

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

## THE DIGBY NAME

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Recalling the link between Robert  
William Smollett of New Carlisle  
and Captain Henry Digby, R.N.

(Admiral Sir Henry Digby, R.N.)

reflected in the naming of two  
Smollett sons.

Ken Annett

THE DIGBY NAME

Reference to Digby Smollett, father of the New Carlisle centenarian, Mrs. Leora Steele, by Cynthia Dow's article in SPEC of June 23, 1996, recalls the Digby name with its interesting background and historic connection. For the Digby family has had a long and distinguished role in British life. For generations, members of the Digby family were prominent in the military and civic life of their country. As examples, in the early 17th century Sir Kenelm Digby as diplomat, naval commander, philosopher and author exemplified the Renaissance ideal of the "complete man", versatile in ideas and action. His cousin, Sir John Digby, later the Earl of Bristol, served as the British ambassador to Spain. In the Civil War period of King Charles Lord George Digby was one of the inner circle of the King's men. And new light has been cast recently on the Digby family in the time of Robert William Smollett, first of his family to settle in New Carlisle, in the fascinating biography, "REBEL HEART" by Mary S. Lovell, of the life of Jane Digby (1807-1881)

The history of the Smollett family, including reference of the circumstances that led Robert William Smollett to name two of his sons after Sir Henry Digby, R.N., has been researched by Ralph Rogers, Jr. of Pennsylvania and Stephen J. Smollett of Nassau, Bahamas, among others. Record has been found of the baptism of Robert William Smollett at St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Magna Minterne, Dorset, England. Other church records appear to indicate that he was a son of James and Martha Smollett whose respective deaths in 1788 and 1790 left him orphaned at early age. St. Andrew's Church adjoined the manor house and estate of Lord Digby, "MINTERNE". In Robert William Smollett's youth the Digby family was represented in the

Royal Navy by Lord Digby's nephew, Captain (later Admiral) Henry Digby, whose home, "FORSTON HOUSE" was near the great manor house of his uncle. In due time he would inherit the "MINTERNE" estate.

To place in context the link between Robert William Smollett and Captain Henry Digby, R.N., it should be recalled that from 1793 onwards England was faced with the threat of invasion by France under Napoleon Bonaparte. The British Navy was England's first and most effective line of defence. Navy records show that Robert Smollett joined the crew of H.M.S. ALCMÉNE, Captain Henry Digby, R.N., Master as a twelve year old lad. As part of a British Naval Squadron commanded by Horatio Lord Nelson, the ALCMÉNE was heavily involved in the Battle of Copenhagen on April 2nd., 1801. That Captain Digby was a hero to young Smollett long after his navy service is evidenced by the naming of two sons, Henry and Digby Smollett after him. A tradition that Robert Smollett left the Navy as a result of the horrifying scenes he had witnessed during the bloody battle of Copenhagen may also be well founded.

HENRY DIGBY'S  
NAVAL CAREER

Subsequent to the Battle of Copenhagen Captain Henry Digby commanded the frigate "AURORA". In less than two years he had captured six French privateers and one corvette, "L'ÉGALITÉ", making a total of 144 guns and 744 men, besides 48 merchant ships taken or sunk. In command of H.M.S. LEVIATHAN he assisted in the capture of the island of Minorca. Later he captured two French men-of-war, "LE DÉPIT" and "LA COURAGE"; and in 1799 two Spanish frigates, THETIS and BRIGIDE, which carried between them 3 million dollars in gold. Fifty military wagons were needed to convey the spoils from Plymouth Dock to the Citadel. By the time he was thirty, Captain Digby had earned himself over £57,000 in prize money alone.

NAVAL CAREER

(ctd)

But possibly the highlight of Captain Digby's career with the Royal Navy was his part in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 when the British under Lord Nelson decisively defeated the French and Spanish at sea. He commanded H.M.S.AFRICA and writing to his uncle at "MINTERNE" he said, in part:

"I write merely to say I am well, after having been closely engaged for 6 hours on 21st October. For details, being busy to the greatest degree, I have lost all my masts in consequence of the action and my ship is otherwise cut to pieces but sound in the bottom. My killed and wounded number 63, but many of the latter I shall lose if I do not get into port...

After passing through the line in which position I brought down the fore masts of the "SANTISIMA TRINIDAD" mounting 140 guns, after which I engaged with pistol shot "L'INTREPIDE" 74 guns, which afterward was struck and burnt, "ORION" and "CONQUEROR" coming up. A little boy that stayed with me is safe. Twice on the poop I was left alone, all about me being killed or wounded. I am very deaf...."

Captain Henry Digby rose quickly to the rank of rear-admiral in the Royal Navy and was often absent for long periods of duty with the fleet. He was knighted and, as Admiral Sir Henry Digby, showed the twenty-year old Queen Victoria around his flagship in 1841 and danced at the Trafalgar Ball. The following year he suffered a stroke that followed an earlier fall from his horse and died. The funeral was at "MINTERNE", the seat of the Digby family.

ROBERTWILLIAM  
SMOLLETT

Following his Royal Navy service under Captain Henry Digby Robert William Smollett left his native Dorset for Canada in the early years of the 18th century and settled in New Carlisle. At the time of the great famine of 1816

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records show that he was 28 years old, married and with one child. He had helped to unload the shipment of relief flour sent by ship from Quebec to Gaspesia and he and his family had benefited from these welcome provisions. His wife, Ann Kempffer, was a daughter of Frederick Lewis and Elizabeth Caldwell Kempffer. In time their family grew to include:

Sarah	Henry
Frederick	Digby
Margaret	Ann
Elizabeth	Sarah II

Sons Henry and Digby were named after Captain Henry Digby, R.N.

It seems evident that Robert William Smollett had a sound education. Some records list him as a "schoolmaster". He was the Deputy Registrar for the District of Gaspé - his signature appears on many legal documents and church records.

Ann Kempffer died in 1846 at the early age of 49 years and was buried at St. Andrew's Church, New Carlisle by the Rev. George Milne. Following his wife's death Robert William Smollett went to live with his son Henry and daughter-in-law, Violet Sherar Smollett at Moncton, N.B. It was there that he passed away in 1860.

The story of his life that Robert William Smollett could have told to his children and grand-children stirs the imagination of those interested in the Gaspesian heritage. It would have encompassed his early boyhood in Dorset, England, his recollections of the Digby estate of "MINTERNE", his service with the Royal Navy in the era of Napoleon, his migration to America and Gaspesia and the life of New Carlisle and area in the early 18th century.



Admiral Sir Henry Digby, R.N.

1770-1842