

ROUTH Richard, died between August and December 1801

Collector Customs for Newfoundland 1782-1801. Commissioner of Oyer and Terminer
for Newfoundland 1785-1790. Justice of the Peace for St Johns 1788.
Chief Justice of Newfoundland 1798-1801 Family, wife Abigail and a
large family including at least the following children:-- Richard,
William, ~~Randolph~~ Randolph (born 1782, baptised Poole Dorset 1783)
Hannah (born 1783, baptised poole), Mary (born 1785 baptised Poole 1787)
Henry Lloyd (born 1787 baptised Poole 1789) and John .'

Richard Routh would have been instantly identified by Charles Dickens as of that classical genus, the inveterate Place Seeker. He knew nothing of the Revenue ~~but~~ ^{SERVICER} but moved from obscure civilian life to the ~~rank~~ of senior Customs position in Newfoundland; he knew even less about ~~the~~ law but became Chief Justice ^{ON THE ISLAND.} ~~while continuing to hold the job of Collector of Customs. Civil Service Commissions notwithstanding, his example would seem to still exist today, their places obtained by the politics of Patronage.~~

We know nothing ^{of} ~~about~~ Routh's ~~origins~~ until 1779 when, already an adult, ^{HIS NAME} he began to appear ~~firstly~~ in the diaries of Benjamin Lester of Poole, who was the wealthiest merchant in the Newfoundland Trade. Lester, who was later ~~to become~~ Member of Parliament for Poole, naturally ~~attracted~~ attracted fortune hunters and place seekers, and invariably pressed their interest in the firm assurance ~~they~~ they would find some means of repaying him. He was in fact a good 18th century "Godfather". ^{PROBABLY} It is ~~probable~~ that Routh was from London and joined Lester as a senior clerk or ^{ATTORNEY} ~~account~~ upon the recommendation of one of the latter's many London acquaintances, for between 1779 and 1782 he seems to have transacted a considerable amount of business for Lester.

However by 1782, Lester's Son in Law George Garland ^{HAD JOINED} was ~~ready to enter~~ the business and this ^{ENDED ROUTH'S PROSPECTS FOR ADVANCEMENT.} meant that ~~there was no chance of advancement for Routh,~~

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who then apparently ~~decided to~~ purchase a vessel and ~~go into~~ business on his own account.

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~~However~~ Events in Newfoundland rendered this step unnecessary, when the position of Customs Collector was declared vacant. Actually it had been vacant since 1777 when the then occupant obtained a patent to develop a mine on the Island, only to end up with a large water-filled hole in the ground.

The American War ~~had~~ pre-occupied Government and no one in Newfoundland was anxious to remind it that there was no longer a Customs House on the Island.

Lester ~~was~~ a strong supporter of Lord North, and William Pitt, ~~was~~ had an extremely large influence in Poole and as a result between 1782-and 1785 managed to obtain the post of Collector of Customs for Richard Routh, that of Comptroller for

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one D'ewes Coke who had been working as a surgeon in Trinity Bay where Lester had his main fishery, and the position of Commissary General to the Garrison, for another client, William Eppes.

Thus George Garland entered the Business of Lester and ~~Richard~~ Routh was given alternative employment. Lester even purchased his ship-and found it a very bad bargain.

Routh sailed to Newfoundland in 1782 and narrowly escaped capture by the Grand Fleet. He returned to Poole in December on the very day

that the merchants ~~met~~ met and decided to support those of Dartmouth in a campaign to have the Customs House in Newfoundland abolished.

~~He may or may not have been consoled by the fact that~~ This campaign had nothing to do with him personally and had been going on since 1764, the year in which the Commissioners of the Customs, with remarkable absent mindedness had first decided that Newfoundland, like the mainland

possessions ought to have a Customs House. The merchants, citing a list of precedents dating back to the reign of Edward VI claimed that

this was illegal, or even if the Customs House were legal, that the levying of customs fees ~~was~~ were not. The First Collector had his house burnt down

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and quickly resigned for reasons variously given as poor health, or inability to see the necessity for a customs House anyway. A successor was sent out but the merchants entered into a combination, and refused to pay customs fees until 1776 when Government passed legislation which retroactively legalised the Customs House and its fees. ²²⁻²³⁻²⁴ By then ~~however~~ the American Revolution had broken out, and Mr Collector had become pre-occupied with his mining ventures. There was thus no effective customs establishment until the appointment of Routh reminded the merchants that this was only a temporary phenomenon. The imminent end of the American War saw the merchants with a host of greivances against Government Action and legislation which pre-dated 1775 and they began a strenuous campaign to change things. This ~~campaign~~ culminated in a private members Bill introduced into Parliament by Arthur Holdsworth, merchant and Member of Parliament for Dartmouth. The Government refused to do more than modify a few details of its policies but the years between 1783 and 1786 were full of anxiety for ~~Rick~~ Routh and his fellow officials in Newfoundland. ²³⁻²⁴⁻²⁵

