of Vienne and seven years later entered the Trappist Order, relinquishing his name of James Merle to take that by which he was ever afterwards known. So greatly was he

venerated that in cases of serious illness journeys were made to his grave for a handful of the covering earth from that hallowed place which the people felt had special healing properties to cure the afflicted.

As Prior, Father Vincent was succeeded by Father Francis who had accompanied him from France in 1825, but whose advanced years and infirmities obliged him to resign his office within five years to Father James, a native of Belgium. The discovery of a spring of very cold water in one of the pastures of the Monastery is credited to Father James.

In 1876 the Monastery was raised to the dignity of an Abbey by Pius IX, and affiliated with La Grande Trappe, France. Dom Benoit, Abbot of Gathsemani, Kentucky, was appointed Visitor. The Sisters, about fifteen in number, were given the opportunity of joining the Order but refused and in 1888, they gave their buildings over to the monks with the understanding that they themselves should be cared for until their deaths. They all lived to over eighty years of age, one dying at a hundred and two years. The first Mother Abbess, Anne Cotie, died in 1877, aged eighty, and the last surviving Sister, Osite Lavandin of Havre au Bouché, died December 21, 1917, aged eighty-one. As the life of the Trappistines did not appeal to many and as other Orders took up the work in the parishes, the Community died with the dying members. A portion of the old convent still remains on the original site, but it has been converted into a residence. When closing the convent a copy of Father Vincent's Journal was found among the books where it had been lying perdue for years. It is very voluminous, being kept by Father Vincent when in America. On his visit to France in 1824 it was printed at the private press at Bellefontaine and the copy found at Tracadie is now in the keeping of the Monks at La Trappe, Quebec.

In 1886 the Community at Petit Clairvaux amounted to eleven choir religious, fourteen novices, one oblate and twenty choir-brothers. At its best the Community numbered about forty, thirteen of whom were priests, and a host of labourers.

Father James had been succeeded by Father Dominique as Prior and under his government the Monastery flourished until 1892, when a disastrous fire consumed the greater part of the principal buildings, including the pretty little church with its sacred vessels and vestments; the valuable library containing the records of the Community and all the furniture. Starting about one o'clock in the morning the fire was not discovered until the monks rose at two o'clock as usual and found an old wooden building adjoining the Monastery in flames. This was the original house built by Father Vincent himself and used as a dormitory for the workmen. The flames spread very rapidly and soon caught the main building. An alarm was given at once, all the monks and guests hurrying to the spot where they worked strenuously to keep the flames under control. They had no way of fighting the fire but by little buckets of water carried from the mill-brook near by and passed from hand to hand. The wind being against them these efforts proved futile and the fire got quite beyond control. Exhausted by their vain efforts they could only fold their arms and stand by while the fire consumed their beloved retreat. Everything was destroyed except the mills, barns and live-stock. The estimated loss was $60,000 no insurance being carried. Some of the Brothers were so exhausted by their efforts to save some at least of the furniture and books that they fell ill and never regained their health. With the Monastery a clock, made and installed by Father Benedict of Father Vincent's Community, was destroyed. It had operated three dials in widely separated parts of the building: one in the

community room or refectory, one in the tower exposed to public view and the third in the church. Brother Benedict, besides being an exemplary monk, was a mechanical genius and had installed all the complicated machinery in the mills. The poor Abbot was greatly pitied as he stood disconsolate the following day, looking at the labours of years reduced to a heap of cinders in a few hours.

For about a month after the disaster the monks were unable to observe their rules. They slept in a loft over the grist-mill and took their meals in a tent they had pitched in one of the fields. The people of the surrounding district provided everything necessary for clothing and bedding. As it was October, with winter rapidly approaching, they made all haste to provide a temporary dwelling. They fitted up as best they could an old building which had been used as a carriage shed. Here they partitioned off regular places and immediately began to observe their usual religious duties. They passed five years in this poor abode suffering severely during the winters.

