

Susanna Moodie, "Scenes in Canada. A Visit to Grosse Isle," *The Victoria Magazine 1847–1848*, ed. By Susanna and J.W.D. Moodie, with an introduction by William H. New (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Library, 1968) 14–17.

In 1832, cholera came to Canada, transported across the Atlantic from Europe on ships. A disease spread by drinking water infected with the bacteria *Vibrio cholerae*, cholera hit British North America in a series of epidemics between 1832 and 1871. Historian Geoffrey Bilson has estimated that it killed approximately 20 000 in the Canadas and in the Atlantic provinces.<sup>1</sup> Responses in the colonies ranged from social panic to government control measures that, often fruitlessly, aimed to protect the healthy and isolate the sick. In particular, in 1832, the House of Assembly of Lower Canada passed a law establishing a quarantine station at Grosse Île near Quebec, which would become a mandatory stop for all ships from Europe and remain in operation until 1937. Thousands of immigrants would not only pass through but die at Grosse Île, especially during the years of the Irish Potato Famine.<sup>2</sup>

## SCENES IN CANADA.

### A VISIT TO GROSSE ISLE.

Alas that man's stern spirit ere should mar  
A scene so pure, so exquisite as this.

The dreadful Cholera was depopulating Quebec and Montreal, when our ship cast anchor off Grosse Isle, on the 30th of August, 1832; and we were boarded a few minutes after by the health officers. One of these gentlemen, a little, shrivelled up Frenchman, from his solemn aspect, and spectral, attenuated figure, would have made no bad representation of him who sat upon the pale horse. He was the only grave Frenchman I ever saw, and I naturally enough regarded him as a phenomenon. His companion, a fine looking, fair-haired, florid young Scotchman, though a little consequential in his manners, looked like one who in his own person could combat and vanquish all the diseases to which flesh is heir. Such was the contrast between these doctors, that they would have formed very good emblems—one of vigorous health, the other of hopeless decay.

Our Captain, whom I shall call old Boreas, a rude, blunt old sailor, possessing as much politeness as might be expected from a bear, received his sprucely dressed visitors upon deck, with very little courtesy, and followed them down into the cabin with various uncouth mutterings, which sounded very like short growls. The officials were no sooner seated, than glancing round the cabin, they commenced the following dialogue:

'Captain, where are you from?'

Now, the Captain had a peculiar lingo of his own, from which he invariably expunged all the connecting links. Small words, like 'and,' 'the,' and 'but,' he contrived to dispense with

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<sup>1</sup> See Geoffrey Bilson, *A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> See "In Quarantine: Life and Death on Grosse Ile, 1832-1937," Library and Archives Canada <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/grosse-ile/index-e.html>

altogether, as my readers will perceive by his laconic reply—‘Scotland—sailed from Port o’ Leith—bound for Quebec—Montreal—general cargo, seventy-two steerage, four cabin passengers—crew, eight men—brig ninety-two tons burden.’ Here he produced his credentials and handed them to the gentlemen. The Scotchman just glanced his eye over the papers, and laid them on the table. ‘Had you a good passage out?’ ‘Tedious—baffling winds—heavy fogs—detention for three weeks on banks—foul weather making the gulf—people short of water—ship nearly out of provisions—steerage passengers starving.’

‘Any sickness or deaths on board?’

‘None.’

‘Any births?’ lisped the little Frenchman.

The Captain screwed up his mouth, scratched his head, and after a moment’s reflection, replied, ‘Why, yes; now I think on’t, gentlemen, we had one female on board who produced three at once.’

‘Indeed! that’s uncommon,’ said the Scotch doctor. ‘Are the children alive and well—are they males or females? I should like much to see them.’ He started up, and knocked his head, for he was very tall, against the ceiling. ‘Confound your low cribs; I have nearly knocked out my brains.’

‘A hard task, that,’ looked the Captain. He did not say it, but I knew by his sarcastic grin, what was uppermost in his thoughts. ‘The young ones are all males—very fine, thriving creatures. Step upon deck, Sam Frazer, (turning to his steward,) and bring them down, for the Doctors to see.’

