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**Mrs. Hester Thrale (Piozzi) and the Pursuit of her “Nova Scotia Fortune”**

In the Public Archives of Nova Scotia a little-known letter from Mrs. Hester Piozzi to the Halifax lawyer Jonathan Sterns dated 30 October 1790 is preserved amongst a collection of miscellaneous eighteenth-century documents that includes a journal of a British army officer, Lt. Wm. Booth. Perhaps this curious arrangement accounts for its neglect, for Mrs. Piozzi had never been to Nova Scotia and was not connected with the Booth family. At the time, she was enjoying a reputation as a woman of letters in England. Having reluctantly married the Southwark brewer Henry Thrale, she had become the intimate of Dr. Samuel Johnson until her subsequent marriage in 1784 to Gabriel Piozzi, her daughters' music master. The marriage had turned Johnson against her, but after his death the publication of her *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson LL.D* (1788) had made her the subject of much controversy and attention. James Clifford's authoritative biography of Mrs. Thrale (Piozzi) portrays a proud, ambitious woman who, in spite of her literary achievements, never fully attained the social recognition she felt she deserved as a member of the Salusbury family, distinguished Welsh landowners who had served the Crown from the time of the Crusades.<sup>1</sup> Not until she sold Thrale's brewery for £135,000 in 1781 did she achieve, as she put it, "Restoration to my original Rank in Life, and a Situation undisturbed by Commerical Jargon, unpolluted by Commercial Frauds; undisgraced by Commercial Connections . . . ."<sup>2</sup> The delay was partly the fault of her father, John Salusbury, a gentleman and a graduate of Cambridge University, who had made no improvement on the family holdings. With no talent for commerce, he had depended on his wife and his brother Thomas for support, and so time after time we note both in the Clifford biography and in Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi's journal the disappointment that followed the loss of a legacy. Furthermore, the letter to Sterns reveals that one of her greatest disappointments came about when her father made a single attempt to improve his position and that

the matter preoccupied her for much longer than the known correspondence shows.

In 1749, when he was 42 and his daughter eight, John Salusbury was given the opportunity to establish himself. Under the direct patronage of Lord Halifax, president of the Board of Trade and Plantations, his friends found him a place on the staff of Edward Cornwallis, the new governor of Nova Scotia, fitting himself out to build a town in what is now Halifax harbour to secure British interests against the encroaching French and Indians. Not only was Salusbury made a member of Council, he was given the post of "Register and Receiver of His Majesty's Rents" at a guinea a day as well as the land grants, implements and victuals afforded any other settler. And so in the first months of his appointment he was a busy and important man, taking part in the deliberations of Council, supervising the allocation and registration of lots, and administering oaths to purchasers of land. As the town rose from the edge of the harbour, he transferred his office ashore to a room in the new court house, where he set his clerks to work from nine o'clock to noon, six days a week.<sup>3</sup> But Salusbury was no colonist. In spite of these advantages, he returned empty-handed in 1753, leaving his accumulated property undeveloped, and died nine years later. For over thirty years the family talked occasionally about the value of the land documents they held in their hands, and we do know that Mrs. Piozzi had formed an image of part of the estate from listening to her father tell about his years abroad. She wrote to a friend in 1785,

The account you have given me of Dear Mrs. Myddelton's tender remembrance, pleases me almost as much as the thoughts of my Nova Scotia fortune; one's first possession should be the hearts of one's friends. I have, however, written to Mr. Cator concerning it, and hope it may end in something of real value. My father used to talk with delight of a place he called "Dunk Cove," and joked me many years ago about my American estate . . . .<sup>4</sup>

Until now, this letter was the earliest evidence of Mrs. Piozzi's interest in regaining the property; however, the letter to Sterns in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia shows that she had tried to regain it before. She writes,

