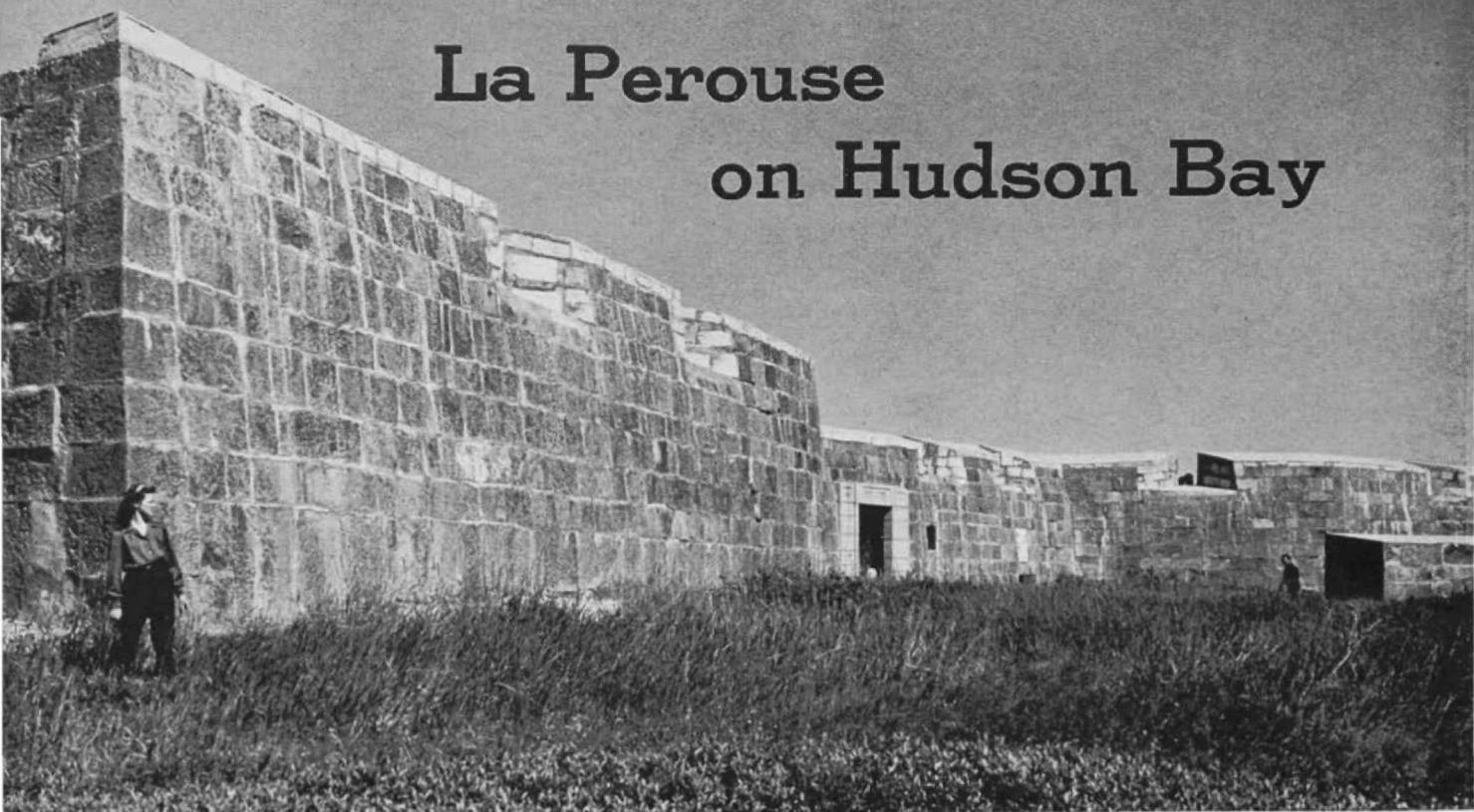


La Perouse on Hudson Bay



Prince of Wales's Fort showing the southwest (near) and southeast bastions, with the entrance in between, as restored by the Dominion Government. R. Harrington

An eye-witness account, hitherto unpublished, of the French capture and destruction of Prince of Wales's Fort and York Factory in 1782.

Introduction and Footnotes
by R. Glover

THE destruction of Prince of Wales's Fort and York Fort in 1782, by the Comte de la Pérouse with one 74-gun line of battle ship and two 36-gun frigates of the French fleet is not usually rated a very great event in Canadian history. An attack on Rupert's Land was not then an attack on Canada. Yet Canadian interests were not unaffected. Far from doing harm, the attack brought pure advantage to the fur trade of Upper and Lower Canada and its headquarters, the city of Montreal. It deprived the Hudson's Bay Company's men on the Saskatchewan of their year's outfit of trading goods for 1783-1784. It drove the Chipewyans to trade at Fort Chipewyan, instead of carrying their furs to the HBC at Churchill. Thus the HBC's loss was the North West Company's gain. From the Canadian angle of that day the destruction of the HBC's two chief trading posts may be called a beneficent act of war; it may also claim the modern Canadian's interest as the last occasion to date on which the northern coasts of the present Dominion have been assailed by enemies of the British Empire. Here the *Beaver*

presents a newly discovered French narrative of the expedition that destroyed the HBC forts.

Three main accounts of the French operations in the Bay have long been extant. The first is the report of the French Commander-in-Chief, the Comte de la Pérouse, published in the *Gazette de France* on October 29, 1782, and quickly reproduced in the English press. The second is the story told by Edward Umfreville in his book, *The Present State of Hudson's Bay*, which appeared in 1790. The third is the account of one of De la Pérouse's officers, later Admiral de la Monneraye; this last is entitled a "Journal," and may be based on a day-to-day diary, but was in fact not written till after the French Revolution, nor published till 1888. Besides these, an excerpt from the York Fort Journal, written by Humphrey Marten, and describing one incident in the French operations, was published in the Champlain Society's *Journals of Hearne and Turnor* in 1934; and David Thompson gives a hearsay and rather jaundiced story of the attack on Churchill.

Of these accounts Edward Umfreville's of 1790 is easily the best known, most quoted, and by far the worst. It ostensibly consists of two letters reprinted from the *Morning Chronicle* of April 1783, and Umfreville thus takes cover behind the anonymity of a letter-writer to a newspaper. That he was in fact their author may be guessed. Their first publication in 1783 is suspiciously closely synchronised with his quarrelling with the HBC owing to "some disagreement arising in point of salary;" and so is their second publication, in his book of 1790. In 1789, after five years' service with the North West Company, Umfreville applied for re-employment in the

HBC and was not accepted on the terms he asked. Thereupon, (as Hearne says), he "published an account of the Hudson's Bay, with the same ill-nature as the former authors [i.e. Arthur Dobbs & Co.]; and for no other reason than that of being disappointed of succeeding to a command in the Bay, though there was no vacancy for him." Umfreville's book is indeed shot through with "ill-nature." He has a general hostility toward the HBC and a violent personal animus against Humphrey Marten, chief at York Fort, that stamp his book as an attempt to pay off real or fancied old scores. Curiously enough, the anonymous author of the letters he borrows from the *Morning Chronicle* of 1783 was equally envenomed against Marten. He was also, like Umfreville, present at the surrender of York but could give only a second-hand account of the fall of Churchill, which Umfreville too had not witnessed. It may well be, then, that Umfreville was quoting himself when, with a specious show of impartiality, he reprinted the seven-year old story from the *Morning Chronicle* of 1783; and in any case it is a story that selects and omits facts in a manner well suited to support Umfreville's prejudices.

From the vengeful narrative of Umfreville it is pleasant to turn to the dispassionate accounts of the French officers, professional men of war who knew the odds against their opponents and make no attempt to ridicule them. The new French account is an interesting supplement to the old. It consists of one faded sheet of foolscap, closely written on both sides in rather pale ink. An attached note declares it to be the "work of a marine officer named du Tremblier." No officer of that name is mentioned either by De la Pérouse, who sailed on the battleship *Sceptre* or De la Monneraye who sailed on the *Astrée* frigate. However it is not surprising that either should omit mention of

Jean-Francois Galaup, Comte de la Perouse, who commanded the expedition of 1782.

him, for he was aboard the third French ship, the frigate *l'Engageante*. He states that he wrote his account between October 12 and December 31, 1782. Both the ink and the paper of our document seem consistent with an 18th century date, but this does not prove that it is the original. The at times highly individual spelling recalls the erratic orthography sometimes employed during the 18th Century even by admirals in the British Navy. The account is unsigned. At point after point this new version is confirmed by the other two French accounts, but its dating of the day to day record is more complete than either. It may therefore appear both reliable and valuable.

