

“Relation of certain details regarding the Island of Cape Breton and its Inhabitants.” Sent by Father Julien Perrault, of the Society of Jesus, to his Provincial, in France, in the years 1634 and 35. in Reuben Gold Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relation and Allied Documents* vol. VIII (Cleveland, Burrows Brother Company, 1897), p.157-167.

THE Island of Cape Breton is about nine hundred leagues distant from our France by sea. It is seventy or eighty leagues in circumference. The mountains here are very high and numerous, at the foot of which are seen great bogs and frightful precipices. The land is covered with all sorts of trees, such as oak, beech, birch, pine, hemlock, and others.

Chibou, which is the principal part of this Island, is a great Bay about two leagues wide at its entrance, becoming narrower little by little, in the six or seven leagues which form its extent. In the middle, on the left hand in ascending, on the summit of the shore that faces the Northwest, is built the fort of sainte Anne, at the entrance of the harbor, opposite a little Cove. The situation of the place is so advantageous, according to the report of those who are acquainted with it, that with ten or twelve pieces of cannon, all the hostile ships that might present themselves could be sent to the bottom.

Those who have grown old upon the sea protest that they have never seen a more desirable Port, either in extent or for its facility of access. Three thousand ships could easily anchor there, and be sheltered from every wind, in a beautiful enclosure very pleasant to look upon; for its form is circular, or nearly so. The tides here are very mild and regular; there is always from ten to twelve fathoms of water. Furthermore, notwithstanding that the Island is in forty-six and a half degrees north latitude, the cold is extreme, the island lying in the midst of snow five or six months of the year. This is the situation of the place, let us come to the conveniences of life which it offers to its inhabitants. On this subject we may say, in general, that the Savages are more comfortable here than in many other places. If the Winter supplies them with fewer Beavers upon the water, it gives them, by way of compensation, more Moose upon the land. In summer, they live very well on Marmots and Parrot fish, with Cormorants and other marine birds. They have also Bustards, Smelts, Mackerel, Codfish, and like supplies, according to the different seasons, in the forests or upon the coasts of the sea.

As to the people, there is nothing anomalous in their physical appearance; you see well-formed men, good-looking, of fine figures, strong and powerful. Their skin is naturally white, for the little children show it thus; but the heat of the Sun, and the rubbing with Seal oil and Moose fat, make them very swarthy, the more so as they grow older. Most of them go bareheaded, and they have long, black hair, with very little or no beard, so that the women cannot be distinguished, except that they use a girdle and are less naked than the men; quite the reverse of what is practiced in many Christian lands, to the shame of Christianity. One sees here old men, of eighty and a hundred years, who have hardly a gray hair. As to their intelligence, if we may judge from their conduct and from their way of dealing with the French, they are not at a great disadvantage. You do not see in their gestures

and bearing any foolishness or nonsense, but rather a certain gravity and natural modesty, which makes them agreeable. They are indeed so clever that, in order to disguise their language, they add to every word a syllable, which only serves to confuse the minds of those by whom they do not wish to be understood.

What they do lack is the knowledge of God and of the service that they ought to render to him, as also of the state of the soul after death; it is wonderful that we have not yet been able to discover any trace of this knowledge in what we know of their language. Perhaps we shall discover something more, when we become better versed in it; for it is not credible that the light of nature should be altogether extinct in them in this regard, when it is not in other more barbarous Nations, or that they never talk among themselves of that of which they cannot be entirely ignorant. For all that, we have not up to the present noticed any more Religion among these poor Savages than among brutes. This is what wrings our hearts with compassion for souls redeemed at the same price as ours, by which they would willingly profit better than we, if they could know what they themselves are worth, and what they cost him who has loved us all so much

Now what consoles us in the midst of this ignorance and barbarism, and what makes us hope some day to see the Faith widely planted, is partly the docility they have shown in wishing to be instructed, and partly the honesty and decency we observe in them. They are very diligent and attentive to the instructions we give them; I do not know whether it is through complaisance, for they have a great deal of this naturally, or through an instinct from above, that they listen to us so willingly concerning the mysteries of our Faith, and repeat after us, whether they understand it or not, all that we declare to them. They very willingly make the sign of the Cross, as they see us make it, raising their hands and eyes to Heaven and pronouncing the words, "Jesus, Mary," as we do,—so far that, having observed the honor we render to the Cross, these poor people paint it on their faces, chests, arms, and legs, without being asked to do so. I am very willing that they should do all these things in the beginning from a natural simplicity, which causes them to imitate all they see, rather than from any greater consideration; because in time they may be helped by it, and they will not be the first, who come to practice by choice that to which by casual encounter they have become accustomed. Besides, what is of no small importance, they sometimes urge us to pray our good Jesus for them, for the success of their hunting and for relief from their diseases.

The other encouragement we see here, for the preaching of the Gospel, is in the honesty and decency that we see shining forth in them like two bright rays of light in the midst of darkness. We never think of distrusting our Savages, or of watching their hands and their feet, as with some others who attract everything to them and appropriate all they find at their convenience. Everything is free to them in all places, and yet nothing is in danger in their presence, even if they are alone in a cabin and where no one can see them. As to decency, they hold it in such high estimation, at least as far as external appearances are concerned, in their actions and words, that there is a probability that they will rise up on the last day and condemn many Christians, who will have cultivated this virtue less under the Law of grace, than these poor people have under that of nature.

We have never heard them use unseemly words, nor seen any actions too free, although we have lived on familiar terms with them inside and outside their cabins. You would say they are trying to practice in advance that beautiful motto of the Apostle, which commands Christians not even to have, if they can help it, upon their lips a word which signifies indecency. Some one will readily reply that, if we were better versed in their language, we would not fail to notice it therein. But is it not a great deal, that the little we know of it has not taught us anything of the kind? And is there not great reason to blush for many Christian Nations, among whom one does not have to serve a long apprenticeship to their Grammar, to find oneself embarrassed and confused in company, if he has even a little regard for propriety? And if our ears are not yet sufficiently opened to give positive evidence of the unconcern or decency of their talk; are we blind, or are we incapable of recognizing a shameful gesture or action? And yet we have never seen anything of this kind, not even among married people. But what shall I say about noticing one day a young Savage kissing a woman, who I did not think was his wife; as that seemed something extraordinary among them, I straightway asked him if that was his wife, and he replied that she was; but it was not without embarrassment on the part of the two who had been taken by surprise. Add to this modesty the gravity which I have said is natural to them, and you will judge that, God helping, they will receive with open arms a Law which recommends nothing so much as this virtue, which makes men like unto Angels; and that they will not have as much difficulty as many badly taught Christians have, to conform entirely to the injunctions of the Gospel, when it shall be declared to them in the words of the Apostle that they have to show their modesty in the eyes of all the world, since the Lord is near. It is true they have polygamy, and pay no attention to the indissolubility of Marriage. But we must hope that, when they come to recognize the obligations they are under, together with all the Nations of the earth, to a God who made himself man for them, they will willingly submit to his most holy Laws, especially in that which concerns a virtue by means of which he wishes us to bear witness to and glorify without ceasing, in our bodies, him who for us has delivered his own up to torture, and who gives it to us every day as food, for this sole purpose.