

FIERCE

Women Who Shaped Canada



Lisa Dalrymple

*Illustrations by
Willow Dawson*

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*For my mother, Sandie,
and my daughters, Nat and Dani,
who are fierce — L. D.*



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Alone Among Demons

Marguerite de la Roche

July 1542

An island in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence

Marguerite glared at her guardian, Captain Jean-François de Roberval, Viceroy of Canada. At his orders, two sailors hauled ashore everything that she had brought with her to the New World. Then, as though in some final insult, they unloaded four arquebuses and ammunition – as if Marguerite or her maidservant knew how to use the nine-kilogram firearms!

Captain Roberval grinned, fully aware that the two women had no chance against the wild animals on this uncharted island of rock, never mind the fiends and monsters the fishermen had warned his crew about.

"Enjoy your exile on *l'Île des Démons!*" he said.

From the nearest ship, Marguerite heard a call. She watched as one of the men shouldered his firearm and forced his way through the sailors to a second rowboat.

She felt the bones of her corset as it tightened around her ribs. Why would he want to share their death sentence? Yet as the young man reached the shore, Marguerite ran to him crying, "*Mon cheri!*"

Captain Roberval, looking quite satisfied, stepped into his boat and was rowed back to the ship. Marguerite waited for the sailors to protest. Surely they could make him change his mind. But she had been foolish. She had been seen walking alone with the young man on the hills around St. John's and making nighttime visits to his cabin. Roberval claimed that if anyone were to hear of it, their family name would be ruined — and her guardian's wrath was too well known for any of the sailors to challenge him.

Watching the ships, the *Sainte Anne*, the *Vallentyne* and the *Marye*, sail from the harbour, Marguerite leaned against her suitor. Though it was July, the sea spray chilled everything it touched. Her elderly maidservant, Damienne, shivered. They needed a fire before nightfall.

Marguerite and Damienne collected wood and checked the rock pools for fresh water while the young man built a lean-to with the canvas that he had brought from the ship. Convinced that he could signal a fishing boat, he lit a signal blaze and insisted they keep it burning at all times.

But as their first night closed in, Marguerite's mind reeled at the dangers around them. To raise her spirits, her

suitor pulled out his citre, the stringed instrument that he had brought with him on the voyage. He played a few tunes from the rural south of France, their home.

Perhaps it was the music that attracted the creatures, as soon Marguerite saw a pair of glowing yellow eyes in the darkness. The eyes were joined by another pair and then another.

The young man fired his arquebus, and the eyes disappeared. But Marguerite heard a menacing growl from the woods. Beast or demon, she did not know. While her suitor measured out a fresh charge for the gun and hurried to adjust the wick, she searched for rocks. She threw stones into the woods while he fired. Together they fought off the creatures until the sun reappeared above the horizon.

On the second night, the beasts grew braver, scratching at the lean-to. All around them the castaways heard demonic cries like the insane laughter of a hundred thousand men. Damienne read aloud from the Bible. The louder the prayers, the quieter the creatures' howls — as if they were being driven away.

The next morning the young man began work on a small shelter made from driftwood and the scrawny trees on the island. Searching for long, straight branches, Marguerite found a dead creature that looked like some sort of hound. From the wound in its side, she could tell that it had been killed by one of the shots fired in the night. Looking at the

beast's sharp fangs and massive claws, she wondered how a cabin of branches could ever protect them.

The summer passed and the castaways ate berries, mushrooms, fish and meat. Marguerite and her young man married in a ritual of word and gift with Damienne as a witness. The young husband presented his wife with a bed of cedar boughs covered in the furs of animals that they had hunted. When she realized she was pregnant, Marguerite's heart filled with hope: they would be rescued, return to France, and become a true family with Damienne as their nursemaid.

As the thought of the child growing inside her brought Marguerite strength, her husband's spirits began to fade. He had kept his lookout every day but he had not seen a single ship. The winds of winter gusted through the walls of the shelter. The castaways' prayers kept the demons at bay but not the voracious animals that clawed at the cabin each night.

One day the young man said that they should let the signal blaze burn out to conserve wood. Marguerite knew him well enough now to know that he feared the worst. She tried to give him hope, talking endlessly about their baby who would be born within the month. Damienne attempted to entice him with new meals created from their meagre ingredients. Both women reassured him that fishing boats would return in the spring. But in February,

1543, after months of drinking water from rock pools and eating whatever food they could find, the young man's belly bloated and he became feverish. With no strength left to fight, Marguerite's new husband died. She and Damienne dug a grave for him as deep as they could in the frozen soil.

The bears and wolves were attracted by the smell of fresh meat. Their attacks became more frequent and frenzied. Marguerite took up watch each night, using her husband's gun to drive the beasts from his grave.

Then finally her baby came — her treasure. Marguerite cut linen from her undershirts to use as swaddling clothes and carried him under her fur cape. She and Damienne baptized him, but they struggled to keep him safe when his cries seemed to beckon the starving beasts. Frightened, cold and aching with hunger, Marguerite defended her small family. There was no time to cry for her husband.

When it seemed to Marguerite that things could not get bleaker, spring returned to the island. The baby loved watching the partridges that walked right into the shelter. Damienne preferred collecting their eggs. She foraged for mushrooms and fished while Marguerite hiked across the island with a readied arquebus under each arm — one to provide her first shot and one for quick backup. It was not unusual for her to kill a caribou or a bear.

