

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



Chez Douce: A day in the life of an entrepreneur, 1815

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Tens of thousands of people, as they come and go on the Canso Causeway, quickly pass a small graveyard near a lighthouse on the Cape Breton side. Few, if any, give any attention to the aged monuments. Although the name Belhaché survives on maps as the identification of a promontory in the area, it does not appear in the telephone directory and is unfamiliar to most people today. But Douce Belhaché and her young daughter, her only child, lie in that cemetery very near to the location of their former home in Port Hastings. The mother came to be a widow when her husband, Capt. Belhaché, was lost at sea. Douce remained in the area even after the death of her husband and came to be a successful entrepreneur. Although a lone woman without family in Cape Breton, she chose not to return to the shelter of her family on the Island of Jersey in the English Channel.

For years, legends have survived that a ghost walked the shore near the cemetery. Many believed that it was Douce Belhaché looking for the return of her shipmaster husband. But the greater story is that of her management of her own affairs and contribution to the development of an economy in the days when Cape Breton Island was being settled by immigrants from many places. She is the very first female entrepreneur known in that part of Nova Scotia.

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A soft wind from the southwest was clearing the early morning fog from the Gut of Canso and a pleasant sunny day seemed to be in the offing. A layer of thin clouds, however, suggested that rain and wind would arrive within twenty-four hours. For now, the sailing ships anchored just off the shore were riding easily in the calm waters. Their spars were reflecting in the slightly rippled surface of the sea. Already on several of the vessels, sailors were busy, readying to set sail for distant ports with their loads of timber, salt fish in barrels and casks of farm butter.

The first smoke of the day was rising from the stout chimney of the one-and-half storey house midway up the hill from the shore of Plaster Cove. With its first storey of cut stone and the next level of wood, it varied from the other all wooden and log houses in the small community. Within the dwelling, Douce Belhaché was ready for the tasks of the day. Her breakfast of freshly baked bread and wild strawberry jam and tea had been prepared by her housekeeper, Sarah Hubert, a distant cousin.

Together, they sat at the table in the corner of the kitchen, speaking in the language of their birthplace, the Isle of Jersey. The tongue, a mixture of English and Norman French, was to be heard as well in their morning prayers as they gave thanks for food and life.

Douce, a widow now for more than a decade, expected several business associates during the day. Her late husband, whose ship foundered near Phial on the coast of Madeira, had left home on a spring morning much like this – the sky clear and the wind gentle. But many months later, word came from one of the other Channel Islands captains that debris from the Belhaché ship, L'Esperance, had washed up on the coast of Madeira. A vicious storm had swept that area in July and brought disaster to several schooners. Douce, already anxious about his long absence, acknowledged that her fading hope for Philippe's return was, like his ship, dashed asunder.

After the women finished at the table, Sarah cleared away the pewter serving dishes and cups and plates edged with a bronze luster glaze. The pitcher of the same pattern had been a wedding gift from Douce's parents when she and Philippe married back on the Channel Island of Jersey, in 1786. It was a cherished keepsake which brought memories of the sturdy stone house in St. Aubin where roses climbing stone walls were in bloom at this time of the year. That fleeting image passed quickly from Douce's mind as she reminded Sarah that Philip Ingouville would be at the house for a noon meal and that he and his daughter might remain over night before they set sail for their home at Sydney Forks at the head of Spanish Bay on the northeastern coast of Cape Breton. Ingouville, also a native of Jersey, had first arrived on this coast in 1788, the same year as the Belhachés. As friends and distant kin, they had been business associates for many years. His ship was lying at anchor in the harbour beyond the Belhaché wharf.

Douce returned to her bedroom for a few minutes to put on her standard white blouse and long dark blue skirt. Across her shoulders, she arranged a shawl newly woven by John and Isabella Buck in their weaving house just across the yard. Her boots were black leather, imported from France. Although a widow, Douce had long ago put aside the usual garb of sorrowing women and carefully adjusted on her head a bright white lace cap embroidered with gold thread. Her carefully combed hair was arranged in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. The image which looked back at her as she stood in front of the mirror was that of a middle aged women with eyes still bright blue and laugh lines surrounding them.

