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LARRABEE AND "THE BACKWOODS EXPEDITION"

By EDWARD S. C. SMITH

WILLIAM CLARK LARRABEE, educator, clergyman, and author, was born on December 22, 1802, probably at Cape Elizabeth, Maine, and was a graduate of Bowdoin College in the class of 1828. He received the Master's degree in 1831. The college records show that he was successively: Principal of Alfred Academy, 1828-30; Instructor, Wesleyan University, 1830-31; Principal of Wesleyan Seminary at Cazenovia, N. Y., 1831-36; Principal of Maine Wesleyan Seminary, Kent's Hill, Maine, 1836-40; Professor of Mathematics, Asbury University, 1840-52; State Superintendent of Public Schools, Indiana, 1852-54, 1856-58. He passed away at Greencastle, Indiana, May 5, 1859, and, although the university records are barren, he was probably on the faculty of De Pauw University while at Greencastle. It is evident that he never lost his love for New England, for he often returned, during the summer months, to visit his birthplace or tramp the hills.

Two years before he died he published a small volume called *Rosabower: A Collection of Essays and Miscellanies*, which, more than its title implies, gives an insight into the mental and spiritual life of the man from whose pen the words fell. Of the facts of his life not many are given to the reader, far fewer indeed than we wish had been the case, but on the pages of the little book are spread, rather, the very soul of the man himself, his joys, his sorrows (and they were many), his reactions to the world of man and to the world of Nature, his meditations on religion and his reflections on the hereafter.

His love for the out-of-doors led him in 1837 to join Dr. Charles T. Jackson as the latter was starting for a reconnaissance of Mount Katahdin¹ in capacity of first State Geologist of Maine. Larrabee describes this trip with Jackson as "The Backwoods Expedition," the last essay but one to be found in *Rosabower*. Because this essay concerning Katahdin is not familiar to many interested in Maine's greatest mountain, and because, so far as the writer is aware, this is the first time it has

¹As Larrabee used the form Katahdin, it is, for the sake of uniformity, maintained throughout this article. Jackson used the form Ktaadn, which latter the writer is advised by the most competent authorities in Algonquian languages is to be preferred as the most exact etymological rendering.

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become known that Larrabee's "Backwoods Expedition" was in reality Dr. Jackson's first Katahden trip, it seems desirable to reprint portions of the account. *Rosabower* is long since out of print and copies are difficult to obtain. On comparison with Jackson's account² it will be noticed that certain parts of both narratives are practically identical as to fact, but widely different as to point of view. Jackson's party, ten in number, set out from Old Town for "up river" September 13, 1837, by batteaux and canoes. Larrabee was much interested in the handling of a batteau and writes as follows:

"Our journey lay through an unsettled wilderness. We therefore had to take with us all necessary provisions for an absence of some weeks. Ourselves and baggage had to be pushed up a rough, rocky river in batteaux and canoes. The batteau is about twenty feet long, and three or four feet wide in the middle, while the extremities taper to a point and turn up, much like the old peaked-toed shoe worn by our great-grandmothers. It is made of plank as light as possible, for it must often be carried by boatmen around the falls, which frequently occur in the river. It has a flat bottom, so as easily to slide over the rocks in shallow water. The canoe is made of the bark of the white birch. It is round as the tree from which the bark was taken, and, like the batteau, peaked at both ends. It is about fifteen feet long and two feet wide. It is so light that a man can carry it on his head. In these frail vessels we first packed our camping apparatus, provisions and mathematical instruments, and then we packed in ourselves, sitting much in the manner of the Indian governor, flat on the floor. To sit in any other more dignified or comfortable manner would manifestly endanger the stability of our position. To manage the batteau requires two skillful, athletic men. One stands on the prow, and the other in the stern. Each has a long pole with a spike in the end. This is called a setting pole. Keeping time with their poles, they thrust them against the rocks, or on the bottom of the river, and pushing with great force, urge the boat rapidly up against the current. The canoe is managed in a similar way, only it requires but one to work it. Our boatmen on the batteau were skillful, careful hands, well acquainted

² Jackson, Charles T. *Second Annual Report, on the geology of the public lands belonging to the two States of Massachusetts and Maine.* Boston, 1838; also Augusta, 1838.

with the river, and every way qualified for their business; but they were addicted to the most horrid profanity of language. I did not know before that the English language could be tortured into such outrageous oaths. If our army in Mexico swore as did our Penobscot boatmen, it is not at all strange that the Mexican general, Ampudia, wished to learn how to swear too, thinking, as it would appear, that the victory of our army was owing to the big oaths sworn by the officers at the men. Finding every means of correction ineffectual, I chose to go into the canoe which was managed by an Indian; for though he swore, as well as the white men, yet he swore in Indian, and it did not sound so bad as in English."

