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# Some Reflections of Rebellion/Patriot War in Upper Canada, and the Resulting Aftermath in Van Diemen's Land

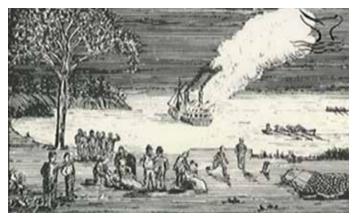
By: John C. Carter

#### Introduction:

ne hundred and eighty-five years ago, all was not quiet, nor peaceful in Upper Canada. It was a time of tumult and turmoil, uneasiness and unrest, the likes that the government and the population of that province had never been seen before or since. Between December 1837 and December 1838, at least 14 armed incursions into Canada from the United States, would be made by members of the Patriot Army. These actions would cause dissention and discord, fear and profound worry on both sides of the border for a period of 12 months, and constitute the 1838 Upper Canadian Rebellion/Patriot War.

#### **BACKGROUND:**

After the initial rebellions against British rule in Upper and Lower Canada in 1837 were put down, many of the rebels fled to adjoining American border-states. There, U.S. sympathizers and supporters augmented the ranks of the Patriot cause. Their ambitions were not dead, and early in 1838, convinced of the desire for a popular rising against what they perceived as British "tyranny and oppression," the rebel forces banded together to renew their efforts to "liberate" the Canadas from British rule. This would signal the beginning of the Patriot War in Upper Canada.



Brockville,Ontario artist, Frederick C. Curry's drawing of his depiction of the burning of the steamer Sir Robert Peel. Credit: Library & Archives of Canada.

Feelings about these events varied, and were expressed by various period observers. Robert Marsh, a Patriot soldier from Niagara Falls, New York, described the mood on the border at this time. In his published narrative, he wrote that; "It was all excitement in Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit and all along the frontier...the whole country was awake; many and strong were the inducements for young as well as married men to engage in so glorious a cause." Subsequently, various armed invasions and rebellious acts occurred. These incursions ignored neutrality laws established by the federal government of the United States, and violated the sovereign authority of Canada.

Others made comments about these events. Irish writer and traveller, John Robert Godley, provided an international perspective regarding border tensions. In a published letter he stated; "I had no idea until I came to this country [Canada] of the extent to which the operation of the



A November 6, 1840 sketch of Todmorden Mills, U.C. farmer and brewer William Helliwell, by Rochester, N.Y. artist J. DaLee. Helliwell kept diaries for many years which described his life, including comments on the Patriot War. Credit: Bill Helliwell, Cheticamp, Nova Scotia.



Period woodcut of the Battle of the Windmill by an unknown artist, commissioned by William Lyon Mackenzie, and published in his Mackenzie's Weekly Message (July 30, 1859).

sympathizers were carried at the time of troubles in Canada; from all parts of the Union adventurers flocked to the border (literally in thousands), fully persuaded that the scenes of Texas were to be acted over again, and that the British dominion in America was at an end... these vagabonds perservered for a long time in predatory expeditions, taking advantage of the scarcity of troops in the Upper Province, and of the facilities of escape afforded by the river." American author Nathaniel Parker Willis, noted that; "The United States contained many individuals disposed to sympathize deeply with the Canadians, and many restless spirits were inclined to join them, allured by the promise of large lots of confiscated land."

Even Queen Victoria, the recently crowned young monarch of the British Empire, weighed in on the debate. In an address to the British House of Lords, she said; "I have to acquaint you, with deep concern, that Lower Canada has again been distressed by insurrection, and hostile incursions into Upper Canada by certain lawless inhabitants of the United States of North America. These violations of the public place have been promptly suppressed by the valour of my forces and the loyalty of my Canadian subjects. The President of the United States [Martin Van Buren] has called upon the citizens of the Union to abstain from proceedings so incompatible with the friendly relations which subsist between Great Britain and the United States."

## THE EVENTS:

During this period, two incursions took place in the Niagara River region (at Navy Island and Short Hills), four were evidenced on Lake Erie and the Detroit River (at Bois Blanc Island, Fighting Island, Pelee Island & Windsor), four happened in the area of the St. Clair River (at Goderich, Sombra, Nugent's Landing & Bear Creek), and four occurred along the St. Lawrence River. The events on and along the St. Lawrence River, included the invasion of Hickory Island, the burning of the steamer *Sir Robert Peel*,

the raid on and plundering of Amherst Island/Isle of Tonti, and the Battle of the Windmill at Prescott.

In the fall of 1837, Sir Francis Bond Head, Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, had received a request from the Commander in Chief of Armed Forces in British North America. Sir John Colborne asked Bond Head to send troops to Lower Canada, to assist him in putting down the Patriote uprising there. Believing that rebel leader William Lyon Mackenzie had "completely failed" in his armed efforts and uprising at Toronto in December 1837, Bond Head sent almost all regular troops in the province to Lower Canada. The only few that remained were a small detachment of the 24th Regiment which were stationed at Bytown (now Ottawa). Bond Head wrote to then British Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Lord Glenelg [Charles Grant], and included a copy of his October 17, 1837 response to Colborne. It read in part; "I consider that the Province [Upper Canada] can dispense with as many troops as you may deem it desirable to require." This action would prove to be a monumental mistake, as it left Upper Canada virtually defenceless from attacks by malcontents and Patriot invaders from the United States. Serious and rebellious consequences would occur as a result of Bond Head's grievous error.

Rebel leader William Lyon Mackenzie had fled from Toronto, and escaped to Buffalo. His arrival there was noted in the December 23, 1837 issue of the *New*-Yorker; "His appearance in Buffalo was hailed with great enthusiasm, and was the signal of accelerated movements on the part of the inhabitants." There Mackenzie rallied disaffected Canadians and American sympathizers to join the Patriot cause. They soon established themselves on the Canadian Navy Island, situated in the Niagara River, and began preparing to launch an attack on Chippewa.

Fervent loyalist and Todmorden Mills', U.C. brewer William Helliwell, recorded the following about this event, in his diary entry for December 22, 1837. He wrote that he; "Was in Toronto today. Strange rumours of Mackenzie having several hundred men and field pieces on Navy Island and that they [government forces] had taken a 32 pounder from Niagara to cannonade him from the Canadian shore." The following day, Helliwell noted that bomb shells, congreve rockets and mortars were being taken to Chippewa to bombard the rebel positions. In addition, a large force of militia had been sent from Hamilton to join what was estimated to be 2,000 volunteers who had assembled on the Niagara frontier, to repulse the Patriots and to drive them off Navy Island.

Soon after the evacuation of Navy Island, American General Winfield Scott and New York Governor William



Canadian maritime artist Peter Rindlisbacher's depiction of the schooner Anne incident off Bois Blanc Island in the Detroit River, January 1838. Credit: P. Rindlisbacher, Katy, Texas.

L. Marcy arrived on the state's northern frontier. They were there to assess the current situation and to take any immediate action which might be required. Their impact was noted in the January 20, 1838 edition of the *New-Yorker*. An informative article concluded that their presence; "...has had a most salutary and pacifying effect... Everything in reason is doing and will be done to maintain the neutrality of our territory and repress the belligerent spirit of the frontier towns and counties." But would their efforts be effective or enough to achieve these goals? Only time would tell!

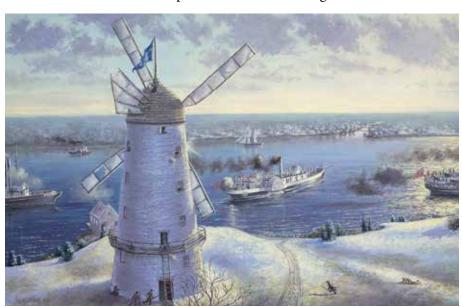
Lieutenant-Governor Sir Francis Bond Head addressed the Upper Canada Legislature on December 28, 1837. He reported about events along the frontier and on Navy Island, and said; "I am informed that Americans from various quarters are hastening from the interior to join this standard of avowed plunder and revolt; that cannon and

arms are publicly proceeding there; and under the circumstances, it becomes my painful duty to inform you, that without having offered to the United States the smallest provocation; without having entertained the slightest doubt of the sincerity of the American alliance, the inhabitants of this province may in a few days be called upon by me to defend their lives, their properties and their liberties, from an attack by American citizens, which, with no desire to offend, I must pronounce to be unparalleled in the history of the world." Bond Head had finally come to the realization about the gravity of the situation!

He also sent a dispatch to Major-General Lord Fitzroy Somerset in Montreal on January 2, 1838. This document confirmed that; "...a party of Americans have taken possession of Navy Island, and are constructing works of defence on it, and inviting others to join them, with the intention of aiding rebels who have been driven out of the province." This would prove to be the first of at least 14 armed incursions from the United States into Upper Canada. In response, Bond Head would quickly reinforce the provincial militia and call back regular troops from Lower Canada. Both groups would immediately become involved in defending the province from these impending threats. He also corresponded with the New York State Governor, William Learned Marcy, to request that all efforts that could be made by American officials to uphold provisions in the American neutrality laws, were in fact instituted and carried out.

The Lieutenant -Governor reported that "upwards of 10,000 men" from across the province had answered his call, and "... nobly rushed forward to defend the revered constitution of their ancestors." Loyalist militia helped to capture and destroy the rebel steam boat *Caroline*, and shortly afterwards, they participated in attacks on rebel positions on Navy Island. Bond Head triumphantly reported that because of these initiatives, that; "The rebels, dispersed in all directions, surrendered every where at discretion; and before sunset the whole conspiracy exploded."

Again this was a miscalculation of the actual situation which Bond Head made. Far from being defeated, a portion of the Patriot forces would move westward along Lake Erie to Ohio, and eventually set up headquarters near Detroit, at Gibraltar, Michigan. From there they would launch attacks and piratical raids into the Western District of Upper Canada. Other rebels would re-assemble in Upper New York State, and hatch plans to wreak havoc along the St. Lawrence River



Peter Rindlisbacher's modern water colour image of the Battle of the Windmill, Prescott, Upper Canada, which originally occurred in November of 1838. Credit: P. Rindlisbacher, Katy, Texas.



Sir George Arthur, Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada. Credit: Archives of Ontario.

corridor and the Niagara River. Motives for these incursions varied. After several of the first armed invasions failed, American newspaper editor Horace Greeley wrote in an editorial in his weekly *New-Yorker*, dated February 17, 1838. He mused; "Whether the 'Patriots' of Navy Island [Niagara River] or Bois Blanc Island [Detroit River] were impelled by a holy zeal for freedom or a hope of victory and booty, we leave them to their own consciences and the opinions of our readers." Greeley also urged all American citizens to refrain from joining the rebel ranks, and not to break established neutrality agreements. While his pleas were listened to, some would take heed, while others would not! Almost a year of continuing unrest would follow.

## THE CONCLUSION OF REBELLION:

Tumult and insecurity was far from being over, and residents in the eastern portion of Upper Canada and northern New York State, would soon directly feel the impact of these restless and dangerous times. In the February 1, 1838 edition of the *Lewiston Telegraph*, an editorial suggested that; "... the winter campaign of the Upper Canada patriots may now be considered as abandoned." The article concluded that; "The feelings of the Canadians as developed by the late disturbances, are conclusively proved to be averse to a change of government. The appeal to arms was premature; and the revolt has resolved into reality the doubt which we expressed at the commencement of the disturbances-whether they had sufficient preparations for political freedom."

Unfortunately this rather overly optimistic pronouncement would prove not to be the case. Along the St. Lawrence River, additional incursions would be experienced at the invasion of Hickory Island on February 22, in the capture



Lithograph of Sir John Colborne, Commander-in-chief of British Forces in the Canadas. Colborne was involved in rebellions in both Lower Canada (Quebec) and Upper Canada (Ontario) in 1837 and 1838. Credit: John C. Carter, East York, Ontario (author's collection).

and burning of the Canadian steamer *Sir Robert Peel* on May 29/30, in the raid on and plunder of Amherst Island/ Isle of Tonti on June 6/7, and finally at the Battle of the Windmill on November 12-16, 1838. The last incursion would occur in December of 1838 at the Battle of Windsor. However calm would not entirely return to Upper Canada until early in 1839, when the 1838 Upper Canadian Rebellion/Patriot War finally and thankfully came to an end. Today only written records and remembrances of these perilous times and events of 185 years ago remain.

#### AFTERMATH:

For participating in or being accused of collaboration in rebellious acts in Upper Canada, charges of piratical invasion and treason were laid. Between December 1837 and December 1838, over 1,000 individuals went to trial, had judgements made against them, and then awaited word of their fates. Of these, 92 men who were found guilty and were ultimately transported to Van Diemen's Land as political prisoners.