I looked hard at old Boreas, wondering all the while, what he was at. Sam appeared to comprehend him in a moment, for he vanished with a knowing wink to his superior; and quickly returned, bearing in his arms three fat, chuckle-headed bull-terrier pups, whom I had christened Neptune, Triton, and Bowswain. The sagacious slut followed close at his heels, as if she dreaded some sinister design upon the part of Sam towards her young, and looked ready to give and take offence on the slightest provocation.

‘Well, gentlemen, here are the young ‘uns.—They do credit to the nursing of the brindled slut,’ cried the old tar, chuckling and rubbing his hands together.

‘Sacre! do you tink us dogs, to try and pass your tam puppies on us for babies?’ screamed the enraged little Frenchman.

‘Hout, man! don’t be angry,” said the Scotchman, stifling a laugh, ‘you see ‘tis only a joke.’

‘Joke! tam his joke—me no understand such joke,’ retorted his angry comrade, bestowing a hearty kick on one of the unoffending pups, who was frisking about his feet. The pup yelped—the slut barked and leaped furiously at the offender, and was only kept from biting him, by Sam, who could scarcely hold her back, for laughing. The Captain was uproarious in his mirth, and the Frenchman alone maintained a serious countenance.

The dogs were at length dismissed, and peace Restored. After some further questioning, a bible was required for the Captain to take his oath; but mine was mislaid, and there was none at hand. ‘Confound it!’ muttered the old sailor, tossing over the papers in his desk, ‘I don’t think there’s one in the ship. Oh yes, here it is at last. That scoundrel, Sam, always stows all my traps out of the way;’ and taking up Voltaire’s History of Charles XII, from the table, he handed it, with as grave a face as he could assume, to the Frenchman.

The official received it with the dignity of one who has authority. The Captain kissed the book with an air of mock sanctity, and the gentlemen returned to the deck. Here they requested

old Boreas to give them a few feet of oak, to mend their sailing boat, which had sustained some damage in going on board a vessel, the day before. This the Captain could not do, which circumstance put them into a very bad humor; and in no very gentle tones they ordered him instantly to prepare the boats to put his passengers on shore.

‘I’ll be sunk, if I do!’ returned the bluff old sailor. ‘Stiff wind—short sea—great danger in making land—the boats heavily laden will be swamped. Not a soul shall leave the vessel tonight!’

‘You must comply with our orders.’

‘I won’t; that’s poz. I know my duty—you stick to yours. If the wind falls off, I’ll go off with them myself; but not a life shall be risked to please you!’

The officers left the vessel in high disdain; and we could but applaud the Captain’s firmness when we saw eleven drowned from another vessel, in attempting to obey the same orders.

The next day all was confusion and bustle on board our vessel. I watched boat after boat depart for the shore, full of people and goods, and envied them the glorious privilege of once more treading their native earth. How ardently we anticipate pleasure, which in the end proves positive pain; such was my case, when indulged in the gratification I so eagerly desired. As cabin passengers, we were not involved in the general order of purification; but were obliged to send all the clothes and bedding we had used during the voyage, on shore with our servant, to be washed.

The ship was soon emptied of all her live cargo. My husband alone remained to bear me company, and he intended to reconnoitre the Island, the first time the boats returned to the vessel. We paced the deck nearly all day—the baby, and the slut and her family, our sole companions; and more than this, we were doomed to undergo a strict fast. All our provisions were consumed; some of the steerage passengers had been out of food for days, and were half-starved. The Captain was to bring a supply of soft bread, from the store-ship, which came daily from Quebec with supplies for the people on the Island. How we reckoned upon once more tasting bread and fresh butter;—the very thought of the treat in store for us, served to sharpen my appetite, and make the long fast more irksome. I could now fully realize Mrs. Bowdich’s feelings in her longing so for English bread and butter, after her three years’ travels through the burning African deserts, with her talented and devoted husband.