After being certain she was ready for the day's undertakings, Douce went to a small room at the front of the house. Here the windows with their small panes allowed a view from the promontory below, coming to be called Belhaché's Point, all the way to Ship Harbour. She noted which vessels were preparing to set sail and which flags flew from their masts. She knew that later in the morning she would need to go down the hill to the wharf to confirm the number of casks of butter which she was shipping to Newfoundland and to examine the contents of the barrels of goods which were

arriving from Liverpool, England. She would need the bills of lading to bring to her bookkeeper, Jean Langlois, who had a small office near the wharf.

Before she took her place at the oak desk imported from England many years ago, she paused by the hearth, in front of the grate wherein burned coal from Glace Bay, at the other end of Cape Breton. On the wall above was a small silhouette portrait cut from black paper by André Jervais. It was the outline of the face of a young child with thick curly hair, her only child and her namesake who was buried on a little hill on the promontory jutting out into the Gut of Canso. At least her burial site was known – her husband was but one of many sailors who drowned in deep water.

Douce Elizabeth Belhaché had died of fever at the age of six years and eight months, now almost twenty years ago. No day started without the mother putting her fingers to the outline of the face she had known so well. This day, she reminded herself that she must order a memorial stone with her late husband's name to be placed next to the child's marker at the cemetery near the sea at Belhaché's Point. The salt water of the nearby Atlantic Ocean, so much a part of their lives, continually rolled to the shore just beyond the grave.

But, for now, she must give her attention to documents newly arrived by messenger from the Justice of Peace in the area. Her request for another grant of land at Ship Harbour, now more often called Port Hawkesbury, had been approved by the Governor of Cape Breton. She had realized that she should apply for that piece of land when she became aware that the Paint and Bailleul families were establishing new yards for building ships in that cove. It had become evident to her that sometime soon she might need to build there herself so as to be nearer the activity.

In addition, she received a letter of permission to ship more plaster from the inlet where she owned the rights to excavate the soft rock. She had a request from the farming district of Mabou down the coast for a small shipload, where the plaster would be used, after being burned in a lime kiln, to sweeten the somewhat acidic soil of that area. She quickly wrote a letter to John Baillie who had a flat boat on which the mineral could easily be loaded. In her clear handwriting, she requested a price from him for transporting the valuable product to Mabou Harbour. It would be but one of several missives in her own hand which would be delivered later on in the day by a trusted messenger whom she paid well to respect the confidentiality of her business correspondence.

As the sun, now high in the sky, came through the front windows, she paused as Sarah brought to Douce cups of hot chocolate and plates of warm rolls and several slices of local cheese. As they shared the small mid-morning repast, they discussed what food they would need to import from the larger markets in Halifax. It was too early for the first new potatoes from the Isle of Guernsey, but perhaps they should place an order for the time when they did arrive at one of the wholesalers in Halifax. The climate on the Channel Islands was much more conducive for harvesting early vegetables than

that on Cape Breton with its frequent late frosts. They listed several other items for the household.

After they finished the hot chocolate, Douce listened with her head nodding approval to Sarah's request to hire two of the young MacKinnon boys in the area to help with whitewashing the exterior walls of the house and barn, and their sisters to help with washing the blankets and painting the floors. It was time for the yearly thorough housecleaning. Sarah also reported that she had heard that some of the farmers along the shore in Judique were planning to bring spring lambs to Plaster Cove at the end of the week. They were said to be in good shape. Douce made a note to herself to send a message to one of the farmers there, whom she knew well, to offer him a suitable price. The lambs would sell well in Newfoundland, and she was sending butter and timber to St. John's at the end of the next week on one of the Ingouville ships. Fresh lamb might go as well.

