
ARTICLE II.—ON A LATELY DISCOVERED MS. OF
SAMUEL CHAMPLAIN.—*By the Honorable Thomas
D'Arcy McGee.*

(Read before the Society, on Wednesday, Dec. 17th, 1862.)

The discovery of an Autograph work by the illustrious Founder of Quebec, and first Captain General and Governor General of Canada, and its recent publication by an English Antiquarian Society, more than two centuries after the death of the author, are thought to be circumstances of sufficient interest, apart from the very curious matter of the work itself, to justify some special mention being made of them before "the Quebec Literary and Historical Society."

The English association to whom we are indebted for the publication of this MS., in their annual volume for 1859, is one particularly beneficial to students of early American discovery and adventure. Established in 1846, it has repeatedly devoted its funds and the talents of its Members, to the editing of those rare old tracts, or recently recovered MSS. which bear upon the Atlantic Voyages and American explorations of the XVI and XVII centuries. It bears appropriately the name of that Richard Hakluyt, prebendary of Bristol in the reigns of Elizabeth and James 1st, who was the most enthusiastic and laborious, as he was the earliest collector of voyages and travels, in the English language. Its seems something more than a coincidence, the natural result of commercial causes, that Hakluyt

should have been officially connected with Bristol, which held in those days to other British ports, for enterprize and wealth, a corresponding place to that occupied by Liverpool in our times.

The Hakluyt volume for 1859 is translated from the French original of Champlain by Miss Alice Wilmer, who is also the writer of the exceedingly full and interesting biographical introduction. It is edited with great care by Dr. Norton Shaw, a member of the council of the Society.

Miss Wilmer in her introduction acknowledges the Society's obligations to Mr. Feret, Librarian of the public Library of Dieppe, from whom the original MS. was obtained. The story of its recovery, after so long an interval, is thus told: "M. Feret obtained this valuable document from an inhabitant of Dieppe, where it has been for an unknown time; and it is more than probable that it had been in the possession of M. de Chastes, Governor of the Town and Castle of Dieppe, who was Champlain's chief friend and protector, under whose auspices he had been employed in the war in Brittany against the League, and by whom, after his return from the West Indies, he was sent to Canada. To him, it is most likely that Champlain would present a narrative of his voyage. On M. de Chastes' death, the manuscript probably passed into the possession of the Convent of the Minimes at Dieppe, to which he was a great benefactor during his life, and by testament after his death. He was also, by his desire, buried in the Church of the convent. The Library of the Minime fathers was, with the rest of their property, and that of the other Convents of the town, dispersed at the great Revolution; but most of the books remained at Dieppe, as may be seen by a reference to the numerous works which have gradually found their way by gift or purchase to the

“Public Library” of that town, bearing inscriptions as having belonged to the Convent.”

The original title is couched in these words :—

“Brief narrative of the most remarkable things that Samuel Champlain of Brouage observed in the West Indies, during the voyage which he made to the same in the years one Thousand Five Hundred and Ninety Nine to one Thousand Six Hundred and Two, as follows.”

The narration is conducted with great simplicity and directness, in the first person; there are *nine* original illustrations; and the entire Memoir, as printed, is contained in 48 pages of the Hakluyt Society’s octavo volume.

The author begins by informing us that he had been employed “some years” in the army of King Henry IV. in the subjugation of Brittany, as Maréchal de logis (or quarter-master) till finding that war at an end in 1598 he resolved to enter the Spanish Service with a view of voyaging to the West Indies, to which “no Frenchman could otherwise find free access.” He had already an uncle in that service, called the “Provençal Captain” by the French, and “Pilot General of the Sea Armies” by the Spaniards. With this uncle he sailed from Blavet, the last port held by the Spaniards and the League in Brittany, for the city of Seville of which, and of Saint Lucar at the entrance of the Guadalquiver, he made sketches, for the use of King Henry.

Sailing from Saint Lucar in the beginning of January 1599, under the Command in Chief of Don Francisque Colombe, a knight of Malta, and descendant of the great Admiral, Champlain’s ship, the *Saint Julien*, 500 tons burthen, reached the Canaries in six days, and the Island of Guadaloupe in two months afterwards. A plan of the island, with the depth of water leading into its chief harbor, which he calls Macon, is given. The Virgin Islands,

the Island of La Marguerite, with its pearl fishery, illustrated by a curious sketch, Saint Juan de Porto Rico, lately captured by the English, San Domingo and Cuba were next visited, and then the Spanish main or Mexico. The precise place at which he landed on the Mexican coast is not very clearly ascertained, but it is certain, that with the permission of the Admiral Champlain visited the City of Mexico, "distant from that (the landing) place one hundred leagues inland." His description of this journey, of the woods and forests, the plants and animals, the Silver Mines, and the beautiful city itself, the aborigines, Pagan and Christian, the Government of the country and of the towns, is full of curious allusions, though occasionally rendered ludicrous by exaggerated tales of winged serpents, gigantic lizards and fabulous dragons. After spending a month in the city of Mexico Champlain returned to the coast, and embarked in a "patache" or packet for Porto Bello, then the great Atlantic entrepôt of Central and Southern America.

