Jacques Cartier’s brief comments about Prince Edward Island in 1534, after an encounter with the Island of only a couple of days, have been much referred to by writers over the years. Perhaps the most used quotation from Cartier is that the Island “... is the fairest land one can see, and full of beautiful trees and meadows.” Cartier’s description extends to some mention of plant life, trees and aboriginal people, and to the lack of harbours not rendered difficult by sandbars.* Though he and his men could have seen only a very small part of the Island in a few places on the north coast, and his observations are thus very limited, we can be thankful that they were recorded for posterity.

More than 270 years later, John Stewart, regarded as the Island’s first historian, in his *Account of Prince Edward Island* (1806) provided us with the first in-depth description of topography, trees, animals, birds, fish and climate – not to mention the turbulent politics of the Island in which he himself was frequently embroiled. In all of John Stewart’s 304 pages, he manages to say nothing concerning the Mi’kmaq people then living on the Island, perhaps not surprising considering that it was a prevailing custom during the early British colonial period for the Island’s English-speaking population to ignore the aboriginal people who they had largely marginalized.

The time gap between Cartier and Stewart is not entirely devoid of recorded information concerning Prince Edward Island – various records from the French regime on the Island have survived. There are two brief and relatively little-known accounts which are particularly significant in that they were written about the time that European settlement of the Island first began. They were penned by French military officers who spent a year or two on the Island in the early 1720s as managers associated with the Comte de Saint-Pierre’s attempt to settle the Island and to carry on a fishery operation.

The purpose of this article is to bring these two accounts to the fore, in their entirety, and in English translation. The 18th century orthography and writing structure and style have been retained. Round brackets denote editorial clarifications. Square brackets indicate that words, or portions of words, are missing, either because of a portion of the page is torn or worn away, or because they are hidden by a tight binding. Ogee (pointed) brackets represent a likely, or possible, reading of missing fragments or of words that are hard to decipher because of smudging or other reasons.

**Gotteville’s Account**

This account was written in the fall of 1720 by Robert-David Gotteville de Belile, Commandant of the Comte Saint-Pierre’s *Compagnie de
l'Île Saint-Jean, and is addressed to the Council of the Marine. He and approximately 250 colonists had just arrived on the Island in the late summer of 1720 and must have been under considerable pressure to build shelters for themselves before winter's onslaught. Gotteville was probably around 40 years of age and had close to 25 years of military service under his belt. At Louisbourg, extracts of his letter were made and put before the Council in late January, 1721. It is the extracted material, not the letter itself, which has survived. As a result of the extraction/summarization process, in one or two places the first person has gotten grammatically changed to the third person. In translation it reads:

This Island is more than 50 leagues long and in many places is 12 to 14 leagues wide. There is a lot of wood, among others, oak; yellow birch; (spiral-grained or crooked/bent) woods; beech, harder and more dense than oak; woods of spruce for making masts; pines of a very great size for making large masts; and a lot of others for making boards and planks. The soil is suitable for growing all sorts of cereals, according to the report of the ploughmen. The cod fishery there is so abundant that several people who fished this year have assured them that they took almost 450 quintals per shallop and that they had never seen such an abundance, neither at Plaisance nor Louisbourg.

There is a very fine port, very easy to fortify; one could build there a citadel within the points within range of a one-pound cannon on a height of land commanding land and water. At the entrance of the port there are now eight cannons arranged in a battery.

Two hundred and fifty settlers are spending the winter here. Settlers are arriving here every day from Acadia.

There are many Indians which keep him (Gotteville) good company because of the interest which they find there. They provide him with game - among others, geese, ducks, teal, plover, and many partridge. There are also some caribou which are almost as large as (European) deer. They only lack dogs and horses. The landscape is flat, the mature woods fairly open and a lot of meadows and a few lakes here and there.

He plans on making a tour of this Island next spring and to send an accurate map.

La Ronde's Account

The writer of this letter in the late fall of 1721 was Louis Denys de la Ronde, a grand-nephew of Nicolas Denys who had in 1672 published an account of what are now Maine and the Maritime Provinces, making brief mention of Île Saint-Jean, as Prince Edward Island was then known. La Ronde had been recruited at Louisbourg in 1720 by Gotteville to assist in getting the Comte Saint-Pierre's enterprise on Île Saint-Jean established. He was then 45 years of age and had served in the colonial regular troops for some twenty years in places as diversely separated as the coasts of Ireland, England and North America. He had been on campaigns as far flung as Hudson Bay and the Mississippi River, and was well acquainted with the coasts of Newfoundland and Acadia.

