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CARTIER'S OBJECTIVE

By H. P. Biggar

Who first gave King Francis the First the idea that beyond Newfoundland were to be found "certain islands and countries where it is reported great quantities of gold and other riches are to be found", we do not know.[1] In any event this was the avowed object Cartier had in view and the route to these islands we are also told was through the Strait of Belle Isle.[2] That Cartier was selected to command the two vessels, manned by sixty men, shows that he was probably already familiar with the Newfoundland fishing grounds. How far these extended we do not know for certain, but they clearly embraced a considerable portion of the east coast of Newfoundland as well as the Strait of Belle Isle, the western portion of which had been named by the French the Grand Bay. It is also significant that Blanc Sablon had already been so named after a similar place near Brest in France and the name Brest itself was also given to a port farther west along the north shore of the gulf. On Friday, June 12, after passing Shecatica Bay well inside the gulf, Cartier met with a large fishing vessel from La Rochelle "that in the night had run past the harbour of Brest,[3] where she intended to go and fish".[4]

Having gone on board, Cartier piloted this ship some two and a half miles farther west along the coast beyond Shecatica Bay to another harbour which he named Port Jacques Cartier and considered one of the best in the world. This was probably our modern Cumberland Harbour and possibly marked the western limit inside the gulf yet reached by these fishing vessels.

Displeased with the rugged and rocky nature of this north coast of the gulf, Cartier returned to Brest and going on board his ships sailed them down the western coast of Newfoundland, apparently till then quite unexplored. On June 19, off St. George's Bay, he met with bad weather and was driven out into the gulf until June 26, when he sighted our modern Bird Rocks then as now covered with gannets, auks, guillemots, puffins, and murres. Thence he proceeded to Brion Island and the Magdalens which latter he mistook for the mainland until his return to France in 1536.

Sailing westward he examined Miramichi Bay and the Bay de Chaleur which latter he hoped would prove a strait like that of Belle Isle. On discovering it was only a bay "we were grieved and displeased",[5] he adds. So far, therefore, he had found nothing to indicate gold or riches of any kind.

On July 14, headwinds with fog and mist drove him into our Gaspé Bay and on the sixteenth, he had to run for shelter behind Sandy Beach Point. There he got into touch with a party of Huron-Iroquois Indians

[1]H. P. Biggar, *A Collection of Documents relating to Jacques Cartier and the Sieur de Roberval* (Ottawa, 1930), p. 42.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 43.

[3]Probably Bonne Esperance Harbour.

[4]H. P. Biggar, *The Voyages of Jacques Cartier* (Ottawa, 1924), p. 21.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 54.

from Quebec who had come to Gaspé to fish for mackerel. They already had caught a quantity near the shore with their nets. Having erected a cross thirty feet high, he seized two of the Indians to take along with him, promising to bring them back again with iron-wares and other goods.

Leaving Gaspé Bay on July 25 and rounding this peninsula, the St. Lawrence lay open before him to the west, but on account of a mirage frequent in these parts, he imagined the passage south of Anticosti to be merely a bay. Thereupon he sailed east-north-east to Anticosti, and proceeded to the eastern extremity of this island. Rounding this he sailed westward until he caught sight of the coast of Labrador. He then realized that he had at length found a passage leading to the westward and possibly to the islands of which he was in search.

After a consultation with the other leading seamen, it was decided, in view of the fact that heavy east winds were now setting in and that they did not know what lay between them and Blanc Sablon, to postpone the exploration of this strait, which he named the Strait of St. Peter, until the following year, 1535.

Off Cape Natashkwan on the coast of Labrador some Indians came on board and reported that the French fishing vessels had already sailed for France from the Grand Bay laden with fish. Continuing in the same direction until he sighted our Rich Point in Newfoundland, Cartier entered Blanc Sablon on August 9 and a week later left for St. Malo where he arrived safely on September 5, 1534.

