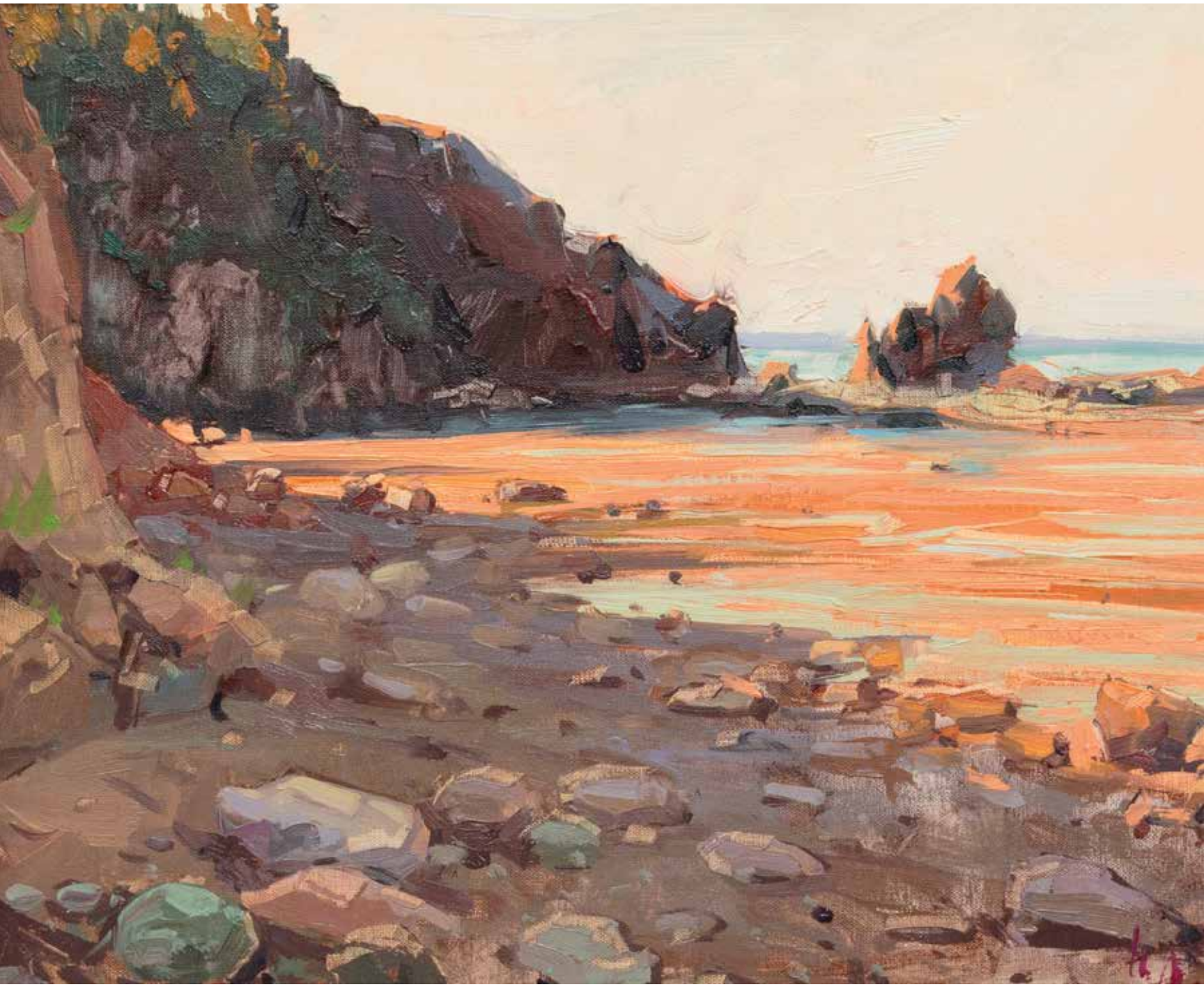


The Old Wife
Natalia Andreeva
2023, oil, 12 x 16 in.
PIPAF 2023 Second Place (photo: Luc Germain)
Plein air

Where Tides *and* Time *Collide*

Discover how Nova Scotia's ancient cliffs and powerful tides have long inspired artists — from early explorers to today's plein air painters.

BY TIM FEDAK

A View of Partridge Island, from the West
J. F. W. Des Barres
1777, etching with watercolor, 10 1/2 x 28 1/4 in.
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Artists and geologists perceive the world with unique insight, each attuned to the subtle clues left by time and nature. When standing before a dramatic rock formation or sweeping coastal vista, both can feel the sublime — a recognition of our deep and ancient connection to the Earth. Nowhere can this synergy between art and science be more powerfully felt than along Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy.

