



of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775, by John Trumbull. Reproduction by permission of the Yale University Art Gallery.

Sheldon S. Cohen

LIEUTENANT JOHN STARKE AND THE DEFENCE OF QUEBEC

LESS THAN SIX MONTHS after the Revolutionary War had erupted at Lexington and Concord, American forces began their major attempts to wrest Canada from British control. Despite the initial declaration of the Second Continental Congress that it "had nothing more in view than the defense of these colonies," the strategic and political advantages accompanying an apparently simple conquest of Canada proved too tempting to the colonial delegates.¹ On June 25, 1775, Congress dispatched instructions to Major-General Philip Schuyler on his way to Fort Ticonderoga that if he found it "practicable and that it will not be disagreeable to the Canadians, he shall immediately take possession of St. John's, Montreal and any other parts of the country."²

General Schuyler, however, proved too dilatory and unenthusiastic in organizing the invasion, and Brigadier-General Richard Montgomery, his younger and more energetic second-in-command, took charge of the floundering expedition. Under the direction of this former British officer who had served during the French and Indian War, a force of about two thousand raw but eager troops was formed, and in early September they advanced northward along the old Lake Champlain-Richelieu River invasion route.³ Later in the month, a second, smaller (but less obvious) expedition proceeded from the coast of Maine. Led by Colonel Benedict Arnold, this force of eleven hundred men moved to invade Canada by a more treacherous and extremely difficult route along the Kennebec River, Lake Megantic, and the Chaudière River. Although Arnold's men met the greater hazards, frustrations, and difficulties, Montgomery's troops were also faced with their own serious and perplexing obstructions.⁴ The resolute commanders continued their advance, nevertheless, and by December 5, Fort St. John's and Montreal had been captured, and Montgomery and Arnold had joined their reduced forces (approximately one thousand men) on the St. Lawrence at Aspen Point. Only Quebec, a few miles upriver, remained as the last British stronghold in Canada.⁵

It was at Quebec, however, that the American drive was thwarted and

its aspirations shattered. Commanding the garrison at Quebec throughout most of the American threat was Governor Sir Guy Carleton, who had previously sacrificed most of his available regulars in an unwise defence of tenuous positions below Montreal. Carleton had been able to escape the advancing American troops and reached Quebec on November 19.⁶ There he took charge of a makeshift garrison of almost twelve hundred men, consisting of a small remnant of his original regulars, some British and French Canadian militiamen, a number of disembarked sailors and marines, a group of volunteer inhabitants, and a few hundred men from the recently gathered Royal Highland Emigrant Regiment of Lieutenant Colonel Allan Maclean.⁷ With such diverse combatants, Carleton judiciously decided to remain under siege behind the town's fortifications to await reinforcements from England. Montgomery, unable to force his opponent into open combat or pressure him into surrender, decided to attack the town directly and wrote optimistically to Schuyler, "I do think there is a fair prospect of success."⁸ The valorous but abortive assault was finally launched on the wintery evening of December 30-31, and its failure resulted in the death of Montgomery, the wounding of Arnold, sixty to seventy other American casualties, and four hundred men made prisoners. Although Arnold's survivors and additional American reinforcements continued a desultory siege of the citadel, the opportunity for its capture had passed. Early the following May, thawing ice permitted the arrival of a significant British military relief force under Sir Charles Douglas, and the remaining American troops were easily driven from the area.⁹

Among the hastily organized defenders of Quebec was Lieutenant John Starke. Starke had entered the Royal Navy in 1762 while still in his boyhood. Before the American Revolution he had rendered almost continuous naval service, including a four-year tour of the East Indies which had ended early in 1775. He was originally ordered to Canada while serving on the frigate *Lizard* under Captain John Hamilton, but he soon became one of the naval and marine officers pressed into service on land when Quebec was threatened.¹⁰ After the half-hearted American siege was broken, Lieutenant Starke commanded the armed schooner *Maria* which helped drive the Americans from Montreal and back to Ticonderoga. Starke subsequently participated in the 1776-77 operations on Lake Champlain, including the battle of Valcour Island, but he returned to England in 1778 hoping to gain a promotion for his conduct in North America. In London he submitted a lengthy memorial of his services, plus a recommendation from Carleton, to Lord Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, and after receiving a favourable reply

from him, Starke was posted to the West Indies for service against the French.¹¹ His tour there lasted until the spring of 1781, when he was ordered to take *H.M.S. Niger* to Chatham. After his return to England, he was placed on a half-pay status in which he remained until his death on March 13, 1793.¹²