After having killed two bears in one morning, she

looked up to see a third above her on a granite outcrop – its hide was as white as snow. The bear charged toward Marguerite. She raised her gun and pulled the lever. As the ball tore into the bear's shoulder, the creature roared. Its foreleg collapsed and it toppled forward. Marguerite took a step closer and aimed her second arquebus. She fired to kill.



Bear meat was foul-tasting, but Marguerite knew that she had to dry as much as possible. She could not last through another winter of starvation, frozen to near death and no energy to even chop wood – not with a child to provide for. She told Damienne that they should

start drying berries and she wanted to fortify the cabin's walls with peat. Damienne, who was usually so helpful, simply nodded.

During some of the previous winter's storms, the castaways had hidden out in a cave at the north end of the island. It had been too small for three adults, but two could slide down into it and seal off its entrances with hides.

"Do you think that it would be warmer for the baby in the cave?" Marguerite asked Damienne.

Again Damienne was silent. She had a look Marguerite had only seen once – in the eyes of her husband before he died. Not long after this, Marguerite found Damienne's body at the bottom of a bluff. Perhaps the wind had caught her skirts and blown her from the top.

With no one to help her, Marguerite dug a fresh grave alongside her husband's. That night she guarded their resting site alone – as she would be now in everything that she did.

When dawn arrived, Marguerite thought that she had never witnessed a sun that brought with it so little heat. Her son began to cry and Marguerite resigned to press on.

"Come, *mon trésor*," she said as she strapped him to her back and returned to collecting water, chopping wood and hunting. Carrying the baby, she could only take one arquebus so she tied her husband's old sword around her waist.

But all her efforts could not ensure the survival of her

child. A month after she had buried Damienne, Marguerite cradled another small body in her arms. Laying her treasure to rest beside his father, she wept beside his tiny grave.

The beasts sensed that Marguerite was now alone. The demonic cries she had not heard since those first nights returned. As she guarded her small cemetery, her gunpowder now stale and useless, Marguerite was haunted by the thought that when she died, there would be no one to bury her.

She descended into madness and could no longer tell vision from reality. Dressed in skins, she became as wild as the animals that clamoured to devour her. Later Marguerite would not talk about these months, except to tell of a pack of growling beasts that ambushed her one day. Using only her battered sword, she fought off one after another, killing four as she scrambled her way back to the cabin.


As her third winter was closing in, a fishing ship sailed onto the horizon. Marguerite, uncertain if this was a hallucination, ran along the shoreline waving furs in the air. To the fishermen she looked like one of the demons said to haunt the island. Watching to make sure that they did not vanish, Marguerite lit the signal fire and sent up thick smoke. The ship ventured closer.

When the fishermen landed, they were shocked to find one of their countrywomen stranded on this harsh and



remote island. It had been two years and five months. They offered her passage back to France – and Marguerite's heart tore in two. To return home she had to leave the island where she had buried the three people she most loved.

But to stay would give Roberval the satisfaction of knowing she eventually died where he had exiled her. She boarded the ship and sailed back to France, where she quietly carried with her the story that marks her as Canada's first French settler. Yet few people have even heard her name.



How Do We Know What We Know?

Marguerite told her story to André Thevet, a Catholic clergyman who wrote about her many years after she returned to France. Marguerite was careful about what details she shared with Thevet — especially since he would not have approved of her Protestantism or her relationship with the young man. Another version of the tale was told by Queen Marguerite de Navarre. But both accounts of Marguerite's story are likely influenced by her guardian's perspective. The Queen wrote the story as she was told it by Captain Roberval. And while André Thevet claimed he was telling Marguerite's story, he was a close friend of Roberval's.

What Do We Know?

Roberval was the Viceroy of Canada, one of the five colonies of New France, which is why we know who he was. His name was *Jean-François de la Rocque*, but he preferred to be known by his title, *Sieur de Roberval*.

Some say that the Isle of Demons, where Roberval abandoned Marguerite, is Quirpon Island off the coast of Newfoundland. But Elizabeth Boyer, in her book *A Colony of One*, writes that it is Hospital Island, one of the Harrington Islands that are now a part of Quebec. Roberval, having heard folk tales about islands populated by horned fiends and monsters, tried to scare the castaways by calling the place *l'Île des Démon*s. The island was known by this name for a while.



What Don't We Know?

We don't actually know who Marguerite was. She may have been Roberval's sister, niece, cousin or cousin once removed. Marguerite was a very popular name in France at this time and there were also many De la Rocques/Roques. We only know that this Marguerite was a close relation of Roberval's and that her parents were probably dead, which is why she would have required the protection of a male relative. We don't know how old she was — both unmarried women and children required guardians or chaperones at that time.

We don't know the identity of her suitor. Thevet said that he had come along on the ship because he loved Marguerite, so he must have been someone she already knew before the journey. He was probably a nobleman if he had a musical instrument like a citre with him. His sword and arquebus suggest he likely had some military training.

Upon his return to France, Roberval — not wanting to anger a noble family — made sure that the story of the marooning was shrouded in secrecy. Even the passenger list for the voyage somehow disappeared. If the fishermen had not come across Marguerite's island, no one would have heard any more about her. The story that Roberval almost succeeded in burying is the story of Canada's first French colonist. But in history books, the names of Cartier, Champlain and Roberval are the ones you are much more likely to find.