

NOVA SCOTIA PURITANS IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION¹

V. P. SEARY

NOVA Scotian histories have, of necessity, been too general in nature to give particularized attention to all the shifting phases of popular sentiment. They contain accounts of disaffection in the little settlements during the period of the American Revolution; but estimable as they and their writers may be, it requires a Parkman or a Green to give these dry bones life. In the manuscripts written during the period and handed down to us, and in the documents collected by Poole in his *Annals*, we are given intimate glimpses of things as they were. A seeing eye is shown the picture of an unrecorded struggle,—a struggle which amounted, at times, to one for bare existence.

The sea always plays a major part in the history of those lands it touches. Imagine England as a part of the continent! Such potentialities exceed the bounds of imagination. The fact that Nova Scotia is sea-girt is undoubtedly the reason why she is still British. When the fate of the whole province hung upon a very slender thread, that thread was not only slender but composed of water as well; yet it served. Had Nova Scotia been joined to New England, the whole story of the Revolution would have been changed.

The part played in the great drama by the people of Western Nova Scotia must be recognized as a most difficult one. This portion of the province included the settlements at Yarmouth, Chebogue, Argyle, Barrington, Lockeport and Liverpool. The settlers were drawn from Puritan New England. The Puritan has his faults, some of them glaring to modern eyes and modern ideas of tolerance, but lack of determination can never be imputed to him. He was as firm as the Rock on which he first landed at Plymouth. Here then was the situation; Western Nova Scotia was settled by Puritans, sturdy and dour, who were separated from their brethren in New England by a narrow strip of sea.

The smouldering discontent in New England burst into flame in 1775, and the Nova Scotian sky became immediately flushed with its threatening reflection. Legge, the governor, issued a proclamation forbidding all intercourse with the rebels. War developed from

1. Awarded Overseas League Essay Prize of \$55.

a startling rumour to a stark reality. An infantry company was instituted for the western part of the province. Those intended for its composition were to be drawn from Yarmouth and Argyle, and were given no choice in the matter of enlistment, being nominated by Captain Allen of Yarmouth. But signs of nascent disaffection became daily more apparent. The first warning came from an unexpected source. Some Acadians lived at Pubnico; and it was an Acadian gentleman of that place, a descendant of the La Tours, who first apprised the government of the situation. On the twenty-third of August, Benoni d'Entremont preferred complaints against Major Jeremiah Frost and his brother Justice Frost of Argyle, who were attempting to detach the Acadians from their allegiance to the Crown. Three days later Governor Legge's Order on Allegiance was promulgated, and the Frosts were replaced by Major Ranald MacKinnon.

Two months later a further demonstration of hostility was made, which went further than was expected by those who began it. The infantry company, mentioned above, received orders to meet their officers at Cape Fourchu on a day late in November. Some of them ignored the order; the remainder came prepared for trouble. They had appointed a spokesman who announced it as their intention to disregard both officers and commission. The unfortunate officers were faced with mutiny before their men were properly enrolled. There seemed to be no solution to the deadlock, for the officers could not offer a compromise even if the mutineers would have accepted one.

The Gordian knot was severed by the cutlass of a semi-piratical privateersman. Just as the controversy was at its height, two armed schooners, each mounting light carriage-guns and a number of swivels, each crowded with men after the prevailing American custom, sailed boldly into the harbour. Their commander had learned at Barrington of the company's muster and the defenceless condition of the settlement. He sailed at once to nip the preparations in the bud. Some of the mutinous conscripts went on board the schooners, now swinging at anchor in the inner harbour, and soon returned with two boats filled with privateersmen who seized the wretched officers and hurried them on board. To make their success complete, they went to Chebogue as the short autumn twilight deepened, and added Michael Scott to the number of their prisoners. Scott was a subordinate officer who had been too ill to attend the muster, and with his colleagues was taken to Machias to be released shortly after.

