

NOVA SCOTIA IN THE CRITICAL YEARS 1775-6

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THAT from 1758 until the end of the American Revolution, Nova Scotia was in essentials a New England colony is, of course, an elementary fact in the history of the province. Eaton, the local historian, estimates the number of inhabitants in 1775 at under 20,000, of whom three-quarters came from Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island.¹ Since the people were in such large proportion New Englanders, and since they suffered from exactly the same restrictions on trade and navigation as the thirteen colonies to the south, the question has been raised why they did not join in the American Revolution. In view of two recent studies of this problem, one by Professor Martin in *Empire and Commonwealth* (pp. 73-93), and one by Miss Barnes in *New England Quarterly* for July, 1931, which emphasizes the attitude of the merchants, it may not be amiss to attempt to discover the exact state of opinion among non-merchant classes in the province during the critical years of the American Revolution.

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The early years of the revolutionary agitation passed with little disturbance in Nova Scotia. The East India Company's tea evoked a few meetings in the townships, some murmurings when George Henry Monk's consignment arrived, and the well-known Smith-Fillis affair.² Yet the tea was landed, distributed and sold without interference from city populace or farmers. It is noteworthy that Smith and Fillis, the objectors, were neither artisans nor farmers, but prosperous merchants. The meetings in the townships failed to excite anyone to action. Governor Legge was able to report to London on April 24th, 1775: "There has not been the least tendency of that sort (disorders)".³ It is clear that the revolutionary agitation had almost entirely failed to move the Nova Scotians.⁴

1 *Halifax County*, p. 188.

2 *N. S. Gazette*, Sept. 20th, 1774, *Can. Arch. A.* 91, p. 19.

3 *Can. Arch. A.* 93, p. 190.

4 An examination of Miss Barnes's views and an investigation of the period 1765-75 in Nova Scotia (by the writer) will shortly appear in the *Canadian Historical Review*.

In January of 1775 Governor Legge entered on the financial investigations which roused much irritation and, with other matters, eventually brought about his recall. Resentment at this aspect of his conduct, however, was confined to the merchant-official class of Halifax. The farmers and artisans were hardly to be moved by sympathy for either party in this affair. In intervals of his war on Newton and Binney, Legge cast an anxious eye over remote sections of the province; and on July 31st, 1775, he wrote his impressions of the situation to Lord Dartmouth. The nearest people to Massachusetts, he declared, those of Passamaquoddy and the Saint John, were wholly from New England, as were the greater part of the inhabitants of the Annapolis river and of the townships Cornwallis, Horton, Falmouth, Newport, "some of which are not forty miles from this town." In those communities "little or no dependence can be placed on the militia." Even in Halifax "many are disaffected." Should a serious invasion be made, "I dread the consequences." He referred to the setting on fire of a hay-stack destined for Gage's cavalry in Boston; stated "since that, the buildings in the navy yard have been set on fire, but timely discovered and extinguished;" and was certain of a "malicious design." He reported that he had with him only 36 effective soldiers, and in consequence suggested the raising of a regiment of 1,000 men, partly in Nova Scotia, partly in Newfoundland. At the same time he explained the straits of the province for bread since the interruption of commerce with New England, and suggested importation from Quebec.¹ Shortly after this despatch was written, the men of Machias in Massachusetts raided Nova Scotia, entered the Saint John river, burnt Fort Frederick and the barracks there, took prisoner four soldiers who were in the fort and captured a 120-ton brig laden with oxen, sheep and swine for the British troops in Boston. From this occurrence, and from Legge's despatch, it is clear that the testing time of popular opinion in Nova Scotia occurred in this summer of 1775. American economic pressure was producing a food difficulty; the governor was alienating leading elements of the population; New Englanders had invaded the border; and the garrison was negligible, no obstacle to even a minor attempt. Sympathizers with the colonies had every motive to revolt, since a rising in Nova Scotia would have forced the evacuation of Boston. "Halifax is the only port from which the army can be supplied", Legge wrote to Dartmouth on August 19th.² All the conditions favoured a revolt; yet none occurred. Except

¹ *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 58.

² *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 121.

for the arson group, no one raised a finger to support the American cause. Nova Scotia remained quiet through critical months in spite of the governor's forebodings of evil, while magistrates examined newcomers, applied oaths of allegiance, enforced an embargo on the export of arms, and forbade all measures to assist the "rebels" or correspondence with them. It is hardly credible that such could have been the case unless the great majority of Nova Scotian farmers and artisans were at least mildly in favour of the Government.

From the summer of 1775 therefore, it was probable that Nova Scotians would not revolt of their own accord. But the prospect of invasion appeared a nightmare to the anxious governor. "I cannot depend on the militia here", he wrote to Lord Dartmouth on Aug. 19th; but adds that one reason may be that he has no pay for them.¹ He had tried the temper of the Halifax men by calling out thirty militia to do night duty in the streets, evidently gratis; and he found them so willing that he reported "the militia here will cheerfully continue to do its duty were the private men allowed pay."² Such testimony from the nervous Governor Legge is conclusive that the militia and consequently the populace of Halifax were loyal to the Government. In the rest of the province "the militia are not to be depended on in case an attempt should be made on this province by the people of the eastern parts of New England, as most of them are from New England;"³ and again "the militia are unreliable. . . . many of them inimical to the measures of Government."⁴ Though he distrusted the militia as a defence force, and with some reason, he expressed no fear that they would attempt a revolt on their own initiative.

The approach of danger now stirred the loyalists to action. On Sept. 5th, 1775, Chief Justice Belcher, New Englander-born, presided at the quarter sessions in Halifax and delivered a charge to the jury "of the most loyal character". He prepared an agreement of association for loyal allegiance which was shortly signed by all the councillors, judges, J. P.'s, grand jurors and others.⁵ In October the Council and Assembly again passed loyal addresses. Soon Legge was able to report to Dartmouth that more than 700 of the principal inhabitants of Halifax County, King's County and Annapolis had not only taken the oaths but entered into an association "acknowledging their duty and fidelity to His Majesty

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 121.

2 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 137.

3 To Gage, *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 150.

4 To Gage, *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 158.

5 *N. S. Gazette*, Sept. 28th, 1775.

and the supremacy of Parliament.¹ As we hear of no counter-demonstration, we may surmise that these sentiments were not repugnant to public opinion in the communities in question. At the end of October a regular regiment, the 27th, arrived from England: and at the same time Admiral Graves stationed frigates in the Bay of Fundy. The governor now had something more than a skeleton force. In December he reported that he had at his disposal 980 men, 446 of whom were fit for duty.² Even this garrison could hardly have coped with a general rising of 20,000 people; but such a duty it was never called upon to perform.

Two matters now caused the governor uneasiness. He had received authorization from London to raise a defence regiment of 1000 men, to be called the Loyal Nova Scotia Volunteers, and paid out of the British Treasury. But he found so few coming forward that he wrote to Dartmouth suggesting reduction of the number to 500, on the plea that two regular regiments had already been recruiting in the province.³ It was clear that if Nova Scotians would not fight for the Americans, they were reluctant to fight against them even in defence of the province. And in November the governor sent Captain Stanton on a tour to Annapolis. This man returned in alarm, and wrote a report which Legge forwarded to Dartmouth. He declared that he had talked with many inhabitants of the townships through which he had passed; and he had found "their principles republican, their views to subvert the English Constitution, their wishes that the rebels of New Hampshire and New England may invade this province in the spring." though somewhat inconsistently their fears were "lest by mistake they join the weaker party." Early in summer they refused to send provisions or vegetables to the troops in Boston, and declared they would never grant "the least assistance to the army which has been endeavouring to enslave their friends and relatives." But when three ships of war had been stationed in and about the Bay, "they immediately despatched many sloops and schooners laden with provisions to Boston for which they received exorbitant prices. Yet they always abused the masters of these sloops and schooners on their return to this province, affirming that they were enemies to their relations of New England." Further, Stanton had talked to several Englishmen settled in Windsor, Horton, Cornwallis, Cumberland and Granville townships, who "universally agreed" that all who had come from New England and Connecticut

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 258.

2 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 294.

3 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 220.

were attached to the cause of the rebels; that in every township where the greater number of settlers were nationals of New England they were always endeavouring to infuse their own principles among all the other settlers, that they frequently declared when heated in argument or intoxicated with liquor "that they would sooner kill an Englishman than a dog", and uttered "many other expressions equally inhuman and base in order to intimidate them.*

Such is the principal document—and the only important one in the archives—which can be cited to show that the majority of New Englanders in Nova Scotia favoured revolt. Yet it contains within itself evidence to modify the obvious conclusion. It is hardly credible that the same people who in the summer refused to supply Gage would suddenly turn to make profit out of that supply as soon as three ships of war appeared. The opinions, political and otherwise, of persons whose actions could so belie their words, would be negligible. Rather we may suppose that there were two groups among the New Englanders of these Nova Scotian communities; one which sympathized with the Americans strongly enough to make itself heard, and another which cared so little for the Americans that its members were ready to make money by supplying the British as soon as they could do so in safety. From the fact that the first group confined themselves to denunciation we may conclude that they represented a minority, though a vociferous one. Further, the fact that the acquaintances of the Englishmen required provocation, the heat of an argument or a liquid stimulus to bring out their American sympathies seems to show that when in their right minds they allowed other considerations to dominate. That the Nova Scotian New Englanders entertained a passive sympathy for their relatives in insurrection is not to be doubted; but it is also clear that they did not seriously contemplate action for themselves. Within a few months Lieut.-Gov. Francklin was to find in these very communities a temper different from that which Stanton attributed to the majority of their population.

