

A Brief History of Early 19th Century Cape Breton Colony under the
Governorship of Lieutenant General John Despard (Royal Fusiliers),
1800-1807

In 1763 Cape Breton Island (CBI) was ceded to Britain by France following the Seven Years War. The island had some military significance being the most easterly part of the mainland and was approximated to the entrance to the St Lawrence Seaway. Surveys had found it rich in coal, timber, fishing and gypsum, but early on little was done to exploit these resources. This was done partly to protect British domestic industries and partly because there was no internal infrastructure to work the various commodities. Besides, the colonial office considered CBI as a very low priority and was loath to provide land grants to would-be settlers. The Revolutionary war changed that as loyalist streamed from their northern provinces into Canada. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia soon swelled from the influx and in 1784 it was decided to use CBI as an overflow location for these émigrés, and CBI was identified as a separate colony from Nova Scotia but with limitations. However, the colony was short lived for in 1820 the new colony was annexed back to Nova Scotia.

Politically, CBI had no house of assembly because it was still attached to Nova Scotia for administration reasons. That meant that the Lt. Governor of Nova Scotia outranked the Lt. Governor of CBI. The British government felt that since the settlers were initially few and were a mixture of French and illiterate English that their ability to develop as a colony would be limited and therefore required to be tied to the more established colony of Nova Scotia to facilitate the administrative side of the development. The serious implication was that without a house of assembly there could be no taxation (this of course was an incentive to the loyalists to come) and therefore no cash for internal improvements. It also meant the Lt. Governors had to work through an Executive Council and as time went on there was much infighting among members of the council and with the Lt. Governors. Between 1785 and 1820 there were 10 Lt. Governors of CBI, the longest in office serving 8 years. Part of the problem was that in 1784 only a few loyalists came to CBI - about 500. The majority went to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia or Prince Edward Island and the 'remainder' came to CBI. The Lt. Governors looked to others to come to CBI to increase the population and improve the skill base of the colony. English, Scots, and some Irish arrived at different times and did have a positive effect on the community but, unfortunately, leaders among them also created disharmony within the

Executive Council. This might have developed into a party system if there had been a house of assembly, but in this case antagonistic factions developed within the Executive Council. These could be dubbed ‘loyalists’ and ‘non-loyalists’ for simplicity.

This state of affairs made it very difficult for any Lt. Governor to succeed. The situation has been described as a Lt. Governor having to ‘walk through a minefield, laced with booby-traps.’

Loyalist actually seemed to prefer having no house of assembly, as they were able to maintain their political power for themselves and did not seem interested in creating more rights and responsibilities.

In 1800 CBI was barely functional. Sydney, named after Lord Sydney, secretary of the Colonial office, was the capital at the north end of the island. It had marginal developments that included a drafty Governor’s house on Charlotte Street, one of only three north-south streets in the town that had been cleared of stumps. There were some cross streets that ran from the harbor to George Street, and on the other side of George Street was swampy land. There had been a bank at one time and the Governor’s house also served as a meeting place for the Council and as a courthouse. The Anglican Church, St George’s had no pews, pulpit or a steeple. The troops lived in a barracks in Victoria Park, and the well-to-do lived at Point Edward and Point Amelia.

Outside Sydney were a few scattered farms. To the south lay Louisbourg that had been a functional fort during French occupation but was now a ruin with only a few families living there together with some rotting French cannons. Farther south in St. Peter’s there lived a mixture of French, Irish and Acadians some of whom were merchants. Further south still was Arichat that was by far CBI’s largest town with about 200 inhabitants, mostly fishermen. Their catch went abroad to Spain, Jersey, and Barbados. They also returned home with many foreign imports including black rum that Bretons had a proclivity for. The Bras d’Or lake area was virtually uninhabited. Port Hood on the NW side of the island had a few loyalists and Judique on the coast had a few Scottish squatters that could not get land on Prince Edward Island. There were also some settlers from St Pierre and Miquelon in Acadia who moved to the west coast of CBI and the outset of the French Revolution. These were mostly fishermen employed by the Robin Company, the island’s major employer from Jersey, located in Arichat. Ingonish, near the northern

tip of the island, grew feed for the horses in the mines. Some Mi'kmaq Indians, about 450, also lived on the island as hunters and gatherers. About one-third of them were good with bows and arrows and accurate with tomahawks and they were all Roman Catholic being converted by the French during their occupation. All told the colony had about 2,500 poor and illiterate people. No roads to speak of, industry foundering; the capital, Sydney, in decline with little contact with the rest of the colony. Many people were in the process of leaving and their deserted homes were used for firewood as soon as they left.