Once located at the heart of the ancient supercontinent Pangaea, this region holds within its cliffs the story of a world long past. Here, 300-million-year-old rocks bear witness to a time when all Earth's continents were joined as one and the planet turned green with the rise of the first trees. Around 200 million years ago, that great landmass began to fracture. As the continents split apart, molten magma surged to the surface, blanketing an area the size of modern-day Canada. In the upheaval, the Atlantic Ocean was born, its waters slowly widening as landmasses drifted from the mid-Atlantic ridge. Today, the striking red cliffs of the Cliffs of Fundy UNESCO Global Geopark stand as vivid remnants of this global transformation and preserve the oldest known dinosaur fossils in Canada.

Washed by the world's highest tides, the geopark's dramatic coastline has long inspired exploration — both scientific and artistic. One iconic site is Partridge Island, known to the First Nations people of Mi'kmaq as Wa'so'q ("Heaven"). With more than 13,000 years of cultural history, it has served as a meeting place for Indigenous communities and, centuries later, became a beacon for early geologists drawn to its rich geological story.

View of Partridge Island and Parrsboro, Nova Scotia, Canada, George Heriot, 1807, watercolor and pencil on paper, 5 x 7 1/4 in., Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

FIRST LOOKS

Before photography, artists served as the eyes of exploration, documenting unfamiliar terrain with remarkable precision. Working alongside cartographers and surveyors, they created the earliest depictions of Partridge Island — images so accurate they became essential references for geological study.

In 1777, mapmaker Frederick Wallet DesBarres included the island in *Atlantic Neptune*, his seven-volume set of cartography maps and images. A few decades later, watercolorist George Heriot and draftsman John Elliott Woolford documented the area's vibrant coastline and iconic rock faces. In the Age of Sail, the imposing

Parrsborough [Parrsboro] and Partridge Island from ye S.
John Woolford
1817, ink and watercolor on paper, rectangular bound album
Nova Scotia Museum

Cape Blowmedown [Blomidon] and Parrsboro
Drawn by William Henry Bartlett, engraved by Robert Brandard
1842, steel-engraved print, 4 1/2 x 7 in.
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

A LIVING LANDSCAPE: THE CLIFFS OF FUNDY

Designated as one of 229 UNESCO Global Geoparks in 50 countries, the Cliffs of Fundy spans 160 kilometers of coastal communities along Nova Scotia's Minas Basin. Celebrated for its geological and cultural significance, the geopark fosters sustainable development, supports environmental stewardship, and honors local culture, arts, cuisine, and traditions — all through the lens of responsible international tourism.

sandstone cliffs and pillars of basalt headland stood like a fortress against the relentless tides, with Cape Blomidon often seen in the distance of these early illustrations, anchoring the background like a sentinel of deep time.