Fortunately, we have expressions of opinion from these New Englanders themselves. For in November, 1775, the Legislature passed two important bills, one to call out the militia, the other to raise taxes for its support. At once the men of Yarmouth sent the governor a petition. "All of us profess to be true friends and loyal subjects to George our King. We were almost all of us born in New England. We have fathers, brothers and sisters in that country. Divided betwixt natural affection to our nearest relatives

**Can. Arch A.* 94, p. 273.

and good faith and friendship to our King and country, we want to know if it may be permitted (to remain neutral).¹ Although the men of Yarmouth may be supposed to have chosen the phrasing which would make the best impression on authority, yet this document expresses sentiments so consonant with their conduct that it may be taken at face value, a witness to their perplexity between two loyalties. The Cumberland men also petitioned the governor against "laws made to aggravate our distress" and pleaded their "indigent circumstances." They pointed out that all had been quiet in the Cumberland area except for the destruction of the fort on the Saint John "which appeared rather an act of inconsideration than otherwise" . . . "We do not fear danger from the Americans unless the militia bill is enforced. Those of us who belong to New England being invited thence by Governor Lawrence's proclamation, it must be the greatest piece of cruelty and imposition for them to be subjected to march into different parts in arms against their friends and relatives. Should any person or persons presume to molest us in our present situation, we are always ready to defend ourselves and our property." They pointed out that the Acadians were under the same disadvantages; and they pleaded that if the militiamen were mobilized, their families would die of hunger. In conclusion, they stated that they could not comply with the law.² Two hundred odd signed, with fifty odd Acadians, two of the signatories being members of the House. At the same time Rogers of Cumberland and Archibald of Cobequid protested in the House that the people would rise in arms to oppose execution of the acts.³ The tone of the petition, however, suggests reluctance to combat Americans rather than dissatisfaction with existing conditions in Nova Scotia. Petitioners from Onslow and Truro asked less than the Cumberland men, that none of their militia soldiers be drawn away from their place of residence, ostensibly that they might continue to care for their farms and families.⁴ These petitions do not bear the stamp of Adamases, Hancocks and Henrys, rather of men who accept existing conditions and do not wish to be disturbed. The governor and council refused to allow the Yarmouth men neutrality, but compromised by assuring the people that the militia would not be removed from their habitations except in case of invasion, and deferred raising the money. But even before they made this decision, in that December of 1775 when

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 300.

2 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 328.

3 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 358.

4 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 364.

Arnold and Montgomery had overrun Quebec to the capital city, when Gage was clinging by a toe-hold to Boston, when the American cause seemed triumphant on the continent, Legge had been able to write to Dartmouth (Dec. 22nd): "Nova Scotia is the only settled province on the seacoasts which has preserved itself from the headiness and contagion which has overspread all the other of His Majesty's colonies. I am in hopes I shall be able to preserve them in their loyalty and fidelity"; though he adds "this will greatly depend on a sufficient number of troops." He considered that there was no danger of revolt, because most of the settlements had neither powder nor ball; and he explained that he had persons of fidelity in every province who kept him informed. "All matters are at present quiet and peaceable".¹ It is hardly to be doubted that this quiet and peace corresponded to the wishes of a majority among farmers and artisans of Nova Scotia.

The organization of the militia, however, opened a struggle which tested the strength of the minority and led to the only attempts at revolt. On January 1st, Legge wrote to Dartmouth: "I am just informed from Annapolis and King's County that the people in general refuse to be embodied. . . Every obstruction possible is thrown in the way against arming the militia of the province."² A rumour spread that the governor would summon the militia to Halifax and send them as soldiers to New England. This report "inflamed the country so that many companies refused to assemble."³ Legge at once issued a circular explaining that the militia would serve only in the province, under their own officers, and would be called away from their homes only in case of invasion.⁴ This assurance seems to have quieted most scruples. But soon alarming reports arrived from the Cumberland area, the neck of that peninsula which is now Nova Scotia. On January 14th, Charles Dixon, assessor at Sackville, wrote to John Butler of the Council that the drafting of even ten men and the collection of taxes in specie in his district was impracticable; that the people would sell the British troops anything they had, but if forced into arms they might join the rebels: that some had advocated calling in the Americans, but the majority had preferred to petition the Government.⁵ The preference of the Sackville men for quiet and the status quo could not be expressed more clearly. On Jan. 27th, 1776, John Eagleson

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 94, p. 306.

