

NICOLAS DENYS, A FORGOTTEN OBSERVER OF BIRDS

BY ELSA G. ALLEN

THE name Acadia, though familiar to all of us, does not convey a very clear conception of the region's early vast extent, and while Longfellow has memorably pictured for us the grand beauty of Nova Scotia, Evangeline's home, few are aware that in the mid-seventeenth century Acadia included, besides Nova Scotia, all of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, a portion of Quebec and a large part of the State of Maine.

It was in this general region that John and Sebastian Cabot were cruising when they discovered the rockbound coast of Newfoundland and claimed the country for Henry VII of England in 1497. Along the same coast, in 1524, came Giovanni da Verranzanno, a Florentine navigator in the service of France, and in 1534 came the famous French explorer, Jacques Cartier, tightening the hold which France had upon this disputed territory. There followed nearly a hundred years during which England and France were competing for supremacy, and in 1621 the Scot, Sir William Alexander, poet and statesman and author of 'Encouragement to Colonies' (1625), received from the King of England a grant of Acadia with permission to colonize, although at this time it actually belonged to France. He established a colony at Port Royal in 1629, and in 1630 a second expedition with colonists, including the elder La Tour and his English wife, came to Port Royal to take possession of the baronetcy of Nova Scotia under Sir William Alexander who was governor of the whole. This marriage presupposed allegiance to the British crown, and the younger La Tour, holding another baronetcy along the coast, also was expected to give homage and service to the British King. This, however, he refused to do, with the result that Canada and Acadia were restored to France by the Treaty of St. Germain in 1632.

By this time the Company of New France had become a powerful organization in charge of French affairs in America, and a very able commander, Isaac de Razilly, was put at the head of the enterprise of exploring, colonizing and exploiting the great country of Acadia. Alexander's colony at Port Royal surrendered to him, and he fixed his own capital at La Have, a strategic location for the fishing industry and a suitable one also for colonization. Here the first French families of Acadia were planted, and here Nicolas Denys came in 1632 and eventually made himself a leader in the land. He was born at Tours in 1598, of good and rather noted parentage, but early in life was apprenticed to the fishery business and in his thirties definitely took up his life in America, engaging in preparing and shipping lumber and fish to France. The vicissitudes of his life during the renewed hostilities of

the English in Acadia are a long series of hardships and injustices involving the loss of many thousand francs and unwarranted imprisonment which was rendered more bitter by the death of his chief and benefactor, Isaac de Razilly, in 1635.

For many years he lived at Miscou with his family, including two children, kept several gardens, and slowly amassed, through his other business interests a modest fortune. In December, 1653, he went to France and bought from the Company of New France "a grant (with) the coasts and islands in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence from Cape Canso to Cape Rosiers in the Gaspé Peninsula." This gave him a monopoly of the fur trade, and, in 1654, he was made governor of all this territory, including Newfoundland. He controlled also the "sedentary or fixed fisheries as far as Virginia." Thus temporarily securing and having accomplished the surrender of previous commanders in these parts, he was the ranking man of the eastern part of all Acadia and was made governor of it at the age of fifty-six.

After the death of his friend and patron, Razilly, however, and the accession of D'Aulnay, to whom Denys was then subservient, his career was largely frustrated. His gardens at Miscou were seized, and although payment for them was promised, the money was never received. Denys then moved to Nepisiguit, but these properties were likewise seized by Le Borgue, and altogether, through the loss of his fortune and his discouragement incident to continual internal strife, Denys was made to appear an incompetent governor in the eyes of authorities in the homeland, and he went back to France leaving his son Richard in charge of his affairs in Acadia. It was said that he lived in actual want for many years in Paris, but still cherished an abiding affection for his adopted country in America. He returned to Nepisiguit in 1687 and died at his former home in 1688, an old and disappointed but loyal subject of his King at ninety years.

During Nicolas Denys's residence in Acadia, he wrote his experiences in a two-volume work, 'Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America,' which was published in Paris in 1672. This is one of the most thorough early accounts of the region of Acadia and, although the title in mentioning "Coasts of North America" is far too inclusive, it seems strange it was not given recognition sooner. It passed unread in America for over a century and received its first mention here in the 'North American Review' for 1816; but not until 1908 was it rendered into English and reprinted, through the instrumentality of the Champlain Society, by a professor of botany at Smith College, Doctor William Francis Ganong. Doctor Ganong's Canadian background and scientific training received at the University of New Brunswick and elsewhere, made him appreciative of Denys's knowledge of the plant and animal life of his domain, and since his bird lore has apparently been largely overlooked by ornithologists, I have

gone over his account of the birds to try to gain some appreciation of his powers of ornithological observation back in the late seventeenth century.

