

THE MEDITERRANEAN PASS

By: Lynden Bechervaise Sept, 2012

In his book entitled “The Robin’s of the Gaspé” David Lee in an Annex called { The “IF” and her captains }, tells of Capt. Phillip Bechervaise readying Robin’s ship for the trip to the Mediterranean. It is the Autumn of 1794 and the “IF” is a new ship, the second to have been built by the Robins at Paspébiac. His first square rigger was named the “Fiotte” but it was captured by American Privateers soon after being launched, as were two other of Robin’s ships that spring.

In preparation for the voyage, Charles Robin provides Bechervaise with a “Mediterranean Pass”..Just what that pass

was and why it was necessary is the reason for this article.

Bechervaise first appeared on the Paspebiac scene in 1786 where he was captain of a ship called “La Paix” and he returned regularly each year until 1808. These circumstances are proven by copies of letters from Charles Robin’s copy book and addressed to his captains, which are now housed at the Gaspé Museum.

THE MOORS IN SPAIN

In 711 AD, The North African Moors conquered most of Spain in an eight year campaign and brought most of Iberia under Islamic rule.

The Moorish Kingdom of Granada continued until 1492 when Christian monarchs united and reclaimed the country.

As a consequence of this expulsion the Moorish population retreated to North Africa and without any economic base reverted to Piracy on a grand scale.

The Barbary Pirates or Corsairs

Primarily they operated out of the Ports of Tunis, Tripoli and Algiers in North Africa. Their predation extended throughout the Mediterranean and into the North Atlantic. In addition to seizing ships they engaged in raids on European coastal towns and villages, mainly in Italy France Spain and

Portugal, but also in England, Scotland the Netherlands and Ireland. The main purpose for their raids was to capture Christian slaves for the Islamic market of North Africa and the Middle East.

The Corsaires captured thousands of ships and long stretches of the coast in Spain and Italy were almost completely abandoned by their inhabitants. From the 16th to the 19th century corsairs captured an estimated 800,000 to 1.25 million people as slaves.

Men would be made Galley Slaves, chained to their seats rowing speedy attack ships or on building projects in North Africa, under horrible conditions. Women were employed in Domestic work or in harems and sold throughout all of North Africa and

the Middle East. One writer stated that there were so many white slaves in North Africa that one could be exchanged for an onion.

Religious communities raised money to buy the release of influential hostages which could usually be done for the equivalent of one year's wages.

The Sack of Baltimore [*Ireland*]

(As an example of their activity I offer this report)

In 1631 a particularly brazen Barbary corsair was operating from Sallee on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. A sea captain from Flanders, he had 'turned Turk' and taken the name Morat Rais. That year, with two ships, on the night of 20 June 1631 this corsair chieftain made a surprise raid on the Irish coastal village of Baltimore successfully kidnapping most of its population of men, women and children. Their fate was to be sold into slavery on the Barbary Coast of North Africa. A French missionary priest working in Algiers saw several of Morat's Irish captives put up for auction. After that, very little more was heard of them.

The pirates were steered up the intricate channel by a Dungarvan fisherman whom they had taken at sea for the purpose. Two years later he was convicted and executed for the crime.

The Solution

Unable to defeat the pirates , the British Govt as well as most other seafaring nations, signed treaties with them whereby they paid healthy sums of money in order to procure safe passage for their nation's ships. This was the Mediterranean Pass.

CONCLUSION

Because of the menace to shipping and to coastal living, fishing activities in the Mediterranean were very much curtailed. The catholic countries of the area needed the fish that Charles Robin and others were providing. In Spain, for example, there were 256 days of

the year that were identified as 'fasting days' when meat could not be eaten. Competition among suppliers for this market was fierce and the risks extremely high.

Phillip Bechervaise died in Messina ,Sicily in 1812 of the "Fever" as did all but two of his ship's crew. In correspondence days before his passing he refers to having to dump some of his cargo of dried fish due to spoilage as another supplier had flooded the market at a cheap price and there was no sale for his cargo. His ship was taken over by the mate of another ship who indicated that the "Amazon" would return to Jersey "in convoy" the following month. Apparently, even in 1812, nations thought it prudent to travel the Mediterranean 'in convoy'.