In Consequence of my worthy friend Mr. Wetherhead's Recommendation I take the Liberty of sending you a Power of Attorney to transact my Affairs in the Province of Nova Scotia, where John Salusbury Esq<sup>r</sup>. styled in the Grants the Hon. John Salusbury possessed a good deal of Land, from

the Inheritance of which I, though his only Child and sole Heiress, have been hitherto kept out of Possession, though my first Husband Henry Thrale Esq<sup>r</sup>. made such Enquiries as were then thought necessary; & though when a Widow I besought my Agent M<sup>r</sup>. Cator to seek for these Grants that were at last put into my hands by the Kindness of Colonel Butler, whose sister is married to John Myddelton Esq<sup>r</sup>. of Gwaynŷnneg near Denbigh North Wales, my worthy Old Acquaintance & Countryman. —His Brother Captain Thomas Myddelton lately deceased, was at Nova Scotia when my Father was; & knew of these Grants, and advised me to send a power of Attorney over to Halifax in the Year 1785. Being then at Leghorn with my present Husband Gabriel Piozzi Esq<sup>r</sup>. we wrote to our Agent M<sup>r</sup>. Cator, who sent the Letter of Att<sup>y</sup> to M<sup>r</sup>. Wylly; but he was gone to another Part of the World, and it is scarce two Months since I received any Acct<sup>t</sup>. of or from that Gentleman, in Ans<sup>r</sup>. to mine written five Years ago. You see Sir how Fortune has hitherto treated my American Claims, of which my Father's personal Intimacy with Gov<sup>r</sup>. Cornwallis, and particular Favor from his Friend Lord Halifax, then head of the Board of Trade—made him excessively fond. You will therefore perhaps kindly take up a falling Cause; & partly from Justice, partly from Compassion, and partly from Friendship towards M<sup>r</sup>. Wetherhead; be active in obtaining Possession of this Property for me; and likewise contriving so to ascertain its Value, that I may know in future what to trust to—& not consider all my Father promised me from that Quarter, as the mere Dream of his unshaken fidelity, & unrewarded Diligence. I *think*, but know not how I shall make *You* think; there is a little Island called by my Family Name, in Consequence of its being a Gift to my Father when the first settlers arrived there, and of his having built himself a Hut or Cottage upon it—very near to the spot he call'd *Dunk Cove*, and parted from the main Land by an extremely small space. Do me at least the fav<sup>r</sup>. to enquire, & by your obliging Activity & service on this Business—bind M<sup>r</sup>. Piozzi everlastingly your Debtor, with all possible Gratitude on the Part of Sir

Your most Obliged Serv<sup>t</sup>.  
Hester Lynch Piozzi

I have got our kind Friend M<sup>r</sup>. Wetherhead to direct my Cover, and doubt not of his taking the Trouble to add some solicitation on his own part, to press your Attention to my Affair.<sup>5</sup>

Though highly rhetorical, the letter fills in important details leading up to subsequent correspondence referred to by Professor Clifford.<sup>6</sup> But before we follow Mrs. Piozzi's pursuit of the property, let us examine some of the claims she makes in beseeching Sterns to assist her.

To begin with, Salusbury possessed four tracts of land in the Halifax area, not as a special favour but as either a direct purchase (not unlike a homesteading agreement) or a settler's grant. Arriving in the summer of

1749, he purchased two building lots in the North Suburb and built a house on one.<sup>7</sup> After returning to England in August, 1751, he set out again the next spring apparently resolved to make a more permanent place for himself, for that summer he was granted first a lot 40 x 78 rods next to the water, near the narrows, then one of over 200 acres on the east side of the harbour, and finally a tract of about 30 acres at Dunk Cove (now Purcell's Cove), a convenient place for landing and curing fish.<sup>8</sup> He had already had a small schooner built, perhaps with the intention of fishing, but left all that behind in April, 1753, when he returned to England for good. Noticing the number of withdrawals and the lots left unimproved, to the detriment of the colony, that summer the Board of Trade made abandoned lands subject to resumption.<sup>9</sup> Unaware of the new policy, Salusbury would have assumed his land remained in his possession and ultimately that of his heiress. In reminiscing he would have reminded his daughter of the valuable estate that awaited her.

