

## EVANGELINE AND THE ACADIANS: THE TRUE VERSION.

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No poet has ever sung a more touching story than that of Evangeline. The cruel fate of the lovers cannot be read without emotion, but its pathos all springs from, and is indeed but the pointed arrow by which the poet brings home to his readers, the conviction of the heartless tyranny of the British and Colonial Governments in

the expulsion of the Acadians; when, to use his own language, the simple inhabitants of the lovely village of Grand-Pré were ruthlessly torn from their much-loved homes and sent into an

“Exile without an end, and without an example in story.”

Had there been no expulsion of the Acadians, the world would not have been enchanted with Longfellow's poem, but every line of it is such a bitter indictment of Great Britain and her colonies for unparalleled cruelty, that a just regard for the fair fame of both appears, even at this distant day, to render an inquiry not uninteresting.

Were the groundwork of the story strictly true, the name of Britain would be justly held up to the execration of the world; no poet's imagination could add to the enormity of her conduct. But, happily for the fair fame of both the parent country and the colony, facts have come to light which entirely change the character of the event. The Government of the Province of Nova Scotia, which name was unfortunately substituted for that of Acadia, a few years since appointed a most competent and learned member of the Bar to the office of Commissioner of Records, whose duty it was to search out from mouldy boxes and dust-covered shelves the official documents and correspondence of the Province from the time of its first settlement, and to arrange them in a systematic and accessible method.

A portion of these valuable papers has already been published, and among them the deeply interesting correspondence which took place in connection with the expulsion of the Acadians. This correspondence has to a large extent dispersed the cloud of sympathy which has surrounded the Acadians and their expatriation, and which Longfellow has largely contributed to create. The poet is not indeed responsible for the accuracy of the historical ground-work of his poem.

In a short explanatory note prefixed to it, he states that “war having again broken out between the

French and British in Canada, the Acadians were accused of having assisted the French, and the British Government ordered them to be removed from their homes and dispersed throughout the other colonies, at a distance from their much-loved land.”

This was the generally received account of the transaction, and Longfellow merely assumed it as the basis of his exquisitely pathetic story. He could not do otherwise, as the Commissioner of Records did not unearth the despatches which set the event in its true light until long after *Evangeline* had been read with enthusiastic admiration both in England and America. The accusation that the Acadians had been assisting the French was not the cause of their expulsion, as we shall presently see. The determination of the British Government rested chiefly on their open repudiation of allegiance to the Crown of England and their treacherous hostility to their neighbours of British origin.

When, in the seventeenth century, a French expedition landed on the western coast of what is now known as the Province of Nova Scotia, they selected the valley of the Annapolis river as the site of the future capital. It was in the autumn, that season so sweetly sung by Longfellow:—

“Such was the advent of autumn. Then followed that beautiful season,  
Called by the pious Acadian peasants the summer of All-Saints!  
Filled was the air with a dreamy and magical light; and the landscape  
Lay as if new created in all the freshness of childhood.”

The valley was broad and fertile. Here, then, in the name of his master, the King of France, the commander of the expedition decided to plant the seat of Government of the Province of Acadia; and to it he gave the name of Port Royal.

In the next century, a British expedition sailed into a harbour on the eastern coast of the same Province, to which was given the name of Halifax, while the name of the Province had been changed from Acadia to Nova Scotia.

Between these two events the infant Province had a chequered and romantic history. Now French, now British, it had been tossed to and fro in the contests between the two Crowns like a shuttlecock between two battledores.

In the western districts the French had made large and flourishing settlements. From Port Royal they had advanced as far as the plains of Grand-Pré, everywhere leaving their mark in the dykes by which they reclaimed the rich alluvial marshes from the ocean.

Nor were the British settlers unaware of the value of these vast tracts of alluvial soil. They too were anxious to have flocks and herds grazing on those fertile fields. That animosities should spring up between them and the French inhabitants was not unnatural. Alternately they conceived themselves to



be the true lords and masters of the land. But when the Province was finally ceded to the British Crown, it was hoped that all animosities would cease, and that all the inhabitants, without reference to their original nationality, would become peaceable and law-abiding subjects of the King of England.

