

Crocodile Chronicle: Atlantic Provinces, 1838 - 39

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Le journal de Charles Cockayne Austen est une découverte récente. Le Lieutenant Austen servit abord du HMS Crocodile posté à la Station Amérique du Nord-Antilles en 1838-39. Son journal donne un aperçu intéressant sur plusieurs aspects de la vie quotidienne de l'époque. Ces notes de recherche peuvent servir d'introduction au document pour ceux qui seraient intéressés à l'examiner de façon plus approfondie.

Accounts in the form of journals, diaries or logbooks that mariners kept of their travels date back to the earliest written records of sailing. A logbook kept by Lieutenant Charles Cockayne Austen¹ during the period 1836 - 41, while serving in the British Royal Navy, recently turned up in England. Part of his account should interest Canadians in particular, because he recorded weather conditions, ports of call, salutes, social events and diversions while sailing around the coasts of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland aboard HMS *Crocodile*, a frigate of the West Indies and North America squadron on detached duty.

The first official naval record found on Charles Austen shows that he joined HMS *Alfred* in 1831 as a mate. However, he probably entered the Royal Navy before then. He was promoted to lieutenant in 1835. After serving in a number of different vessels, in September 1837 he joined *Crocodile* in England, and was with that ship for just over two years.² The *Crocodile*, a wooden sailing vessel, was built in Chatham in 1825. Armed with twenty-eight guns, she was approximately 114 feet long, 32 feet in the beam, and had a displacement of about 500 tons.³

When Lieutenant Austen first came to the north Atlantic from Bermuda in April 1838, *Crocodile* was employed as a troop transport. He stayed at Halifax but does not say

¹ Although details about Lieutenant Charles Cockayne Austen's personal life are sketchy, one fact is clear. He was not one of the sailor brothers of the well known author, Jane Austen.

² The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom (TNA), Records of the Admiralty including Adm 36, Ship's Muster Rolls for 1831, and ADM 31, ship's pay book for 1835. Lt Austen's logbook (hereafter logbook), entry for 16 September 1837. The logbook is in the private collection of Commander Alan Norris RN, (retired).

³ National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (NMM), "Warship Histories, *Crocodile*, microfiche No. 018.

how he spent his first few days there. The ship soon left Halifax for Charlottetown with eight-six members of the 93rd Regiment, the Sutherland Highlanders, commanded by Captain Charles Gordon. For some five hours, off the Gut of Canso, she encountered "great quantities of broken ice so thick ... it was just like bumping on rocks," Lieutenant Austen wrote.⁴ Finally, on 20 May, the Scottish troops arrived safely in Charlottetown where they replaced a detachment of the 85th Regiment at the local garrison. The Highland Society warmly welcomed their countrymen and "gave them a public reception on the wharf," the newspaper reported.⁵ A few days later Captain James Polkinghorne, RN, and the officers of the *Crocodile*, government officials, the military and other distinguished citizens celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday, her first after her accession to the British throne. Governor Sir Charles Fitzroy held a levy in her honour followed by a dance at Government house. The ship's fiddlers, along with the Governor's "dancing master," provided the music for the occasion.

The *Crocodile* then returned to Halifax with the 85th, but the weather was so foggy "it was impossible for us to approach land," Austen noted.⁶ Days passed before the ship could anchor, but once it did the soldiers boarded HMS *Cornwallis* for Quebec. There, they participated in a welcoming ceremony for Lord Durham who had come out from England to investigate the affairs of British North America after the rebellions and were on alert in case of another uprising in Lower Canada.

