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## EARLY PRINTING IN NEWFOUNDLAND

VERY LITTLE has ever been written about the first printers in Newfoundland. Although the island had an active and lively printing trade in the first half of the nineteenth century, information is scarce; the products of the first Newfoundland presses are extremely rare, and none of the account books or other records of the old printing houses survived the fires that from time to time swept through the huddled wooden buildings of the town of St. John's. Most of the publications of the early printers are now known only from the advertisements in their weekly newspapers; and large gaps in the available collections of early Newfoundland newspapers make it even more difficult to learn much about the colony's first printers. Fortunately, however, some information about the introduction of printing into Newfoundland and the steps taken to keep the press under control can be found in the records of the Naval Governors and those of the later Council and Legislative Assembly. This paper will attempt to outline from them the history of the press in Newfoundland from 1806, when permission was first given for the establishment of a printing house, to 1836, when the regulating Act came into effect. By 1806, although permanent settlement in Newfoundland had for years been actively discouraged, St. John's had become a reasonably prosperous town, with a profitable fish trade in the Caribbean and in the West Country of England. It had no printer, and all official and commercial printing had to be done in England or in one of the other North American colonies. In August the leading fish merchants of St. John's accordingly asked Governor Sir Erasmus Gower to allow a man named Walter Charles Davids to set up a printing house; and Gower, doubtless feeling the need for a King's Printer in his growing administration, quickly gave his consent.<sup>1</sup> Davids did not start printing, and I have been unable to learn anything more of him. He does not appear to have been a United Empire Loyalist. He may have been a printer from the West Country, where the St. John's merchants had close family and commercial ties, or he may have been an agent for John Ryan, the King's

Printer in New Brunswick, who was contemplating a move to St. John's and who did establish the first printing house in St. John's in the following year.

Only a few weeks after giving Davids permission to set up a press, the Governor gave his permission, at the recommendation of the merchants, to John Ryan:

Whereas the Magistrates, Merchants and other principal Inhabitants of St Johns have represented to me that the establishment of a Printing Office and the publication of a News-Paper in this town would be beneficial to the Trade of the Island in General, by circulating mercantile advertisements and communicating much useful information to the Out Harbours; And whereas the said Magistrates, Merchants, and other principal Inhabitants have requested I will allow Mr. John Ryan (whom they recommend as a person of good and respectable character) to settle in this town for that purpose; I do hereby grant permission to the said Mr. John Ryan to establish a Printing Office in S. Johns, and publish a Weekly Paper to be entituled the Royal Gazette or Newfoundland Advertizer provided he shall give bond in the Court of Sessions, for two hundred pounds sterling, with good securities, that previously to the printing of each number of the said Paper, he shall submit the perusal of the proposed contents thereof, to the Magistrates in the said Court of Sessions, and not insert in the said Paper any matter which, in their opinion or in the opinion of the Governor for the time being, may tend to disturb the peace of His Majesty's Subjects . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Ryan was not to set up his printing house on the Lower Path (now Water Street and still the main commercial street in St. John's) and, under further conditions imposed in August of the next year, he was not to allow anything against Britain or her dependencies or any comments on the policy of any nation to appear in his newspaper; he was to keep for official reference the original manuscripts of everything he printed and to print nothing without his name "at foot thereof".<sup>3</sup> Under these conditions the first number of *The Royal Gazette* appeared on August 27, 1807.

John Ryan's place in Loyalist history and in the history of early printing in eastern Canada is of considerable interest. He was born on October 7, 1761, at Newport, Rhode Island. When rebellion broke out in the American colonies in 1776, Ryan was a Loyalist, an apprentice in the Draper printing house, where he learned his trade under John Howe, who was later King's Printer in Nova Scotia and the father of Joseph Howe. When the Loyalists left the United States, Ryan moved to Parrtown in Nova Scotia (now Saint John, New Brunswick) and in 1783 set up the first printing house in the territory, using the press and types of his partner William Lewis to produce a weekly paper, *The Royal Gazette and Nova Scotia Intelligencer*. In the following year New Brunswick became a separate colony, the paper became *The Royal New Brunswick Gazette and General Adver-*