The spirit of loyalty, however, in Frenchmen before the Revolution, died hard. The Acadians could not, or would not, understand that they were now absolved from all allegiance to the King of France, and that, whether they liked it or not, they had now finally and irrevocably become British subjects. Self-interest, too, fanned the flame of discontent. They had hitherto lived quiet and uneventful lives, being ruled in all matters temporal and spiritual by their curés, and they wanted no bustling intruders to surround them and outstrip them in the race of life.

Soon the animosity broke out in deeds of violence. English settlers were set upon and maltreated whenever the Acadians caught any of them at a disadvantage, until at length no Englishman's life was safe beyond the precincts of his own farm. The Indians were firm friends and allies of the French, and, instigated by the latter, as the British settlers affirmed, they scalped and killed many victims. The lives of the English became intolerable. They applied to the Government at Halifax, now become the capital, for protection. The Government appealed to the French, and reminded them that they were now British subjects, and amenable to British law; that those whom they were harassing were their fellow-subjects, not aliens and enemies; and they warned them that any further outrages would be severely punished. But all in vain. The outrages continued as frequent and as violent as ever. The English inhabitants then sent a deputation to Halifax, who represented that their lives had become a burden to them, and that they were unable to pursue their daily avocations in safety. The Government then called on the French inhabitants to take the oath of allegiance to the Crown of England. This they stoutly and repeatedly refused to do unless an exception were made in the oath that they should not be called on to serve against the French Crown. Of course no Government could consent to make a new oath of allegiance to suit the consciences of a small but turbulent section of its people. The disturbances continued unabated. The life of an English settler was as insecure as ever. And at length, in utter despair of succeeding by milder measures, the Government of the Province decided on taking that step which has been the occasion of so much controversy and which has undeservedly brought so much obloquy on the British name.

They sent an order to the Acadians commanding them all, with their families, to assemble on a given day at Grand-Pré, without giving them any intimation of the purpose in view. Transports had been secretly provided and ordered to assemble near the scene of the gathering; a sufficient force of troops under the command of Colonel Winslow was despatched to overawe the malcontents and to enforce the execution

of the orders of the Government. All was carried out as proposed, and the whole settlement was thus by a strong hand removed from the land of their affections, never to see it again.

At this day it certainly does appear to be a harsh mode of solving a difficulty however grave and complicated. But we must remember the circumstances, the state of hopeless despair in which the English settlers were plunged by the bitter hostility of the Acadians, the helplessness of the Government in a newly-settled country to control the turbulent, and the absolute necessity which existed to put an end to the miserable state of violence and bloodshed which prevailed, and to remove which expostulations and mild measures proved utterly inadequate. Can we wonder, then, that the authorities in their despair resorted to abnormal measures in their ardent desire for peace? We are separated by a long interval of time from the sad scene of the expulsion of the Acadians; the world has changed; and we look on events with different eyes from those of our forefathers.

It is to be assumed that the Imperial Government were fully cognisant of the design of the Government of the Colony, and approved of it, but of course the chief responsibility must rest upon the latter. They, no doubt, wearied by the importunities of the English inhabitants for relief, in their extremity devised the scheme of expulsion; and they must ever be held chiefly accountable.

There is no more lovely view in any land than that of the scene on which the sad event of the expulsion was enacted. From the summit of a hill which commands the surrounding plain the eye takes in the whole of the now classic ground. In the foreground lie those fertile fields of Grand-Pré, still grazed by countless flocks and herds, while the waters of the Basin of Minas sparkle as of old in the sun-beams stretching far away until the lofty promontory of Blomidon stands out, the last and noblest feature of the landscape.

There is something singular in the fidelity with which Longfellow has described these scenes, although he never looked upon them. And it is still more singular that he never visited them, when we know that he might have reached them by a railway journey of thirty-six hours from his own door.

But perhaps he feared that the vision which he cherished might be rudely dispelled by the reality, and he wished to retain it unimpaired. He need not have feared. He had not coloured the view more highly than Nature herself had painted it.

On the hill which commands this noble view, there now stand the buildings of a flourishing seat of learning, called—by what other name could it on that historic soil be called?—Acadia College. Each morning the students look out upon the glorious scene spread out before them and are, in their present peaceful surroundings, reminded that their lot is cast in a happier day than when their forefathers administered such rude justice as the wholesale expulsion of a people from their homes, albeit they were turbulent subjects and treacherous neighbours.