His long experience in the fishery, fur and lumber trades gave him above all else a love and understanding of business and his biographer cites the man's chief maxim: "Profit, the chief concern of all men." This does not point to a great aesthetic sense nor does it connote the true scientist. We may therefore expect his observations on birds to be a rather dry unembellished record of what he saw as he practiced his various trades—not literary in quality (and of this the author was aware) but practical, with attention to the market value and gustatory merits of the various species. Nevertheless, his descriptions in most cases embody a great deal of accurate observation of the habits, particularly of the seabirds, and his observations on the landbirds contain much of interest to the naturalist as well as many quaint folk beliefs. Because Denys does not appear to have gained recognition among ornithologists it seems desirable to quote rather fully from his chapters on birds.

p. 266. "It is also worth while to know that upon the Bank, which is twenty [49]¹ five leagues from the nearest land, there are to be seen so great a quantity of birds as to be almost unbelievable, such as Fulmars (Happefoye), Petrels (Croiseurs), Guillemots (Poules de mer), Great Auks (Pennegoins), and many other sorts.

"I shall speak only of these particular ones. The Fulmars (Happefoye) are very gluttonous birds. They are thus called because they live on the liver of the Cod. If they see a ship engaged in fishing they assemble in very great numbers around her to seize the livers which fall into the sea. As soon as one of these is thrown in, more than fifty of these birds pounce upon it, and fight among themselves to secure it. They come close up to the vessel, and sometimes one is able to kill them [50] with a pole. Their gluttony makes them easily taken by means of hooks which are attached at the end of a little line, with which the fishermen are furnished on purpose. This line is supported upon the water by a piece of cork, and a fragment of liver is placed upon the hook. This is thrown as far off as possible. Immediately these birds fight as to which one will capture it. After a smart struggle, finally one seizes it, and is caught by the beak, [and] is drawn on board. It is necessary to take great care that it does not seize the hand. Its upper beak is hooked, and passes much over the under. If it bites it pierces the finger or the hand. When it has been taken from the hook and allowed to go [51] upon the quarter-deck, it does not fly away. It does not know how to rise, at least when it is not on the water. This fishery provides a great amusement.

"The Petrels (Croiseurs) are birds which also come to eat the livers, but they do not approach so near. They are called Croiseurs because they are ever crossing on the sea from one side to the other. Their flight is different from that of other birds in this, that they fly, so to speak, crosswise, having one wing up towards the sky and the other towards the sea, so that, in order to turn, they bring the upper wing undermost. It is found always from the time one is at sea a hundred leagues from land as far as New France. [52] A day never passes that one does not see them go crossing from one side to the other. This is in order to find some little fish to eat, of those

¹ The reader may disregard these numbers in brackets which refer to the original French pagination.

which exist between wind and water, such as the Flying Fish, the Herring, the Sardine, and others on which it lives.

"The Guillemot (Poule de mer) is thus called for its resemblance to this land animal. It lives also on little fish and livers. It is not gluttonous, but tamer than the others. It is always flying around the ship, and if it perceives any entrails, it throws itself upon them."

Denys's remarks on the Great Auk are of particular interest since there is no mention of his description of this extinct species in Alfred Newton's 'Abstract of Mr. John Wolley's researches' (*Ibis*, 1861, p. 374-399) nor in the review of the paper, 'The Gare-fowl and its historians,' by Professor J. J. Steenstrup (*Natural History Review*, 1865, p. 467-468) nor yet in Hardy's article (*Auk*, 5: 380-384, 1888). Denys writes of the Great Auk as follows:

"The Great Auk (Pennegoin) is another bird, variegated in white and black. It does not fly. It has only two stumps of wings with which [53] it beats upon the water to aid in fleeing or diving. It is claimed that it dives even to the bottom to seek its prey upon the Bank. It is found more than a hundred leagues from land, where, nevertheless, it comes to lay its eggs, like the others. When they have had their young, they plunge into the water; and their young place themselves upon their backs, and are carried like this as far as the Bank. There one sees some no larger than chickens, although they grow as large as geese. All those birds are [considered] good to eat by the fishermen. As for myself I do not find them agreeable. They taste of oil because of the quantity of fish and of livers they eat; and they serve to make fish oil. [54] The fishermen collect them for this purpose. There are vessels which have made as much as ten or twelve puncheons [a measure of 72 to 120 gallons] of it. This is nearly everything which is practiced in the fishery for green Cod upon the Grand Bank."

Chapter XIX of the second volume is given over to a further discussion of seabirds, or at least the principal ones, for he says ". . . the number is too great for me to remember them all." It is an interesting account but, withal, contains several errors and many omissions, which the editor, Doctor Ganong, has briefly dealt with by means of footnotes. Like most other travellers of this time Denys fell into the common mistake of thinking the American forms like those of Europe, and was primarily concerned with the value of the various kinds of birds as food, although other pertinent facts of interest are included and indicate that he was a good observer. A paragraph on the Brant bears out this statement.

p. 372. "The Brant (Cravan) is scarcely smaller than the small Goose. Its taste is also very pleasant, [303] roasted and boiled, but not salted. It is browner in plumage, the neck is shorter, and there is no white under the throat. It is a bird of passage; it only comes into the country in summer, and it goes away in winter. It is not known whence it comes nor whither it goes. No one has ever seen it producing its young. If it were not for the taste, which is infinitely better than that of the Widgeon (Macreuse)¹ I would say they were the same thing. The plumage is very

¹ This species was permitted as a Lenten dish because of the supposed resemblance of its oil to fish-oil.

much alike, but to eat it in Lent would be too delightful. They live also on grass, with some little shell-fish or worms which are found in the sand.

"The Ducks are all like those of France, as to plumage and goodness. Those which have the wing blue and the feet red are the [304] best. Those with grey feet, which have also the wing blue, hardly differ in goodness. There is another kind of them which has not the blue wing, but they are not so good. There is seen also another species which has the plumage bright brown; of this species the male is white, with black at the end of the wing. The male and the female are never together, and only assemble in spring when they mate. When the females begin to make their nests they separate. The males go in flocks by themselves, and the females the same. If one fires upon the females, unless he kills them entirely dead, they are lost; for so soon as they are wounded they dive, and they seize with their beak any, even the smallest, grass they find, [305] and die there, and do not come again to the surface. They are not good in other respects; they taste of oil like the Widgeon.

"As for the Teal (*Sarcelle*), it is familiar in France. One knows its value as well as that of the Great Northern Diver (*Plongéon*), and the Mud-hen, or Coot (*Poule d'eau*), and this is why I shall not speak further of them. There are seen also quantities of other birds of the big-ness of Ducks, such as the Spoonbill (*Falonne*), which has the beak about a foot long and round at the end like an oven shovel; the Night Heron (*Egret*), which has three little feathers straight up on its head; the Sheldrake (*Bec de scie*), which has the beak formed like a saw; the Long-tailed Duck (*Cacaouy*), because it pronounces this word for its note; the Buffle-head Ducks (*Marionet*-[306] *tes*), because they run leaping upon the water; the Razor-billed Auk (*Gode*), a bird which flies as swiftly as an arrow, black and white in its plumage; the Cormorant (*Cormoran*) which devotes itself to the catching of fish. Their neck is tied near the stomach, which prevents them from swallowing, and being thus prevented, they carry their fish ashore.

"There are Plovers (*Allouettes*) of three sorts. The largest are of the bigness of a large Robin (*Merle*) of greyish colour, and they have long feet. Others, which are scarcely less large, have the beak longer. Others are like Sparrows and little Chaffinches. All that game goes in flocks together, always along the edge of the sea, where there is any beach. The Sandpipers (*Chevalliers*) are a kind of Snipe (*Beccasse*) which have the beak very long. They live [307] on small worms and other things which they find in the sand on the border of the sea. They are of the same size, have legs as long, and the plumage redder than the Small Snipe (*Beccassine*).

