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Cartier and the Cape Breton Shore By George Hermann at the Lower End Jacques Cartier wrote one of the very first accounts of a portion of Cape Breton to appear in European history. But because the description of what he saw was sub? merged in his tale of more grand explora? tion and adventuring in Upper Canada, his depiction of our land has never been fully understood as a significant but entirely negative geographical discovery. In addi? tion, he was the first to write of sailing from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Atlan? tic through the Cabot Strait, although he does not mention that Strait at all. More? over, his account of Cape Breton, which ap? pears towards the end of his relation of his second voyage, 1535-36, shows him to be a skillful and conscientious mariner, bold and cautious in turn, and mindful of the letter and the spirit of his duties to his king. Finally, we must keep foremost in our minds the distinction between the fact of discovery and the significance of that discovery. Cartier first saw the land of the Bretons and the Cabot Strait on his homeward voyage to France, but the signif? icance of what he saw relates to outward voyaging from France, to a sailor coming in from a transatlantic voyage of 30 to 90 days duration, and bound for the new world of New France. By the royal command of his king, Fran9ois- premier, he had been directed, along with other duties, to perfect "the navigation of lands by you already begun, (and) to discover beyond les Terres Neufves." In do? ing so, Cartier described a cape of the land of the Bretons as "hauts a' mer- veille," wondrous high, to which he gave the name. Cape Lorraine. But where was it? What did he see there? Why was the cape im? portant? When I read historians on this matter, I become confused because they can? not agree upon its location. I believe they misunderstand "the perfection of the navigation" set forth in Cartier's commis? sion. Let us take Cartier's own accounts of his voyages and trace his route. We will find his accounts are clear and have only trivial errors. The First Voyage Cartier made three voyages to the New World under his king's commission, 1534, 1535-36, and 1541-42. His visit to Cape Breton took place on the second, but cer? tain experiences and observations that he made on the first voyage were important for the second. Cartier entered the Gulf on his first voy? age by the strait between Labrador and the Newfoundland, the Strait of Belle Isle, at 51? degrees north, between June 15th and 19th, 1534 (New Style). This was quite ear? ly in the year, for passage of that strait (only 10 miles wide at its narrowest) is normally blocked with drift ice from the upper gulf until July. Berg ice from the Atlantic is dangerous, but by itself would not prevent navigation. Early passage of the Strait (mid-June to early July) de? pends upon strong westerly winds to flush the drift ice into the Atlantic. The situ? ation with respect to wind and drift ice is not unlike that in the Cabot Strait in the spring (April-May). The Cabot Strait allows entrance into the Gulf two months earlier than the Strait of Belle Isle. After entering the Gulf Cartier made a cir? cuit of it, sighting Cape Anguille on the southwestern comer of the Newfoundland on July 4th, and discovering Brion Island of the Madeleines on July 5th, 1534. Brion lies 10 miles off the northern tip of the principal islands of the Madeleines. These islands are shaped like a long, slant let?



ter "C" southwest to northeast, parallel to the Cape Breton shore. Here Cartier gives us our first clue to the location of Cape Lorraine. He observes of the Made? leines , About these islands there are high tides which set nearly southeast and northwest. I presume rather than otherwise, by what I have seen, that there may be another passage between New Land and the land of the Bretons. If so it were, it would be a great shortening as well of the time as of the way, if perfection be found in this voyage. The key words are "time," "way," and "per? fection." A southern passage to the Gulf (at 47 degrees north) would not be blocked with drift ice so late in the year as the Strait of Belle Isle. Moreover, the north? ern strait is on the latitude of Bristol, England. French seaports lie between 50 de? grees and 44 degrees north. Thus, the southern passage might be a better one, easier for latitude sailing, besides being a shorter way. CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE