

An Extract from the Memoirs of Alexander Drysdale, Ensign in the New Brunswick Regiment, 1804-1806

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Volume 5, Number 1, Autumn 1975

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad5_1doc01

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Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Drysdale, A. & Gavin, J. B. (1975). An Extract from the Memoirs of Alexander Drysdale, Ensign in the New Brunswick Regiment, 1804-1806. *Acadiensis*, 5(1), 146-149.

Documents

An Extract from the Memoirs of Alexander Drysdale, Ensign in the New Brunswick Regiment, 1804 - 1806

This extract is taken from the memoirs of Alexander Drysdale, a generally unknown ensign in the New Brunswick Regiment, 1804-1806, and later a Lieutenant in the 27 Regiment of Foot Soldiers. His account of his brief stay in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, written in a boyish, simple manner, is important in so far as it presents life in the colonies at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

He was born in 1784, the younger son of William Drysdale of Roxburghshire, Scotland, and Barbara Walker. Alexander became interested in a military career, and was appointed at the age of twenty an Ensign in the New Brunswick Regiment. His first assignment before leaving for New Brunswick was to convey a party of Scottish recruits from Scotland to the Isle of Wight, the *Scots Highlanders* as they were called. This was an extremely difficult assignment, as Drysdale admitted, and only his natural optimistic outlook helped him survive. Along with appalling travel and accommodation conditions, none spoke English; they also had seventeen women and forty-nine children in the group. Drysdale was very glad to be rid of them.

In June 1805 he left England for New Brunswick and here lived happily, as he recounted, until May 1806. On returning to England he received his commission of Lieutenant in the 27 Regiment of Foot Soldiers, and very soon afterwards journeyed to Sicily and Malta where he stayed for over a year. In 1810 he was appointed to organize the Calabrian Corps, and went to Spain where he remained until 1814. Having served by this time for ten years, he requested leave to travel for a holiday in Italy — he had an audience with Pope Pius VII, 20 September 1814 — and afterwards in France. Impressed with French life, he stayed for two years.

The close of the Napoleonic wars meant unemployment for Drysdale, so he returned to England to settle for a time with his married brother, William, at Tosson near Rothbury in Northumberland. His parents had earlier moved from Scotland to spend their remaining years with William; they both died here during Alexander's absence in Europe. His memoirs end at this time, so no record remains of what, if any, his occupation was for the remainder of his life. He married his cousin, Barbara Nisbett; they had no children. Alexander died in 1854 and was buried in Edinburgh.

Except for some minor punctuation changes to avoid ambiguity, the extract remains in its original form.

1st July 1804. I was first appointed an ensign in the New Brunswick Regiment, but my appointment did not appear in the Gazette until Sept. the same year.

In Jan. 1805 I got leave of absence to go to Scotland. In Feb. I set out for London in the Royal Charlotte . . . I soon left town for the Isle of Wight.

About the 10th June we embarked upon the *William Sibbard* Transport — a wretched brig. We sailed about the 20th. The *Jamaica* frigate was our convoy. Our passage across the Atlantic was long & tedious, and was rendered truly unpleasant by the scarcity of provisions, but much more so by the quarrels we had with one another.

We proceeded on our way, coasting the Barren & Uninhabited shores of Nova Scotia. We arrived at Liscomb harbour. I shall never forget it; it is a beautiful bay which runs far up into the country. There were two Fisherman's houses or Plantations on one side the harbour & one on the other. We landed on the side where the two houses were. The inhabitants were overjoyed to see us. They provided us with milk & everything they had. We ate, drank and danced in their houses. I never enjoyed anything si much in all my life. It was about the latter end of July. The country was entirely covered with woods, (old as the hills), except a small spot which had been cleared. We had been long at sea, living on salt provisions. The woods were everywhere filled with ripe large raspberries, strawberries & gooseberries — conceive the luxury.

At a little distance there was a marsh which teemed with birds of different kinds, of most extraordinary appearance. They were very tame. We frequently made excursions up the bay in our boat. In one of them we fell in with a party of Indians. They were the first I had seen — most extraordinary people. They lived on fish & game. We saw the flesh of a deer which they had dried in the sun. Their habitation was a wigwam; it consisted of three sticks tied together at the top, and covered with the dried bark of trees which they always carried with them. We got two ducks from them. Mr. Roche promised to pay for them but did not. The Indians came to the ship in their canoes for payment, but never got any. Their canoes were made of birch bark, long & light.

During the time we were at Liscomb we generally drank tea on shore every night. Coming on board one night from the solitary house, we saw a most extraordinary light which flew about amongst the trees. I wished to land to see what it was, but the sailors & Mrs. Roche were frightened & would not.

We left Liscomb harbour & continued our voyage. In the Bay of Fundy (sic) we stopped some time at Briar Island. It was a pretty place but I did not go ashore. The tide is rapid in the bay. On approaching St. John several small boats came off to meet us. We saw the shore crowded with people.

We landed on the 9th Sept. 1805 & were received by the hospitable worthy old Capt. Sutherland, the party marching up to the fort where he resided. We were very happy at St. John. We often dined out with the inhabitants who are the most hospitable people in the world, & lived luxuriously. We danced, we sang, & the house was like our own. His daughter was a most amiable girl. The Miss Bishops (sic) were also charming girls; Mr. Black had married the prettiest of them. He, his worship Mayor Campbell, Commissary Robinson & several other gentlemen constantly treated us with most sumptuous dinners.

St. John stands at the mouth of the river of the same name. It is intended for a large place, but it is still in its infancy. The houses are mostly built of wood, notwithstanding which they clean their chimneys by setting them on fire!