"The Terns or Mackerel Gulls (*Esterlais*) are other birds, large as a Pigeon, which live on Fish. Flying always in the air, if they perceive their prey they fall upon it like a stone, seize it with their beak and swallow it. The Herring Gull (*Goislan*) is much larger, lives upon fish and livers or entrails of Cod, but only captures that which is floating upon the sea. There are also a number of others which I do not remember. All those kinds of birds are good to eat, as are also all their eggs, aside from those of the Cormorant. Throughout the country, there [308] are found numbers of Herons (*Hérons*), which are always upon the borders of the sea or of the ponds, and live on little fish which occur in the holes where the water remains when the tide falls, or (else) on the border of the water in the ponds. They make their nests in the thick woods which occur on islands. They are good to eat and have seven galls and are always thin. As for the young they are better and always fat."

Continuing with the landbirds, Denys writes in Chapter XXI, p. 390:

"The Duck-hawk (*Faucon*), the Goshawk (*Autour*), and the Pigeon-hawk (*Tierce-*

let) have the plumage like those which are seen in France. The claw and the beak are the same. They prey on [337] the Partridge, the Pigeon, and other birds of that strength. The Pigeon-hawk has not a good claw for seizing the Partridge, though it is good for the Pigeon, and for other little birds. There occurs there another kind of Hawk. This captures only fish. It is always flying over water; if it catches sight of some fish it drops upon it more swiftly than a stone can fall. It takes its prey in its claw and carries it off to a tree to devour it.

"There are three kinds of Partridges (Perdrix), the red, the grey, and the black. The red is the best, equal to that of France for flesh and taste. The grey has a different taste from that of France; it suggests venison. Some persons find its taste better [338] than that of the red. As for the black it has the head and the eyes of a Pheasant (Faisan); the flesh is brown, and the taste of venison so strong that I find it less good than the others. They taste of Juniper berries, with a flavour of Fir. They eat of these seeds which the others do not. All these kinds of Partridges have long tails. They open them, like a Turkey, into a fan. They are very beautiful. The red has a medley of red, brown, and grey—the grey of two shades, one bright and the other brown, the black of grey and black. They have been brought into France and given to sundry persons, who have had fans made of them, which have been considered beautiful. They all perch, and are so silly that if you meet with [339] a flock of them upon a tree, you may shoot them all one after the other without their flying away. And indeed if they are somewhat low, so that you can touch them with a pole, it is (only) necessary to cut one, and to attach to its end a cord or a little tape with a running knot, then to pass it over their necks and pull them down. You may take them all alive one after another, carry them home, place them on the ground in a room, and feed them with grain. They eat it promptly, but they must not be able to get out or they will fly away. I have twice tried to bring some of them to France. They stand well all the length of the voyage, but when approaching France [340] they die, which has made me believe that our air must be contrary to their good."

It is interesting to see that Denys took cognizance of three kinds of grouse in his territory. J. L. Peters, in his 'Check List of Birds of the World,' 1934, lists the Spruce Grouse, *Canachites canadensis canace*, and the Canada Ruffed Grouse, *Bonasa umbellus togata*, as characteristic of New Brunswick, and with regard to a third grouse, *Bonasa umbellus thayeri*, he says that it is found in the "Nova Scotian Peninsula, possibly also eastern New Brunswick." Apparently Denys, likewise, recognized this variety as occurring in the Gaspé Peninsula where he lived some two hundred and sixty years ago.

It is a regrettable omission that Denys has not made any reference to the grouse drumming—a feature which usually impressed later travellers. However, so far as I am aware, his account gives the earliest record of the grouse being transported to Europe, and it would seem that this fine species was no more amenable then to artificial environment than it is today.

"There are also Woodcock (Becasses de bois), but they are not common. They are found occasionally at the sources of spring brooks.

"All the Crows (Corbeaux) of this country are wholly black. The note is not the same (as ours). They are also as good to eat as chicken.

"Also Night-hawks (Orfrayes) are met there, not so large as those of France. In summer they are heard crying in the evening. Their cry is not so disagreeable as in

France. They cry mounting in the air very high; then they let themselves fall like a stone to within a good fathom of the ground, when they rise again; and this is a sign of good weather. [341] The Barred Owl (Chat-huant) is of the plumage and size of that of France, and has a little white ruff. Its cry is not similar but there is little difference. All the birds make war upon it. Is better and more delicate eating than the chicken. It is always fat. It feeds upon little Field-mice which are in the woods. It makes provision of them for the winter. It captures some of them, which it places in hollow trees. With its beak it breaks their fore legs in order that they may not escape or crawl out. It collects hay in another tree to nourish them, and brings them every day their provision, whilst it makes its own meals on these little animals in proportion as they grow fat.