‘When we arrived at the hotel at Plymouth,’ said she, ‘and were asked what refreshments we chose—Tea and home-made bread and butter—brown bread, if you please, and plenty of it.—I never enjoyed any luxury like it; I was positively ashamed of asking the waiter to re-fill the plate. After the execrable African messes, and the hard ship-biscuit, only imagine the luxury of a good slice of English bread and butter!’

I laughed heartily at the lively energy with which that charming and lovely woman related this little incident in her eventful history; but just at that moment I fully realized it all.

As the sun rose above the horizon, all these matter-of-fact circumstances were gradually forgotten, and merged in the surpassing beauty of the scene, which rose majestically before us. The previous day had been dark and stormy, and a heavy fog had concealed the mountain chain which forms the stupendous back-ground to this sublime scenery, entirely from our view. As the clouds rolled away from the hoary peaks of their grey, bald brows, and cast a denser shadow upon the vast forest belt that girdled them round, and they loomed out like mighty giants, Titans of the earth, in all their wild and awful grandeur, a thrill of wonder and delight pervaded my mind; the spectacle floated dimly on my sight, for my eyes were blinded with tears;—blinded

with the excess of beauty. I turned to the right and the left; I looked up and down the glorious river;—never had I beheld so many striking objects in one landscape—nature had lavished all her noblest features in producing that enchanting scene. The rocky Isle in front, with its neat farm houses at the eastern point, and its high bluff, crowned with the telegraph towards the west;—the middle space, occupied by sheds for the cholera patients, and its shores dotted over with motley groups washing their clothes, added not a little to the picturesque effect of the whole land-scene.—Then the river, covered with boats, darting to and fro, and conveying passengers from twenty-five vessels, of various size and tonnage, which rode at anchor, with their flags flying, gave an air of life and interest to the whole.

Turning to the south side of the river, we were not less struck with its low, fertile shores, white houses, and neat churches, whose lofty spires and tin roofs glittered like silver, as they caught the first rays of the sun. As far as the eye could reach, this line of buildings extended along the shore, its back-ground formed by the dense purple hue of the interminable forest. It was a scene unlike any we had ever beheld; and to which Britain contains no parallel; and this recalls to my memory [a] remark made by an old Scotch dragoon, who was one of our passengers, when he rose in the morning and saw the Parish of St. Thomas for the first time: ‘Well, it beats a’. It looks jist for a’ the warld like claes hung out to drie. Can they white clouts be a’ houses?’

There really was some truth in this strange simile; and for many minutes I could scarcely convince myself of the fact that the white patches, scattered so thickly over the opposite bank, were the dwellings of a busy, lively population.

‘What sublime views of the north side of the river those inhabitants of St. Thomas must enjoy,’ thought I; ‘but perhaps familiarity with the scene has made them indifferent to its beauty.’

Eastward, the view down the St. Lawrence towards the Gulf, is the finest of all; perhaps unsurpassed by any in the world. Your eye follows the long range of mountains until their blue summits are blended and lost in the blue of the sky. Some of these, partially cleared, are sprinkled with neat cottages, and the green slopes which spread around them are covered with flocks and herds. The surface of the splendid river is diversified with islands of every size and shape; some in wood, others partially cleared, and adorned with orchards and white farm houses. As the morning sun streamed upon the most prominent of these, leaving the others in deep shadow, the effect was wonderfully grand and imposing. In more remote regions, where the forest has never yet echoed to the woodman’s axe, or received the impress of civilization, the first approach to the shores inspires a solemn awe, which almost becomes painful in its intensity.

Land of vast hills and mighty streams,  
The lofty sun that o’er thee beams  
On fairer clime sheds not his ray,  
When basking in the noon of day  
Thy waters dance in silver light,  
And o’er them, frowning dark as night,  
Thy shadowy forests, soaring high,  
Stretch far beyond the aching eye,  
And blend in distance with the sky.

And silence, awful silence, broods

Profoundly o'er these solitudes;  
Naught but the lapsing of the floods  
Awakes the stillness of the woods—  
A sense of desolation reigns  
O'er those unpeopled forest plains,  
Where sounds of life ne'er wake a tone  
Of cheerful praise round nature's throne—  
Man finds himself with God—alone.

