

John Salusbury, Father of Mrs. Hester Thrale, and the Founding of Halifax in 1749

Ronald Rompkey

Volume 31, 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1013073ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1013073ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (print)

1927-8284 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rompkey, R. (2012). John Salusbury, Father of Mrs. Hester Thrale, and the Founding of Halifax in 1749. *Lumen*, 31, 145–154.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1013073ar>

John Salusbury, Father of Mrs. Hester Thrale, and the Founding of Halifax in 1749

RONALD ROMPKEY

Memorial University of Newfoundland

The province of Nova Scotia was the youngest and the favourite child of the board. Good God! What sums the nursing of that ill-thriven, hard-visaged, and ill-favoured brat, has cost to this wittol nation? Sir, this colony has stood us in a sum of not less than seven hundred thousand pounds. To this day it has made no repayment.

Edmund BURKE¹

The Anglo-French confrontation on the isthmus of Chignecto in the early 1750s was part of a complex British plan to govern the Acadian population of Nova Scotia, a prelude to the victories at Louisbourg in 1758 and Quebec in 1759. At that time, the isthmus was a testing point for the claims of two imperial powers engaged in a continental struggle that continued uninterrupted between the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 and the beginning of the Seven Years' War in 1756. During this confusing period of official peace, the game of territorial influence continued unabated. But while the apprehensions, fears, and disasters it produced preoccupied soldiers and civilians on both sides, a few took the trouble to record their experiences, as we see in the journal and letters of John Salusbury, the father of Hester Thrale (Piozzi), a reluctant participant thrust into the events in Halifax and

1. Edmund Burke, *Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq. Member of Parliament for the City of Bristol, On presenting to the House of Commons (On the 11th of February, 1780) A Plan for the Better Security of the Independence of Parliament, and the Oeconomical Reformation of the Civil and other Establishments* (London, 1780), 76.

Chignecto by virtue of a patronage appointment from the Earl of Halifax, President of the Board of Trade and Plantations.

For years the Board of Trade had aimed at transforming Nova Scotia into a civilian colony, partly to draw off settlers from the colony of Massachusetts Bay and partly to satisfy merchant groups and speculators. With the appointment of the Duke of Bedford as Secretary of State for the Southern Department and the Earl of Halifax as President of the Board of Trade and Plantations, this project suddenly became a priority in 1748, when the harbour of Chebucto, big enough to anchor a fleet and strategically located between Annapolis and Louisbourg, became the new focus of British interest.² A link with Annapolis would be established, forts would be built near pockets of Acadian confrontation, and troops forced to evacuate Louisbourg would be deployed to protect settlers. To be effective, though, the plan would have had to have been implemented before the French reasserted themselves at Louisbourg, and Halifax stressed the urgency of it when he wrote Bedford in 1748

The only Means of preserving this Country is by a well regulated Settlement of it, and I believe your Grace will be of Opinion, that no Time should be lost in the Performance of this publick Service. It has already been too long delayed, for if it had been undertaken as it ought to have been soon after the Treaty of Utrecht, this Nation would many years ago have felt the happy Effects of it, and particularly in the late War. If it be longer neglected, it possibly never may, it probably never will be in Our Power to effect it, & I take the present Consideration to be no other than whether We shall settle or whether We shall lose the Province of Nova Scotia.³

By the spring of 1749, Parliament had given its approval to the enterprise, and the Board of Trade was busy organizing the details of population and supply. Since Parliament had voted what it considered sufficient funds and a pool of sailors, soldiers, and artificers made redundant by the peace of 1748 was available to serve as a population

2. See James A. Henretta, *“Salutary Neglect”: Colonial Administration Under the Duke of Newcastle* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), 282-93; and George A. Rawlyk, *Nova Scotia’s Massachusetts* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1973), ch. 10.

3. “Extract of a Plan presented to His Majesty by the Earl of Halifax for the Settlement of His Majesty’s Colony of Nova Scotia,” *Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia* (Halifax: PANS, 1971), Appendix B, 29.

base, early in March the Board invited settlers with an announcement in the *London Gazette* and similar exhortations in popular magazines.

