

On a Mission for Brock: Recollecting a Visit to Guernsey in 1968

Written by Julia Gibson Matthews

In May 1968, on a bank holiday weekend, I flew from London to Guernsey on a mission for Brock. I had been teaching that year and lacked suitable small luggage, and so I put a few things in a flat plastic shoe bag. In my large purse, I carried a drill core from the Niagara escarpment to present to the Bailiff, Sir William Arnold, on behalf of my father, James Gibson, Brock's President. A small duty became an adventure.

St. Peter Port, the capital, is built on a hill around a harbour. I headed for the old main street so that I could see the house where Sir Isaac Brock was born. I had been told that it was a Boots pharmacy. There was a plaque.



Further up the hill were stone government buildings and the courthouse, my destination. The three huge windows in Sir William's office faced the harbour. On the deep windowsill was a pair of binoculars. The Bailiff was charming. He accepted the core for the windowsill and immediately invited me to lunch with visitors from England who had arrived that morning on a battleship. We climbed higher up the hill to an amazing restaurant. I found myself at a table with six men, among them the Attorney and Solicitor Generals. I felt like a colonial girl as they queried me.

The parts of the menu I remember were Coquilles St Jacques served in huge shells and the desert of fresh raspberries on a meringue. I remember the desert because Sir William passed his to me and ordered another!

After the luncheon, expecting to go off on my own to sightsee, I was surprised to be asked what I would like to do while he presided over adoption cases in camera. I knew that I would be returning to Canada to study what was then called Library Science, and so I asked if I could go to a library. Both island libraries were private. Sir William delivered me to the one that had been Assembly rooms in the market square and introduced me to Mr. Shepherd ("the good Shepherd"), who brought me the visitors' book to sign. Without

words, he indicated that the signature ahead of mine belonged to the gentleman sitting across from me, "C. Northcote Parkinson," it read.

I asked if I could read the newspapers from 1812 to find out how long it took the news of Brock's death to reach home. Massive bound volumes appeared on a cart beside me and the answer was easily found. What impresses me now is how little I knew of the world Brock lived in and how global it was. For the first time, what I was seeing showed me that the War of 1812 was a world war. Since I didn't know the month when Queenston Heights occurred, I started in January. Quickly I was scanning reports of naval and army battles with dispatches from Denmark and the Caribbean, as well as North America.

There was local news: there seemed to be about five or six families who had produced admirals and generals. Later, when I visited the small museum, I saw the treasures that these fighters had sent or brought back - glass domes covering dried exotic flowers and shell frames lovingly created by sisters and aunts.

On a stair landing was a replica of the Brock monument created for a Paris exposition. One family possessed a tomahawk given by Tecumseh. News of Brock's death on October 13th reached London on November 4th via the timber ship Fame from Montreal. The Office of the Lord Mayor announced it. When I asked my father why the Mayor rather than the King, he suggested that the King was probably in one of his bouts of "madness."

One other highlight of what turned out to be a packed weekend was a reception at Government House for those who had received awards. Given my limited wardrobe, I went to Woolworths and bought white gloves and some material to make a hat. Fortunately, my shoe bag contained a tunic that I put over my all-purpose crimplene dress. This House, built especially for a visit from young Queen Victoria, must be unique because on the north side of the lawn was a herd of Guernsey cows observing the champagne drinkers.

The following year, Sir William and Lady Beryl came with their son David to present Brock with a stone from the birthplace house, which was later set into a wall. It was a grand occasion. Roland Mitchener, the Governor General, presided. There was a convocation, a banquet off campus and then a procession of cars that stopped (unplanned) at a roadside stand so that the visitors could carry away the bounty of Niagara.



The granite block from the Isle of Guernsey donated by Sir William Arnold, Bailiff, in October 1969. The block was integrated into a wall in the Thistle Complex. Pictured here from left to right are: Sir Arnold, Caroline Gibson, Dr. James A. Gibson and Governor General Roland Michener. It has since been relocated and is now part of a wall in the Walker Complex.

A time of happy memories and connections to old and new worlds...

Julia Gibson Matthews

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