After some time we embarked on two River Barques for Fredrickton. We left St. John & passed the falls of the river the same evening. The passage was delightful, the river was as smooth as a lake. The shores were beautiful, the whole country on each side being one immense forest with the exception of a few fields close to the banks. We passed many pretty islands in the river. We were one night overtaken by a most dreadful storm of thunder & lightning. The lightning played about the mast head.

On our arrival at Fredrickton we were received by all the officers of the corps, with our Colonel (General Martin Hunter) at their head. We dined with him. The General is one of the best of men. Col. Johnstone & Major McCarthy were not inferior to him. I was very happy at Fredericton. The Inhabitants much resemble those at St. John. Instead of inviting us to dinner, however, we were always asked to Gregories, viz, to drink tea, dance, sup most sumptuously & afterwards to drink & sing.

Our time passed away very agreeably. During the Autumn we used frequently to visit our friends, the Chief Justice, Mr. Rainsford, & the family of the Windsors who resided a few miles up the river, where they had excellent houses & large properties.

When the winter set in I was constantly on the river skating; never was there a finer ice for the purpose. For 200 miles there was nothing to interrupt your progress. The post-man from St. John travelled on skates to Fredrickton, the distance I believe being nearly 100 miles. The woods during the autumn were beautiful, but it was for a very short time. The frost set in with inconceivable severity. No thaw, no intermission ever took place. In a fortnight from the time it had commenced, wagons had crossed the immense river St. John! For those who have not been in so northerly a climate it is impossible to form an idea of the cold. In our barracks nothing could keep us warm. One morning I sat down to breakfast before a fire large enough to roast an ox. The milk was brought warm from the cow; before I had done breakfast it was frozen! Strong wines froze in bottles. The snow fell at times in a surprising manner, and as it never melted, it at last became of an extraordinary depth.

Notwithstanding which, I have seldom passed a happier winter. We had little or no Regt. duty to do. I paid a company, which gave me some employment & 2/- a day. There were many Indians in the neighbourhood. They used frequently to come into Fredrickton. At a Ball (one of the grandest I ever saw) given by Gen. Hunter on hearing of the battle of Trafalgar, two of the King's daughters were present. They danced and sung in their own country's costumes. It was truly savage. Judge Clapper danced with them. The only music was the constant repetition of the words "hu ha" in which the dancers all joined with great eagerness. When the Ball was over, nothing would induce them to eat anything for supper, although they sat at table. They afterwards slept in a wood; they would not sleep in a house.

The infamous and unfortunate Roche was accused of many crimes. A general Court Martial was ordered to assemble at St. John. It was an unpleasant business. He was broke.

We returned to Fredericton in our slays. Shortly afterwards I received letters from home announcing my appointment to be a Lieut. in the 27th Regt. How happy was I on the occasion.

Having bid adieu to Col. Johnstone my worthy & much esteemed Commanding Officer, & all my other friends, I left Fredrickton about, I believe, the beginning of March. We travelled down the river as on a former occasion on our slays, and on our arrival took up our abode at Madame Devaux, where we were to remain until the season was far enough advanced to take measures for a passage to England. Our friends at St. John still paid us the same attention.

It became necessary to think of setting out for England. At first I intended to return by way of New York, but having heard of some disturbances at that place, I determined upon proceeding to Halifax to take a passage.

It was about the beginning of May 1806, that having taken my last farewell of Capt. Sutherland, his worthy family and all other friends, I embarked on board a schooner near the head of the Bay of Fundy. It was a Sunday morning that I left the river St. John, on whose banks I had spent so many happy hours. Our passage was short & rough. Windsor is, I believe, about 150 miles from St. John. We reached it on the second day. It is a beautiful little village. We stopped two days at it. Early on the 3rd, Bath & I set out on foot for Halifax. The road lay all the way through the woods. It was only a narrow path cut out of them. The scenery was wild beyond all description. We often passed beautiful rivulets swarming with fish. The road was long, for we walked 25 miles the first day — but we were young. We saw no human habitation by the way. We met with several parties of Indians who were very civil. Several of them accompanied us part of the way, & when

we stopped, much fatigued at "The Half-way House", for the first night, they betook themselves to sleep in the woods. Our quarters was a kind of inn. When we asked for dinner we were told that there was nothing in the house, but that a boy should immediately be sent to catch us some fish, in the little pool or lake that washed the walls of the house under the window of the room where we sat. The intelligence was far from being agreeable to us; but there was no remedy but patience. To our surprise, in less than half an hour a most sumptuous dish of the finest red trouts I ever saw was put on the table, which we washed down with a bottle of excellent claret. We fared luxuriously. At day break in the morning we resumed our journey. We found several of our Indian friends still asleep under the bushes. The morning as delightful and we walked on singing and exceeding happy. We arrived at Halifax in the evening & took up our abode at the Jerusalem Coffee House. About 6 or 7 miles before we came to the city, we passed a country house which had been built by the Duke of Kent.

The Jerusalem was a good house. Miss Galligar, the landlady's daughter as a fine girl. We always drank tea with her, and had frequently dances. She played on the Pianoforte and sung prettily.

After spending about three weeks very pleasantly there, I engaged a passage for England on the Brig *Betsy*, Capt. Hamsley, belonging to and bound to Newcastle upon Tyne. We sailed from Halifax on the 4th of June 1806. At the moment I did adieu and left the American shore for ever, the troops were firing a *Feu de Joie* in honour of the day. We soon were out of the Bay. The sea was rough. I was exceedingly sick and distressed. I went to bed & saw America no more.