As for Salusbury's "unshaken fidelity & unrewarded Diligence," we have ample evidence in his own hand that fidelity and diligence were not his dominant traits. Both his Halifax journal and the letters preserved in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester are shot through with complaint demonstrating that he plainly allied himself with the Nova Scotia expedition under sufferance. Up to that time his wife's legacy had helped him through the first years of marriage (some would say he married her for just that reason), but in 1749 his honour was at stake. Even that could have been laid aside, he said, for the "joy" of being with her, but, as he wrote before the ship left Plymouth in May, "not to be Able to Live up to Thy Rank—without this Prostitution of That Joy Determined Me."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, he portrays himself in the journal and the letters as a lost soul fated to bear out his exile in loneliness and pain, forgotten by those at home and unappreciated by his superiors. In October, when the mail packet brought nothing to relieve his loneliness, he wrote in his journal, "This with Everything almost breaks my Heart but this more than anything."<sup>11</sup> Once over the first winter's "confinement," we find him in September, 1750, determined to return home in April. To his wife he wrote,

for this purpose I sollicitd my Lord [Halifax] Himself in my last I could Hold out no longer—I wish He may not be displeasd at it:—but I put it thus—Not out of any dislike to my situation, but to return with thee and the little wench. In this manner You must second my sollicitation at Every opportunity &c I am so distractd in my self without thee—<sup>12</sup>

That winter he offered to act as a courier, but when April arrived and there was no reply, he again wrote in his journal, "Please God that I may be ordered to go to England this Summer—or I fear I shall break my Heart."<sup>13</sup> To his great relief, a few weeks later Cornwallis promised he would carry despatches that summer, and he wrote in a rare moment of jubilation, "this day has given me more Joy than I felt since I left England."<sup>14</sup> Yet no one mentioned the proposal until June when, observing that his duties were being taken over by others and terrified that the Governor had changed his mind, Salusbury submitted a letter again, adding in his journal,

It is peevish to detain me when He Knows of How little Use I am rendered not Suffered to Act in any thing—scared to think on any subject I mean Aloud and when I attempt it—not attended to but much disliked as forwards &c &c I am so vexed with this uncertainty about going that I am far from Well violent vomiting and purging.<sup>15</sup>

Cornwallis, it seems, had either forgotten or else had been indulging the excitable Salusbury all along. On 18 June, Salusbury noted the Governor had consented but "with some reluctance," and the renewed doubt so terrified him that he became ill and had to be bled by the doctors.<sup>16</sup> He remained in a distracted condition until he boarded a ship and cleared the harbour on 5 August.

In England the autumn and winter were soon over. Salusbury's friends (including Lord Halifax) convinced him to return, and in July, 1752, he was back in Halifax. In his absence much had changed: the town had become tenser, more political, and from his place at the Council table Salusbury observed the merchants' lobby pressing the administration and the new governor, Peregrine Hopson. In a few weeks, his journal reveals, he was already thinking of England:

If I am not very much ill treated in my Office and other Affairs I hope to out live the Winter Here and Get Home in the Spring—which I would not do on any consideration but that I think it is pleasing to My Lord to Get Home in the Spring please God I am deteremined on To day August 27th.<sup>17</sup>

At once he took a dislike to Hopson, but because he was confident of Lord Halifax's support he did not fear him. Instead, he took a detached, sardonic view of local affairs, and the last book of his journal was transformed from a repository of complaint into a vehicle for gloomy, satiric humour with scattered allusions to Pope's *Dunciad* and a view of the world as inferno, a place of unrelieved bondage. The *Dunciad*

(completed in 1743) had portrayed a world in which "Dulness o'er all possess'd her antient right, / Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night."<sup>18</sup> By dullness, as a quality of mind, Pope had meant not only inertness but inconsequential busyness, and in a similar vein Salusbury looked with disdain upon the posturings of councillors, judges and merchants puffed with self-importance, far from the more civilized environment of London or Boston. At the end of a letter to his wife on 16 October he concluded, "Dear Love I can write no More. Here is nothing but Dullness—the very Empire of Dullness."<sup>19</sup> Presiding over the vortex of dullness though not controlling it was Hopson, to whom Salusbury assigned the name "King Log", the abusive term Pope had drawn from Aesop.<sup>20</sup> The allusion suited his view of Hopson very well, for he found that in Aesop's fable of the frogs who desired a king, the frogs were sent a log by Jupiter; but they complained of its inertness, and as soon as they noticed it was harmless, jumped up and down on it and went about their business without regard for the king lying in their midst.<sup>21</sup> As political tension grew that winter, England looked more inviting to Salusbury than ever. At the end of January, after he had been forced to hear a particularly long and arduous case as a councillor, he wrote,

please God—I will leave them and their Laws soon, (for a Dog would not live Here sensible of the total folly of the Whole) and return to my Dear Love—and May the Almighty Protect You both. I hope for my departure from Hence about the Middle of April, and, with the Protection of the Almighty, Hope to see you All Well in England.<sup>22</sup>

This time nothing encumbered his departure, and after he sailed in April he never set foot in Nova Scotia again.