There they faced the rigours of an established penal system, and worked at various Probation Stations throughout the colony (including Rocky Hills), before receiving tickets of leave and finally their pardons. During this period some died, a few escaped, and others stayed on in Van Diemen's Land, or crossed over to the mainland of Australia to work or settle. The majority however, returned to their homes in the United States. There they lived out the rest of their lives, most in relative obscurity, thus closing out the final chronicles of the 1838 Upper Canadian Rebellion/Patriot War.

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Destruction of the Caroline at Niagara Falls, by George Tattersall, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Recruitment for the Rebel Army, English engraving from London (January 22, 1838), Library & Archives of Canada (R9266-3527), Peter Winkworth Collection of Canadiana.

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A TOUR THROUGH TASMANIA. (1877, October 3). *Tribune (Hobart, Tas.: 1876 - 1879)*, p. 3. Retrieved November 24, 2022, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article201736971

# A TOUR THROUGH TASMANIA.

(Letter No. 63.)

NORTH~ FROM SPRING BAY.

Letter No. 62 should have contained a notice of Okehampton Spa, a mineral spring near to the stone quarries. As the Spa waters are generally believed in by those who prefer physic to exercise, and rich food before early rising, I think I may safely recommend the Okehampton or Spring Bay Spa to the notice of my very delicate friends. This spa oozes out of petrefaction (sic), and is of about the capacity of a bucket; the water runs a short distance, and is then lost sight of, probably running underground. The sides of the Spa are covered with a strong iron sediment like red rust, and a greasy film floats on the surface. After a copious draught of this water, I should say that it is strongly impregnated with iron and magnesia; its taste is not unlike Epsom salts. Cattle are very much addicted to drinking this water, and they are noticed to thrive particularly well on it. Debilitated persons who drink of this Spa between the hours of 6 and 7 a.m., and then walk three miles before breakfast along the seashore, would in all probability return to town quite recruited. If I were interested like Mr Weaver, or Mr Cowburn in the preparation of "Medicinal Beverages," I should buy up this Spa, bottle it off, advertise it, and make a fortune out of the spec. Personally I should prefer as a medicine, one pint of spa water, to a gallon of New York schnapps.

There is a track somewhere near the East Coast leading from the Spring Bay Quarries to Littleport; but as I never saw anything of the road after the first two miles of the journey, it may be inferred that it is quite possible to get to Littleport (sic) without it. The distance between the two places is 15 kangaroo miles ~ a kangaroo mile is measurement with the tail thrown in~ and if scenery, balmy breezes, and the roar of the surf on the rocks, have any peculiar charm to the emigrant, then I can recommend Tasmania to those who can enjoy these natural blessings. Some persons at an early period in life, have tried to persuade the world that they can live on love; which is practicable no doubt when that love is cemented with an occasional repast of Irish~

stew, poached-eggs, and apple pudding. Exactly so; that is just what I said. Love in a cottage is a very sweet thing no doubt, when the wife is all smiles, and the washing is put out; but the man out of work and the wife cross and thin, not to mention wet linen, love (probably) dwells not within. Again~ "Laughing makes people fat," with a good many exceptions to the rule of course. So marine views, deep ravines, towering tiers, and the voice of the mopehawk, are not altogether what they seem to the emigrant, unless backed up with plenty of good chocolate soil, or a few good mines. Without troubling myself about what is termed the main road, I found my way comfortably enough through the bush. Just by way of a change, I determined, if possible, to steer by the compass due North to Littleport, taking ranges, gullies, bogs, and paddocks, just as they came, and with the exception of one detour to cross a creek, I managed to eke out two miles an hour, for eight hours till night fall, and to enjoy the walk into the bargain. The two things which I have the greatest aversion for in travelling over a new country are lagoons and quicksands. Sometimes I am told "the lagoon is shallow," yet I approach it with some caution and a good deal of suspicion. I remember being piloted across a lagoon on the N.S.W. Coast by a blackfellow. When half way across we were waist deep in mud and water. There were fish in that lagoon. My guide carried a spear, and seeing a big bream he called out, "Stop 'um there, me spear 'um brim." He threw the spear seven times, and missed his mark every time. At the first miss he smiled, at the second miss he grinned, at the third he grunted, at the fourth he swore, at the fifth he took twice as long to get a sure aim, at the sixth aim he plunged about the lagoon in a great rage, at the seventh miss he turned on me, and yelled, "You get 'um out lagoon, whitefellar's face frighten all fish." I retired as desired. In ten minutes he got another shot, and the "brim" was speared. The blackfellow picked it up in triumph, and continued his march onwards. I made a fresh start, and followed in his tracks. When across the lagoon, I happened to step barefooted on a whip-snake; I believe I turned a trifle pale, but I escaped unhurt; for two miles more I had to pick my way over pools and tussocks, and believe me I did not forget to act up to the maxim which says~ "look before you leap." For these and other reasons, I never admire scenery which has a lagoon for its chief attraction. Ouicksands are also objectionable features to the lone traveller on foot. When within about ten miles of Swansea, and walking along the beach, I came to the mouth of a creek, which owing to the late rains was running at ten knots, dark and muddy. I felt a bit dubious about fording this mountain torrent; however, after prospecting about for a shallow place and finding none, I thought the "bar," where the salt and the fresh waters met,