One or two facts from the French record may be worth glancing at here. If these French accounts can be trusted (and they probably can) the English at the Bay committed the not uncommon error of over-estimating the numbers of their opponents. At Churchill, says our author, 150 French soldiers were landed; both Umfreville and Thompson supposed the French forces to total 400. However an ample advantage still lay with De la Pérouse who writes "I was assured that if the enemy should meditate any resistance the *Sceptre* could easily reduce them." At York likewise Humphrey Marten estimated the number of his opponents at 700 men, though De la Pérouse states he only landed 250. But he also brought "all my mortars [and] all my cannon" and against these the wooden palisades of York were no defence.

Perhaps the most interesting remark of this new account is that, off the mouth of the Churchill, "We dropped anchor 1 league from the fort, then, *flying the English flag and pennon*, we lowered our ship's boat." No other account mentions the French trick of flying British colours to deceive the HBC men at Churchill, but the truth of it seems inferentially confirmed by De la Pérouse's statement that at York (where a delayed landing and long approach march made his recognition certain) the garrison might "entertain projects of defence, which that of Fort Prince Wales [*sic*] could not have had any idea of."

But none of these accounts answers the most interesting question about De la Pérouse's expedition to Hudson's Bay—namely, *why* did it ever take place? Six weeks before she sailed for the Bay the *Sceptre* had been badly damaged in the great battle of the twelfth of April where George Rodney heavily defeated the French fleet. Rodney had broken his enemy's line and annihilated their centre in a day-long conflict, while the sharks of the Caribbean leaped from the water and struggled with each other to feast on dead and dying Frenchmen among flaming hulks and fallen rigging. From this scene of slaughter the surviving French ships had fled, some to Curaçao, some to St. Domingo. When De Vaudreuil, the senior surviving French commander, sent De la Pérouse from St. Domingo to the Arctic, he deprived himself of a newly repaired ship of the line and two first class frigates for half a year at least. He thereby enhanced in equal measure the disadvantage at which Rodney's victory had already placed him, and he accepted this added military handicap for no greater gain than the destruction of some civilian property.



DU TREMBLIER'S ACCOUNT

Translated by Gertrude Laing

June 1782. Departure from the Cape, of the island of St. Domingo, May 31, 1782, for a special expedition aboard His Majesty's frigate *l'Engageante* commanded by the Marquis de Lajaille, ship's lieutenant, under the direction of Monsieur de Lapérouse, commanding the *Sceptre* with 74 guns, and the frigate *l'Astrée* commanded by Monsieur de Langle, ship's lieutenant.

We left the cape of St. Domingo Island on May 31, at 2 a.m., with the *St. Esprit*, which was in charge of a convoy of more than 100 ships, along with three other warships. We received a signal to get under way on June 1st.

June 2—We spoke to the *St. Esprit* during the morning, and were told to sail on ahead.

June 4—We sailed close to land, on the look-out for Turk Island¹. At 2 o'clock we sighted land straight ahead. Between 5 and 6 o'clock the *Sceptre* signalled to us as well as to the *Astrée*, and at 7 o'clock we separated from the convoy.

June 7—Our Captain, Monsieur de Lajaille, went on board the *Sceptre*.

June 8—At 9.30 a.m. we sighted two ships to windward about 5 leagues away.

June 9—Monsieur de Lapérouse signalled us to discontinue the pursuit [of the ships seen on the 8th].

June 13—The *Astrée* put up our signal; we joined her immediately, and lowered our boat to go on board, finding ourselves almost a league away from the Commandant.

June 15—Monsieur de Lajaille went on board the Commandant. He returned with two bales of coloured cloth for the landing troops.

June 20—We sighted a ship to leeward, and started in pursuit².

June 21—We continued in pursuit of this same ship until 1.30 without being able to overtake it.

June 22—At 3 o'clock the Commandant signalled to us to heave to. Our captain went on board. He came back at 5 o'clock, having sighted a vessel to windward. We received the signal to give chase. At 6 o'clock we gave up the chase.

June 30—We saw banks of ice, commonly called by sailors *banquises*, [ice-bergs], which would be about 200 or 300 feet high.

July 1782. Monsieur de Lajaille went aboard the *Sceptre* July 2, at 3.15. The fog began at 7 o'clock. We were so close to an iceberg one could throw a stone on to it without any difficulty. Since the fog was so heavy, and we didn't know on which side of us the two ships were located, we sent up signals, to which they replied. One could see very little through the fog save great blocks of

Today the great guns stand once more looking out to sea between the embrasures the French demolished nearly 170 years ago.
R. Harrington



ice, with smaller pieces which had probably broken away. The ice-mass continued to grow in volume. As it was very heavy, it struck with great force against the frigate, and because of the vast quantity of ice we were unable to avoid the blows. At 10 o'clock we succeeded in getting clear of it.