To the ordinary citizen with no prospect of a secure living, these advertisements were difficult to ignore, for the Board was offering fifty acres of land to every private soldier or seaman and an extra ten acres for every member of his family. Such a grant would also be free from quitrents or taxes for ten years, and at the end of that period no one would be required to pay more than a shilling per annum for every fifty acres granted. In addition, each settler would receive subsistence during the passage and for twelve months after his arrival. He would also be furnished with any necessary arms and ammunition and provided with tools for the erection of houses, the cultivation of land, fishing, husbandry or any other purpose. Standing in a London street, a prospective settler could visualize himself as a virtual guest of the government with few responsibilities, and many of the unemployed found it difficult to resist. In the popular imagination, Nova Scotia became a kind of Utopia where class distinction dissolved, the common miseries of life faded, and riches abounded in vast expanses of land. Such Utopianism provoked an assortment of satirical verse, and pieces like this parodic ballad from the *Gentleman's Magazine* ridiculed the promoters' offerings:

Let's away to *New Scotland*, where Plenty sits queen
O'er as happy a country as ever was seen;
And blesses her subjects, both little and great,
With each a good house, and a pretty estate.
There's wood, and there's water, there's wild fowl and tame;
In the forest good ven'son, good fish in the stream,
Good grass for our cattle, good land for our plough
Good wheat to be reap'd, and good barley to mow.
No landlords are there the poor tenants to tease,
No lawyers to bully, nor stewards to seize:
But each honest fellow's a landlord, and dares
To spend on himself the whole fruit of his cares.
They've no duties on candles, no taxes on malt,
Nor do they, as we do, pay sauce for their salt:
But all is as free as in those times of old,
When poets assure us the age was of gold.⁴

4. "Nova Scotia. A New Ballad. To the Tune of King John and the Abbot of Canterbury," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 20 (1750): 84.

In another song forming part of a “garland” dedicated to Nova Scotia, a weaver’s wife resists the urgings of her sister, a maid. She refuses to leave her husband and run away to “glorious Nova Scotia” even though, she is told,

Good old Gin there be in Plenty,
 Money never can be scanty,
 In a Place that is so plenty
 As is *Nova Scotia*:
 Leave the Town now I say,
 Your Sot like Husband disobey;
 Consult your Interest while you may,
 And make for *Nova Scotia*.
 Servant Maids that kiss your Masters,
 Who lie under great Disasters;
 Ne’er fear Fortune ever after,
 Away for *Nova Scotia*:
 There you will in splendor live,
 And as Maids they’ll you receive;
 No ill-thoughts, I pray, believe
 Of generous *Nova Scotia*.⁵

Even more pointed is one of its companion songs. Here a ship’s captain lately returned from the colony describes an island of pleasure in the North Atlantic where the rivers run with wine. Streets are paved with mutton pies, walls are made of hasty pudding, and houses are tiled with pancakes:

There is nothing there but Holidays,
 With Musick out of Measure;
 Who can forbear to speak the Praise
 Of such a Land of Pleasure:
 There you may lead a pleasant Life,
 Free from all Kind of Labour,
 And he that is without a Wife,
 May borrow of his Neighbour.
 There is no Law nor Lawyars Fees,
 All Men are free from Fury,
 For every Man doth what he please,
 Without a Judge or Jury.

5. “The Weavers Wives Resolution, not to go to Nova Scotia,” *The Nova Scotia’s Garland; Furnished with Three merry New Songs* (Newcastle, 1750?), 3.

The Summer Time is warm they say,
The Winter is never Colder,
They have no Landlord's Rent to pay,
Each Man is a Freeholder.⁶

In spite of these amusements, hundreds of settlers recognized what seemed to be a comfortable situation and signed on. In the weeks after Governor Edward Cornwallis dropped anchor in Chebucto harbor, they confronted the wilderness with an air of cheerfulness and determination. The first tree hit the ground. Tents dotted the shoreline, and space for a town expanded into the forest behind them. As though fulfilling the prophecies of the Board of Trade, enthusiastic reports found their way into print.

The euphoria continued through the first few weeks as the settlers progressed with clearing land and erecting temporary quarters. But if Nova Scotia promised bountiful and salubrious surroundings, it could not guarantee social equality. Too many British people, including those shelved by the navy and the army, were looking for an easy year of it. The New Englanders, on the other hand, were used to conditions in the New World: some had fought with provincial regiments at Annapolis and Louisbourg or in the colonies further south, and others had been busy extending their well-established commercial network. It was they who would dominate the civil appointments and business while the British took a more humble role.