In mid-June the *Crocodile* sailed to the Island of Saint Pierre where Austen called on Joseph L. M. Bruë, commander of the French possessions in North America. Afterwards, the ship sailed a short distance to Grand bank and Fortune Bay on the Burin Peninsula. One of the favourite pastimes there was trout fishing and once, near Grand Bank Village, a party from the *Crocodile*, "brought on board thirty dozen of fine trout."⁷ A few days later Austen met some fishermen at LaPoile Bay on Newfoundland's south coast, who depended on Mr Antonia, the only merchant, for their livelihood. In Austen's words, "Mr Antonia buys all the fish from the fisheries round about... the merchant never pays in money but supplies them with everything they want - clothes for themselves and their families as well as provisions in the winter."⁸ (This truck, or barter system, had existed in some Newfoundland outports since the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713.⁹) On 28 June, there was great rejoicing for her Majesty on her coronation day. The *Crocodile*, then patrolling the south coast of Newfoundland, fired a royal salute to mark the event.

En route to St John's, *Crocodile* anchored off the Burin Peninsula. Capitalizing on a quirk of nature, at Little St Lawrence some of the men from the ship half filled a small boat with capelin that were caught when they came inshore to spawn near a sandy beach.

⁴ Logbook, 16 May 1838.

⁵ Logbook, 21 May 1838; *Royal Gazette*, Charlottetown, 22 May 1838.

⁶ Logbook, 30 May 1838.

⁷ Logbook, 20 June 1838.

⁸ Logbook, 24 June 1838.

⁹ Stewart MacNutt, *The Atlantic Provinces: The Emergence of Colonial Society*, (Toronto, 1965), 17-18.

Upon arrival at St John's, the Admiralty instructed Captain Polkinghorne to undertake a survey "respecting the settlements on the western coast of Newfoundland."¹⁰ So, on 21 July the *Crocodile* left for the Cape Ray area, and did not return until 11 September.

Although Great Britain had sovereignty over Newfoundland, migratory fishermen from France took advantage of their treaty right (confirmed by the Treaty of Paris, 1763) to dry and cure fish along the west coast, also known as the "French shore." Consequently, there were few permanent settlers there or on the Northern Peninsula until France surrendered her right to use the coast in 1904. Since the French usually returned to France at the end of the fishing season, only a few "unprotected settlers" lived along the west coast. Captain Polkinghorne's report and accompanying census showed a diverse but small population of mainly French, British and native Newfoundlanders living there. He found about four hundred living in the St George's Bay area, about a hundred more at the mouth of the Great and Little Codroy River, and seventy-four along the Humber River. A few people, mainly British, were scattered around various coves long the Northern Peninsula. Although Mi'kmaq were seen, none were included in the census." The permanent settlers fished salmon, herring and cod, but were so isolated they had "no magistrate to administer the law or qualified person to give the benefit of moral or religious instruction," Polkinghorne lamented.¹²

Both Captain Polkinghorne and Lieutenant Austen observed that the permanent settlers usually lived along the shore in the summer but moved inland during the winter. According to Polkinghorne, the French fishers did not "molest" the settlers¹³ and at times, the residents even looked after property belonging to them. The captain determined that some smuggling occurred along the French Shore because no customs officer was present. Once at St George's Bay, he reacted angrily when a French citizen hoisted a tricolour and he instructed one of his officers to remove it immediately.

Before returning to St John's, the *Crocodile* sailed across the Strait of Belle Isle where Polkinghorne surveyed the fisheries on Labrador's south coast. He found that American, French and a few local fishermen frequented the area. At L'Anse-au-loup the captain and Austen chose an opportune time to shoot curlew. "They are in great numbers here just at this time and gorge themselves with a small blue berry peculiar to this coast."¹⁴ Although plentiful then, today this shorebird is an endangered species. In July and again in

¹⁰ TNA, CO 194/101. Governor Prescott, Newfoundland, to Colonial Secretary, 25 September 1838, enclosed a report from Polkinghorne relative to the settlements on the "French shore" of Newfoundland, (hereafter, the Polkinghorne Report"). The Provincial Archives, The Rooms Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador, GN 1/13/2/B holds a manuscript copy of this report dated 12 Sept. 1838.

¹¹ Polkinghorne Report, 5-6, 16.