Routh re-acted quickly to the news that the merchants had voted to abolish his job and spent the end of December 1782 currying favour with all the Poole merchants he could find. ~~In the mean~~ At the same time Lester exerted his own more powerful influence and just two days later another Town Meeting was held where "after much argument (concerning the resolution to remove the Customs House) it was dropp'd and agreed that Mr Routh would everying < in his power to lessen the grievances they complain'd of and put the fees on a more equitable plan. ^{" 24-26} This reversal, although it was soon hotly denied by some of the merchants including John Jeffery, m Lester's business rival in Trinity Bay, ~~and his rival in English politics, and~~ and his political rival in Poole, placed a wedge between the merchants of Poole and those of Dartmouth and Bristol, who continued to press for the abolition

of the Customs House. This division was explicable in wider terms than the influence of Lester, or the modest and placatory demeanour of Routh. The Devonshire merchants had their major interests in St Johns and thus were under the direct eye of the Customs Officials. Only one of the Poole firms was established there, the rest trading to the "outports" where the ~~deputy~~ "deputies" of the Customs were all either ~~merchants~~ agents or Doctors and Clergymen under the direct influence of the merchant. 25 27

In 1786 the Government rejected the demands of the merchants and amongst other things confirmed the necessity of the Customs House. 26 28
Routh was now secure; whilst Benjamin Lester began to accumulate the rewards for ~~this~~ ^{his} support in the form of commercial intelligence and ~~officials~~ in St Johns. other services from ~~his clients~~ ~~and the~~ official ranks of St Johns.
Routh, Coke and Eppes ~~indeed~~ ^{WHO} acted as his unofficial and unpaid agents in ~~that town.~~ ^{ST JOHNS 27 29} Lester's political influence temporarily declined soon after but by now there were hardly any worthwhile positions left to be filled in the meagre Newfoundland government.

Routh would ~~continue to~~ ^{28 30} meet with hostility from the St Johns Traders almost to the end of his life, but it was now muted and generally passive, ~~due~~ ^{29 31} due in part to his own discretion in exercising ~~his~~ powers. The position of Collector of Customs in Newfoundland carried no fixed salary and Routh depended upon a share of the fees levied on shipping and cargoes but the job had one supreme attraction; The Collector, unlike his deputy the Comptroller was not obliged to reside permanently on the Island. Newfoundland's shipping season was confined to the period April-December and for most of that time the Comptroller alone could handle all the duties and it was only necessary for Routh to be present at the end of the fishing season, ~~busiest period of the year.~~ (Indeed as the Dartmouth merchants

always argued, it was far from certain that Routh was ever really necessary). ^{AT 22 32} Routh exploited this situation to the full and succeeded in spending 19 years in the Government of Newfoundland without ever ^{MAINTAINING} spending a single winter on the Island. He never left England until June, and sometimes delayed sailing until August and could be sure of returning "home" by the end of December. His best year in fact was 1784, when he sailed in late June and was back by the 13 October. ³³ His Rank moreover entitled him to passage on a naval Frigate which is uncomfortable by modern standards was infinitely preferable to that ~~of~~ a small, dirty fishing brig. His family settled in Poole where he leased a house from Benjamin Lester ., and one or more of his sons was educated at Wimborne School, with various relatives of Benjamin Lester, ^{34 34} who treated them as if they were his own family whilst his wife found consolation for Routh's absence in the company of Lester's numerous friends and relatives. ³⁵ Routh's winters in England were agreeably spent in dinners, trips into the Country, and up to London, games of whist at the Poole "Club" ~~and~~ visits to the New Play House, and with the onset of middle age and gout, journeys to "take the waters" at Bath. ^{36 36} The rigours of life in Newfoundland were softened by the employment of a maid and the importation of what seems to have been the first Coach to the Island. The older merchants violently condemned this unnecessary extravagance as tending to weaken the industry and moral fibre of the inhabitants, but a ~~Collector~~ ^{37 37} Collector of Customs had a station and dignity to maintain. ^{38 38}

Thus did Routh enter into the ~~happiest period of his life~~; a life of pleasant and dignified routine enlivened only by the dangers of the sea and a temporary revival of mercantile antagonism to the custom house between 1790 and 1793. ^{39 39} He continued to win over the support of previously ^{HOSTILE} antagonistic merchants, ^{40 40} obtained the confidence of the Government and a succession of naval Governors, and retained the

the warm regard of Benjamin Lester. His family was growing up with no discernible stress; ~~and~~ life liberty and happiness ^{SECURED} assured.

IN 1798 an ~~unexpected~~ ^{PROPELLED TO CLIMAX} event gave ^{to} Routh the ~~pinnacle~~ of of his career, when the Chief Justice of Newfoundland was forced to Resign.