Despard, who was a career soldier in the Royal Fusiliers, arrived in June of 1800 with his wife and daughter, both named Harriet. Despard also brought his nephew William. William was the son of Despard's older brother Philip and all these Despards were or had been officers in the Royal Fusiliers.

When Despard arrived he found that there was already an issue about him being there. The outgoing Governor, Brigadier-General John Murray, did not want to leave. He had been in the post less than a year and was already in the midst of a major dispute with members of the council regarding the payment of the miners with rum and payment for education. Murray felt that there was no need to be replaced as he could handle the situation. While waiting for a response from London regarding the issue Despard got to know some of the antagonists that were in support of Murray's remaining in his post. One of these was a long time politician who was also the minister of St. George's Anglican Church, Ranna Cossit. Despard could not understand what the minister was doing in the center of all this political infighting. Surely his job was to finish building up the church which was then in need of completion, and to tend to his flock. When word came of Murray's removal, Cossit became isolated and Despard sought to oust him from the political arena. He contacted Bishop Charles Inglis about this seeming conflict of interests of his minister. Eventually, Inglis arrived in CBI and convinced Cossit that his activities were becoming problematic and he needed to move to a new parish. This he eventually did but it must have been very hard for him. Most of his surviving 10 children had been born there, his wife was buried there and his roots were there too. He moved to Yarmouth.

One of Despard's first jobs was try to sort out the issue with the mines. For this he employed the current mine manager and solicitor-general William Campbell to conduct a study for him. Unfortunately, Campbell's interests in

running the mine was for personal gain and he set out to convince Despard that government involvement and duties would eat into any profits. An advertisement was then placed in the Nova Scotia Royal Gazette for an opportunity to lease the mine for a seven years term starting in 1801. There were no takers and even though the mine was still making some profit under government control, Despard leased the mines to Campbell. It was a disaster. production dropped and Halifax went short of coal. There was a serious move to develop an Acadian field at Pictou. Despard scrambled and fired Campbell replacing him with John Ritchie, a Halifax merchant. The CBI mines prospered and production went up satisfying the needs of Nova Scotia without opening the Pictou field near New Glasgow. Production increased to almost 38,000 bushels a year. The mines level was extended and the pier at the mines extended and strengthened to serve bigger vessels. Exports now included Newfoundland and money began to pour into the colony coffers.

The land question arose next. Early loyalist settlers had been given free land grants. Non-loyalists that could not afford grants were given leases that expired upon their deaths. In the 1780's the government stopped issuing land grants, only leases could be obtained. The Pitt government, in England, hoped to push up the price of land and make bigger profits, but it only turned people away. The policy was a failure. Despard perceived that much of the land granted had not been improved or settled, particularly around the Mira River to the south-east of Sydney, encompassing about 100,000 acres. So he set up an escheats court which was empowered to take over land that had been unsettled. In 1802 thousands of acres became available when none was available in Nova Scotia or Prince Edward Island.

The infrastructure of the island was still deplorable. Better roads, doctors, teachers mills and bridges were needed, but without a house of assembly no taxes could be imposed unless authorized by the British Government. Despard reckoned that Bretons consumed about 10,000 gallons of rum a year. If a tax could be imposed of a shilling or two per gallon, then roads could be easily developed. He convinced officials in Westminster that unless a tax were imposed that the money would have to come from British taxpayers and that w/o roads progress in CBI would grind to a halt. The government agreed to the tax but it was called a duty in order to safeguard the 'health and morals' of the community. The colony prospered and only needed new settlers.

The Despards usually hosted a New Year's Ball at the Governor's House.