John Salusbury lived only eight more years, largely at the pleasure of his brother, Thomas, who had married well. The choleric temperament which had sometimes made his company unbearable in Nova Scotia complicated the life of Hester as she grew into an intelligent and desirable young woman who was also Thomas's potential heir. While the father slammed the door in the face of earnest suitors, the daughter was forced to devise her own methods of maintaining her eligibility. Salusbury was nearly successful in keeping the house clear of young men, but in the end, it appears, the added worry killed him. In December, 1762, there was a particularly heated argument in which he accused his daughter of concealing a clandestine letter from Henry Thrale (actually a note from her Latin tutor). The following day he was brought home dead. As it turned out, Hester did marry Thrale the following October, but she confessed her unhappiness many years later:

[my father] adored his wife, he doated on his Brother, and his anxious Tenderness for me would often pass the Bounds of common or of *uncommon* Attention.—Yet so he contrived that though we could not help being sorry, yet I think we all three felt as if relieved by his Death, which happen'd on the last of December 1762 by an Apoplectick Stroke. His easy his elegant Gaiety however his Desire to oblige, and utter Incapacity to refuse one any Gratification in his Power, must be for ever remembered by me with Gratitude & Delight; while his Jealousies which made me miserable during his Life, are now greatly vindicated by my Observation that every thing has happened in the manner he predicted . . . .<sup>23</sup>

Salisbury's will made Hester his heir after his wife's death, but it included only the old family estates in Wales,<sup>24</sup> and it does not seem he still claimed his North American holdings.

With that in mind, let us return now to the letter in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia and note that it empowers Sterns to attempt to repossess the land "from the Inheritance of which I, though his only Child and sole Heiress, have been hitherto kept out of Possession . . . ." The last phrase implies that Thrale had once acted on her behalf, though there is no evidence of the enquiries he is supposed to have made. What we do know from the Salisbury papers in Manchester<sup>25</sup> is that soon after *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson LL.D.* appeared in March, 1786, Mrs. Piozzi sent a power of attorney to another Halifax lawyer, William Wylly, but as Wylly had just removed to the Bahamas, the letter did not find him until several years later—June, 1790. By that time Piozzi himself was interested in the prospect of a North American estate,<sup>26</sup> and Wylly's reply made Mrs. Piozzi more determined than ever. After she had made contact with Sterns, the correspondence went back and forth across the Atlantic until the matter was concluded more than a year later.

John Wetherhead, an acquaintance lately returned from Nova Scotia who had first put her in touch with Sterns, wrote Mrs. Piozzi in November to observe that since two of the lots were situated within the town, "the Value must be very Considerable indeed."<sup>27</sup> Encouraged now, she confessed in her journal, "My Property in America is likely to turn out of more Value than I thought it."<sup>28</sup> But Sterns' first letter early in the new year was not so optimistic. The valuable town lots had been taken by the escheator, resumed by the Crown and regranted;<sup>29</sup> yet Sterns was confident his case was strong and anticipated "the Tracts found by the Inquests of Office were in some instances untrue, and in others the proceedings were so informal that they will not stand in the way of Recovery by the Representative of the late Mr. Salisbury [*sic.*]"<sup>30</sup>

He would only require copies of the original grants and proof of her legitimacy to ratify her claim. For the next few weeks Mrs. Piozzi was busy seeking testimonials from friends long departed her circle.<sup>31</sup>

