

HISTORY REVISITED - Newfoundland's

Earliest Recorded Letter, 1708

by ROBERT H. PRATT

D. W. Prowse wrote a complete and detailed *History of Newfoundland, from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records* and published his second edition in 1896. Pages 245 through 254 outlined the rise and fall of one Major Lloyd, hero and despot to the citizens of St. John's.

Albert Perlin, the eminent Newfoundland historian, condensed this data and amplified it, when possible, in his treatise contained in Vol. I, *The Book of Newfoundland*, page 180, edited by Joey Smallwood. This knowledge forms the background for Newfoundland's earliest recorded letter.

Lieutenant Thomas Lloyd came to St. John's as paymaster for the garrison in 1700. Becoming Senior Lieutenant in 1705 he assumed command of a reinforced garrison and thus assumed the Governorship of Newfoundland. During the winter of 1705-1706 he succeeded in repulsing the raids of M. Montigny, Lieutenant of the conqueror of St. John's (M. de Subercasse) and Governor of the French town of Placentia, who had been charged with annoying and interfering with the activities of the Conception Bay plantation owners.

As protector of Newfoundland, Lloyd assisted two British warships during the summer of 1706 in destroying six of the ten armed French vessels which had been raiding the coast, thus blunting this irritation.

By the end of 1707, the now Major Lloyd had undergone a metamorphosis, and while still in command of the garrison had become a tyrannical Governor addicted to drink and living a loose life.

The Rev. John Jackson, first resident clergyman since 1699, from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (Unitas Fratrum), a particular target of Major Lloyd, made a bitter complaint about his actions to the Lord's Commissioners for Trade and Plantations upon his recall to London in 1705.

This letter read in part:

"He put in practice all sinister ways and base means he could devise to get money. . . . He ruined families by his tyranny. . . . His debtors would run from their flakes and business in fishing season as from an Indian when they saw him coming, which he often did with his sword and cane in his hand and threatening, if not beating, those he lighted on. . . . So greedy of getting money he neglected seriously the garrison and soldiers. . . . A constant breaker of the Sabbath threatening and cursing those who would attend service, going about the harbour with his fiddle to divert the people, and spending the remainder of day in most disgraceful rioting. . . . Took to live with him a woman of disreputable character who caused the soldiers to be whipped and abused at her pleasure. . . . Took care no account should reach home, and intercepted letters relating to his conduct."

As can be seen the Rev. Jackson had little good to say of the doughty Major, and records indicate that the esteem was mutual.

A convoy or private ship carried the earliest recorded letter from Newfoundland in late 1708. It is dated 22 October and was sent by Major Lloyd to the Lord's Commissioners for Trade and Plantations. Compared with the letter dispatched by the Rev. Jackson an interesting contrariety results.

"MY LORD:

"I am very sensible of ye (the) misfortune I have, to live under Her Majesty's displeasure through a false and misrepresentation made of my behavior now, by some persons whom I cannot but consider enemies to myself, and possessed as I have reason to believe, with no good designs toward Her Majesty's interests, and ye trade in this Country.

"For reasons best known to somebody, how falsely they accuse me may appear to

your Lordship, and all ye World, by papers which ye Commodore brings with him to lay before ye Lord's Commissioners for Trade and Plantations where they lay their foundation of their prosecution, and to which I humbly refer your Honor.

"I hoped and assured myself, My Lord, that when you have considered the universal testimony of honest and discerning men who cannot but truly know my behavior now, and would not (t'is reasonable to think) all conspire to abuse ye Government with a false report of (about) a person so obnoxious to ye Queen's commands and ye interest of themselves and ye trade of this Country in which they have so large demands, were it true as my enemies have shown to represent me.

—TEN—BNAPS—July-Aug

"I hope I say when your Honor has weighed these, you will find reason to believe that I have been grossly insulted and think it worthy that honor and justice, which ye world proclaims you master of, to inform Her Majesty of ye injury done to my character and possess Her with better thoughts of my integrity and regard to her person and commands.

"Pardon me (My Lord) if I say I am proud of ye occasion I have to assure your Honor of ye good posture of defense this part of the country (particularly St. John's) is in, ye Company and of my Command being full now, clothed and in good courage; beside two or three hundred men now, to winter in St. John's, more than ever was known here since I have had Honor to serve now. So as I dare promise a stout defense if ye enemy should dare to attempt us, I am with ye greatest respect,"