This was an open assembly mixing both military and civil persons. There was plenty of dancing and hors oeuvres. Ladies and gentlemen also met to socialize separately, at specific times during the evening. More common were smaller gatherings of the elite of local society. Fancy dresses were the order of the day for the ladies and the Despard's home was usually decorated gaily with local flora and fauna as well as roses. Ices and other refreshments were handed about between the dances. Elegant suppers were then served and the ladies would withdraw relatively early leaving the men to chat with the General over a bottle. Card parties were also a favorite, but seem to have been more reserved for the ladies. Etiquette was also important as you were not expected to dance with your spouse and also to mingle for suppers. The general was also fond of festivities on St. Patrick's Day & green was the expectation for part of the ladies attire.

In August of 1802 the 245 ton ship, 'The Northern Friends,' arrived in Sydney Harbour. There were 415 Scots on board that had probably heard of the available land from friends or relatives in Judique. Anyway they wanted to settle. Despard was overjoyed at the event and wanted to capitalize on it immediately. He sent for the councilors who were not immediately available because of the unexpectedness of the arrival. The group agreed to provide the would-be settlers with a cash incentive to stay rather than start looking elsewhere. The duty money was used to provide each man with 40 shillings, each woman with 30 shillings, each child over 12 with 20 shillings and each child under 12 with 15 shillings. The new arrivals were given land near Mira and Sydney and were soon working the land. Despard's foresight stopped the Scots from leaving and they were happy with their situation and sent messages back to Lewis, Harris, Uist and Skye about the new land that was very much like their own. More Scots began to arrive and Despard saw to it that grist mills were developed to offset the high imports of food products. Land petitions increased and many Scots were willing to accept leases never having owned land before. By 1805 things were looking up - a new market was opened in Sydney for selling local produce. Domestic food production was up dropping imports, and St George's church finally received a grant to complete the pews and a steeple.

By 1803 Chief Justice Dodd was forced to move his court to Arichat to hear cases due to the swelling of the population on the west coast. In 1806 the executive council also met in the same town. Judique, Port Hood and Margaree Forks became centers of the Scots Gaelic language in what was now a trilingual island with French predominating and English coming in

third. In five years the colony's population doubled. The Scots also brought the shipbuilding trade with them setting up their trade in Port Hood, Mabou, and Margaree Harbour. By 1805 the number of sail ships had jumped from 217 to 267 and most were small schooners that carried coal from Sydney to Halifax or Newfoundland. The domestic coal fleet saved money at home for other projects.

When Despard left the Colony in 1807 his legacy was one of expectation for the future. He had helped the colonists cross the threshold to a better way of life and sheared off many of its historical albatrosses. As Morgan (2000) says "His steady, hard-working, honest disposition shows him to be a man of great ability - one of the few administrators in Cape Breton's 36-year existence as a separate province of whom Cape Bretons can be proud." He also alludes to Oswestry in Shropshire, England where Despard retired and eventually died in 1829. There is a pre-Norman church there, St Oswald's, and the front of the church yard is described as neat and tidy where the grave makers were well-cared for. In contrast the grave markers at the back of the church are overgrown with 'holly, ivy and leeks 'and seem forgotten. Here the cracked marker of John Despard lies unkept and unnoticed yet his effect on the early developments of Cape Breton cannot be forgotten. His achievements are all the more remarkable since he was suffering from stomach cramps that were probably bleeding ulcers that were thought to have eventually killed him in 1829.

As an aside, during Despard's tenure as Lt. Governor his notorious younger brother Edward was being tried in London for his involvement in a plot to kill the king. The evidence against Edward was dubious, at best, but his association with known Irish revolutionaries of the time was to be his undoing and he succumbed to the hangman's noose in 1803. This unfortunate family affair happened right in the middle of Despard's tenure as Lt. Governor and undoubtedly took a toll on him and his family and probably contributed to his ulcerated stomach. Later, Despard was promoted to the rank of general in His Majesty's Army and it was widely thought that he did not receive a deserved knighthood for his outstanding service as a soldier and statesman to the realm because of his wayward brother Edward.

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