2 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 1.

3 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 61.

4 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 67.

5 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 108.

of Cumberland wrote to John Butler of the Council of a strong agitation led by Allan and Wethered, of "committees upon committees," of resolutions denouncing as "enemies to the common cause" certain individuals whose acts showed them loyal to the Government. He stated that he and four others were threatened with hanging and the loss of their property, and he asked protection. "There are many timorous and weak persons among us who, awed by fear, are drove to do what they would avoid if they durst. . . . I am ready to suffer for the cause of my king and country as it is a good one.¹ Probably summing up these reports, Legge wrote to Dartmouth on Feb. 15th that he had heard of the Cumberland men holding several meetings and "entering into associations of a treasonable and dangerous nature, no less than inviting an army of Americans into this province."² It was clear that serious disaffection had commenced in the Cumberland area. The disturbance in King's County was of different nature. There Sam Willoughby was heard to remark at the house of Mr. Joseph Congdon about Feb. 1st "that the raising of the regiment would be the ruin of the place, and faith he would put a stop to it, and that he was the mouth of the people. . . . and that he would not have the people of the town so imposed on as to be enlisted and decoyed away. . . ." Nevertheless, Sam effected an immediate volte-face, and "offered to bet ten guineas that he would enlist more men in four hours than all the recruiting officers had yet enlisted. . . . (and said) the dam'd recruiting officers would be the ruin of the township."³ Mr. Willoughby's uncertain opposition was not to be taken seriously, even if tersely expressed.

Meanwhile, the organization in various parts of the province had been proceeding under the personal supervision of Lieut.-Governor Francklin. Writing from Windsor on March 3rd, this popular officer informed Governor Legge that the people were not reluctant to defend the colony, but did not want to see their families ruined.⁴ Five days later, he reported further that 300 men in the townships of Windsor, Newport, Falmouth, Horton, Cornwallis and 200 in Cobequid and Cumberland—the very townships which had so alarmed Stanton in November—were ready to enroll themselves voluntarily, and enter into a formal association under oath for defence of the province.⁵ Soon Legge was able to write to

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 112.

2 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 103.

3 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 173.

4 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 193.

5 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 177.

Dartmouth that 100 men had enlisted in the Halifax area, that 100 Acadians had offered themselves at St. Mary's Bay, that Col. Creighton had secured 70 men at Lunenburg for the defence of Halifax. With the militia of the town, he had in all 400 men to defend it, presumably in addition to the regular soldiers.¹ On May 4th Francklin reported to Pownall in London that, between March 21st and 30th, 384 able-bodied men had enrolled in the townships of Windsor, Falmouth, Horton, Cornwallis, Newport; and by May their number had, he believed, risen to 450, more than nine-tenths of the able-bodied men in those townships. He could have enlisted 800 or 900, the rest presumably in other districts, but for the lack of officers' commissions.² If Francklin's statements are correct, the province must have responded favourably to the organization of the militia. His 800, Legge's 400 and the 100 Acadians of St. Mary's Bay would make up a majority of the odd 2,000 enlisted men which a population of under 20,000 could be expected to furnish. It follows that in 1776 a majority of Nova Scotian men were ready at least to attempt a defence of their province against the Americans. Of that majority the greater part must have been New Englanders.

As is well known, Legge was recalled to England in April of 1776. Germain, who had taken Dartmouth's place in the Colonial Office, turned over control of Nova Scotia to Commodore Arbuthnot as lieutenant-governor, having first revoked Francklin's commission in order to hold the balance between parties. In the early summer Arbuthnot set out on a tour of the province. On his return he reported to London, confirmed Francklin's account of his success in Windsor, Horton and Cornwallis, and described his own investigations in Londonderry, Onslow and Truro. There he had found Scots and Irish, "a strong, robust, industrious people, bigoted dissenters and, of course, great levellers." They had 500 men capable of bearing arms, "the finest in the province" who would, he thought, take the oath to defend it; and he would send Francklin to organize them.³ Thus Arbuthnot too formed an opinion that the majority of Nova Scotians were favourable to the Government.

The minority had yet to make themselves heard; and this they did under stimulus of the militia organization. Some Cumberland men, led by the well-known Jonathan Eddy, attempted to secure armed assistance first from Washington and second from the Massachusetts General Court. Meantime, in May of 1776, two

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 185.