July 3—We noticed more ice ahead of us.

July 7—At 9.30 we tacked about because of the ice which lay ahead of us. As we veered about we could hear the sea breaking on the banks of ice as though breaking against land.

July 16—We sighted land. We believed it to be [illegible].

July 18—We came into view of the land, which we recognized as Resolution Id. [Entrance to Hudson Str.]

July 19—We altered our course several times in order to find an opening in the ice-pack. Unable to go through it because of its thickness, we were obliged to tack about and go back on our course all during the night. At day-break, the *Astrée* signalled land on the eastern horizon. Thereupon we headed into the ice-pack at the clearest point. Several times we had to stop, the ice was so thick and so heavy.

July 20—After being caught in the ice until 3 o'clock, when we got free, we had to heave to in order to wait for the Commandant and the *Astrée*, which were not yet through it. We were at that time about 5 leagues distant from the land, which we recognized as Lasblack [Saddle-back?] Island. At 8 a.m. we noticed a number of natives going off to hunt seals, whereupon we ran up the English flag and pennon. Some of the natives came on board. These men are well-built, of average height, but swarthy, and with very small eyes. Their canoes are made of whale bones covered with animal [seal] skins. They give skins in exchange for knives or shells or anything shiny. For weapons they use spears and arrows.

July 23—Having arrived in a little bay between the islands and the mainland, we cast anchor in 55 fathoms of water, with sand on the bottom. Forthwith we lowered the boats to get water from the ice.

July 24—We continued to get water. At 10 o'clock the ship's boats and the long boats were pulled up again, and we sailed out of the bay and the channel, keeping close alongside, and leaving finally after taking observations. It appears that the islands surrounding us were North Bluff Island and West Savage Island. The land east of this bay was the mainland of Terniatta [Baffin Land]. This land produces nothing but moss, a very little wood, and a great deal of game.

1. A small island at the southeast end of the Bahamas group, marking a passage through the archipelago.

2. According to De la Monneraye, the French had now reached the banks of Newfoundland. The ship pursued was doubtless a fishing schooner. Here too De la Perouse opened his sealed orders and learned where he was being sent. The purpose of his expedition had been kept so secret he was not supplied with proper clothing, and his men had to sail through the ice packs described below wearing only tropical kit, says De la Monneraye.

3. Umfreville gives Aug. 8 as the day the French arrived and Aug. 9 as the day the fort surrendered. All three French accounts, however, say they arrived on Aug. 9 and took the fort on Aug. 10. They are probably correct.

4. This would probably mean any distance up to about 3000 yards.

5. Umfreville gives the number of defenders at only 39. De la Monneraye puts it at a round 50. Samuel Hearne, who commanded the fort, states in the next-to-last paragraph of his *Journey . . . to the Northern Ocean* that the number of men under him at Churchill River never amounted to more than 53 in any year. Umfreville may well be correct here, as in 1782 the Saskatchewan posts' need of men left the Bay posts thinly manned.

July 25—We had to heave to, to avoid the ice which surrounded us.

July 26—Still caught in the ice, and unable to steer, we had to make fast to an ice floe. We remained there until 9 p.m.

July 28—Seeing an ice-pack ahead, we looked for a likely opening to pass through it.

July 29—We started in, but were obliged to make fast to an ice floe.

Aug. 2—Trying to find a way out of the ice-pack, having lost sight of the Commandant during the night. We finally came out of the ice-pack at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, after having suffered considerable damage from the pounding of the floes of ice, of which there were great quantities.

Aug. 6—We were obliged to change our course because of something which lay ahead.

*Aug. 9*³—Having sighted land which we took to be Cape Churchill at noon, we approached the land at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and observed a fort from which a jack was flying on shore, which was said to be Prince of Wales's Fort. We dropped anchor 1 league from the fort, then flying the English flag and pennon we lowered our ship's boat and our long boat, the Commandant and the *Astrée* doing likewise. We armed them to go and look for a suitable place to land. At 2.30 a.m. Monsieur de Rostin [Rostaing], Major in the Regiment d'Armoniaque [Armagnac], left the *Sceptre* with 150 of the men of his regiment to make a landing, which he did within cannon-shot⁴ of the fort, without any incident. At the same time he sent one of the officers of his regiment bearing a flag of truce, to summon the governor of the fort to surrender. He surrendered at 7 a.m. without making any resistance. Thereupon the English flag was lowered, and the French flag and pennon run up. His Majesty's ships under the command of Monsieur de Lapérouse lowered their English flag and hoisted the French flag and pennon. Monsieur de Rostin entered the fort with his troops.