Now that the claim was formally under way, more legal obstacles appeared. Richard Bulkeley, secretary and register of the province, issued a report in May, 1791, showing that all the Salusbury lands had been escheated except the one at Dunk Cove, and cautioned, "This is a Place for Fishing—the Condition of the Grant is, that the Grantee shall always occupy it for Catching and Curing Fish. As soon as he quits that Occupation, it becomes forfeited & the Place is given to another person."<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, Sterns delayed introducing the case in court so as to observe the outcome of a similar suit and at the same time informed Mrs. Piozzi's solicitor that the depositions she had taken pains to send would probably not be admissible as evidence because they had been taken *ex parte*.<sup>33</sup> His next letter, in December, brought the news that in the court's opinion the original proprietor could not overturn an escheatment by legal action but would have to seek remedy in the Court of Chancery (the court of equity). Sterns advised against this further initiative "as that Court would probably not make the Tenant in Possession pay Costs which would amount to nearly as much as the Value of the property in Litigation . . ."<sup>34</sup> While Sterns offered to pursue the matter, Mrs. Piozzi decided further effort would not justify the expense. The large tract at Dunk Cove, together with the "Salusbury Isle" her father was wont to remember, was not escheated until 1816, following a petition from fishermen living there for twenty or thirty years. It was then regranted, complete with what the escheater described as a large rock at the head of a small cove on the western side,<sup>35</sup> surely the fabled "Salusbury Isle." (It was not the only island so named. Returning to Halifax from the Minas Basin in May, 1750, John Salusbury had indulged himself the same way, and had written in his journal, "open Petit Passage at 4 afternoon broken lands with Island till we make Cape St Mary's call one Salusbury Isle.")<sup>36</sup> Now the huge folios no longer recorded the holdings of the man who, ironically, had distributed property in Halifax in the first place.

## NOTES

1. See James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)*, 2 ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); Sir John Ballinger, "Katheryn of Berain," "*Y Cymmrodor*," XL (1929), 1-42; and W. J. Smith, ed., *Calendar of Salusbury Correspondence, 1553-circa 1700*, Board of Celtic Studies, University of Wales History and Law Series, No. XIV, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1954).



2. Hester Lynch Thrale, *Thraliana*, ed. Katharine C. Balderston, 2 vols., 2 ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), I, 498.
3. *Halifax Gazette*, no. 35, 25 November, 1752, 2.
4. *Bentley's Miscellany*, XXVIII (1850), 312; to Mrs. Lysons, 21 September, 1785.
5. Public Archives of Nova Scotia, MG 1, vol. 144, 38 - 42.
6. James L. Clifford, *op. cit.*, 353.
7. Public Record Office, CO 217/13, f. 346.
8. CO 217/14, ff. 55, 58.
9. CO 218/14, f. 243; Board of Trade to Governor Hopson, 12 July, 1753.
10. John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Rylands Eng. MS 530, f. 37.
11. Rylands Eng. MS 615, Book I, p. 44.
12. Rylands Eng. MS 530, f. 39.
13. Rylands Eng. MS 615, Book V, p. 37.
14. *Ibid.*, Book VI, p. 7.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
17. Rylands Eng. MS 615, Book VII, p. 9.
18. Alexander Pope, *Poems*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1965), 721, 11. 11 - 12.
19. Rylands Eng. MS 530, f. 46.
20. Alexander Pope, *op. cit.*, 735, 11. 327 - 330.
21. *Fables of Aesop and Others. Newly done into English, with an Application to each Fable.* Illustrated with Cutts. (London, 1722), 5 - 7.
22. Rylands Eng. MS 615, Book VII, p. 35.
23. *Thraliana*, I, 127.
24. Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 2 Caesar 884, f. 342 - 343.
25. Rylands Eng., MS 601.
26. *Thraliana*, II, 807.
27. Rylands Eng. MS 601, f. 34.
28. *Thraliana*, II, 789.
29. Public Archives of Nova Scotia, RG 1, vol. 378: Records of the Court of Escheats and Forfeitures, pp. 1, 3 and 18.
30. Rylands Eng. MS 601, f. 37.
31. *Thraliana*, II, 807 - 808.
32. Rylands Eng. MS 601, f. 38.
33. Rylands Eng. MS 601, f. 40.
34. *Ibid.*, f. 41.
35. Government of Nova Scotia, Department of Lands and Forests (Crown Lands), Folio A, Halifax County West Portfolio, f. 87.
36. Rylands Eng. MS 615, Book IV, p. 37.