

THE CANADIAN MAGAZINE

VOL. XXXVII

TORONTO, SEPTEMBER, 1911

No. 5

THE MYTHICAL TOWN OF BREST

BY W. S. WALLACE

THERE are few people, except perhaps professional historians, who realise the extent to which "History is a pack of lies." In ancient and in mediæval history, of course, it is recognised that mythical elements exist; but modern history, at least, is commonly supposed to be free from them. Sir Robert Walpole's sarcasm, "Anything but history, for history must be false," is unintelligible to the average man if applied to anything later than 1485. And yet any historical specialist knows that the mythopoeic imagination has been at work in modern history also, and that we have there, too, fairytales and legends as baseless and unfounded as any of Greece or Rome.

In Canadian history there is no more interesting myth, no more instructive example of the way in which history is sometimes manufactured, than the legend of the town of Brest. The story is to be found in such recent books as Professor Packard's "Labrador Coast" (1891) and Judge Prowse's "Newfoundland" (1895). Brest, it appears, was a town of some size, on the Straits of Belle Isle, which flourished during the French régime in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Judge Prowse's account of it is as follows:

"In the Dictionary of Commerce, by Lewis Roberts, printed in London, 1638, there is an account of the French settle-

ment of Brest, afterwards Bradore, on the Straits of Belle Isle. 'It was,' he says, 'the chief town of New France, the residence of the Governor, Almoner, and other public officers; the French drew from thence large quantities of baccalao, whale fins, and train (oil) together with castor (beaver) and other valuable furs.' It is computed that it contained two hundred houses and a thousand inhabitants in winter. About 1600; Brest began to decay. In 1630, a grant en seigneurie of four leagues of the coast, embracing the town, was granted to Seigneur Courtemande." (p. 596).

And in a footnote it is added:

"The remains of works at Bradore are still traceable, though all the buildings have long since disappeared. The settlement was deserted by the French early in the seventeenth century, on account of the hostility of the Eskimo and the decay of the fur trade." (p. 596).

Professor Packard's version of the history of Brest is as follows:

"On the shores of Bradore Bay are still to be seen, it is said, the ruins of the ancient port of Brest, which was founded by the Bretons and Normans about the year 1500. The ruins are situated about three miles west of the present boundary of Canada at Blanc Sablon. Samuel Robertson states in his Notes on the Coast of Labrador: 'As to the truth of Louis Robert's remarks there can be no doubt, as may be seen from the ruins and terraces of the buildings, which were chiefly constructed of wood. I estimate that at one time it contained 200 houses, besides stores, etc., and perhaps 1,000 inhabitants in the winter, which would be trebled during the summer. Brest was at the height of its