Before Sarah went back to the kitchen hearth to begin preparations for the noon meal, Douce shared with her the thought that she might build a house at Ship Harbour now that she had been granted a piece of land there. Sarah was pleased with the idea, for she had young nieces living there whom she much liked. The two women had a deep confidence in one another and knew that their relationship was much more than employer and employee, and very important as two women living alone in a house in a seaport where sailors came and went. Sarah knew where Douce kept a loaded pistol in a drawer in the desk in the drawing room should an occasion arise where such a weapon was needed.

As Sarah rose to return to the kitchen, Douce asked her to go across the dooryard to the weaving house of the Bucks and to ask Isabella to come over for a few minutes. Douce had arranged for Isabella and John Buck to come from Scotland more than ten years previously. As skilled weavers, they prepared yard goods for sale, often to newly-arrived immigrants who required more clothing or bed coverings. But they were also able to weave fine linen from flax thread imported from Ireland. Much of this product Douce used in her own house or sent as gifts to her cousins in Arichat and Quebec or occasionally gave to the wives of ship captains who arrived with their husbands at her wharf from places in the United States. The end of the war between Great Britain and the United States had brought many vessels to the Gut of Canso, and more and more families accompanied the sea captains.

After a few minutes, Isabella Buck knocked at the door of the room Douce used as her office. With Isabella's Lowland Scots accent and Douce's soft Channel Island voice, their conversation in English still amused both of them as they heard the different sounds in each other's words. Douce commented on how much she liked the new shawl which she was wearing around her shoulders, woven from cotton and fine wool. She told Isabella that she thought such an item was very marketable, and wondered if Isabella and John could plan to weave more of the fabric and engage a young girl to make the shawls under their direction. She thought there might be

many requests for them. Isabella was pleased with the idea for she preferred that kind of weaving to just making yards and yards of homespun.

Douce also asked Isabella if they needed a larger space for their two looms and spinning wheels. She felt that it might be time to expand the business a bit. Isabella had a good judgment and took care of the business aspects of their weaving, while John cared for the looms and for setting up the patterns for the warp. Their older children were now able to look after the sheep they raised so that they had a supply of the best wool for their work. Isabella agreed that a larger building would allow them to expand and to take on an apprentice or two, thus providing some employment for young women in the area. Douce said that she would speak to Alex MacKinnon, the carpenter, and ask him to undertake the work.

Isabella left after sharing a merry joke with Douce that grew out of the misunderstanding of English words by recent Scottish Gaelic-speaking people. They thought that a male sheep was a "bull sheep," since they had learned the word bull as related to cattle. The laugh lines around the eyes of Douce Belhaché were well exercised as she enjoyed her conversations with Isabella and John, her neighbors and employees. She started to write a preliminary deed by which she would transfer the land on which they lived and worked in order to recognize the fulfillment of their agreement with her to weave for her household needs and for her export business. She appreciated their excellent work and their diligence.

As the day progressed, the long, thin clouds were starting to diminish the light of the sun. The wind was shifting to the west and small white caps were beginning to be seen on the strait between Cape Breton Island and mainland Nova Scotia. Douce noticed that the liquid in the barometer was starting to fall, an indication that inclement weather was approaching. But nothing could diminish her pleasure as she welcomed to her home her long-time friend and very distant relative, Philip Ingouville, and his daughter, Ann, who had been born about the same time as her own child. She rejoiced as Ann greeted her as "Tante Douce" and kissed her on both cheeks. The question passed through her mind as to what her own child would have looked like at this age. But she quickly asked them to sit down and, with much interest, she asked Ann about her engagement to be married.

Although Douce and Philip lived at different parts of Cape Breton Island, and road travel was sometimes all but impossible, they did visit several times a year and were often in correspondence concerning business matters. Douce was able to negotiate very profitable arrangements with Philip who operated a large farm at Sydney Forks and employed many people. He also had several vessels coming and going across the Atlantic and she found that he could always find room on his vessels for the large shipments of dried cod which she could provide for markets in Europe and South America. They both knew that for generations their relatives had participated in a cooperative shipping relationship. Philip enjoyed his negotiations with Douce and never took advantage of her. They were respectful of each other as persons and as business associates.