My Lord
Your Lordship's most
obedient servant
Thos. Lloyd

St. John's, Newfoundland
October ye 22D, 1708

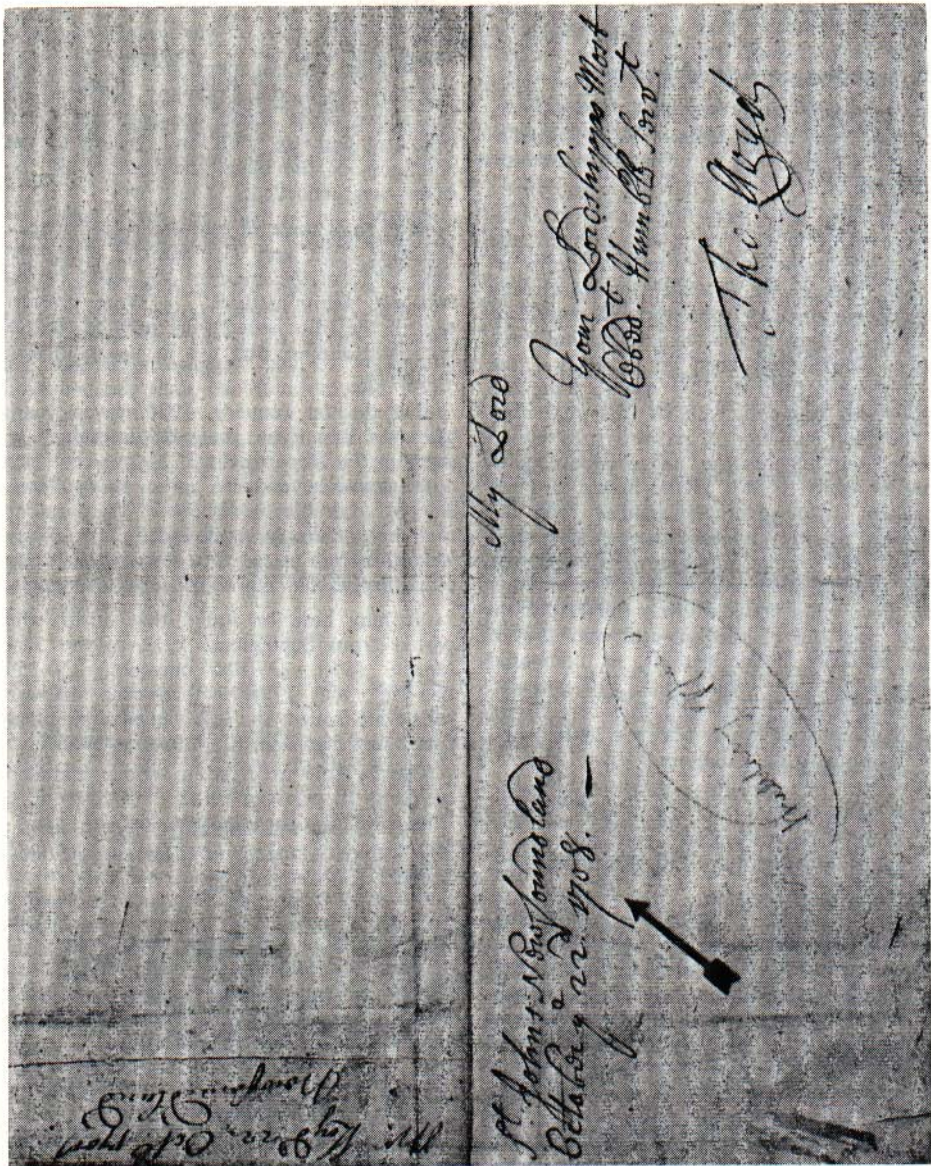
Not long after the letter was received in England, the new year with its attendant revelry made its annual debut. On the first day of 1709 the Major was to suffer his comeuppance. Under a clear night sky and a brilliant moon, while the inhabitants of St. John's drowsed off their night of carousing, a faithful sentry spotted the approach of a band of unknown soldiers.

When his musket failed to fire and raise the alarm, a shout signalled another soldier to shoot his piece and alert the garrison. The raucous signal aroused the fort and soon a scattered volley broke the night stillness. The unfortunate, heavy eyed Major Lloyd, after a half hour of fitful combat was forced to strike his flag.

The French Commander, M. St. Ovide, once again successfully captured for William, the main defense of St. John's, in a manner not related to courage or defiance by the defenders. Remaining until 31 March, when a ransom of \$35,000 was paid, St. Ovide returned to Placentia with prisoners, among whom was the now not so gallant Major.

He was taken to France (probably to save him from a courtmartial) where he later met his end in a manner unknown, but possibly on the point of a dueling rapier. Lloyd's excesses and ignominious defeat did have one benefit. An inquiry decided that no longer was the Governor of the Colony to be the commander of Fort William and early in 1709 the Senior Naval Officer on the Newfoundland Station assumed that position.

The letter by itself is exciting because of its age, and it is a great rarity. When the story behind the letter is known, added interest must result.



The Letter of 1708