In the summer of 1893 Rev. Father Jean Marie, Abbot of Notre Dame de Bellefontaine, France, made his regular visit to Tracadie. With his advice and encouragement preparations were made for the reconstruction of the monastery. Plans were drawn up by Mr. O'Donahue, an architect of Antigonish, which provided for three wings of a large monastery, allowing for 350 feet of building in all. As much of the brick and stone from the old building as possible was utilized, the remainder of the brick necessary to complete the building was made by the monks and the stone was quarried by them. The buildings proved very unsatisfactory. They appeared very nice on paper, but when finished had the appearance of a big mill or factory and were spoken of as a poor, hasty job. In 1894 the exterior of the three wings was completed. The church, which was to have formed the fourth side of the hollow square, was never completed. Before the interior could be finished another disaster overtook them. In 1897 the remaining buildings of the monastery were destroyed by a conflagration even more unfortunate than the first. This time they were burned out of the temporary abode where they had lived and were obliged to take refuge in the unfinished new building. Here they suffered great hardship during the following winter. Having lost all their provisions and crops they were even worse off than before. An October chill was in the air, first frosts had touched the maples with a magic wand until they flamed crimson and gold on the hills; the birds had left and the earth was hardening in anticipation of the coming of its snow mantle. The deeper chill of winter crept into the hearts of the monks in the empty buildings, froze the bread and water of their meagre meals, while the snow and icy blasts of winter gales whistled round them as uncomplainingly they carried on. Inured to hardships and fasting a more rigorous diet made little difference and spring was always ahead. Three of the brothers died in quick succession, their death hastened by the cold and hardships. In this last fire all their sources of revenue were cut off, the mills being destroyed. The huge barns filled with all the crops of the season, hay, grain, vegetables and mangles for the cattle, were all lost. The hen houses with about two hundred hens had also been burned. Two beautiful thoroughbred horses perished but ten horses and all the cows escaped and roamed at liberty in the fields and woods for several weeks until they could be herded together in a rough enclosure, where the brothers cared for them under very trying circumstances. A number of swine kept under the barn had managed to get out of their pens, but in wandering about the ground many of them fell over the bridge into the mill dam and

were drowned. Once more the people of the district surrounding the Monastery had come to the rescue and showed every charity and kindness in bringing clothing and provisions and giving their labour gratis.

Discouraged by all these misfortunes and with his health very much impaired, Father Dominique resigned. He returned to Belgium accompanied by four of the brothers. He is still remembered by the people of Tracadie who speak of him with almost lyric admiration, saying " Father Dominique, he was the farmer! He knew how to make his fields yield tremendous crops of hay and mangles, and fond he was of heavy draught horses and thoroughbred cattle." Under his regime they had built up a regular demonstration farm, practising, as a matter of course the rotation of crops and drainage. During the Great War, being obliged to retreat before the German invasion, the Community he was with went to Sept Sous, France, where he died January 18, 1919.

The General Chapter of the Order placed the Monastery at Tracadie under the jurisdiction of Dom Antoine Oyer, Abbot of Notre Dame du Lac, Quebec, in 1898. He immediately sent his Prior, Rev. John Mary Murphy, to act as Superior at Petit Clairvaux. The new Superior found Tracadie a most uncongenial place for a Monastery. Taking heed of the scanty resources of the place and the lack of vocations, he considered it would be extremely difficult for a Community, reduced to such circumstances as was Petit Clairvaux, to subsist in Nova Scotia. He, therefore, for these and other well grounded reasons, solicited and obtained permission to transfer the Community to Lonsdale, Rhode Island, where he had purchased a farm from the Right Reverend Matthew Harkin, Bishop of Providence. Two of the brothers went to Oka, the remaining fifteen to Lonsdale.

The closing of the Monastery at Tracadie was a real calamity to the district as they had operated their grist mills, shingle and board mills and manufactured bricks and lime from material on the property greatly to the benefit of the community. At Lonsdale they established the Monastery of Our Lady of the Valley and, after years of patient toil in a sparsely settled section of the State, have just completed a chapel constructed out of the blue-grey granite hewn from quarries on their property. In strict silence, side by side, they toiled and laboured in quarrying and building until at last, after twenty-five years of effort they have attained the seemingly impossible through unity of purpose, keeping up the tradition and reputation of the Order throughout the centuries for the beauty of their buildings in the chapel which contains fourteen altars and reflects all the mystical dignity of a medieval cathedral.