They passed up the West Branch of the Penobscot and on the twenty-first of September camped, according to Jackson, on "a little island just above the outlet of Muddy Lake." Under the heading "The Encampment" Larrabee writes:

"After a journey of many days through the most various scenery, sometimes pushing the boat against the rapid current, and at others gliding smoothly over the broad lakes, into which the river frequently expanded; now going past wide and fertile bottom-lands, and again coasting along under the shadow of mountain cliffs; now opening into broad meadows of tall wild grass, and then shooting through some narrow passage, where the overhanging trees, entwining their branches from each side of the river, completely shut out the sunlight, we arrived at the place destined for headquarters, during our sojourn in this wild region. The spot selected for the encampment was a beautiful island. The river here expanded into a broad, deep, and most lovely lake. The island was covered with every variety of tree common to a northern forest. There was the magnificent elm, with its large, graceful branches; the birch, with its dress of pure white; the maple, with its limbless trunk and rounded top; the northern cedar, with its gnarled, elk-horn limbs; the pine, with its tassels sighing in the wind, and the fir, with its tall, straight trunk, and its delicate branches, so regular as to form a more perfect cone than art ever constructed. The island was bounded by a sandy beach, extending all around it, forming a most delightful promenade. The clear waters of the lake reflected the blue heavens and the green trees so perfectly, that you seemed, when gazing on its

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tranquil surface, to be looking at another beautiful world, concave, below you. At the distance of about ten miles appeared, looming up far above the horizon, Katahden, the prince of eastern mountains. It stood wild, grand, and solitary before us. Its topmost peak was to be the summit of our ambition."

It was toward evening that Larrabee made his observations, and, sunset coming on, he says:

"The waters of the lake glittered like silver. The trees, clothed in their autumnal garments of a thousand hues, seemed to reflect back the crimson, and the gold, and the purple of the gorgeous skies. On the east, and on the south, and on the west, the view was bounded by a circumference of blue hills, just rising above the horizon. On the north was Katahden, 'monarch of all it surveys.' It stood alone, rising from a vast forest plain, like an island from an illimitable ocean. It seemed composed of alternate ridges and ravines—the ridges protuberant, like immense ribs, and the ravines of unknown depth. In many places there appeared the paths of immense avalanches, or slides. These extend from the top to the base, a distance of many miles, sweeping down, in their headlong rush, rocks, and trees, and acres of earth. The light of the sunset, reflected from the ridges, and from the naked path of the slides, and the shadows of night gathering dark and deep in the bottomless ravines, presented a mingled picture of brilliant beauty and awful grandeur, such as I may never hope to see again."

In this description of Katahden from a distance it is interesting to note that Larrabee was impressed by two things, the "immense avalanches," whose size he may be pardoned for exaggerating, and the "solitary" aspect of the mountain. In most of the earlier writings about Katahden the loneliness of the mountain is dwelt upon. We know that Katahden, far from being alone, is one of a group, and that there are many mountains of considerable size in its immediate vicinity, both on the north and west. This belief that Katahden was a solitary mountain, so strong in fact that in many school texts it is described as practically a monadnock, was acquired because all of those earlier excursions to the mountain used the approach from the south or southeast where Katahden is the only mountain visible, and is really of such proportions that one sees more of

Katahden than of the low hills on those sides, which seem insignificant by comparison. Had some of those earlier trips been made from the west, as is now possible, Katahden would hardly be spoken of as lone.