Although there was general rejoicing in the settlement that

the new military organization had been broken up, the dangers of the situation were not ignored. A week after the incident an exact account of the affair, along with a request for protection and for permission to remain neutral in the inevitable conflict, was sent to the Governor. In support of the latter request it was stated that such permission had already been granted certain British possessions in the West Indies. This was either a mistake or a direct attempt to deceive the Governor, for no such grant had been made. The favour was denied its petitioners, as might have been expected; and the aid was promised, but was not sent. Liberty of open communication with their friends and relatives in New England being denied them, they carried on surreptitious commerce with the rebellious colonies in spite of governmental displeasure; and although the sympathies of the majority lay with those colonies, they abstained from open defiance. Both Yarmouth and Chebogue, like other ports along the coast, formed regular points of embarkation for escaped prisoners.

How these Continental soldiers, strangers in a strange land, covered the distance separating Chebogue from Halifax, is a matter for conjecture. It was over two hundred miles, of a country at that time heavily wooded, broken here and there by small settlements whose friendliness for the American cause was not to be relied upon. Either the escaped men walked the entire distance, or—having won free of the Halifax gaol or prison-ships—were carried down the coast by friendly schooners. The meagre details hint on the one hand at a lonely and dangerous tramp through a wilderness, and on the other at a swim in the waters of Chebucto Harbour, waiting boats with muffled oars, slipped cables and spray flying from beneath a plunging forefoot. Tinselled Romance keeps from between the lines of each matter-of-fact account.

The story of the voyage of the "Flying Fish" might be taken from a volume of buccaneer adventure. On the night of the fourth of April, 1780, Captain Greenwood of Barrington, owner and skipper of this shallop, was seated in his cabin while the little vessel was lying at a wharf in Halifax. At about nine o'clock a man came into the cabin dressed in the uniform of a Continental soldier. He was followed by a second, and four others remained on deck. They had dug out a passage for themselves beneath the wall of the Halifax gaol, and escaped the lax vigilance of the guards; but being in full uniform they could hope for escape only by sea. They easily persuaded Greenwood to take them at least as far as Barrington, and he immediately set sail, slipping out of the harbour in the friendly darkness.

At sea the captain took every precaution that they should not be discovered. During the voyage down the coast he met his brother sailing for Halifax, and hid his passengers below deck while the ships were near each other. As a result of his misplaced trust he nearly lost his boat and underwent a most extraordinary experience. The passengers mutinied, robbed him of his money, stripped him of his clothes, and put him ashore with one companion. How he managed to survive and to reach home the documents leave one to surmise; but within a month he was petitioning the Massachusetts Council and House of Representatives for the return of his property; and, what is perhaps more wonderful, he finally received it.

His adventure did not deter him, for in 1782 he was busily engaged in petitioning the harassed Council for recompense for his services in giving passage to six more escaped prisoners who were evidently more docile than those of two years earlier. In this petition he affirms himself "a faithful friend to the Cause of America, and one who has suffered very much on account thereof". It must be admitted that he spoke truth. To be left naked on the Nova Scotian coast in early April entailed no little suffering, even if it was insufficient to change his politics.

One large body of Americans arrived at Chebogue in a manner about which there can be no doubt. They were driven there by the British frigate "Milford". The story of the long chase of several days' duration, and of the magnificent seamanship of Captain Burr of the "Milford", does not concern us, interesting though it is. On the twenty-fifth of March, 1777, the privateer "Cabot" of fourteen guns was driven ashore at Chebogue,—to be precise, "on Deacon Robbins's beach". Her officers and crew, numbering one hundred and forty men, made their escape in the boats to the shore, whence they fled into the woods, save one unfortunate wretch who perished of cold on the beach. These men were sheltered, fed, and ultimately restored to their homes by the people of Yarmouth.