From such meditations we were aroused by the return of the boat, and the Captain, who brought a note for M——, from the Captain who commanded the station, inviting us to spend the afternoon in his tent, and proposing to show us all that was worthy of notice on the Island. 'This is very kind,' said M——; 'Captain—— claims a former acquaintance with me; but to tell you the truth, S——, I have not the least recollection of him.—Do you wish to go?'

'Oh by all means,' cried I joyfully,—'whosoever he may be I shall owe him a debt of gratitude, for giving me an opportunity of seeing this lovely Island. It looks a perfect Paradise.'

The Captain smiled to himself, as he assisted in placing the baby and me in the boat. 'Don't be too sanguine, Mrs. M——.' But the very idea of going on shore—of putting my foot upon the New World for the first time, after nine weeks of sea and rough weather, had transported me into the seventh heaven. I was in no humor to have listened to reason, had an angel delivered the lecture.

It was four o'clock when we landed on the rocks, and the heat of an intensely warm day had rendered them so hot that I could scarcely stand upon them. How the people without shoes bore it, I cannot imagine. Never shall I forget the extraordinary spectacle that met our view the moment we passed the low range of bushes which formed a screen in front of this strange scene.

A crowd of some four thousand Irish emigrants had been landed during the present and former day; and all, men, women and children, who were not confined by sickness to the sheds, (which greatly resembled pens for cattle,) were busily employed in washing clothes;—the men and boys in the water, and the women trampling their bedding in tubs, or in holes of the rocks, which the retiring tide had left half full of water. Those who had not the good luck to possess either tubs or iron pots, or even a good hole in the rocks, were running impatiently to and fro—swearing at, and scolding, in no measured terms, the poor soldiers, who stood by to keep them in order; wondering no doubt at their want of success, and the wilful and perverse nature of the women critters.

'For God's sake! woman, let me go!' cried the sergeant—a tall, handsome young fellow—vainly endeavoring to extricate his coat tails from the grasp of a hard-featured, sun-burnt, middle-aged harpy, who clung to him with the most provoking pertinacity.

'Give me a kettle—I can't wash without a kettle!'

'My good woman, I don't keep a hardware store—I have no kettles to lend or sell.'

'A wash-tub, then—do you hear? A wash-tub—I must and will ha' a tub!'

'Wash in the holes of the rocks, like the rest,' cried the soldier, losing all patience, and hurling her off. 'Confound the hag! she has torn the facings from my coat.'

The savage shook them in his face with a grin, and I thought him very lucky to escape with so little damage from her grasp; for I shrunk from the red-fisted virago with a feeling almost approaching to fear, as she pushed past me in the crowd.

I had heard and read much of savages; and have since seen somewhat of uncivilized life among the Indians, whilst dwelling in the bush; but the Indian is one of Nature's gentlemen; he never does nor says a rude or vulgar thing;—but the vicious, uneducated barbarians, who form the surplus of over-populated Christian countries, are far behind them in delicacy of feeling and natural courtesy. The people who covered the island appeared perfectly destitute of shame, or a sense of common decency. We turned from the revolting scene in disgust, but were unable to leave the spot until the captain had satisfied a noisy group of his own people, who were demanding from him a supply of stores. Fortunately, M—— discovered a woodland path that led to the back of the island, where, sheltered by some hazel bushes from the intense heat of the sun, we sat down, by the cool, gushing river, out of sight, but not out of hearing, of the noisy, riotous crowd which we had left. Could we have shut out the profane sounds which came to us on every breeze, how deeply should we have enjoyed the tranquil beauty of that retired and lovely spot. The rocky banks of the island were adorned with beautiful ever-greens, which sprang up spontaneously from every crevice. I remarked many of our most highly esteemed ornamental shrubs among these wildings of nature. The filigree, with its dark, glossy narrow leaves; the privet, with its modest white blossoms and purple berries; the *Lignum Vitae*, with its strong resinous odor; the Burnet Rose, and a great variety of elegant unknowns. Here, the indentation of the shores of the island and main land, receding from each other, formed a small cove, overhung with lofty trees; and the dense shadows cast upon the waters by the mountains, which towered to the height of some thousand feet above us, gave them an ebon hue. The sunbeams, dancing through the thick quivering foliage, fell in stars of gold, or long lines of dazzling brightness upon the deep, still, black waters, producing the most novel, and at the same time, the most beautiful effect in the world. It was a scene over which the spirit of peace might brood in silent adoration; and how was it marred by the discordant yells of the filthy beings who were performing their necessary but unpoetical ablutions on that enchanting spot, sullyng the purity of the air and waters by their contaminating influence.