The memorial which Starke presented in England contains a brief yet interesting account of the siege of Quebec. It was probably written by one of Starke's senior officers or else was dictated by Starke himself. Despite its brevity, this report does corroborate much of the lengthier descriptions by such defenders as Thomas Ainslie, Hugh Finlay, Henry Caldwell, and Sir John Hamilton.¹³ First, it bears out the assertions that the most apprehensive period for Quebec's protectors came between November 8 and 19, the period between Arnold's first appearance opposite Quebec and the return of Carleton. It also credits Colonel Maclean's reinforcements with a decisive role during this critical interval and reflects the mistaken British belief that the combined American forces outnumbered the defenders during the December 30-31 assault. Finally, the account does substantiate the fact that the British garrison was not without its own problems during the long winter siege, and it verifies conspiratorial plans among the American prisoners who were taken during Montgomery's defeat.¹⁴

The memorial of Lieutenant John Starke, R.N. is deposited in the archives of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England. The following account of the siege of Quebec, taken from this memorial, is published for the first time with the acknowledgment and permission of the museum and its director:

The case of Lieutenant John Starke of His Majesties Navy, together with a short sketch of the Operations of the war in Canada in which he was employed during the years 1775, 1776, and 1777. . . .

In the beginning of November 1775, His Majesty's ship the *Lizard* with a store ship under her convoy arrived at Quebec, when that Province was invaded by the Rebels, with two different bodies of troops—One of which, under the command of General Montgomery, after taking possession of Ticonderoga, and making himself Master of all the vessels and armed craft on the Lake Champlain, entered the Province by that rout[e]—The other under the orders of General Arnold, made their appearance before Quebec, having taken their rout[e] by Chaudiere [the Chaudière River]; Every place of strength was now in their possession, that city excepted, which had no troops in it, and the Governor Sir Guy Carleton was

absent, who had hastened to endeavour to save Montreal, upon receiving information of the progress which General Montgomery had made.

It is not easy to form an adequate idea of the deplorable situation of the Town of Quebec at this time. The Governor was absent; the Lieutenant Governor [Hector Theophilus Cramahé]¹⁵ a feeble old man was diffident and uncertain what measures to pursue; there were no troops to make any defence; all the artillery mounted on the Ramparts consisted of seven pieces of cannon; and the Inhabitants were in a state of despondency expecting that the Army under General Arnold, which having crossed the River St. Lawrence, occupied the heights of Abraham close to the city, would advance and enter the gates without resistance, for such was the consternation that the gates were not shut, when the enemy was within a mile of them—And the apprehension of the Lieutenant Governor was such, that he thought it advisable to send back the store ship, lest she should fall into the hands of the Rebels—She took her departure, but fortunately as the events afterwards turned up, was obliged to return, as the River was so much frozen up that it was impossible for her to proceed.

In this very critical situation, Captain Hamilton, since created a Baronet, and his Officers endeavoured to animate and encourage the Inhabitants to take arms in their own defence, by offering to lay up the Frigate, and disembark his men to do Garrison duty, and to give them every assistance in their power, for His Majesty's service—At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Maclean who had crossed the country arrived in the Town with about 100 men—His activity and exertions contributed to give spirits to the people and rouse them from their despondency, and with so good an effect, that when Captain Hamilton met the principal Inhabitants to know their formal determination, they consented to act in their own defence.

Upon this a Proclamation was published, by the Lieutenant Governor and Captain Hamilton, laying an embargo upon all the shipping in the River; and by way of further precaution, his boats' crews were ordered to unbend the sails and carry them on shore, to prevent such vessels as might be so disposed, from leaving the place.

The officers and men belonging to His Majesty's ship the *Lizard*, the Hunter Sloop and the Magdalen Schooner were commendably disembarked, which, together with those from the Merchants vessels, were formed into a Battalion of 9 Companies consisting of near 400, officers included. The officers took rank in the Marine Battalion respectively, according to their Rank in the Navy, and Mr. Starke being then second Lieutenant of the *Lizard*, served as a Captain therein during the Siege, which lasted from December the 1st, 1775 to May the 6th, 1776—

They proceeded immediately to put the fortifications in the best possible state of defence; they cleared the ditches and the ramparts, and mounted thereon, with great activity and dispatch, the artillery; and constructed Barriers in some of the Streets, and others worked to strengthen the place.