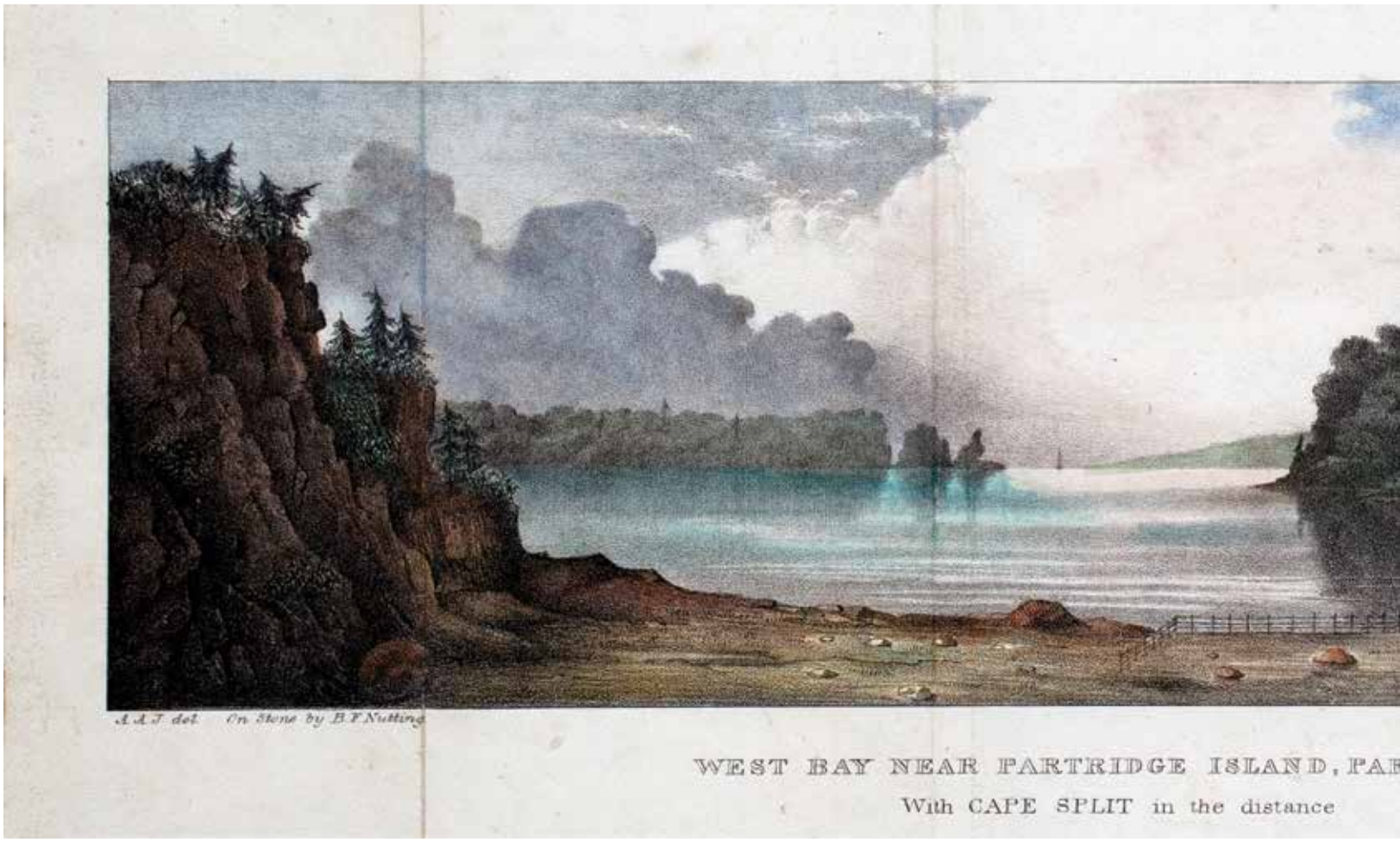
THE BIRTH OF MODERN GEOLOGY

In 1842, famed geologist Charles Lyell visited Partridge Island on his journey through Nova Scotia. A quick sketch of the island — marking the angle and orientation of geological layers — helped support his revolutionary idea that the processes shaping the earth today are the same ones that formed it over eons. This concept, known as uniformitarianism, became a cornerstone of modern geology.

During his stay, Lyell became particularly interested in the extreme tides of the Bay of Fundy and spent considerable time along the coastline studying the effects. At low tide, he watched birds walk along the shore, leaving footprints in the soft red mud that appeared similar to fossilized tracks he'd seen a month earlier in Connecticut. Today, we know those footprints in the fossils were actually made by dinosaurs.

While there, Lyell also met local physician-geologist Abraham Gesner, a key figure in the region's early scientific community. In his book detailing the area's industrial minerals, Gesner published a lithograph of a painting that featured Partridge Island by Alicia Anne Jeffery, one of Nova Scotia's earliest trained artists. Recognized for his efforts to learn the Mi'kmaw language and his respect for Indigenous cultural heritage, Gesner also included a pencil sketch by Jeffery depicting a Mi'kmaw guide.

The same year Lyell visited Nova Scotia, popular British artist William Henry Bartlett was making a tour of his own. Concerned with rendering "lively impressions of actual sights," Bartlett traveled



West Bay Near Partridge Island, Parrsboro', with Cape Split in the Distance
Painted by Alicia Anne Jeffery, lithographed by Benjamin F. Nutting
1849, hand-colored lithograph on wove paper, 4 1/2 x 14 1/2 in.
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

extensively throughout Britain, the Balkans, the Middle East, and North America, including Canada. Engravings of his Canadian drawings were hugely popular, and several dramatic views he captured of the Minas Basin coastline were published as part of his series *Canadian Scenery Illustrated*.

STORIES OLDER THAN TIME

Long before colonial exploration, however, the Mi'kmaq people honored the land with stories passed down through generations. In the 1880s, missionary Silas Rand recorded Mi'kmaw oral traditions, including legends of Glooscap, whose grandmother cooked the "bubbling" tides in a great pot and wore an amethyst necklace. These stories, tied to Partridge Island's natural resources and the tides, speak of a living landscape infused with meaning.

Today, Mi'kmaw artist Gerald Gloade carries this tradition forward, weaving geology and the stories of Glooscap into his art and educational outreach. Through visual storytelling, he bridges Indigenous knowledge with scientific understanding. And he's not alone in finding inspiration in this timeworn landscape.