As he prepared for his first winter in North America, Edward Cornwallis, the thirty-six-year-old governor, assessed the 3,500 settlers he had taken with him and received a shock. Only a small proportion, he discovered, could support him adequately, and he wrote worriedly to the Board of Trade,

Of Soldiers there is only 100 – of Tradesmen Sailors & others able & willing to work not above 200 more – the rest are poor idle worthless vagabonds that embraced the opportunity to get provisions for one Year without labour, or Sailors that only wanted a passage to New England – Many have come as into a Hospital, to be cured, Some of Venereal Disorders, some even incurables – I mention this particularly to Your Lordships, because I find by experience, that these idle abandoned

6. "An invitation to the famous and plentiful Island of Pleasure, call'd, New Scotland, in the Northern Parts of America," *The Nova Scotia's Garland*, 7.

fellows are the most troublesome & mutinous & instead of helping hinder the rest as much as they can.⁷

Not surprisingly, these were the very people Cornwallis selected to serve as his council members and his principal salaried officials. With two exceptions, the men he chose had either sat on the previous council at Annapolis or demonstrated their skills at Louisbourg or New England. Hugh Davidson received the dual position of secretary and treasurer. John Salusbury, through the influence of Lord Halifax, was given the title Register and Receiver of His Majesty's Rents.⁸ But neither found favor with Governor Cornwallis. Davidson was suspected of trading with government stores for his own profit, and after Cornwallis sent him to England to explain his actions in September 1750, he never returned. As for Salusbury, he seems to have been the victim of a conflict between Cornwallis and the Board of Trade. The governor did not consider the Registry an essential part of the secretary's office, but their Lordships did.⁹ The result was that though the position stayed, Cornwallis delayed swearing in Salusbury until August 1749 and then virtually ignored him.

As his journal shows,¹⁰ John Salusbury was sensitive and intelligent, but unsympathetic to what was going on around him. Destitute through ill fortune and bad management, he was being given a second chance, at the age of forty-one, to achieve some success.¹¹ The youngest son of a landed Welsh family of ancient origin, he had found his present employment only through his links with the patronage system. Thus, he had not so much chosen this new career as acquiesced in an arrangement contrived by his family and friends, beginning in the summer of 1748, when he moved his wife and his infant daughter Hester to London. Dr. Edward Crane, the new prebendary of Westminster, introduced Salusbury to Lord Halifax, whose family Crane served as tutor. Distributing colonial offices without the board's approval was not

7. Public Record Office. CO 217/9, f. 70: Cornwallis to the Board of Trade, 24 July 1749.

8. CO 217/9, f. 85: List of civil officers.

9. PRO 30/50/39, f. 29: Davidson to Richard Neville Aldworth, Undersecretary of State to the Duke of Bedford, 19 October 1749.

10. Rylands Eng. MS 615.

11. Prof. J. G. Adshead unravels the confusion over JS's birth date in "Hon. John Salusbury, 1707-62," *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, 29 (1951): 6-7.

an unusual practice for Halifax, and when Crane recommended that Salusbury accompany Cornwallis, he had no trouble finding him a place. The idea did not interest Salusbury at first, but he reluctantly set sail in Cornwallis's ship in May 1749. Halifax assured him that "if there is any thing in which I can be serviceable to you, pray inform me of it, and I shall gladly obey your commands."¹² But arriving in Halifax, Salusbury took no further advantage of Halifax's favor.

The sense of drift that emerges from Salusbury's journal is characteristic of a life that had begun more auspiciously. Besides enjoying the advantages of an agreeable manner and a good education, Salusbury could claim membership in a celebrated Welsh family.¹³ As the eldest of three surviving sons, he had inherited the family estate when his father had died in 1714,¹⁴ leaving his mother Lucy the burden of three children and the encumbrances of heavy mortgages. Drawing on her limited means, she sent John and his brother Thomas to the Whitchurch School, and from there they proceeded to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. John was admitted in 1725 and took the M.A. in 1728. Much of his income was dedicated to supporting his mother, who spared no expense, and his brother, who insisted on living in high style as a rising London lawyer. This was a tiresome exile for John and his wife, a couple accustomed to the society of cultivated friends, and it remained so until 1741, when, "after several Miscarriages from Frights, Contests Falls &c," the birth of their only child, Hester, brought a brief distraction.¹⁵ The short-tempered Salusbury did not enjoy the company of his daughter at first. "Rakish Men seldom make tender Fathers," she observed in later years, "but a Man must fondle something, and Nature pleads her own Cause powerfully when a little Art is likewise used to help it forward."¹⁶ She consequently grew to be his favorite and, equally important, the favorite of her uncle, Sir Robert Cotton, who had spurned his sister when she married the rake.

12. Rylands Eng. MS 530, no. 54: Halifax to JS, 18 October 1749.

13. See Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), ed. Katheron C. Balderston, 1: 275-304; and the first two chapters of James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952).

14. Piozzi, 1: 276, n. 5.

15. Piozzi, 1: 281.

16. Piozzi, 1: 281.

When Salusbury received the offer of an appointment in Nova Scotia, he thus had no prospects at all. He and his family were rapidly declining into a liability for those around them, and though some encouraged him to accept, others balked at what seemed to be an ill-considered venture into the wilds of North America. If Salusbury was hoping for a quick profit, Halifax was not likely to enrich him. His salary of twenty shillings a day did not go far, and the funds sent by his brother Thomas provided only a reserve for keeping up appearances. What he had, he mishandled, and as he confesses in one letter, he spent too much keeping himself as a gentleman.