tiser, and Ryan petitioned to be allowed to bring a press and type (possibly those of John Mott, his father-in-law) from New York. In 1785, the coveted post of King's Printer was given to Christopher Sower of Germantown, Pennsylvania, and the paper's name was again changed, this time to *The St. John Gazette*. By this time the partners had been fined twice on libel charges, for criticism of land grants and for their comments on municipal elections; after the second fine Lewis gave up and went back to the United States. Ryan, on the other hand, appears to have been suitably flexible in his dealings with authority; he undertook to print much of Sower's official work for him and, in spite of an official reprimand for printing Assembly documents in his newspaper in 1797, he succeeded to the post of King's Printer at Sower's death in 1799. One imagines that he had long coveted the position, with its steady income and loyal-sounding title. He certainly let it be believed in Newfoundland that he had been King's Printer in New Brunswick for many years, and his move to St. John's in 1807 seems to have been inspired as much by his desire to be King's Printer there as by his reluctance to move up the Saint John River to the new New Brunswick capital at Fredericton.<sup>4</sup>

He died at St. John's on September 30, 1847, just a week before his eighty-sixth birthday. His obituary, which was probably written by John C. Withers, who had been his partner since December, 1832, is worth printing in full as an account of his long life:

Died, on the morning of Thursday last, after a protracted and painful illness, John Ryan, Esq., one of the Printers in this Colony to Her Majesty the Queen. Mr. Ryan was a native of Rhode Island, in the United States of America, and was one of the Loyalists who at the close of the war of Independence left their homes in that country, proceeded to the British North American Provinces, and settled down on wilderness lands—choosing rather to endure the hardships incident to a residence in those then new and partially settled countries, than to renounce their allegiance to the British Crown. Mr. Ryan settled on the site of the present flourishing city of St. John, New Brunswick—at that time but partially cleared from the forest. Some years afterwards, the Colony having rapidly increased in population and importance, Mr. Ryan was appointed to the office of King's Printer in New Brunswick—which office he continued to hold until the removal of the seat of Government to Fredericton—whither he declined to proceed. In 1807, being on a visit to Newfoundland, he was induced, by offers of support from the Government and Commercial Body, to establish a Press in this Town<sup>5</sup>, and the *Royal Gazette by authority* was published by him in that year—being the first periodical ever issued in the Colony. From that time to the present (being a period of 40 years) he has held, first by himself and afterwards jointly with Mr. Withers, the office of Printer to the Crown. Mr. Ryan has been a Newspaper Proprietor between 60 and 70 years—and was the father of the Press in British North

America. In New Brunswick Mr. Ryan held a Captain's Commission in the Militia, and in this Country commanded one of the Companies of Volunteers enrolled at St. John's in 1817.—Throughout an unusually protracted term of existence, his character has been irreproachable.—His public conduct has ever been marked by the strictest integrity and uprightness—whilst in private life his many virtues will be long remembered by those who knew him most intimately.<sup>6</sup>

Ryan had several interesting connections with other Loyalist printers. He had been an apprentice under John Howe in Margaret Draper's house, and he was married to the daughter of John Mott, a printer of Long Island, New York. Jacob Mott, Ryan's brother-in-law, took over *The St. John Gazette* in 1799, when Ryan became King's Printer in New Brunswick, and succeeded him in the office in 1808. Ryan's younger son Lewis printed with his father in St. John's; and his elder son Michael became a printer and newspaper publisher in New Brunswick and tried in 1810 to become the second publisher in Newfoundland.

Michael Ryan was born at Parrtown on June 23, 1784. He learned his trade in his father's office and, at the age of twenty, started his own newspaper, *The New Brunswick Chronicle*. It was not a success, and so he moved from Saint John to Fredericton, where he opened a printing house; early in February, 1806, he issued a prospectus for *The Fredericton Journal*, which he planned to start publishing at the beginning of May. The newspaper, the first in the new provincial capital, appeared finally on August 9 as *The Fredericton Telegraph*.<sup>7</sup> It could not have been a success, as he was settled in St. John's by August, 1810, with equipment and financial backing for a new paper to be called *The Commercial Register*. The proposed new paper had "the encouragement of the great majority of the Principal Inhabitants" but not the permission of the Governor, which he sought in a letter to the Secretary:

When I had the honor of waiting on His Excellency . . . some observations dropped from him entertaining a doubt as to the propriety of my entering on such a business at present. Not conscious of any injury that can result to society from a periodical publication under the encouragement of the Magistrates and other principal Characters in the Island, any interference on the part of Government I had not calculated on, and I still flatter myself that his Excellency the Governor will see no reason against my being permitted to proceed with the publication as the term fixed for my commencement has already elapsed and my patrons are pressing upon me to know the cause of my delay.<sup>8</sup>

The Governor, however, immediately told his secretary to inform Michael Ryan that he could not "at all conceive a necessity for two Gazettes in this Town", and permission was refused.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Ryan seems to have either left Newfoundland or gone to work for his father, who was able to continue without any competition until 1814, when a British Government decision took control of the press out of the hands of the Governor, much to the displeasure of Governor Sir Richard Keats, and St. John's got a second weekly newspaper.

Alexander Haire and Robert Lee were the second printers and newspaper publishers of Newfoundland. They had been stopped by the Governor in their first attempt to start a newspaper, but they wrote him again on November 14, 1814, informing him respectfully of their "serious Concern that on a former application to your Excellency to sanction our printing a Newspaper in this Town, your Excellency at that period declined granting our request." They went on to say that they had already imported a press and all the other equipment needed for printing. They tactfully did not mention what they seem to have known about the British Government's new policy, expressing only "the earnest hope that during the lapse of time since we last addressed Your Excellency on this subject those reasons which actuated Your Excellency then to refuse our request may have ceased to exist and that your Excellency may be pleased now to favor us with your high sanction to proceed with the publication of a News paper."<sup>10</sup> Apparently they intended to start publication no matter what the Governor said, but for the sake of peace and government printing contracts wanted to stay at the same time on the right side of the authorities.

No reply to their second application is extant, but Governor Keats' report to the British Government and a later letter from John Ryan both show that permission was refused. But the letters and the numbers of existing copies of their paper also show that they took advantage of the new ruling from London and began in that year to publish *The Newfoundland Mercantile Journal*, inspired, as their application had said, by their "earnest solicitude to promote the welfare of our respectively numerous families in the employment of our time and talents as honest and industrious citizens, and as faithful, dutiful, and loyal subjects."

In December, Governor Keats sailed back to England with the yearly convoy. From his cabin aboard H.M.S. *Bellerophon* he wrote in his report to Earl Bathurst:

From this short view your Lordship will see the encreasing difficulties of the Government at St John's, and the opinion of His Majesty's Attorney and Solicitor General transmitted to me from your Lordship's office, which decides against the Power of the Governor to prevent the publication of Newspapers which seems to settle the unrestrained Freedom of the Press in Newfoundland, and to abridge the Exercise of and Authority of the Governor in a Settlement where hitherto it has been respected in Cases of this and a similar nature, is I fear not at all calculated to lessen the difficulties.<sup>11</sup>

His report also included the information that John Ryan had again been in court on a libel charge, apparently for having printed a pamphlet attacking the unpopular Chief Justice Colclough. Governor Keats wrote with some regret that "though the Proofs were compleat and the charge of the Chief Justice admitted of no doubts, They [Ryan and the unknown author] were acquitted."<sup>12</sup>

The two printing houses seem to have been on friendly terms for some years. On November 7, 1817, a fire broke out near Ryan's printing house "between the Lower Path and Duckworth-Street" and spread rapidly, destroying the *Gazette* office and much of the town. Robert Lee, whose house was untouched, printed *The Royal Gazette* for Ryan until late in January, when the King's Printer had found a new house in King's Place and had either found or replaced his lost printing equipment.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible that the partnership of Lee and Alexander Haire had broken up by this time, and that Lee had completely taken over the business. The imprint of Ryan's paper during the two months after his own house had been destroyed was "at the Office of Mr. Robert Lee, Jun., near the Custom House", without any mention of Haire; and in the early summer of 1818 the Supreme Court named assessors for a case between the two.<sup>14</sup> However, in the earliest copy of *The Newfoundland Mercantile Journal* I have seen (No. 602, November 3, 1825), the printer is Donald M'Phee Lee "for the Proprietor", which suggests the possibility that the Lee family might have been the printers and Haire the journalist or financial backer of the paper.