While these preparations were carrying into execution, under the direction of Sir John Hamilton and Lieutenant Colonel Maclean, Sir Guy Carleton arrived at Quebec; after having narrowly escaped from being taken a prisoner, by getting into a canoe, in which he came down the River from Montreal with much hazard, and immediately resumed the command of the Garrison—The British and the Canadian Inhabitants were formed into Corps of Militia, which amounted to about 700 Men and which being added to Lieutenant Colonel Maclean's Corps and the Marine Battalion, made the whole to consist of about 1200 Men bearing Arms—The Management of the Artillery was allotted to the Marine Battalion, during the Siege; and that Service they performed with so much effect, that they dismounted the Rebel Batteries as fast as they raised them.

General Montgomery soon arriving from Montreal, and joining the Force under General Arnold, with a large body of Men, formed the Blockade of the Town; and began the Siege by raising Batteries against it—But impatient of delay, and relying on the superiority of his numbers, the activity and the courage of his men, and knowing that the garrison was weaker considering the great extent of the Works, determined to make a bold attack upon the Town in the night, in the belief that he should carry it by a Coup de Main—This plan was carried into execution in the night of the 31 of December 1775, in the middle of a heavy snow storm—To distract the attention of the Garrison, feigned attacks were made upon several parts, at the same time that the principal assault was given to the lower Town—The Enemy surprised an outpost of a Captain's Guard, and had entered the Town before the alarm was communicated, and had passed the first Barrier. On their attempting to storm the second Barrier, an action took place, in which they were repulsed with great loss—Some guns judiciously placed in a house formed a kind of masked Battery, which raked the street which the Rebels occupied, and being loaded with grapeshot, they did effectual execution; many of them were killed and wounded; among the former was their General Montgomery, and among the latter was General Arnold—While these things were performing, Sir Guy Carleton ordered a detachment to make a sortie at a gate, and march round to the place where the Enemy had entered, which cutting off their retreat, about 400 of them were made prisoners. The number of their killed and wounded could never be exactly ascertained, as many of them fell among the snow, which

covering them during the winter, their bodies were found scattered about, upon the melting of it as the summer approached.—

This successful defeat of the Rebels, while it animated and encouraged the besieged, pointed out the necessity of observing the utmost vigilance; and the duty was very hard and constant throughout the winter and the spring; for as the snows fall frequently and heavily during that season, a number of men were often employed, besides the guard, to clear the great guns from it, and so deep was it at times, that the officers in going their rounds were frequently up to the middle in it; and were obliged to wear leggins [leggings], and other contrivances to defend themselves against the severity of the cold.

The Prisoners who had been treated with a lenity which they ill-deserved, attempted to corrupt the Sentinels appointed to guard them; but a discovery being made in time, their purpose was frustrated—They had fallen upon means of communicating their design to their companions the besiegers without, which was to break out of confinement in the night, open the gates of the Town, throw the beds and groins of the guns into the ditch, and apprise their friends without by a signal of their success, who were to be ready to come in to their assistance, and seize upon the garrison,—

To such a degree of vigilance and alertness did the officers perform their duty, that several of them did not venture to cast off [off] their cloaths [clothes] or accoutrements for weeks together but lay down with them on their backs, both night and day, that they might be prepared against any surprise—Others felt the severity of this constant and fatiguing duty, but it was particularly so to Lieutenant Starke, who had but a few months before, returned from a Station of four years in the warm climate of the East Indies.

Upon the arrival of the Men of War and the Transports from England, under the command of Captain Charles Douglas, since created a Baronet, the Rebels abandoned the Siege, the 6th of May 1776, and fled with great precipitancy. Measures were immediately taken to annoy them in their flight, both by land and Water. . . .

So concluded the Starke account of this memorable historic event. The siege of Quebec had been marked by courage, heroism, and resoluteness on both sides, but in the end victory had rested with the defenders. Their triumph ensured that it was England who would determine the destiny of Canada.