As a companion, Salusbury was agreeable enough, and his friends found him honest and loyal, even though he could not control his affairs. In a rare tribute to his activities the first year, a lady from Halifax testifying before the Board of Trade after Davidson's dismissal told the board that he "behaves very well, and that they want a few more such, and that he takes a great deal of pains to do publick good."¹⁷ As the Saint Paul's Church register shows, parents named their children after him, an honour bestowed only upon prominent and respected citizens.¹⁸ Beneath the charming exterior, however, he was a sensitive individual who sniped and carped throughout his journal and took offense at the slightest provocation. His humor seemed to consist of droll jests not always appreciated by his hearers. Thus, his affected gentility and sententiousness brought him pain, especially amid the less felicitous surroundings of Nova Scotia. His daughter recalls,

My Father was a Man of quick Parts, much Gentleman like Literature, and a Vein of humour very diverting and seemingly inexhaustible: his Conversation was showy however, not solid; few Men were ever more certain to please at Sight; but though his Talk did not consist in telling Stories, it fatigued his Hearers, who as he was not rich – made no Ceremony of letting him see it. His Sensibility – quickened by Vanity & Idleness was *keen* beyond the *Affectation* of any other Mortal, and threw him into Hypocondriack Disorders in spite of a Manly Vigorous Person, & of a Constitution eminently strong.¹⁹

17. *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1936), 9: 77.

18. St. Paul's Church Register, vol. 1 *passim*.

19. Piozzi, 1: 127.

Consequently, his journal is often indignant. But instead of asserting himself as a member of council, he expressed his resentment in his journal and in letters to his wife.

Meanwhile, his daughter Hester, an attractive and intelligent girl who would later become the friend and biographer of Samuel Johnson, was being pursued by a series of earnest young men, but her father thought her far too young for this kind of intrigue. “The least mention of a Proposal to his Daughter put him in the most violent passion imaginable,” wrote Hester in later years, and rather than arouse his ill humor, she avoided all such solicitations.²⁰ One suitor he could not discourage, though, was Henry Thrale, a frequent visitor to the household, and in 1761 Thrale’s presence hastened John Salusbury’s death. That year, Salusbury and his brother accompanied Lord Halifax to Dublin as the new Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. On his return, John found two things had changed: Thomas was paying court to a widow, and at the same time both Thomas and John’s own wife were plotting a marriage between Henry Thrale and Hester. When John’s wearying exchanges with his brother made him unwelcome, he took his family and retreated to London, where Thrale pressed his suit and the two impending marriages dominated the conversation of their acquaintances. But where joy and expectation would have followed in most families, in this one there was discord and ultimate tragedy.

In December 1762, the girl’s Latin tutor wrote her a secret note in Latin. Thomas was about to marry Mrs. King, he said. He would come next day to break the news to her father. This information she concealed awkwardly, and her explosive father, suspecting a clandestine correspondence between her and Thrale, was enraged. Resolutely protecting her honesty, Hester argued over the matter with her father until three o’clock the next morning, when she revealed the letter. Salusbury apologized and retired in an agitated frame of mind. Early the next day, he arose and left to consult Dr. Crane and his brother-in-law, Sir Lynch Cotton. The same afternoon he was carried home dead of an apoplectic stroke.²¹

20. Piozzi, 1: 296.

21. Piozzi, 304. *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 32 (1762): 601, records his death for 18 December.

When Salusbury died, his experiences in Nova Scotia became a part of family legend, and the Nova Scotia connection receded into the background until 1785, when Hester, by now the wife of the Italian singer Gabriel Piozzi, examined her father's papers and discovered extensive grants of land in Halifax.²² Obsessed with the idea of regaining her father's valuable properties, she engaged a Halifax lawyer to take her case to court, but learned after several years that they had been taken back. Among the rest of his papers, though, were seven small notebooks and a handful of letters recording his colonial experiences in a fragmented and elliptical style. As a salaried official yet a virtual outsider, Salusbury had described the early years in Halifax from an unusual point of view. Many of his comments were personal, but others referred to conditions, events, and individuals directly affecting the settlement's progress. Today, they stand as one of the valuable accounts of early colonizing in Nova Scotia.

22. See Ronald Rompkey, "Mrs. Hester Thrale (Piozzi) and the Pursuit of Her 'Nova Scotia Fortune,'" *Dalhousie Review*, 58 (1979): 434-42.