2 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 320.

3 *Can. Arch. A.* 95, p. 127.

American privateers came into the harbour at Saint John, informed the people that the province was soon to be invaded, that the privateers would stop all commerce unless the people joined them, and that if the colonies had the expense of conquering them, they would take their estates to pay for it. At the same time some Indians returned from Boston with letters for their tribe from Washington, and declared that the whole tribe was joining the colonies and would kill some of the people if they refused to do likewise. Subject to these threats, the men of Saint John held a meeting and agreed "since they were neglected by the Nova Scotia Government" to submit to Massachusetts.¹ But the people of Maugerville, a little below the present Fredericton, displayed no reluctance. On May 14th, 1776, many heads of families, being Massachusetts men, voted the strongest resolutions of sympathy with New England, and appointed a committee to go to the General Court to beg its protection and help. This committee presented a petition, "The governor of Nova Scotia requiring them to assemble in military array and by force of arms repel all invaders. . . . (and because of) the exorbitant taxes required of them to support the war against the United Colonies. . . . they find it impracticable to continue as neutrals."² The General Court, petitioned by the Maugerville men and by Eddy, Howe and Rowe of Cumberland, found itself unable to send men, but undertook to provide supplies. Accordingly in mid-August, 1776, Eddy left Machias with 28 men on his invasion of Nova Scotia. At Passamaquoddy he picked up a few men; but at Saint John he obtained little encouragement. At Maugerville he had better fortune, securing two officers, 25 men and 16 Indians; but even with these he had met little success in his attempt to raise the North Fundy settlements. He now proceeded to build roads and establish depots for an attack on Fort Cumberland, commanded by Col. Goreham with about 175 of a garrison. Reports of Eddy's activity poured into Halifax all summer; but Major-General Eyre Massey, commanding officer of the Nova Scotian forces, refused to believe them. In the first days of November, however, Eddy reached Cumberland. There many settlers of North Irish stock joined him, increasing his force to 200 men; only three militia officers and eight or ten inhabitants joined Goreham. It is clear that the invaders had the strong sympathy of the majority in the Cumberland area; and thus they brought about the only revolt of consequence in Nova Scotia during the revolutionary period. Eddy laid siege to the fort, but Gore-

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 97, p. 200.

2 Eaton, *Halifax County*, p. 190 and foll.

ham defended it ably and sent word through to Halifax. Massey at once despatched *H. M. S. Vulture* and part of his garrison to the fort; and the militia of Windsor, in majority New Englanders, turned out to defend the province with "zeal and alacrity" which earned Germain's praise.¹ But the *Vulture* and her company of marines sufficed to drive off Eddy's force. At once the people of Westcook, who had been in arms, pleaded for mercy; and the loyal families requested Goreham not to burn rebels' houses for fear of reprisals. Accordingly, Goreham offered pardon to all who should ask for it within four days, excluding Eddy, Howe, Rowe and Rogers. Most of the Cumberland men accepted the offer. On Jan. 17th, 1777, Massey was able to report to Germain that all was quiet in Nova Scotia.² In the summer of 1777, a little raiding took place on the Saint John river, of no importance to the province. The one attempt at invasion had failed. Nova Scotia was not again exposed to serious danger during the revolutionary war.

We are now in position to sum up. Only at Maugerville and in Cumberland was there serious desire to revolt against British authority. Even these localities might have remained quiet, but for the obligation to take sides represented by the militia bill. Everywhere else in Nova Scotia the people had refused to join the Americans. Most of them had accepted even the organization of the militia for defence of the province, although if the province had been seriously invaded, they might not have displayed excessive resolution in its defence. Certainly the Nova Scotian New Englanders entertained no strong enthusiasm for either side, and desired to keep out of the conflict. But their loyalty to the Crown, though mild, was strong enough to overcome their natural sympathy for their relatives in arms, and to secure their satisfaction with the existing status in Nova Scotia. In my opinion, the mass of evidence goes to show that the majority of Nova Scotians, even of New England extraction, preferred of their own will to maintain their relation with the Empire, letting their relatives do what they would. Perhaps their position may be described as that of tepid loyalty. The men of Halifax, however, seem to have been positively loyal. In any event it is clear that Nova Scotia offers the nearest approach—though not a near one—to a Vendée of the American Revolution.*

1 *Can. Arch. A.* 97, p. 85.

2 *Can. Arch. A.* 97, p. 96.

*The above is no more than a description of the Nova Scotian attitude in 1775-6. The writer feels unable to offer explanations until he has completed further research.