In 1903 the Monastery at Tracadie took on a new phase of life when Dom Bernard Chavaliere, Abbot of Thymadeuc, Brittany, fearing the effects of impending religious persecution and the expulsion of the Trappists from France, looked, unsuccessfully, for a refuge in England. He wrote to the Abbot of Oka to enquire about Petit Clairvaux. After a consultation with Father Murphy, to whom he was referred, he purchased the property for $10,000 and sent a contingent of twelve monks under Father Eugene, as Prior, to open the house and prepare it to receive about fifty others who might have to abandon France. They left Thymadeuc, crossed England to Liverpool and sailed on the 13th of June for Halifax where they arrived on the 20th. Reaching their new home the following day they settled in the Monastery at once. With their coming the white cowl of the Cistercians was again seen.

On his arrival Father Eugene found the Monastery, which was only an empty carcase, a mere roof upon walls; a cow shed, a little bakery in the

yard and a very dilapidated Porter-house, standing. They soon fitted up the Monastery sufficiently to make it suitable to live in; built a woodhouse and large mill sheltering a grist and shingle mill, with carpenter shops, forge and new ovens. Then they pulled down the old Porter-house and erected a new one; built a brick tower at the west angle of the Monastery and a bakery and laundry across the brook. On a hill near the road facing St. George's bay they planted a large wooden cross. That they worked hard can be judged by the extent of labour expended on the fields and about the brook and buildings which remain standing.

Father Eugene died in 1908 and was replaced by Father Brieve, formerly Prior of Thymadeuc. Several more buildings were erected and the construction of the church planned, but Father Brieve was recalled to France and a second Father Dominic took his place. On his arrival he kept the usual routine going without trying to carry out any new schemes. The little Community now consisted of eleven monks and nine lay-brothers. Nobody in the country showed any serious desire to join the Community and recruits were few. The French Government did not interfere with the Trappists as had been anticipated; so no more were sent out from France.

When the Great War broke out in 1914, all the monks capable of bearing arms were called to the colours in France, being trained soldiers, to stand shoulder to shoulder with their brothers in battle and save their kindred from destruction. After the war it was found that so many of the Order had been killed or incapacitated that they were short handed at home and the little Community remaining at Tracadie was summoned to the Mother House at Thymadeuc. The century-old establishment of Petit Clairvaux, in the lovely vale of Tracadie, was finally closed in July, 1919. Father Dominic was instructed to dispose of the property. He vainly tried to induce some religious order to purchase it at an exceptionally low price, but without success. Later a Montreal broker bought it for $25,000, selling it shortly afterwards to a company of Italians of Sydney, Nova Scotia.

In 1926 Father Dominic revisited Tracadie and exhumed the deceased members of his Order from the Monastery graveyard, three priests and four brothers who had died in the last sixteen years, and transferred them to the Community at Oka, Quebec. In 1928 the remains of all the deceased members of Father Vincent's Community, thirty-nine in number, were removed from the Monastery graveyard to the cemetery beside the parish Church at Tracadie and interred in a common grave. The little graveyard beside the Monastery where there had always been an open grave waiting as a daily reminder of the brevity of life, was deserted, its occupants with their headstone crosses resting no longer in the soil they loved.

With the departure of Father Dominic after his last sad visit, the Trappist Order left Nova Scotia permanently. Only the huge, lonely, buildings survived as mute witnesses to their energy and zeal. The dim halls and lofty ceilinged rooms in their silent emptiness have an atmosphere eloquent of regret for the times and people who have passed on. The summer air is embalmed with the scent of wild roses and cooled by salty breezes blowing in from the sea to that calm solitude where time slipped away for:

> " Men whose lives glided on like
> rivers that water the woodlands,
> Darkened by shadows of earth,
> but reflecting an image of Heaven."

The chapel bell is still. Only the siren of a passing train a mile away or the horn of a motor on the nearer highway disturbs the peace that

rests and broods above the fields about the deserted Monastery, now fast becoming a heap of ruins which in time will be visited as a shrine of silence and desolation. Perchance on moonlight nights a wisp of fog, drifting in from sea, will appear like a ghostly habit and cowl covering the saintly spirit of Father Vincent or the broken heart of Father Dominique, looking over the ruins of their lost hopes. The cross stands tall and triumphant above the uncultivated fields and lonely forests where silence reigns, unfathomable, as in the hearts of the unselfish men who laboured there. Pine trees keep up their solemn dirge over the Monastery which awaits the coming of those who will waken it into life again, remaining faithful to the past, unable to take part in the present.