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## ACROSS THE ISLAND

### Land Row Not Settled Until Confederation

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THIS IS a continuation of the story of the evidence placed before the Land Commissioners referred to in last week's column. It will be recalled the commission consisted of Hon. John Gray from New Brunswick, representing the Crown; Hon. Joseph Howe, Nova Scotia, representing the tenants and Matthew Ritchie representing the proprietors. There is reference at one spot to a Mr. Haliburton, but I cannot identify him unless he was a lawyer acting at this hearing.

Hon. Donald Montgomery, speaker of the House of Assembly was giving evidence at the point I dropped last week's column.

I should add here that the information contained in these two columns was gleaned from a book on the Commission's activities, obtained from Edward Clark, MLA, Belmont Lot 16.

Mr. Montgomery was expressing his opinion that the unjust deals the tenants here were receiving "deprived us from having a superior class of immigrants, persons with money prefer locating in places where they can receive land on more favorable terms" – New Brunswick was mentioned by several witnesses as having greater attraction for settlers in this regard.

### Persons Without Means

"AND SO", Hon. Mr. Montgomery added, "this Island has been inundated by persons without means, some of whom had their passage paid by persons who were interested in their removal from the mother country. Tenants of this description will never enhance the value of any country."

"Our population increases slowly, one reason is the manner in which lands are held," he added.

A member of the commission observed:

"It is said here that the impression has gone abroad that tenants cannot obtain justice through courts of law when brought there by the proprietors on this Island."

To which Mr. Montgomery observed:

"I would be sorry to say they cannot obtain justice, still I believe that such an opinion is general."

"As sons of the tenantry grow up they do not see the use of settling upon land which they are so liable to lose, and consequently many are induced to leave."

A few years ago, he continued "in conversation with a land agent, I discovered that his tenants were largely in arrears."

"Why keep these people in bondage? I enquired, if you cannot obtain the arrears strike them off your books. By so doing you will create in them a sense of freedom which would be beneficial to both parties," Montgomery told him.

But the land agent had no such good intentions. He told Montgomery, "These people improve the property a little after they build a second house" – an apparent

reference to the house that would replace the original shack thrown up as a shelter on their arrival.

### “Worth The Back Rent”

AND SO, added the land agent, arrears are accumulating until the improvements are worth the back rent. “Then, apparently, the land lord, or his agent, would move in and seize the improved properties.”

As Montgomery described it to the Land Commission:

“This shows that after a man has put many years of hard labor on a farm, they (land agents) make no scruple of turning him off because of a few pounds of back rent.”

“I think you will agree with me,” he told the Commission, “that such a state of affairs should not exist in any country, and especially in a new country.”

Contrasting conditions here with New Brunswick, for example, Montgomery said “There lumbering privileges are very considerable. On this Island we have to import our lumber. Men of means obtain general permits and strip the lands, and in many instances have left them worthless.”

Asked by Commissioner Howe “Do you mean that you have to import your boards and shingles?”

Mr. Montgomery replied “It is so.”

If I may add a personal observation here, I suggest that this bit of evidence suggests, perhaps even more than the other, the complete indifference to the settlers’ welfare shown by the people who were responsible for the whole sorry mess that the land question really was.

Commissioner Howe: “Do you refer to the whole Island?”

Mr. Montgomery: “I believe that it is nearly general.”

Asked for the price of hardwood, Montgomery replied, “It is sometimes as high as 20 shillings a cord in Charlottetown. It is 10 shillings in the country area.”

I believe the “Halifax currency” was used here at the time, though I am not sure, and that would mean the Pound was worth \$3.00. The pound Sterling was generally recognized in former times as being worth \$5.00, though currency tables used when I went to school said the pound Sterling was worth slightly less.

At any rate the quoted price for hardwood, fuel wood apparently, was terribly high, considering the worth of money at that time.

“MUCH OF the forest was destroyed by fire, Montgomery added, then said “I think there will not be a green stick left in my area in another twenty years.”

“Persons with means who come to this country to settle usually succeed and, in a few years, become comfortably settled” Montgomery told the Commissioners. In some cases people bring no money, but when they settle by the seashore, or have other advantages, they occasionally prosper.

“In many cases, however, when the virgin soil is exhausted, poverty ensues.”

“The soil on the Island is poor,” he added, and requires to frequently be improved with manure if you expect to get anything approaching to an abundant crop.”

The proprietary system “retards the efforts of the people and retards the country generally,” Montgomery concluded.

The hearings conducted by the Land Commission members back in 1860 were sincere in their purpose, so were the recommendations made by them, but nothing came out of the effort because the recommendations were not carried out by those who were responsible. Those people kept developing new propositions to block the course of justice.

### Islanders To London

AFTER MANY attempts to get some action from the proprietors and then representatives in England, “the Island government sent Edward Palmer and W.H. Pope to England to submit fresh conditions (this quote is from Campbell’s History printed by Bremner Bros. in 1875), which might prove acceptable.

They “had an interview in October 1863 with the Colonial Secretary, the Duke of Newcastle, when the land question was discussed.

The proposals of the two men were substantially embodied in a communication addressed to the Colonial Secretary, and dated October 13. A copy of that communication was sent from the Colonial office to Sir Samuel Cunard, with the view to having its contents submitted to the proprietors by the gentleman.

“On the 14<sup>th</sup> of October the Baronet sent to the Duke of Newcastle a reply, in which he presented, at considerable length, his own views of the points at issue. He considered at the outset that the granting of the land originally in blocks was an act of necessity, that the grantees had all lost very heavily by accepting the grants, and that no individual at present on the Island had been injured by that proceeding, but, on the contrary, the grants had been a fruitful source of profit to the present generation.”

As Campbell observed in his history:

### ‘Intensely Absurd Proposition’

“THIS NOVEL and intensely absurd proposition Sir Samuel proceeded to establish by reference to the taxation to which the proprietors were subjected, and the various measures that had been passed by the local legislature, and confirmed by the home government.

“In December of that year Sir Samuel addressed another letter to the Duke of Newcastle, enclosing a Bill which he said would be acceptable to the proprietors if adopted in its integrity.”

“To the letter and the proposed bill, Mr. Pope replied, in an able and exhaustive communication dated December 13 which concluded with the following words.

“I regret to say that I cannot construe Sir Samuel Cunard’s communication on the subject of the proposals for settlement of the land question, in any other sense than an indication of unwillingness on his part at least, to any such reasonable concessions to the tenantry as would afford the relief which is essential, in order to secure the colony generally from these much-to-be dreaded evils which unnecessarily result from widespread agrarian agitation.”

These are just a few of the unproductive and often ridiculous replies from England to efforts on behalf of the tenants. The work of the Land Commission virtually went for

nought. Indeed one titled proprietor, or his representative chastised the Commission for exceeding its authority among other things.