NOTES

1. Worthington C. Ford et al., eds., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, 1904-37), II, 75; Justin H. Smith, *Our Struggle For the Fourteenth Colony* (New York, 1907), I, 237-40; Claude H. VanTyne, *The War for Independence, The American Phase* (Cambridge, 1929), II, 69; Richard B. Morris and Henry S. Commager, eds., *The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six* (New York, 1958), I, 184.
2. *Journals of the Continental Congress*, II, 109-10.
3. John Richard Alden, *The American Revolution 1775-1783* (New York, 1954), pp. 49-51; Allan French, *The First Year of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 383-416; Smith, *op. cit.*, I, 247-70. Montgomery had served under Sir Jeffrey Amherst during the capture of Montreal in 1760, but had resigned from the British Army in 1772, and the following year settled in New York where he married a daughter of Robert R. Livingston.
4. Kenneth L. Roberts, ed., *March to Quebec; Journals of the Members of Arnold's Expedition, Compiled and Annotated by Kenneth Roberts During the Writing of Arundel* (New York, 1938), pp. xiv-657; Justin H. Smith, *Arnold's March from Cambridge to Quebec* (New York, 1903), pp. xix-498; Lynn Montross, *Rag Tag and Bobtail, the Story of the Continental Army 1775-83* (New York, 1952), pp. 52-5.
5. Alden, pp. 51-55; French, pp. 428-42; Smith, *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony*, I, 319-606; II, 1-89.
6. William H. Smith, *History of Canada From its First Discovery, to the Year 1791* (Quebec, 1815), II, 83; Smith, *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony*, I, 484-90; II, 92-3.
7. "Journal of the Most Remarkable Occurrences in Quebec, From the 14th of November, 1775, to the 7th of May, 1776, By an Officer of the Garrison," New York Historical Society, *Collections*, XIII (1880), 177; Smith, *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony*, II, 94-5.
8. "General Richard Montgomery to General Philip Schuyler, December 5, 1775," Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: Fourth Series, Containing a Documentary History of the English Colonies in North America from the Kings Message to Parliament of March 7, 1774, to the Declaration of Independence by the United States* (Washington, 1837-46), IV, 188-9; French, pp. 601, 610-11. After many delays a relief force finally sailed from England in February, 1776, to aid Carleton. See Piers Mackesy, *The War for America 1775-83* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 57.
9. Smith, *History of Canada*, II, 92-137; Alden, pp. 56-7; Mackesy, pp. 79-89. A good first-hand account of Montgomery's assault from the British side can be found in the following letter: Major Henry Caldwell to General James Murray, June 15, 1776; Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, *Manuscripts Relating to the Early History of Canada*, 2nd Series, V, 9-13.
10. The Case of Lieutenant John Starke of His Majesties Navy. MS 149/129, BGR/9. Archives of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.

11. Starke, *op cit.*; Dispatch of Sir Charles Douglas to the Admiralty, June 26, 1776. MS 9639/1 AGC III/18. Archives of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.
12. *Commission Register* IND. 9253, *Half-pay Register* Adm. 25/124. The Public Records Office, Chancery Lane, London, England.
13. William T. P. Short, ed., *Journal of the Principal Occurrences During the Siege of Quebec by the American Revolutionists Under Generals Montgomery and Arnold* (London, 1824), pp. 1-45. Attributed to Sir John Hamilton: Frederic C. Wurtele, ed., "Thomas Ainslie's Journal of the Most Remarkable Occurrences in the Province of Quebec from the Appearance of the Rebels in September 1775 Until their Retreat on the Sixth of May," *The Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, Historical Documents* 7th Series (1905), pp. 9-89. "Hugh Finlays Journal of the Siege and Blocade of Quebec by the American Rebels in Autumn 1775 and Winter 1776", *Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, Historical Documents*, 4th Series (1875), iv.
14. *Ibid.* For the details see the accounts listed.
15. Cramahé had been one of the members of Governor James Murray's Council which helped initiate British rule over Canada in 1764. Smith, *History of Canada*, II, 5-6.

A LADY PASSES

Armorial Kent

She will, of course, be smoothing angel wings
 As she stroked down our little ruffled feathers
 Here on earth. She'll do the needful things
 To liven up seraphic get-togethers
 And listen with that special, caring look
 To saintly bores; then leave them feeling sure
 They're prodigies, while she goes off to cook
 Good food and talk to zest the epicure.

"Quite wonderful with cherubim!" they'll say
 As, child-encircled, she drifts down a street
 So different from that other, lonely way
 From work to empty room; a room too neat
 For her whose heaven would have been to see
 Pipes, toys, endearments scattered endlessly.