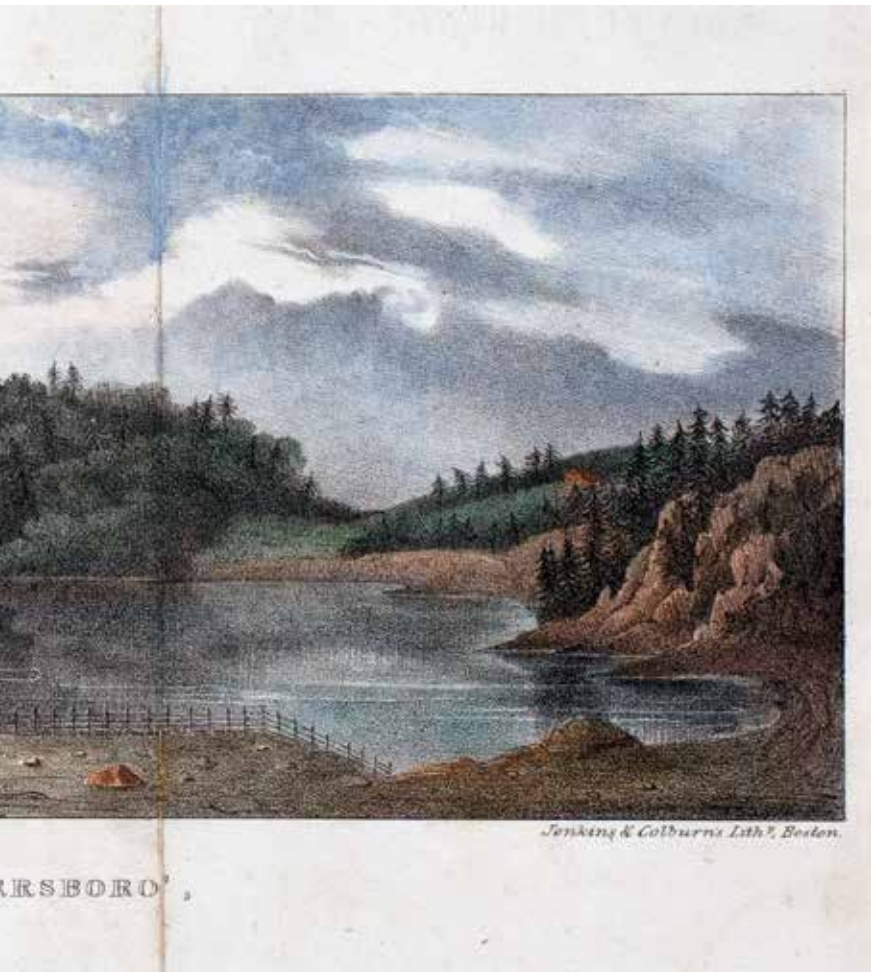
Mi'kmaq Man
Drawn by Alicia Anne Jeffery
1849, woodcut on paper, 5 3/4 x 3 1/2 in.
Courtesy Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

THE PARRSBORO INTERNATIONAL PLEIN AIR FESTIVAL

Whispering stories of ancient forests, drifting continents, and the first creatures to leave footprints in the mud, the Bay of Fundy has drawn painters from across North America for the Parrsboro International Plein Air Festival (PIPAF) since 2017. Held each June, the juried event brings together 30 artists for a week of painting, community events, and exhibitions.

Every painting made during PIPAF reflects a collaboration with the land — its unique geology, tidal rhythms, and dramatic weather. Festivalgoers witness firsthand how the cliffs, carved over hundreds of millions of years, offer fresh inspiration for contemporary painters.

In the same way events like PIPAF invite reflection and reverence for the



landscape, the Cliffs of Fundy, and the 228 other UNESCO Global Geoparks worldwide, aim to deepen appreciation for the Earth's history and connect people more meaningfully with the landscapes they inhabit. Both invite us to see the landscape not only as backdrop, but as protagonist — alive with memory, transformation, and meaning.

DR. TIM FEDAK is Curator of Geology at the Nova Scotia Museum and an Adjunct Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at Dalhousie University. With a PhD in biology for his study of dinosaurs and a background in visual art, his research focuses on Nova Scotia's geological history, and the promotion of geoheritage and global geoparks.

Glooscap and Grandmother at Wa'so'q by Gerald Gloade

Sunset Over the Bay of Fundy, Patrick McPhee, 2024, oil, 11 x 14 in., PIPAF 2024 Best in Show , plein air (LEFT) *Distant Cape Split*, Oliver Hatton, 2021, oil, 16 x 20 in., PIPAF 2021 Best Use of Light, plein air

Le pot de fleurs, Chantal Julien, 2019, oil, 12 x 18 in. , PIPAF 2019, plein air (photo: Luc Germain)