The Isthmus on which it stood was still covered with the dense masses of the intertropical forest, curtained and netted together by the undergrowth of cactus and creeping plants, which had long rendered it impervious to the pioneer's axe, and which still renders most parts of it wholly inaccessible. Down the centre ran a high ridge, from which hundreds of streams descended on the east or the west, but the harbors to which they flowed were exposed and difficult of access, and the whole region had the character of being fatal, at certain seasons, to European life.

During the month he remained at Porto Bello, he seems to have visited, though he does not expressly say so, Panama, the terminus of the Spanish route across the Isthmus. A paved highway about 17 leagues in length connected these two ports, in which so much of the wealth of the new

world was exchanged for the commodities of the old. Panama was still "the very noble and very loyal city" which Charles V. had chartered in 1521, and which Morgan and his Freebooters found so easy a spoil, in 1669. But this reference to Panama is only made to draw attention to a fact disclosed by this recently recovered MSS., a fact most honorable to the memory of Champlain, that while at Panama, he conceived the grand project of connecting by a ship canal the Atlantic and Pacific at that point. The passage in which he sets forth this idea, like all the rest of the memoir, is briefly and simply expressed.—

"One may judge," says Champlain, writing in 1559, "that if the four leagues of land, which there are from Panama to this river, were cut through, one might pass from the south sea to the ocean on the other side, and thus shorten the route by more than fifteen hundred leagues; and from Panama to the straits of Magellan would be an island, and from Panama to the Newfoundland would be another island, so that the whole of America would be in two islands."

It cannot be asserted that this was positively the first idea of canalizing the Isthmus, which had occurred to any European. The natural difficulties of the route had been fearfully impressed on the Spanish mind by the enormous sacrifice of human life, which had attended its first crossing by the conquerors of Chili and Peru. A Biscayan pilot named Gongueseche, at a time when the term pilot was synonymous with our Captain or Commodore in the navy, had suggested to Spain the feasibility of a canal fed by the watercourse between Cupiac Bay and the Atrato or the Naipi rivers, a proposition antecedent to Champlain's voyage. On these representations a survey had been ordered by Philip II. under the direction of two Flemish engineers, upon whose unfavorable report, but still more for political rea-

sons connected with mining monopolies, that arbitrary king, at the instance of the Council of the Indies, had forbidden the subject to be reopened under penalty of death. The cheerful buoyant belief of Champlain in its practicability and importance, thus put on record at the close of the 16th century, contrasts vividly with the gloomy and despotic decree of the Spanish Sovereign, and the dispirited and hostile report of his Flemish engineers.

The attention of the English, the other great Atlantic power of that age, had been long attracted to the Isthmus and the Spanish main, but this idea does not seem to have occurred to any of their leading spirits. In 1572, Sir Francis Drake landed on the Isthmus, and in 1586, he sacked Porto Bello, the former event being 27 and the later 13 years before Champlain's voyage. But in the several accounts of Drake's exploits in those waters there is no indication that he had even dreamt of this enterprise.

His contemporary, Camden, informs us that when Drake first saw from the top of a great tree, midway on the Isthmus, the waters of the Pacific, he was so "vehemently transported with the desire to navigate that sea, that falling down there on his knees he implored the divine assistance, that he might at some time or other sail thither and make a perfect discovery of the same." Neither Camden, nor Francis Drake, the nephew and editor of Sir Francis, in his "World Encompassed," first published in 1628, intimates that the conception of a canal, had entered the mind of the great English navigator. In another quarter the credit of suggesting an inter-oceanic route would seem to devolve to the English of Elizabeth's reign; for we know that Sir Humphrey Gilbert published in 1572 a treatise which, though censured for its pedantry, was still in all probability the earliest formal proposal to search for a North-West passage between the Atlantic and Pacific. Forbisher, Drake, and

other English "Marine Worthies," held theoretically with Gilbert, but Drake's own plan of reaching the Pacific was to follow in the course of the illustrious Portuguese Magellan, through the straits which bear his name, at the Southern extremity of the continent. In estimating the comparative degrees of science and enterprize exhibited by the principal European nations, our ancestors, in the infancy of American discovery, it is not necessary to cast any shadow upon those of one origin in order to bring others more boldly into relief; they found in their day the Atlantic wide enough for all their enterprizes; and still wider—wide as the whole world—is the comprehensive justice of History, inspired by the divine Spirit of Truth.

The continuation of Champlain's narrative after his visit to Porto Bello and Panama contains nothing to us specially interesting. The gulf of Campeachy, the Havanna, Cartagena, the Bahama channel, Florida, Bermuda, and the Azores, were successively visited, and are more or less briefly described. Off Cape St. Vincent on the homeward voyage to Spain they captured two armed English vessels, which they carried into the river of Seville.

The entire voyage narrated in this unpretending MS. had occupied "three years and two months."

Within a year of his return to France from Mexico, Champlain first entered on the career by which he is best known to us of a Northern explorer and colonizer. To the particulars of that glorious and laborious career it is not necessary that I should here allude; but it is worthy of remark as characteristic of the age and the man, that he had deliberately gone to acquire those lessons of nautical science and command under the flag of Spain, in the waters of the Mexican Gulf, which he afterwards devoted to the services of his sovereign, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and along the shores of our Canadian Lakes.