We were now joined by the sergeant, who very kindly brought us his cap full of ripe plums and hazel nuts, the natural growth of the Island, and a note from his superior, who found he had made a mistake in his supposed knowledge of M——, and politely apologising for not being allowed by the health officers, to receive any emigrant beyond the bounds appointed for the performance of Quarantine.

‘I don't envy you the task of keeping these wild savages in order,’ said M——.

‘You may well say that, Sir. But our night scenes far exceed any thing which could strike you during the day. Why, lord, sir, you would think they were incarnate devils;—singing, drinking, dancing, shouting, and cutting antics which would surprise the leader of a circus. And then, sir, they are such thieves that they rob one another of the little which they possess. The healthy actually run the risk of taking the cholera, by robbing the sick. If you have not hired one or two stout honest fellows among your passengers to guard your clothes while they are drying, you will never see half of them again. They are a sad set. We could perhaps manage the men; but the women—the women, sir, are the devil!’

We could not help laughing heartily at this graphic description, though we both felt a little disappointed in not getting a sight of the uninfected and cultivated portions of the island, which, viewed at a distance, appeared beautiful. There was, however, no help for it, and we were obliged to remain until sun-down in our retired nook. We were hungry and tired, with our long fast;—the mosquitos swarmed in myriads round us, tormenting the poor baby, who, not at all pleased with her first visit to the new world, filled the air with her cries.

The captain at last came to tell us that the boat was ready. Oh welcome sound—and forcing our way once more through the squabbling crowd, we gained the landing place. Here we met a boat just landing a fresh cargo of these lively savages. One fellow, of gigantic proportions, whose long great coat reaching below the calves of his bare red legs, partly concealed the want of other garments, leaped upon the rocks, flourishing aloft a shillelah, and bounding and capering about, like one of the wild goats from his native mountains—‘Whurrah! my boys!’ he cried, ‘we are now in ’Meriky, the land o’ liberty! Shure we’ll all be jintilmin here!’

‘What a set of wild devils!’ said the captain. ‘He belongs to the light pocket and cool breeches set; I could almost envy the fellow his devil-may-care spirits. Well, Mrs.—, I hope you have had enough of Grosse Isle. But could you have witnessed the scenes which I did this morning—’

Here he was interrupted by a stout Scotch woman, the wife of the old dragoon, suddenly grasping his arm as he stepped into the boat, and looking up into his face in what she meant to be a very fascinating manner—‘Captain, dinna forget.’

‘Forget what?’ Here she whispered something in his ear. ‘Oh, the bottle of brandy!’ he responded, aloud. ‘I should have thought, Mrs. M’Kenzie, you had had enough of that same on yon island?’

‘Aye, sic a place for dasent folk,’ returned the drunken body, shaking her head—‘One needs a drap o’ comfort, captain, to keep up one’s heart, at a’.’

The captain set up one of his boisterous laughs as he pushed the boat from the shore. ‘Hollo! there, Sam Frazer! steer in—we’ve forgotten the stores.’

‘I hope not, captain,’ said I—I am starving since day-break!

‘Bless my soul! I forgot you. Well, well, I’ve made a good catholic of you, at any rate!’

‘The bread, the butter, the onions, and the beef,’ said Sam, particularizing each article, ‘are here, sir.’

‘Pull away, then—all right. Mrs.—, we’ll have a glorious supper; and mind you don’t dream of Grosse Isle!’

S. M.