The original La Ronde letter, written at Port LaJoye, has over time become rather severely damaged as a result of ink smearing or "bleeding," or by extensive mould or mildew. As a result, much of it has become difficult to read and portions are virtually impossible to read. When transcribers of the National Archives of Canada transcribed many French colonial documents in Parisian archives dealing with Île Royale (Cape Breton) and Île Saint-Jean in the 1880s, they chose not to transcribe this particular document. Whether this was on account of letter being in poor condition or not is unknown - the transcribers were somewhat selective in what they copied, and it is possible that this document was passed over for other reasons.

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* A league is a unit of length which varies somewhat, depending on when and where the term was used. As used by the French, it can be anywhere from 4 to 5.5 km. In English usage the variation is even greater.

† Here "meadow" refers to flat marshland, prized by the Acadians for farming.
It so happens that about a decade earlier, the Rt. Rev. Peter MacIntyre, Bishop of Charlottetown, commissioned a Parisian, Pierre Margry, to transcribe documents in the French National Archives dealing with, or making reference to, Île Saint-Jean. The La Ronde letter was transcribed by Margry, apparently while still reasonably readable. The Margry transcripts resided for many years in the Bishop’s residence in Charlottetown and are now held by the Centre d’Études Acadiennes at the Université de Moncton. If it were not for the existence of the Margry transcript of La Ronde’s letter, we would not today be able to know all of its contents.

It is not clear to whom La Ronde’s letter is addressed. Normally it would be to the minister in charge of colonization. However, in this case the context of the letter suggests that it was to a lesser official, someone who was well known to, or a friend of, La Ronde. In translation the letter, dated 6 November 1721, reads as follows:

Sir,

I have received the letter which you have honoured me by sending. In it you have advised me that I would be named commandant at Port Toulouse, which would have been a genuine pleasure for me; but I am informed from Île Royale that this is not to be; rather, that M. de Pensens will have this posting and that I am going to Louisbourg. If that is so, I confess to you that I would prefer to leave the service than to endure so much injustice done to me, since everyone knows that it was I who established Port Toulouse and also set up the establishment on Île Saint-Jean, which is coming along well.¹

I must tell you that the Island is very beautiful and very flat. In length it is 50 leagues and in width 8; it is rather crescent-shaped. There is a lot of good wood of every kind and a lot of meadow. The soil is very red. There are several opinions about the quality of the land. Some say that it is necessary to treat it with manure; others disagree. In my view, the land will prove good; but it quite lacks the quality of land found at Île Royale.

Fish may be caught in abundance from a shallop, but if these individuals from Île Royale keep sending their schooners here to fish, as they did this year, the fishery will soon be ruined. We know from experience that the fishery of the banks of Île Royale has been ruined.

We are at Port Lajoye which is one of the finest ports that one could hope to see. There are three rivers which empty into the harbour. The North-East River extends 6 leagues, the South-West is 4 leagues long. The third, running north-northwest is 3 leagues. We already have 16 French settlers with their families and four Acadian families. It would be beneficial if they were given additional land, since they all say that two arpents is too little.² I have written about this to the Comte de Saint-Pierre.

On the northern side of the Island there are seven harbours. They are, starting from the southeast:

Tranchemontagne, located one league from the point (East Point). It is an established fishing station and can handle shallop.

¹ Port Toulouse was a military outpost situated on the site of the current St. Peters, Cape Breton.

² An arpent is a unit of land area, again somewhat variable, depending on locality. However, it is roughly equivalent to one acre.

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Havre Saint-Pierre, 4 leagues further, is established and is good for vessels of 60 tons.

Havre Tracadie, 3 leagues further, which is good for vessels of up to 100 tons and is established.

Havre Quichibouganique, (probably Rustico Bay) 3 leagues further, which is good for shallop.

Havre Macquepec, (Malpeque Bay) 3 leagues further, which is good for vessels of 200 tons and transport ships or 400 to 500 tons.

Havre de Cascampec, 6 leagues further, good for vessels of 200 to 300 tons.

