

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Mon. Dec. 13, 1971

## ACROSS THE ISLAND

### Land Commission Hearing Recalled

By NEIL A. MATHESON

This week's column goes back more than 100 years to the Royal Land Commission which began its work on September 5, 1860 to hear the complaints of those who could tell them how the big land proprietors of that day were fleecing the tenants, most of them newly arrived settlers.

The information is taken from a book on that commission kindly loaned to me by Edward Clark, MLA, Belmont Lot 16.

Commissioners named were Hon. John Gary of New Brunswick representing the Crown; Hon. Joseph Howe, provincial secretary of Nova Scotia, representing the tenants and Matthew Ritchie, Esq. Halifax who was representing the proprietors.

The Commission sat for a time in Charlottetown, in the Assembly room of the Colonial Building – we know this now as Province House, the current name for the old Provincial Building in which our Legislative Assembly still sits, though the offices of the Provincial Government have been moved to the Public Administration Building on Rochford Street; later the Commission sat for periods in St. Eleanor's and Georgetown.

### Third Child Ere Wedding Rum Paid

BEFORE I get into the more serious parts of the evidence, Mr. Howe asked a Hon. Donald Montgomery, who was giving evidence on behalf of the oppressed tenants:

“Are they a sober lot?”

When Mr. Montgomery replied “Yes, they are,” Mr. Howe observed, the reason I asked is that in our area it has been said of some of the settlers that “their third child would be born before they had finished paying for the rum that was drunk at their wedding.”

A Mr. Conroy who settled in Tignish in 1835 talking to the Commission about people in Lot 1 who had been out at the mercy of the proprietors said:

“So much terror was inspired by the thought of a half dozen lawyers coming from Charlottetown that the French, who then were more simple than they are now, would run to the woods rather than encounter them.”

Conroy told of one place in the Western end of the Island where people were in debt to the proprietors; if one would choose to say “I want 10 pounds cash” the tenants would have to leave their place though they had labored on it for 30 years.

Conroy told the Commissioners that he knew of this taking place in more than 20 instances. As a result of this people coming with a little money in their pockets could take advantage of those early settlers.

### Settlers Had Left

“LOOK AROUND you”, he said when the Commission was meeting in St. Eleanor's.

“In not one-half dozen of instances will you find that the same people who cleared these farms, now own them.

“The French inhabitants have made this beautiful country you now see. They took down the forests, and parties blessed with more means than they possessed entered upon their labors and they were driven back because of their inability to pay rent, Mr. Conroy insisted.

Back in 1846 – he was not sure of the date – the part of the country he came from was in an actual state of rebellion – he did not name the area.

### Hundreds Of Armed Men

NEARLY THE whole population, about 600 people assembled when the sheriff had distrained upon them for rent.

“I was called upon to aid him in arresting those who had violated the law.”

When he entered the settlement he saw about 500 men armed with sticks and guns. “It is my opinion,” he told the Commission “we could not have raised sufficient force to arrest that body of men successfully.”

However they reasoned with the men and did arrest the “ring leader”. What was done with the man was not revealed in the book I read on the subject.

### Gordons Of Cascumpec

A MR. WARBURTON told the Commission about a Mr. Gordon, one of the oldest and most respectable inhabitants of Cascumpec with a son a missionary in the South Seas, and had spent his whole life on a farm in Lot 4. He had purchased a property in Lot 3.

“The agent endeavored to run a line by which he would deprive Mr. Gordon of part of his property. He could not gain “extortion” by law, and to gain his revenge, extracted British Sterling for rent.

The reason why this was termed “extortion” is not explained but I believe it was this:

British sterling, or English currency as it was called had the pound Sterling worth the equivalent of five dollars. The currency used here was termed “Halifax currency” and the pound was worth only three dollars. So the extraction of the rent in Sterling currency in this colony where the lesser currency was used, would be extortion.

### Settlers Were Basely Deceived

ALEX STEWART, Lot 16 told the Commission:

“I’m the grandson of the man who was instrumental in bringing the first British settlers to this country. They were basely deceived by the descriptions given them of this Island. They settled on the Crown lands in Princetown Royalty; some years later a bill was brought into the legislature to deprive them of their lands; the result was the people left them.”

“A man named Robinson was accustomed to go home annually to deceive the people, to bring immigrants out, then leave them on the shore. Thus they were compelled to settle upon the lands under terms which the proprietors might dictate.”

Mr. Stewart told of a Cascumpec man who sent his son home to look for immigrants. This young man, seeing how the people were being deceived, said it was setting him mad. Eventually the young man became mentally deranged.

Listing specific cases “to show the evils of the proprietary system,” Stewart said:

#### 10 Pounds For 40 Years

“A MAN on Lot 26 with his family leased three hundred acres, and paid rent as long as he could, his family leaving him, he was unable to pay any longer. At his death the family sold the property.

“I bought it for 150 pounds, with all the buildings, a great bargain, handing the family a solitary 10 pound note, which was all they received for the labor of 40 years. All the rent was into the pockets of the proprietors.

“I would impress upon Your Honors the fact the people who were brought to this country were basely deceived.

Among other things, he told them of the “Siege of Malpeque”, a story which was listed in this column recently, from papers left by the late T. Edgar MacNutt of Charlottetown.

Mr. Stewart told the Commissioners that the false dispatch sent to London by Governor Fanning – he had represented a bloody battle, with casualties, etc. when there was nothing of the kind – “was followed by another equally false”.

It represented all of the townships of the Island as having the full complement of settlers which was required by the original grant.

“Between Summerside and North Cape” Stewart explained, “there was not a single settler. From North Cape returning on the North side there were not more than 25 settlers, with the exception of the French; and from St. Eleanors to Charlottetown there was an unbroken forest, with the exception of the clearance of one settler.”

Mr. Stewart added:

“One time Governor Fanning’s secretary came to my father’s house. He struck my father in the shoulder and said “Well Charles, what do you think the Island’s population is? 32,000”

Replied Charles Stewart “It’s impossible, for I know every man on the Island, there is not one-fourth of that number.”

Hon. David Montgomery, Speaker of the Legislature told the Commission about some of the evils that exist under the then practice of land tenure.

#### Evil Exists Everywhere

“THAT EVILS exists everyone knows, even the proprietors themselves do not deny it. The prosperity of the country has been retarded very much by the workings of the system which Your Excellencies are investigating.

“For one thing it has deprived us of having a superior class of immigrants, persons with money prefer locating in places where they can receive land on more favorable terms.”

The story of the land commission and the efforts of the tenants of the Island to get some improvement in treatment, if not justice, will be continued in a later column, probably next week.