On the twenty-second of September they started on foot from their island camp toward what Jackson called "the second western slide" (from the descriptions undoubtedly the Abol slide), and camped that night, says Jackson, where the forest trees were so diminutive that we could not camp any higher up, for want of fuel. . . . This was "about half way up the mountain." The next day came the ascent of the mountain concerning which Larrabee writes:

"Morning dawned, and we made a scanty breakfast, and prepared to climb on. We had reached a little area of tableland,³ commanding a splendid view. Below us and around us the atmosphere was clear. We stopped to look on the magnificent prospect. Toward the south the clear waters of the Penobscot, as they sped away toward the ocean, gleamed like a thread of silver. Toward the west there lay spread out a succession of lakes, bright, beautiful, and innumerable. Some of them we knew to be many leagues distant, yet from the elevation on which we stood, one might seem able to throw a stone upon their glassy surface. To the east appeared an illimitable forest plain, unbroken, silent, and desolate. On the north far as eye could reach,

'Hills peeped o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise,
rugged, savage and drear.'

"But while the lower strata of atmosphere was clear, affording unobstructed view of earth, heaven was shut out from view. Clouds high in the air were rapidly sailing over forest and mountain and lake. One, blacker than its companions, had stooped from its airy flight, and was resting on the mountain-peak before us. It seemed impenetrable; yet we had to climb on into its very embraces. Our way became more difficult. Rocks of every fantastic shape lay along the path, many of them so poised, that a false step, or the slightest accident, might start them from their resting-places, and send them thundering down, carrying ruin on such of our party as happened to be

³This can hardly be the tableland as the term is used to-day. He evidently means the flat area where the camp was made.

behind. Some of our companions got frightened at the scene, and made their escape, while their bones were sound, to a place of safety.

"At last, with many a weary step, and many a hair-breadth escape, we reached the cloud-capped summit. Cloud-capped indeed it was, and the cap drawn tightly down. The cloud, which, from below, appeared resting so quiet on its mountain perch, was all in a whirl. The wind blew so violently, that one of the company, with comic gravity, inquired how many men it might take to hold one's hair on. Nor were wind and cloud all. The snow came thick and fast, and the cold was so intense that out of ten men, protected by overcoats and mittens, not one could unscrew the tube of the barometer, so benumbed were our fingers.

"An Indian of the Penobscots, who was one of the party, averred that Pimola, the mythological demon of the mountain, had sent this terrible storm upon us, in punishment of our impiety in visiting his dominions. Pimola is the genius of Katahden, of Herculean strength, occupying a throne of granite, and reigning sole despot over those lofty peaks and dark ravines. No mortal eye has ever seen him; but his voice, as the Indians affirm, is often heard, and especially in the storm.

"After much difficulty, we succeeded in taking barometrical observations, and obtaining such geological information as the circumstances allowed; and then, finding that longer delay might be dangerous, on account of the intensity of the cold, and the violence of the storm, we started on our return. Starting off in the direction in which I supposed we had come up, I had proceeded but a short distance, when I was arrested by the warning voice of our Indian attendant, and informed that I was on the wrong track. I could hardly believe I was not in the same path by which we had ascended, but returning to the spot from which I had started, he soon convinced me that he was right, and that the way I had been going would have led off among crags, and cliffs, and precipices, and ravines, no one knows where. The sagacity of the Indian had induced him on going up the mountain, to mark the path, after we left the slide, by setting up stones—a prudent expedient, that never occurred to the rest of us. By this instinctive foresight of a half-wild Indian, our whole company was saved from untold suffering,

and even death. The path by which we had come up is the only known way of access to the mountain; and had we attempted the descent by another route, we must have become inextricably confused and bewildered, and we might have perished in the storm."

They arrived back at the spot they had left in the morning about noon of the same day. Rain was falling in torrents, says Larrabee, so he and two of the boatmen continued toward their base camp on the island. Being thoroughly wet, and with the burden of this extra tramping, Larrabee was very nearly overcome with physical exhaustion. But, as he says, "a change of clothes, a blazing fire, and a substantial supper soon restored me. I then wrapped myself in my blanket, and raising my eyes and heart in devout gratitude to heaven for my protection through the fatigues and dangers of the day, I lay down on my bed of cedar boughs, and soon fell asleep."

The next day the remainder of the party got to camp, and the following morning the return journey began. Larrabee's account ends here, but from Jackson we glean that provisions ran very low, and they were obliged to secure extra rations from other travelers whom they fortunately encountered.

There may be some prone to criticize Larrabee for overestimating the dangers incident to the climb, but it must be remembered that the wilderness of 1837 was something quite different from the wilderness of to-day in that region. And it is certain that for clarity of expression and beauty of word picture he is most excellent, assuring that "The Backwoods Expedition" will ever be a Katahden classic.