They found forty-two 36-pounders and 56 English Europeans⁵ [as opposed to English half-breeds], as well as a large number of natives. The fort was in good condition, being built of fine freestone, with powder magazines roofed with lead. The fort was constructed with four fronts, and palisades, and a battery of 6 swivel guns which could fire within range under cover [?] (*à portée à couvert*).

Right away our men fired the artillery of the fort at random. At the same time, Monsieur de Lapérouse, commanding the *Sceptre*, fired a salute of 9 guns. The captains of His Majesty's ships came ashore and found in the storehouses a considerable quantity of skins and provisions and coloured cloth. We set to work to dismantle and destroy the gun-pivots and to demolish the embrasures.

Aug. 10—We sent our boats ashore to transfer the supplies from the fort on board the *Astrée*. During the same day, we began to mine the fort in order to blow it up.

Aug. 11—At 9 a.m. we prepared to hoist sail in order to go and take Fort York. When the fort had been blown up our boats picked up the troops at 10 o'clock, and we weighed anchor at once.

Aug. 13—At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, we sighted a ship. We had to put on all sail. The ship was out of range of our guns at sunset, and we lost sight of it during the night⁶.

Aug. 14—We set sail to return to Prince of Wales's Fort, thinking we might find there the ship we had pursued. We had to put on all sail. We cast anchor 1 league from the fort at noon. We went ashore at once. We found about 60 natives who were taking refuge in the fort which had not completely burned down. Among them were some who seemed dejected at the sight of the misfortunes which we had brought down on them. Forthwith we went back on board and set sail to rejoin the Commandant and the *Astrée*.

Aug. 17—At 5 o'clock we came upon the Commandant and the *Astrée* which were at anchor 4 leagues from Fort York.

Aug. 20—At 3 o'clock in the afternoon we sent our long boat to take the gunners of the Artillery, who would be needed for the landing, on board the *Sceptre*. At the same time we sailed closer in to the aforementioned fort.

Aug. 21—Monsieur de Lapérouse and Monsieur de Langle, who was in command of the division, set out to go ashore. The ships were left under the command of Monsieur de Lajaille.

Aug. 25—We have had a very unhappy day. Two of our cables broken, two of our anchors lost, our tiller bar broken at the mortaise. Having lost hope, we let go our sheet anchor, and dropped it to the bottom⁷.

Aug. 28—9 a.m.—We had word concerning Fort York, that they had surrendered on the 22nd of the month. The fort was made of wood, and was defended by a battery of fourteen 22-pounders. The four bastions of the fort were simply storehouses in which were kept their skins and bales of coloured cloth and a great many muskets.

We took prisoner the Governor of Fort Severn⁸, having discovered him at Fort York.

Aug. 29—We picked up the troops from the frigate *Astrée*.

Aug. 31—At 8 p.m. our tiller bar broke at the mortaise. Within the hour our starboard cable gave way, and as a consequence we lost our anchor. Thereupon, to avoid any further mishap, we paid out the big cable to 150 fathoms.

Sept. 2—We set sail from Hudson's Bay to go to Cadiz in Spain, where I am at the present time. We arrived here on Oct. 12th of this year⁹.

Note in a modern hand: This account is the work of a marine officer, named Du Tremblier, who on his return to Angers spent the years of the Revolution and the Empire there.

6. This was the H B C supply ship *Prince Rupert*, Capt. Wm. Christopher, on her way to Prince of Wales's Fort.

7. On this date De la Perouse records "a very heavy gale" which caused him "the greatest anxiety for my ships anchored on the open coast . . . If it had lasted some hours longer, the frigate of the Sieur de la Jaille would have been lost and 300 men drowned"—and among the 300 would have been the author of the narrative here printed.

8. This was Matthew Cocking.

9. This shows the account was written between Oct. 12 and the end of the year 1782.

York Fort in Hearne's day. This engraving, after a drawing by Hearne, was published five years after his death, in the "European Magazine" for June 1797, and captioned "A South-West View of Prince of Wales's Fort." The evidence, however, suggests that it is rather York Factory. Obviously it is not the great stone fort. Neither can it be the fort that Hearne built on his return in 1783, for there are no high rocks behind it. On the other hand it agrees almost perfectly with Turnor's plan of York Fort in 1778, and it is obviously the same fort as that which appears in Schooling's history of the H B C, page 98, over the caption "Fort York, 1782."

