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Published by Ronald Caplan on 1977/8/1

ifax to protect shipwrecked mariners and the official Receiver of Wreck was given • and still has • powers to shoot-to-kill any? one refusing aid to shipwrecked seamen. Tough laws for tough times. Pirates raided Sable Island even when Res? cue Stations were established there. By 1830, so many buoys had been cut loose around Cape Breton that extreme penalties were ordered for anyone approaching a nav? igational buoy. It is still illegal to tie a boat to a Navigation Buoy. So the very blurred picture begins to sta? bilize and we see that Cape Breton may well have been one of the main bases for pirates. If so, it would explain why settlers of any nationality were unwelcome since a settle? ment meant the advent of law and order. Why would pirates choose Cape Breton? If you look into the sky on a clear summer day in Cape Breton, you can see the answer. At any time there will be at least four vapour trails visible as high flying planes travel between America and Europe. It is on the main great circle route of the air and of course the sea too. Treasure ships bound for Spain, using the Gulf Stream and the Trade Winds would pass a few hundred miles off Cape Breton. All the commerce of the Caribbean would be within easy reach as would Florida and the riches of the Spanish settlers. Ships voyaging up the St. Law? rence were less than a day's sail away, and the rich trade with Newfoundland was sim? ilarly placed. Strategically it is well placed to control the commercial lanes, and of course that is why the French erected the Fortress of Louisbourg and why, in the Second World War, Sydney was heavily for? tified. The pirates left few records of their ac? tivities, but those that did, refer to the safe harbour north of Florida called St. Mary's. Old maps show the Mira as St. Mary's River. Near Mulgrave is Pirate Harbour, and there are several other clues of this na? ture. But let's return to the shipyard in the Mira. Even today you can walk along the north bank or sail on the river and not see it. Actually, it is on the south bank about three-quarters of a mile up from the sea, and you can most easily reach it from Brick? yard Road. (If you decide to visit it, please be very careful. You will come upon it suddenly and the cliffs are rotten and crumbly, so you can easily fall or start an avalanche if you try to climb down. Don't take children-with you, it is much too dan? gerous .) The entrance as seen from the river is ap? parently a small cove, in tall cliffs prob? ably 50 feet high, with nothing in it. If you go inside this cove, you find it turns sharply to the right and then to the left and is surprisingly long. Although it is now filled with silt it was very much deep? er in living memory and was certainly deep enough and wide enough to take a ship of 100-200 tons. Ships of this size could be towed around the first bend and would be totally hidden from view because of the trees on top of the cliffs. The canyon is big enough to hide at least 3 or 4 ships at once, more if they were smaller. At the far end of the canyon we find a gen? tly sloping sandy beach, ideal for careen? ing a ship, to the western side. Centrally placed is a steep ramp, obviously man-made and big enough to handle ships of, say, 50 tons. On the eastern side is a long, beauti? fully constructed mill race at the far end of which is the remains of an axle of a water wheel. When we visited the site the stream feeding the race was dry and the race itself was full



of debris, but the set-up was quite clear. Archaeologists told us that the water wheel was typical of those used to power a trip-hammer forge. On the clifftops overlooking the river we found hummocks which could have been gun emplacements in exactly the right place to interdict the river. Nothing could have moved on the river without coming under the guns of these hidden batteries. The canyon was out of range of any warship at the mouth of the Mira or in Mira Bay because of the flat trajectory of the shot, and the • forest which would have prevented observa? tion of hits. Even if the forest had been set afire, anyone in the canyon would have been safe. It is almost impregnable to any normal form of attack by land or sea. The canyon is sometimes called Echo Canyon, and we noted that when we were on the cliffs we could not hear our companions at the bottom, whilst they were in the inner part. Any sound made inside bounces back and forth between the walls and no matter how much noise you make, hardly any reaches the actual river. It seems likely that even when the trip-hammer was working, nobody on the river would have heard it. It was, and still is, a mysterious and very secret place, and if I were asked to design a pirate shipyard, I could not think of any improvement which could be made to the site in the Mira. It is perfect for the purpose, so perfect, in fact, that I cannot imagine it being used for anything else. Normally, a well-equipped shipyard would welcome business, certainly not hide itself away. There would be merchants, chandlers, shops, taverns, hotels, lodging houses, and entertainment of all sorts. Nothing like this existed near our shipyard. Around the area of all well-known shipyards the forest disappeared • being a handy source of timber; the forest on that side of the Mira appears to be untouched. Far down the Mira are very old farms and presumably the pirates victualled the ships with farm produce from these, so it is probable that the entire area was organ-