¹² Polkinghorne Report, 10-11. Polkinghorne's successor in command of *Crocodile*, Captain Alexander Milne, kept a record of subsequent activities of the vessel on the Newfoundland station in 1840. See John Beeler, (ed.), *The Milne Papers: The Papers of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Alexander Milne, Bt., KCB*, Vol 1, "1820-1859," (Navy Records Society, 2004), 94-118.

¹³ Polkinghorne Report, 18.

¹⁴ Logbook, 21 August 1838.

September the *Crocodile* anchored in St John's. In July the ship brought \$44,000 in specie or coins of an unspecified currency to the Commissariat of the garrison.¹⁵

At St John's, Lieutenant Austen noted in his log the many diversions that he enjoyed there. For example, the first time the *Crocodile* was in port, the highlight was a dinner and dance given at Government House by Governor Henry Prescott. Then, when the vessel returned to St John's, the ship's officers reciprocated with a dinner and dance for His Excellency. Not to be outdone, the officers at the local garrison held a picnic for the naval officers. Afterwards, almost everyone in the area, including Austen, attended the St John's Regatta at Quidi Vidi Lake, a celebrated sporting event held annually to this day. Small wonder that Austen was overwhelmed by the hospitality. The ship then sailed from St John's and made a customary stop in Halifax before proceeding to Bermuda on 9 October.

Three months later, then in Barbados, the senior officer there was ordered to transport "as many of the 69th as he could carry to Halifax."¹⁶ On 10 January 1839, tragedy struck just as preparations were underway for the voyage. Captain Polkinghorne died suddenly from yellow fever at the age of 53.¹⁷ The captain's death and the unhealthy situation at the garrison moved Austen to write, "four officers of the 52nd have died since their arrival. Hardly a day we do not hear musket firing in the direction of the military burial ground."¹⁸ Fortunately none of the troops that sailed from Barbados had contracted the disease.

The soldiers were transported to Halifax because a threat of war existed between Great Britain and the United States over the disputed boundary between New Brunswick and Maine. Although a number of earlier incidents had occurred, in 1839 the circumstances were alarming because a skirmish took place between New Brunswick lumbermen and a Maine official in the Aroostook River valley, that was claimed by both jurisdictions and the two antagonists called out their militiamen. New Brunswick badly needed reinforcements then because several British regulars dispatched to Lower Canada during the rebellion had not been replaced. Between December 1837 and the spring of 1839, Sir John Harvey, the lieutenant-governor of New Brunswick had sent five regiments and two companies there.¹⁹ Consequently, early in January 1839, three ships, *Crocodile*, *Numa*, and *Elizabeth*, sailed from Barbados, each conveying part of the 69th Regiment. En route to Halifax, a heavy gale damaged the *Crocodile* so badly that "the soldiers thought the ship would be lost."²⁰ Nonetheless, she made it to port safely, much to the relief of all.

¹⁵ Logbook, 6 June 1838 noted that coins were loaded at Halifax for St John's; *Newfoundlander*, St John's, 12 July 1838.

¹⁶ Logbook, 9 January 1839.

¹⁷ Department of Archives, Barbados, Ref. No. RL/2, vol 16,145. Polkinghorne had been appointed to *Crocodile* in command in October, 1837. According to Austen's logbook, on 11 Jan 1839 Lieut. Polwhile received an acting commission as commander of *Crocodile*. He acted in that capacity only until 9 May 1839 when Alexander Milne was appointed in command.

¹⁸ Logbook, 10 January 1839.

¹⁹ Phillip Buckner, "Harvey, Sir John," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, VIII, 378.

²⁰ Logbook, 27 January 1839.