By 1820, Ryan, whose monopoly seems to have led him to set high prices for his printing, was feeling the competition from Lee, who apparently was taking some of his official printing. He therefore wrote Governor Sir Charles Hamilton to remind him of the privileges of the King's Printer:

Having established a printing Office here in 1807 under the patronage of Sir Erasmus Gower, and the constitutional authorities for the time being, and since then filled the situation of King's Printer during a period of upwards of twelve years, I was given to understand that the whole of the Government Printing in this district would be executed in my Office, the same as in other offices of His Majesty's Colonies, particularly New Brunswick where I had the honor of holding the appointment for 24 years.

I find however, rather unexpectedly, and for reasons yet unknown to me that for the last twelve months a great portion of the district printing has been withdrawn from the Gazette Office, and transferred to that of the Mercantile Journal, thus leaving me the title of Government Printer while my opponent (who commenced his Establishment in direct opposition to one of your Excellency's predecessors) enjoys many

of the privileges which attach thereto at the same time holding a lucrative position under Government as Deputy Assistant Commissary.

I cannot but lament exceedingly this unmerited neglect, particularly at a time when borne down by misfortunes through fires and other Casualties which have rendered me wholly dependent on the very limited Income of my Office.

Having been recognized as King's Printer by your Excellency's Predecessors, I hope and trust your Excellency will not without a reasonable Cause withhold that Patronage which is so essential to its support and maintenance.<sup>15</sup>

The Governor's reply was that he did not know of any official printing that had been sent to anyone but the King's Printer, "except what might have required immediate dispatch"; but he pointedly reminded Ryan that

when the district accounts were publicly examined at the close of 1818, there was a general surprize at the amount of Printing Expenses & several articles for the Courts being charged so high as to make it a question whether they could not be procured much more economically from England. I believe I did or certainly ought to have advised that they should be obtained in future at the cheapest possible rate, how far this has been the cause of what you complain I will make enquiry, but the only redress it would be in my power to give, would be to require a Tender for the best and cheapest performance of the Articles in question . . .<sup>16</sup>

Ryan took a couple of months to come to terms with the loss of his complete monopoly; on June 9 he called at Government House and contracted to print all official forms for the Courts and government offices at the fixed price of 7/6 a quire.<sup>17</sup> Although he kept the position of King's Printer until his death, he apparently never regained his patent on all government printing; he did not print the *Journals of the House of Assembly*, for example, and instructions on the provision of Court stationery in 1827 merely say that the King's Printer is to be given preference in giving contracts, but only if his tender is low enough.<sup>18</sup>

After 1820, the printing trade spread fairly rapidly through the more prosperous centres of eastern Newfoundland. Henry Winton founded *The Public Ledger and Newfoundland General Advertiser* in 1822. In 1827 John Shea, who was later the printer to the House of Assembly, started *The Newfoundlander*. By 1830 there were printing houses and newspapers in the thriving Conception Bay ports of Harbour Grace and Carbonear. And in July of 1833, Robert J. Parsons began printing *The Newfoundland Patriot*, "The Peoples Friend, The Tyrants Foe", a paper that made a specialty of political agitation, under the guiding hand of Dr. William Carson.

It was the political agitation of *The Newfoundland Patriot* that finally caused the imposition of an Act to regulate the press and to halt the flow of anonymous political pamphlets and ephemera. In 1835 there was a case in the Supreme Court,

in which Parsons refused to admit the name of the publisher of his newspaper and was sentenced to three months in prison for contempt of court.<sup>19</sup> The case caused an angry outcry in St. John's and much thought among members of the Assembly; more than 5,000 people signed a petition against the imprisonment of the "high-minded son of a British Naval officer", and the members of the Assembly began to think of ways to prevent anonymous publishing.

Early in 1836 the Legislative Assembly accordingly began to debate "A Bill to prevent the mischiefs arising from the printing and publishing of Newspapers and other papers of that nature by unknown printers, and to regulate the printing and publishing the same". The inhabitants of St. John's at least viewed the proposed legislation "with considerable alarm" and sent in an angry petition against the Bill which was read a first time on Saturday, and a second time on Tuesday, and before the public could possibly have learned of its existence. That beside the exceedingly pressing haste with which this bill is hurried through the House of Assembly, the fact of its having been read a first time within three days of the rejection of a bill of a similar nature enhances the alarm of petitioners at this attempt of an infant Legislature to cramp the rising genius of Newfoundland, and check the progress of its literature, by flinging fetters round the Press. . . . Petitioners humbly urge that the principle of the bill rejected was the registration of the names of the printers and publishers of newspapers, and that the very same being the principle of the present bill, it is highly unconstitutional to introduce it during the session in which the principle was repudiated; and praying the House to pause before they touch a subject so fraught with danger as to shackle the liberty of the Press.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the petition, the Bill was passed during the session and became law on October 30, 1836. The Act, which is still in operation, can be divided into four main parts:

1. No printer may print any newspaper without having first delivered to the Secretary an affidavit, signed before a Stipendiary Magistrate, giving his real name and address and the name and address of his publisher; the name of the paper must be specified and a similar affidavit must be signed for any change in name or ownership.
2. The newspapers themselves must contain the real names and addresses of their printers and publishers.
3. The printer or publisher of every newspaper must sign copies of each number and deliver them to the secretary within three days of publication.<sup>(22)</sup>
4. Books and pamphlets must contain on their first and last leaves the names and addresses of their printers.<sup>21</sup>

It is difficult to understand the petition now, in an age in which most things are regulated. Although some of the penalties of the Act seem rather strict (the



penalty for circulating books and pamphlets without the printer's full imprint, for example, was a fine of £20 for every copy distributed), the Act appears to be simply a regulating measure that would let the authorities know who was printing and who could be prosecuted should the libel laws be broken. It has certainly not always been strictly enforced, and the number of new newspapers that appeared and disappeared in the later part of the nineteenth century shows that it was in practice not at all repressive.

## NOTES

1. Newfoundland Archives, Colonial Office Letter Books, S1, 19, p. 46 (September 5, 1806).
2. Letter Books, S1, 19, pp. 63-64 (September 22, 1806).
3. Letter Books, S1, 19, p. 175 (August 4, 1807).
4. Marie Tremaine, *A Bibliography of Canadian Imprints 1751-1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952), pp. 665-666.
5. It was in fact in 1806; see reference 2 above.
6. *The Royal Gazette*, vol. 41, no. 2264, p. 3, col. 2, October 5, 1847. The Acts Book in the Court House in St. John's records that Ryan's estate was under £700 in value, but his will has unfortunately been mislaid.
7. James Neville, "Fredericton Newspapers and Their Times" (typescript in the Archives of the Bonar Law-Bennett Library at the University of New Brunswick).
8. Letter Books, S1, 21, pp. 40-41 (August 1, 1810).
9. Letter Books, S1, 21, p. 41 (August 1, 1810).
10. Letter Books, S1, 26, pp. 50-51 (November 14, 1814).
11. Letter Books, S1, 26, pp. 112-113 (December 29, 1814).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
13. The fire stimulated local writers, and Ryan published from his new printing house "An ODE, Descriptive of the awful Catastrophe by Fire, In St. John's Newfoundland, on the 7th of November, 1817" (January 13, 1818) and "A Sermon In commemoration of the Benevolence of the Citizens of Boston, in sending to St. John's gratuitous Supplies, after the dreadful Fires of the 7th and 21st of November, 1817. Delivered on Lord's-day Evening, February 22, 1818, in the Congregational Church, by Rev. James Sabine.—With an Appendix". I have not been able to find copies of either book.
14. Letter Books, S1, 28, pp. 427-428 (June 1, 1818).
15. Letter Books, S1, 31, pp. 130-132 (April 15, 1820). Ryan had in fact been King's Printer in title in New Brunswick for only seven years, although he had done much official printing during the whole of his time there.
16. Letter Books, S1, 31, pp. 132-133 (April 19, 1820).
17. Letter Books, S1, 31, p. 175 (June 9, 1820).
18. Letter Books, S1, 36, pp. 126-127 (1827).
19. *The Newfoundland Patriot*, vol. 2, no. 43, pp. 186-187 (May 23, 1835).

20. *Journal of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland* (6th session of first Assembly), St. John's, John Shea, 1836, pp. 92-93.
21. Newfoundland Acts, 6 William IV Cap. XI.
22. This section of the Act fortunately created a fairly complete collection of Newfoundland newspapers from late 1836 to the present day; the collection was moved some time ago from the Library of the House of Assembly to the Gosling Memorial Library in St. John's.