On the strength of their services in repatriating Americans, the people of Western Nova Scotia often applied to the House of Representatives of Massachusetts for leave to bring their families and effects to New England; but, having received the passes granting protection from privateers, few used them except to carry on trade. In other words, a means of protection, not American citizenship was desired. Provisions were often scarce, and the fishermen-farmers found the boldest way to replenish their supplies was also the easiest. Trade was carried on continually with the West

Indies, largely in salt, a commodity in great demand in New England. Having loaded his boat with salt or fish, taken on board as many ex-prisoners as possible, and being armed with his pass, a skipper would sail for Marblehead, Gloucester, or some other rebel port. There he would petition the General Court for permission to sell his cargo, to buy provisions with the proceeds, and to depart. In his *Annals*, Poole says, "These petitions were almost invariably granted."

If the sea provided a *modus vivendi* to the infant settlements, it must be added that its blessings were not unmixed. It swarmed with privateers, commanded sometimes by gentlemen, and often by rapacious pirates. A crew of these rascals would come ashore and gut of their contents the very houses in which they, as escaped prisoners, had received shelter a short time before. These raids occurred all along the coast, and were carried out with varying degrees of violence. It so happened that members of such raiding parties in some cases later experienced capture, escape, and finally repatriation at the hands of those whom they had abused.

Such an affair took place at Lockeport on August, 1779. Three whale boats sailed into the harbour and their crews came ashore, where they were received most hospitably. Having sought to cover their tracks by announcing themselves Tories bound for Halifax, they put a guard upon every house and proceeded to loot the village in their own efficient manner. When the tide was favourable they withdrew, taking with them a boat valued by its grieved owner at "fifty pounds, Halifax currency". In the indignant protest which the principal sufferers sent to the Council of the State of Massachusetts, they lay claim to have "helped three or four hundred prisoners up along to America and given part of our living to them, and concealed Privateers and prizes too from British Cruisers in this Harbor". Their zeal for the American cause gave signs of its abatement. The men of the settlement were absent when a strange vessel, believed to be an American privateer, approached. The women and children donned whatever red apparel was to be found, armed themselves with both guns and broomsticks, and lined the bluff. Before them stalked one matron manfully beating a drum, while a few shots were fired from the available muskets. Surprised by the unexpected presence of "troops", the privateer sheered off.

A raid similar to that which took place at Lockeport was made on Yarmouth by the private-armed schooner "Dart". In this case a man named Barnes lost most heavily. He was awakened at ten o'clock in the evening by a body of men with drawn cut-

lasses, who ransacked his house and sailed away taking his loaded shallop as a prize. His property was afterwards restored to him in part, to the value of nearly nine hundred pounds sterling. After this outrage the people of Yarmouth drew up a formal petition for redress of grievances, particularly those arising from the piratical action of the privateers. It contains many such statements as the following:

We call to mind with Gratitude the many favours this Township has received from the Liberty granted to bring provisions here from your State in times of extreme want; when otherwise we could not have subsisted. As our situation is totally defenceless and exposed to the rapine and Devastation of every Person base enough to distress such a People, we most humbly request that you would find some method to restrain and prevent your Privateers from coming on shore to annoy us in the peaceable enjoyment of our property and families.

This document was signed by eighty-two persons, and received the support of a great number of influential Americans who—as escaped prisoners—had received aid from Yarmouthians. It is fair to add that the Massachusetts government issued an order forbidding such raids within the limits of the township of Yarmouth. This order was published in July, 1782, shortly before the close of the war.

When peace came, the phrase used by Abbé Sieyès might have been fittingly applied to the settlements along the west and south shores. They had survived. The whole attention of their inhabitants throughout the war had been rivetted on one thing,—self-preservation. The problem which faced them was that of maintaining their hold of the few rocky acres they had already come to love, without losing life itself. They had found it difficult enough. Permission had been given them by the Massachusetts Council to come to that State, with their possessions, under safe conduct, but they had determined to succeed where they were. The strict may censure their want of loyalty, and to such a critic we can only point out the deeds of the sons as amends for the misdeeds of the fathers. The cenotaphs along the southern and western shores of Nova Scotia display in hundreds the names borne by American sympathizers in 1776:

We pass: the path that each man trod
Is dim, or will be dim, with weeds.
What fame is left for human deeds
In endless age? It rests with God.