Almost the same age, they had seen Cape Breton come to be an important part of the growing import-export business which was so beneficial to the Channel Islanders. They had lived through the early days of the island coming to be a colony with its own governmental officials located in Sydney. And now they were witnessing the arrival of many immigrants, often on the Channel Island boats, from Ireland and from Scotland. Occasionally, they spoke about what life would have been like if they had remained on the Isle of Jersey. Philip had been so bold as to ask her once why she didn't go back after her husband didn't return from his journey to Madeira with his shipload of lumber and fish. With a look of pain in her usually happy eyes, she reminded him that her only child lay buried here and she chose to stay where her life had also been happiest and not just the saddest. She revealed as well that she enjoyed the challenge of continuing the business that she and her husband, Philippe, had started.

As Douce and Philip Ingouville and his daughter Ann sat to the noon meal in the dining room of the sturdy house above the wharf, Douce saw that her good friend looked quite unwell. But she mentioned nothing to him then. After their meal and some good stories shared in Jersiais dialect, Ann went next door to the weaving house to select a piece of fabric which Douce wished to give her as a wedding gift. Douce and Philip went to the small room across the hall and quickly settled their business matters.

Douce then told him that she was considering bringing a Methodist minister from either England or the Channel Islands to the area, for she felt that it was time to establish a church, so the community could welcome people of different denominations. She added that she had very much enjoyed the service conducted by an itinerant Methodist minister several weeks previously. Ingouville agreed with the concept and said that he would make inquiries through his agents overseas. And then he told her that he was not feeling as well as usual and thought he might go to Halifax to consult a doctor. Furthermore, he wanted her to know that their agreements were in good shape and his agent would continue to honour them even if he were ill, or... He didn't finish the sentence. Douce, however, realized the import of his words and his loyalty to her was gratifying.

Believing that they should lift anchor today and start the journey home, the Ingouilles refused Douce's offer of hospitality for the night, much to her and Sarah's disappointment for they had prepared for them. But with promises of coming again soon, Philip and Ann Ingouville departed. They quickly found their way down the hill and a small boat carried them back to their schooner.

For some time, Douce sat looking at the strait as the Ingouville ship left the port. She asked Sarah to bring her a glass of Jersey wine and to share one with her. Together, they reviewed the events of the day and looked to what had to be done during the rest of the week. Now that the spring had come, Douce knew that she needed to make a trip to Arichat to consult with some of the ship owners there. Her cousins there were

expecting her to remain with them for several days. For now, she would go to the wharf to be certain that all was in order with the items to be exported and with those that arrived from overseas.

Putting a warm cloak on over the shoulders, she left her house and started down the hill. Looking across the sky, she saw that the clouds were increasing. Her competent eye began to calculate how the changing weather would affect the ships about to leave port. But looking to the ground as well in order to keep her feet on the walking path, she noticed that the first wild strawberries of the season were in bloom in the field. Wild strawberry preserves were one of the delights of the coming summer season and one of the first berries she and her husband had enjoyed when they came to these shores as a young recently married couple.

At the brow of the hill, she came to the stones piled up thirty years earlier when she and Philippe and their young baby first came to this hillside to live. These were left over from the construction of their house. Here and there among the stones, she noticed the very last of the mayflowers in bloom, the scent of the tiny blossoms carried in the damp air of the afternoon. It was such a haunting fragrance, so unlike anything she had known in her childhood home even though other flowers were abundant there. But the sounds of voices from the wharf below reminded her that she needed to hasten on to the business of the day. So she left the signs of spring behind in the knowledge that she would revisit them as she returned. Pulling her shawl tightly around her, she hurried on. She had business to conduct and papers to sign.

Thus may have gone the day of an early entrepreneur of Cape Breton Island, Douce Hubert Belhaché, a very capable woman, a survivor. The winds of time have carried away the tangible traces of her life, but her influence may still be felt as we walk along the shorelines of history and legend.

This story originally appeared in James O. St. Clair and Yvonne C. LeVert's book, *Nancy's Wedding Feast and Other Tasty Tales*, published in 2007 by Cape Breton University Press.

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