The naval authorities at Halifax directed that the military reinforcements be dispatched to New Brunswick immediately because the danger of war with the United States had become acute. However before *Crocodile* sailed, there was time for her officers to attend a dance at Lieutenant-Colonel Bazalgette's residence, where Austen met some interesting guests, including the daughter of the Nova Scotian author and judge, Thomas Chandler Haliburton. On 24 February *Crocodile* sailed from Halifax with one hundred and ninety-five soldiers of the 69th embarked, arriving at Saint John on 2 March. After the men disembarked, the ship proceeded to Shelburne, Nova Scotia, where the *Elizabeth* had been towed in distress. *Crocodile* brought one hundred and seventy soldiers from that vessel to Saint John as well. When she reached port on 17 March, the *Numa* had already arrived with the remainder of the reinforcements. The next day the captain and officers of *Crocodile* were guests of the St Patrick's Society of Saint John where "lively songs and sentiments," including several toasts, raised the spirits of those in attendance.²¹ Meanwhile, the military reinforcements moved up the St John River toward the northeastern frontier, but were withdrawn when a temporary agreement reached between the British colony and Maine late in March averted war. A final settlement of the New Brunswick-Maine border was not realized, however, until the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842.

The *Crocodile* made two more voyages to Saint John in 1839. In April she transported sixty-four soldiers, mainly from the 69th Regiment, as well as several thousand dollars to the Saint John garrison, and in May she brought hundreds of muskets to the military there. In the summer Austen made his final voyage to the north Atlantic *Crocodile* sailed from the West Indies through the Caribbean Sea to the Gulf of Mexico, where she landed at Vera Cruz and at some islands nearby. On her way to Cuba Austen reported the deaths of two shipmates, G. Blakey the gunner, and William Morcombe the rope maker, both of whom were buried at sea. On 10 August *Crocodile* reached Havana, but an outbreak of yellow fever there made Austen anxious to move on. From Cuba the ship sailed to Halifax, where some money was delivered to the local garrison. Later, the ship's officers attended a round of social events including the Halifax Regatta, a naval ball and a soldiers' ball.

On 13 September, Austen wrote that "a devil of a gale" damaged the *Crocodile* in Halifax harbour.²² At the height of the storm she drifted alongside the *Winchester*. By lashing herself alongside that ship, she was saved from further harm. After undergoing repairs, *Crocodile* left Halifax with some money for the garrison at St John's. She arrived there on 21 September, but just four days later sailed for Barbados. This was Austen's last cruise in the north Atlantic. According to the captain of *Crocodile*, on 28 October Austen was invalided ashore in Barbados "suffering from a severe attack of venereal disease which he contracted in April last in Halifax."²³

²¹ *Weekly Chronicle*, Saint John, 22 March 1839.

²² Logbook, 13 September 1839.

²³ NMM, MLN/101/15, Captain Milne to Captain John Leith, Senior Officer Barbados, 26 October 1839; *Crocodile* letter book, 8 May 1839-20 November 1841.

On orders from the commodore, Austen was sent back to England in the packet boat *Penguin* and landed at Falmouth in late December, 1839. For some ten months he kept no records and only recommenced his log after joining the steam packet *Hecate* at Sheerness in October 1840. Then, he kept careful notes for the next year while *Hecate* was employed in despatch and general fleet duties in the Mediterranean. After recording an account of his visit to the Holy Land, the logbook ends rather abruptly on 16 October 1841. However, Austen remained in *Hecate*. On 8 March 1842, the ship anchored off Jaffa (now in Israel) to replenish her supplies. There, Austen and five others left the ship in a small boat and failed to return. On 10 March 1842 the crew of *Hecate* learned their sad fate, Austen, the pilot James Jarvey and Seaman Isaac Jones, as well as John Compton, Uriah Hudson and John Onion, all of the Royal Marine Artillery, drowned when their cutter overturned in the surf.²⁴

Austen's logbook was sent back to England as part of his effects. It was more or less forgotten until recently when it was found in an attic, in a home near Shaftesbury. It is now in a private collection.

²⁴ TNA, ADM 51, Captain's log, HMS *Hecate*, 8-11 March 1842.