In all the harbours one can carry on a fishery, including the drying of fish and the construction of vessels of any size.

On this Island one can put up sawmills which would turn a good profit, for there are pine trees for making boards and oak for ship’s planking. This year I had three vessels built on the Island: one of 100 tons, which carries this letter to you, and which will be loaded with locally-caught codfish; another of 65 tons for trading to the West Indies; and another of 25 tons for getting our oils at the Magdalen Islands where seals are hunted in the winter and sea cows in the summer. This place is well managed, that is to say, only the small seals are killed. And with regard to the sea cows, they are impossible to destroy; hunting of them is confined to July and August.

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Otter – Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire des sciences, des arts et des métiers (Denis Diderot, c.1750).
This Island can provide 50,000 livres of rent to the Comte de Saint-Pierre, after expenses, and if Ile Saint-Jean is well managed, that is to say by people who know how to develop it, I [it?] will repay them 100,000 écus. I don’t think there would be anyone in Paris who could invest their banknotes more advantageously, for one day their investment will yield a large return. One will profit as much as he wishes. Ile Saint-Jean is one good acquisition.

You have asked me about the Indians. They don’t spend the winters on the Island because there are only deer on the Island which they cannot easily kill for food. For this reason they spend the winters on the mainland.

On this Island there are the following kinds of birds: Canada geese, snow geese, ducks, teal, brant, sparrows, oldsquaw, whistlers, eider, loons, curlews, plovers, larks, partridges (grouse) in abundance, turtle-doves (passenger pigeons) in summer, woodpeckers, thrushes, owls, sparrow-hawks, very large eagles, herons, hummingbirds, titmice (chickadees), nightingales {song sparrows?}, robins and starling-like birds.

There are no beavers at all, due to the fact that there are, to the best of my knowledge, no lakes, nor porcupines because there are no mountains. There are deer but no moose at all; otters are plentiful and there are lots of foxes and squirrels, and at any rate wolves are of a great size. Monsieur Gotteville has sent a skin from one to Monsieur L’Amiral (to the admiral).

I don’t know of much more that I can tell you. I have worked with Monsieur Brelay {the priest, Brelay} on the mémoire that he is sending to you. I would ask that you be so kind as to speak well of me to Monsieur Raudot. For this I would be much indebted to you. I am taking the liberty to ask you to give my compliments to my cousin (? de Reppinibi). My wife who has returned from Canada assures you of her regards.

Respectfully yours,
Your very humble and obedient servant,
La Ronde Denys.

Revelations of Documents

Unlike Stewart, both Gotteville and La Ronde refer to the Mi’kmaq on the Island, as did Nicolas Denys. La Ronde’s reference to the seasonal movement of Island Mi’kmaq at that time is interesting, being attributed by him to the difficulty the Indians had in killing caribou on the Island, at least in winter. The implication is that there was little else for the Indians to eat at this time of year, given the absence of moose and bear. The Gotteville document suggests that despite the lateness of the settlers’ arrival, they may have managed to do some fishing in 1720. Alternatively, this could be a reference to one or more fishing vessels having been sent out from France by the Comte de Saint-Pierre prior to the departure of vessels carrying settlers. If so, the crews of the earlier vessels may have remained aboard, rather than spending nights ashore. A rather significant point made in both letters concerns the existence of caribou. Nicolas Denys also made reference to them, stating that their numbers were small on account of the Mi’kmaq’s hunting of them.

Jean-Pierre Roma, who lived on the Island from 1732 to 1745 also mentioned their existence. The surveyor Samuel Holland recorded in 1765 that there were a “very few” caribou on the Island. Since Stewart made no mention of them, it is reasonable to conclude that the species died out on the Island sometime between the 1760s and the turn of the century.

La Ronde recorded that wolves on the Island were very large. It would appear that they soon disappeared, since they are not mentioned again by any subsequent individuals who commented on the animals to be found on the Island. Another species which became extinct, not only on the Island, but throughout North America and, indeed, the world, is the passenger pigeon. Cartier recorded their presence on the Island, as did La Ronde. While the latter appears to have been well aware of the dangers of overfishing cod, he curiously thought that sea cows (walrus) could be hunted in the Gulf of St. Lawrence at will without the risk of significant depletion. He couldn’t of course have been more incorrect, for by the beginning of the 19th century the walrus on PEI had been hunted to extinction, while at the Magdalen Islands, the species lasted only an additional two or three decades.