This was none other than D'ewes Coke, until 1794 Routh's deputy in the Custom House. Newfoundland had not possessed a Surpeme Court before

1792 but in that year John Reeves a barrister with the Board of Trade had been appointed under a new Statute. ³⁹⁴² Reeves ~~no more than any other~~ ^{HOWEVER HAD NO}

~~official~~ ^{DESIRE TO REMAIN IN NEWFOUNDLAND} was tempted to remain in Newfoundland and after two seasons

returned to his old position in London. It proved impossible to persuade anyone else with even the slightest legal training to take his place - not

least because as yet the Government had ~~not~~ omitted to ~~create~~ ^{AUTHORISE} a salary for the Judge - and Dewe's ~~Eoke~~ in the absance of anyone else, obtained

^{40 43} the job. As with the Collector of Customs, no one thought that the

Chief Justice should reside permanently on the Island and Coke now began

to live the same life as Routh, a house in Poole and another in St Johns. ^{41 44}

However in 1798 Governor Wallace prevailed upon the Government to order Coke to reside permanently in Newfoundland. ^{42 45} Coke pleaded ill health

and resigned, and some strenuous and successful lobbying by the Poole ^{43 46} merchants resulted in Routh's appointment to the position. ^{44 47} With only

two days notice he left his family and sailed for Newfoundland where through some oversight of Government he continued to act as the Collector

of Customs as well. ^{45 48} Routh must have been a very happy man, but the conditions for his ~~own~~ downfall had been ~~established~~ ^{CREATED} and the last three

years of his life were increasingly unpleasant. It soon became apparent to all, that Routh ~~no more than Coke was prepared~~ ^{WAS NO MORE WILLING THAN COKE} to spend any winters in

Newfoundland, and to everyone's consternation ^{he} appeared back in England

at the end of the year. ~~Before leaving Newfoundland he informed the~~

His explanation was that he was returning to bring back his family during 1799. An Angry Government ordered him to return to Newfoundland by the first warship which sailed in March; Routh replied with a Doctor's certificate to the effect that a serious attack of gout made ~~it most inadvisable~~ a ~~winter~~ journey to Newfoundland most' inadvisable, recommending instead a rather shorter trip to Bath to recover his health. ⁴⁶⁴⁹

In ~~1799~~ July he sailed (without his family) and arrived without incident, but again determined to return home at the end of the year. He waited until ^{after} the Governor had sailed for England and thus had to take passage on a Dartmouth fishing brig. This Vessel was taken in January 1800 by a French privateer and Routh became a prisoner. ⁴⁷⁵⁰ His captivity lasted only for two months but it had been expensive and exhausting. Routh applied for an increase in salary pointing out that he must maintain a family in England and keep a large and liberal table in St Johns. The Government might well have retorted that had he moved his family to Newfoundland as ordered, his financial problems would ~~probably~~ have disappeared.

Routh Disconsolately returned to Newfoundland, spent two or three months on the Island and sailed for England in December on the Frigate Camilla. they met a heavy gale which threw her on her beam ends and according to Routh forced him under water for five minutes which greatly aggravated his gout, and did nothing to improve his now bitter relationship with his superiors. ⁴⁸⁵¹ By now Routh must have regretted his decision to commute between England and Newfoundland but the needs of his family drove him on. IN August he missed the convoy and had to take passage out on an unknown merchant vessel.

By December he had not arrived and his friends became alarmed.

on the 26th December old Benjamin Lester made a note ~~of~~ ⁴⁹⁵² his diary that there was no news of Mr Routh. Not long after Lester himself was dead, still not sure of the end of his old client and friend.

The ~~enix~~ inevitable patterns of life went on; in June the Government received a letter from Jonathon Ogden late surgeons mate, Justice of the Peace, and currently Chief Surrogate in St Johns, which with careful sympathy reminded the Government that Mr Routh must now be presumed dead, outlined the need for a new Chief Justice, and recomended ⁵⁰⁵³ himself for the post. His wish was granted but he suffered from

what seems to have been an early curse of Newfoundland Judges; IN October ⁵¹⁵⁴ a paralytic stroke forced his resignation and return to England. The

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 Poole merchants pressed for the appointment of Mr Street a local merchant ⁵²⁵⁵ in fallen circumstances, whilst others suggested John Bland the magistrate ⁵³⁵⁶ at Bonavista. However after two ~~decades~~ ¹⁶⁰⁰ decades of "Poole Rule" it was the turn of the Dartmouth gentlemen. ⁵⁴⁵⁷ chief justice they obtained the appointment of Thomas Tremlett, local and well respected but also insolvent, merchant; For Collector of Customs they ~~obtained~~ successfully placed Arthur Holdsworth Brooking of Stoke Fleming. Tremlett knew no more of the Law than had Routh, but he did reside permanently on the island until his ~~in~~ dismissal for incompetence a few years later.

Thus ended- the life of Richard Routh. What had he done to affect the world [?] ~~of his day~~? One is forced to conclude that he had affected it very little. However he had managed to maintain his wife and rear his children to maturity. His Connection with Lester outlived both their deaths for most of his sons became merchants, some almost certainly through the influence of Lester's heirs.