might be the best place to walk over; so, after due preparation, I stepped into the turbulent waters the sand ran from under my feet like quicksilver, and the "buried alive" sensation came over me. I don't remember ever getting out of a difficulty with so much difficulty as I extricated myself out of that quicksand. I would rather wade through "Lake Tiberias" than walk over six yards of quicksand. It was getting dark, so I tried higher up, and of course by the skin of my teeth, I made the opposite shore. The moral attached to this little incident is~When fording a rapidly running stream, never look down at the water, walk against the current, and keep the feet well apart.

"It is better to be lucky than," so I said to Harry Castle, of Banwell farm, when he told me I had better have "a shakedown at his place for the night." The Banwell estate is now in the hands of the grandchildren of the original proprietor, Joseph Castle, who selected the place in 1827. At this time the Oyster Bay Tribe were very troublesome, and Mr. Castle and his servants suffered a good deal at their hands. Mr Castle was attacked one day when within a few yards of his hut by a large number of natives, in making for the hut to get his gun, he received two spears, one pierced through both cheeks, the other went right through his body, just above

the right hip. With the spear still sticking in his body Mr. Castle managed to elude the black and to reach a neighbour's house six miles distant, where the spears were removed, and his wounds dressed. The injured man lived for several years after the attack, but was never again strong enough for active employments. Some people bemoan the extinction of the original inhabitants of this island. If their sorrow be genuine, let them pity the departed ones C5 a~piece, and raise a monument to their memory~put me down for the "epitaph."

To my surprise I found myself amongst "tin" again. The Castle brothers have prospected Schouten Island with some success, though the tin found is not in sufficient quantities to pay a company. As much as seven pounds to the dish has been washed out of the richest dirt, nearly a ton of good coarse tin, assay 75 per cent. has been obtained from Schouten Island. The beach near the house is a very good one for varieties of shells, and the Castle's family have collected a quantity of the rarest of Tasmanian conches. Tourists who have a weakness for conchology, I would recommend them to visit the East Coast, and they will find more boxes, and cases of shells, than could be conveyed to Hobart Town in a one-horse dray.



The Tribune masthead from Wednesday morning, October 3, 1877 (https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/22164478)



# FROM THE COLLECTION



Orford Prosser River, Malunnah across the river. (Postcard S10 JCB) on back C/o Misses Morey, Okehampton, Triabunna 13th Feb. 1941 To Dad ------ from Sybil. (GSBHS 246B)



Maria Island Commissioner's Stores and 12 Apostles C1910. Paper cutting on back of photo: Maria Island before the cement works were built. Tasmanian photographer and journalist Mable Hookey had a knack for putting life into her works - yet she never seemed to consider photography one of her more important skills. (GSBHS 371D)



Orford Millington's Beach, remains of groyne (breakwater) after the big seas June 1942. (GSBHS 412F9)



Prosser River, Paradise C1920. (GSBHS 785PP)



Webster Rometch Coach near Paradise, driver Bill Hunn?, front row Mrs Barwick from Moonah, Miss Louisa Rapp, Lillian Barwick, Mrs Barwick daughter, others unknown. (GSBHS 196A)

Postscript from the president, The Glamorgan Spring Bay Historical Society *always* welcomes new members and guests, please come along on one of our open days to meet our Secretary, or call 03 6257 9011 to organise a meeting. If you would like to learn more about what we do, or show off your skills as a volunteer, we would be pleased to have you on board. *Diane Bricknell*.



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