The New Criterion

Dispatch July 01, 2021 03:00 pm

Solid as the Rock

by Timothy Jacobson

Geology, we learn in the introductory course, is an historical science: the study of the earth's history recorded in rocks. When I was in college, non-science-types like me smirked at the subject, thinking that geology was a not-too-demanding elective ideally scheduled for the period after lunch. Things moved slowly in geology, and the class tended to be on the quiet side. One could doze at low risk.

Geologists, I suppose, treat all rocks equally. Historians, when they treat rocks at all, treat them individually and symbolically. Readers of this journal will know a good deal about the history of that great American rock, Plymouth. For a small rock, Plymouth carried, and carries, an outsize load. Only one other rock, in my mind, packs a comparable cultural and historical punch: the Rock of Gibraltar. Plymouth's fame has largely to do with what men have said about it since the Pilgrims landed there in 1620. The Rock of Gibraltar's has far more to do with its practical or strategic value. Since the time of the ancient Phoenicians, for whom it was the landmark separating the Mediterranean world from the Atlantic wilderness, men have turned it into an object of intense desire, a place worth fighting for in wars, sieges, and unending standoffs between the contending principles of popular sovereignty (if you are a Gibraltarian) or territorial integrity (if you are a Spaniard).

The Rock of Gibraltar, part of the territory of Gibraltar on the southern tip of the Iberian peninsula, is a long and high promontory rearing up out of the Mediterranean to a height of 1,398 feet. From its southern point, at Punta de Europa and O'Hara's Battery, the view across the Strait to Africa is like nothing else in the world. The Rock guards the only western exit from and entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, and, for the British since the opening of the Suez Canal through the mid-twentieth century, it was a key choke point on the route to India and the Far East. Nature endowed it with the characteristics of a fortress, and throughout history men have employed it as such.

In the early eighth century, Muslim forces under the Berber chief Tāriq ibn Ziyād crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to invade the Iberian peninsula amid a succession crisis between the region's Visigothic kings. According to the semi-reliable ninth-century text *The Islamic Conquest of Spain* by the historian Ibn 'Abd-el-Hakem, which is often concerned with connecting notable figures to place

names, the chief gave his name to Gibraltar, *Jabal-Tariq* meaning "Mountain of Tāriq." The Reconquista by Christian kingdoms (the Castillian kings saw themselves as heirs to the Visigoths) took place over the next few centuries as the two sides, Christian and Muslim, battled for the upper hand. In 1492, the Muslims were driven from the Iberian peninsula, and the Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella granted Gibraltar a coat of arms still in use today: a castle and a golden key. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the British entered the picture during the War of the Spanish Succession, when an Anglo-Dutch fleet, commanded by Admiral Sir George Rooke, captured the Rock on August 2, 1704. Under the Treaty of Utrecht, which formally ended the dynastic fracas nine years later, Gibraltar went to Britain in perpetuity, first as a garrison, then, after 1830, as a crown colony. (Today it is a British Overseas Territory.) The Spanish were opportunistic, however, and during the American Revolution, when Spain was allied with France against Britain, they tried to get it back. Thus the Great Siege, which began in June 1779 and lasted three and a half years. Bombardment reduced the town to rubble, but three relief expeditions mounted by the Royal Navy enabled the British to hold on until the war against the United States ended with Britain's defeat. The besieging Spanish called it a day and went home, but they never forgot. Between 1969 and 1985, they tried another type of siege, an economic blockade, and closed the Spain–Gibraltar border. This too failed, though it kept the kettle on simmer. When the government of Tony Blair attempted a deal with post-Franco Spain to resolve "the Gibraltar Problem" through some sort of shared sovereignty, but without consulting the locals, Gibraltarians reared up in referendum and voted a resounding "Never, ever" to Spanish rule. Today, Union Jacks are a common site across the region.

During World War II, Hitler considered taking the Rock by force (a proposal codenamed Operation Felix) in order to choke the British out of the Mediterranean, but the neutral Franco demurred. This was not because he didn't want the British gone, but because he didn't want to risk the Germans tromping across Spain and perhaps not returning home. The Royal Navy was a huge presence throughout the conflict, with the location serving as a convoy assembly point and the home of Force H, established in 1940 to guard the western Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic. The Navy and its dockyard remained the colony's major employer into the post-war years. The last hurrah for Gibraltar and Her Majesty's great gray ships came with the Falklands War in 1982, when Britain scrambled to dispatch a naval task force to the South Atlantic. Much of it was improvised from the fleet then assembled in Gibraltar for an annual nato training exercise.

The Rock is formed of ancient limestone and dolomites from the Jurassic period. It is also riddled with natural caverns. Taking nature's hint, the British turned it into a great fortress with tunnels and more caves, beginning at the time of the Great Siege and especially during World War II. Today, nato communications remain burrowed deep within. Leave it to the Americans, however, to see its potential commercial value. In the 1890s, a Newark-based insurance company, The Prudential or the "Pru," hit upon the Rock as a corporate logo. Actually, the idea was one of the earliest and, as it turned out, most enduring triumphs of the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency. The image depicted the great southern height of the Rock where it is crowned by O'Hara's Battery, and, of course, added a good slogan: "The Prudential has the Strength of Gibraltar."

The closest Gibraltar has come to literary fame is at the hands of Paul Gallico, the writer best known for tales like *The Snow Goose: A Story of Dunkirk* from 1941, which became a surprise best-seller, and his Mrs. 'Arris stories. In 1962, he wrote the story *Scruffy*, set on Gibraltar during World War II, about a particularly cantankerous but ultimately lovable Barbary ape named Harold. Central to the novel is the Gibraltar superstition that if the Barbary apes ever leave, the British soon will follow.

The Barbary ape, a tailless macaque monkey native to Morocco's Atlas Mountains, first appeared on Gibraltar in the early days of the British garrison, when a number were brought in as pets to amuse bored soldiers. A few of them escaped, finding a comfortable habitat in the Rock's limestone cliffs and scrub vegetation. By the early 1940s their population began to decline, however, and so during the war Churchill ordered that their number should not fall below twenty-four, which meant importing newcomers from across the Strait. Neither the apes nor the British, said the prime minister, were going anywhere.

Nor have they. At this writing, it is all still there: the Rock, the apes, the Union Jacks. The Spanish will forever want it back. The Gibraltarians will forever say "Never!" The Rock remains solid as ever.

Timothy Jacobson (1948–2024) wrote from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.