"[342] There is also a bird which is called the Robin (Merle). It is related to the Starling (Etourneau) being less black than the [our] Merle, and less grey than the [our] Etourneau. It is not bad to eat.

"One also meets there the Woodpeckers (Piquebois). They have plumage more beautiful than those of France, and are of the same size. There are others which are called Red-headed Woodpeckers (Gays), which are of a beautiful plumage; the head is all red, and the neck of real flame-colour.

"The Humming Bird (Oiseau Mouche) is a little bird no larger than a cockchafer. The female has plumage of a golden green, the male the same, excepting the throat, which is of a red brown. When it is seen in a certain light it emits [343] a fire brighter than the ruby. They live only upon the honey which they collect from flowers. Their beak is long and of the thickness of a little pin. Their tongue passes a little out of the beak, and is very slender. Their flight is swift, and they make a great noise in flying. They make their nests in trees, and these are of the size of a fifteen-sou piece. Their eggs are the size of peas; they lay three of them, or four or five or more. The attempt has been made to rear them, but it has not been possible to bring it about.

"As for the Swallow (Hyronnelle) it is the same as in France. It comes in spring, and returns at the end of autumn. They make their nests in houses, or against certain rocks where they do not get wet.

"[342] The Bat¹ (Chauve-souris) is also of the same sort as that of this country, but is much larger. It retires in winter into the hollows of trees, or among the rocks, and only appears in summer."

It is related by the editor of Nicolas Denys's 'Natural History' that Denys's name is mirrored in a certain ornithological tradition of the Melisect Indians of the St. John's River who were under the governorship of Denys. According to Mr. Tappan Adney the Indians say that the Veery or Wilson's Thrush, one of the most beautiful songsters of this region, says "Ta-ne'-li-ain ni-ko-la Den'-i, Den'-i?" which is to say, "Where are you going Nicolas Denys?" Adney believes this is an echo of Denys's residence there. His name is probably also perpetuated in the River Denys of Cape Breton Island, but this is not proven, according to Dr. Ganong.

A statue has been suggested to commemorate in 1954 the three-hundredth anniversary of his governorship; this to be placed either at Saint Peters or

¹ The bat is not mentioned in Denys's discussion of beasts, hence it would seem that, like many other early writers, he assumed that it was a bird.

at Nipisiguit (Bathurst) where his book was written and where his grave is (R. R. MacLeod, *Markland or Nova Scotia*, Berwick, N. S., 1903, p. 187).

Nicolas Denys, according to Tanguay's 'Dictionnaire Généalogique,' married Marguerite de la Faye, who bore him one son, Richard, and by a later marriage he had a daughter, Marie.

Tradition says that near the great willow on Denys's old establishment some priests and a French admiral lie buried. The editor of his 'Journals,' Dr. Ganong, says: "This Admiral, I believe, is Nicolas Denys. It is a satisfaction to think that here beside this pleasant basin where the least troubled of his days in Acadia were spent, in the last embrace of the land he loved so well, rests the mortal part of the proprietor and governor of all the gulf coast of Acadia, the first great citizen of that noble domain—a goodly man who fought the good fight and kept the faith—Nicolas Denys."

His biographer has graphically likened Denys's book to a photograph slightly out of focus, and this appears to be true of Denys's bird lore, as well as of his general descriptions. While in the main his observations on birds are good, and bespeak a critical eye, they are damaged by an admixture of inaccuracy and in some of his descriptions, for example, that of the wolverine and its method of killing moose, and the Barred Owl and its habit of harboring and caring for live mice, we feel that he was not entirely above the weakness of writing to please his public. Likewise the erroneous distribution of some birds, as the spoonbill, indicated by Denys is proof that his writing was not entirely a record of his own observations, but it contained also a considerable amount of hearsay and folk belief.

Folklore is one of the most picturesque elements of a national literature but one that naturally is but slenderly represented in American literature. Let us therefore appreciate Denys's bird lore for its firsthand observation of many of our northern birds, and let us enjoy it more because of his colorful blending of fact and fancy.

Laboratory of Ornithology
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York