The net result of his summer's exploration had been that, instead of finding any traces of gold or other riches, he had discovered that the Grand Bay was a very considerable island gulf of salt water surrounded on all sides by land. Whether he named it the Square Gulf we do not know, but this name for the portion explored by Cartier would not be inappropriate. The islands reported to contain great quantities of gold and other riches were still undiscovered, but they might be found perhaps after sailing westward through the new Strait of St. Peter.

On October 30, 1534, Cartier was commissioned by Admiral Chabot to finish his exploration for which purpose he was advanced the large sum of 3,000 livres to fit out three ships at St. Malo. Setting sail on May 19, 1535, Cartier passed through the Strait of St. Peter on Saturday, August 14. The Indians seized at Gaspé in the previous summer and who had passed the whole winter in France, now told him that the land to the south was an island which he named Assumption Island (our Anticosti) and that this route led to the great river of Hochelaga and to the province of Canada but that the river grew narrower as one approached Canada. In view of this Cartier must have despaired of finding the islands said to be rich in gold but, to make sure that no opening existed, he explored the coast of Labrador from Seven Island Bay as far back as Pillage Bay in which he had anchored on August 9 and which he had named the Bay of St. Lawrence. On finding no outlet here he must have resigned himself to the exploration of this great river and given up hope of discovering the islands rich in gold.

However, after leaving Quebec or Stadacona on Sunday, September 19, he reached the Huron-Iroquois village of Hochelaga beside the Lachine Rapids on Saturday, October 2.[6] At Mount Royal some Indians seized the chain of the captain's whistle which was of silver and a dagger-handle of yellow copper-gilt like gold and gave Cartier to understand that these

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

came from up the Ottawa River. Although one could reach this region of precious metals, the Indians said, by way of the Saguenay River, the best and safer route was that by way of the Ottawa. They also assured Cartier that in that country lived natives clothed and dressed in woollen clothes with many towns and people possessed of great stores of gold.[7] In short, the mysterious land of gold evidently existed but continued to recede farther and farther to the west. Its existence, however, now seemed assured.

On May 3, Cartier seized Donnacona, the Indian chief at Stadacona, and the two Indians who had been wintered with him at St. Malo and carried them back to France where all of them died. Owing, indeed, to the war now being waged with the Emperor Charles V, Cartier was unable to return to New France until 1541. Although he again took up his quarters at Quebec and visited the Lachine Rapids, he left for France in the spring of 1542 for fear of an attack by the Indians. He had with him, however, several barrels of pyrites gathered at Cape Rouge, nine miles above Quebec. In the month of June he met Roberval at St. John's, Newfoundland, and this ore being tried in a furnace and found to be good, Cartier and his men "stole privily away the next night for St. Malo",[8] evidently thinking they had become rich men.

Roberval with his armed men, piloted by Jean Alfonse, proceeded up the River St. Lawrence and again occupied Cartier's quarters at Cape Rouge. In the spring of 1543, Roberval proceeded to the site of Hochelaga but does not seem to have made his way any farther westward; for he left Cape Rouge on June 5 and promised to be back by July 22. According to the Desceliers map of 1550 he did not proceed farther than the junction of the Ottawa with the St. Lawrence. He therefore found no trace of the islands said to be rich in gold and other precious metals.

As Cartier's barrels were found not to contain real diamonds but merely worthless pyrites, the net result of the various expeditions from 1534 to 1542 was simply the discovery of the Gulf and River St. Lawrence and the addition to the French language of the term "a Canadian diamond", meaning something of no value whatever.

Such, in brief, would seem to be the objective Cartier had before him when he set sail on April 20, 1534, with the results actually obtained by September, 1543, when Roberval returned to La Rochelle and gave orders for the *Anne* and other ships of his fleet to be disposed of for what they would fetch. Roberval had, in fact, spent his whole fortune in this enterprise. To recuperate himself, he was appointed by Henri II in September, 1548, to take charge of the exploitation of all mines in France. Cartier died childless on September 1, 1557, and Roberval was murdered in Paris about 1561.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 201.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 265.