In La Ronde’s account we have the first known reference to the Island’s distinctively red soil. It is somewhat ironic that a number of early visitors to the Island formed the opinion that the uplands were not particularly good for farming and inferior to agricultural land in Cape Breton. While Gotteville seemed confident of the richness of the Island’s soil, La Ronde was much more circumspect, and wrote that undoubtedly Cape Breton had significantly better farm land. This was echoed less than a week later by the governor at Louisbourg who advised the minister in France as follows:

There arrived four days ago a ship from Ile Saint-Jean by which I learned that some habitants from

* Almost certainly, this is a reference to caribou which resembled the European reindeer.

Chickadee – Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire des sciences, des arts et des métiers (Denis Diderot, c1750).

Acadia had visited the Island to inspect the condition of the land. They reported that it is not as good as they had expected. It is red, dry and sandy. It will be difficult to utilize it to good effect.

If the three ships described by La Ronde were in fact built, there can be little doubt that they mark the beginning of shipbuilding on the Island. No ships are known to have been built here earlier. To have built these vessels within a year of the small contingent’s arrival on the shores of a land with absolutely no infrastructure – nothing but trees – is truly remarkable. Except for wood, the Europeans would have had to bring with them everything needed to build the hulls, such as sawing equipment, tools and fasteners, and also all of the hardware, rope, canvas for sails, anchors, and special fittings needed to rig the ships. And it should be noted that a vessel of 100 tons was a fairly good size.

One biographer of La Ronde has opined that the reliability of the information in La Ronde’s letter is “highly suspect...for it seems that [he] was more interested in promoting himself as a colonizer than in reporting accurately.” This is no doubt fair comment on the part of the letter in which the writer extols the potential returns from investment on the Island. It is tempting to conclude that La Ronde’s shipbuilding claims may also be exaggerated. On the other hand, he states that the letter in which the claim is made would be sent to his friend in France aboard the new 100-ton vessel. One might presume that people in France would recognize whether or not the vessel was new, and whether it was in fact one which had been previously sent out from France.

Gotteville was the first observer on the Island to write of the Island’s timber resources in relation to shipbuilding, and of its agricultural potential. Similarly, he was the first to record that Port la Jolye had a fine harbour. La Ronde enlarged on this, mentioning that there are three rivers which discharge into the harbour. For the first time, also, we get quite a good picture of the north shore, particularly the harbours along this coast. Together, these two individuals provide information on animal and bird life which adds a great deal to the slim accounts of Cartier and Nicolas Denys.

Stewart’s account of the Island remains the first comprehensive description of Prince Edward Island. At the same time he had his antecedents, whose writings he was almost certainly unaware of. His forerunners have left us valuable information which serves as benchmarks, pointing to changes which have occurred over time. Gotteville and La Ronde played a role in contributing to our understanding of events in the early history of Prince Edward Island – as did the Bishop of Charlottetown.

Sources

Cartier’s description, in the original French and in English translation, may be found in H.P. Biggar, The Voyages of Jacques Cartier. Nicolas Denys’ writings in English translation are in Description & Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia), edited by William F. Ganong. Gotteville’s document appears in Archives des Colonies, Series C11A, Vol. 43, pp. 134-136. Curiously, it was filed under “Canada,” rather than the more logical “Ile Royale.” Margry’s transcriptions were converted to typed form sometime after 1965 as Documents pour servir à l’histoire..., a copy of which is in the Robertson Library, UPEI. The La Ronde letter may be found in Vol. 1, pp. 30-34. Biographies for both Gotteville and La Ronde appear in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. The English translations of their letters are largely those of the author. However, I am indebted to Doug Sobey for some assistance in this regard, and more particularly, for help in providing an accurate transcription of the letter of Denys de la Ronde. I am especially grateful for his considerable work in sorting out, as well as can be done, the bird, mammal and tree species being referred to by the French writers. In naming the animals and birds, these writers relied heavily on their own personal experience with species elsewhere, including France where some of the species they saw on the Island are simply not found. For more on this, see Doug Sobey, Early Descriptions of the Forests of Prince Edward Island, I. The French Period (1534-1758). Thanks for translation assistance are due, also, to Arlette Bataille who is on staff at the University of Ulster.