

Homeless in Newfoundland in 1690

By Kyle Joliffe

Homelessness in Canada is a far from new reality. In the fall of 1690, a solitary and poorly dressed young man roamed St. John's, sleeping in an open boat or a hayloft and begging for food. John Croker (1672-1727) had ended up there after a harrowing journey.

In 1686, his Quaker parents in Plymouth, England had apprenticed him to a Plymouth Friend who was emigrating to Pennsylvania.

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After his master in Pennsylvania died in an epidemic, Croker's father asked him to return home. He then took passage on a ship bound for Newcastle upon Tyne, eager to see his family and friends. Unfortunately, England and France had declared war against each other in 1689. To the "great trouble and sorrow" of the ship's passengers, as he recounted in a memoir of his life, his ship was captured by French privateers about 300 miles from England. Along with 27 other captives, he was taken not to France

but to a barren island on the French south coast of Newfoundland.

After six weeks of captivity on a sparse diet, Croker and his fellow prisoners managed to escape by stealing a boat from a French fishing station on a nearby island. They then made their way around the Avalon Peninsula to St. John's on the English eastern shore of Newfoundland. Along the way they stopped at several English fishing outports, and found a warm welcome there, despite twice being mistaken for having hostile intentions and almost getting fired upon. When they got to St. John's, the others in his group sold the boat and its equipment

without paying him anything. They then departed in several ships leaving him, in his own words "destitute of friends, relations, acquaintances, and money, in a strange country — having nothing wherewith to make friends, unless the Lord was pleased to raise some up for me."

After many pleas to the captains of the ships in the harbour and his humble prayers to God "to work a way for my deliverance out of that country," he finally persuaded one of the captains to take him

back to England. This had not been an easy task, as he could not pay for his passage nor was he able to work as a sailor. His prayer for deliverance was answered by a fellow passenger on the same ship. This Good Samaritan was a merchant friend of Croker's father and he promised to pay for Croker's passage.

The trials of this young man did not end once he boarded the ship to England. He was not given a bed in one of the ship's cabins and had to sleep on the deck, between barrels of whale oil. When the ship neared England, a terrible wind blew up and almost sank it. He finally got ashore, managed by reason of his youth to avoid being pressed into service with the Royal Navy, and then made his way to his parents' house. They had thought he had died and rejoiced to see him.

As with the recent case of Maher Arar, a Canadian who was suspected of being a terrorist and imprisoned for almost a whole year in a Syrian jail, John Croker was an innocent person swept up in a global conflict and suddenly stranded far from his home. Both eventually were reunited with their families, but not all such cases end on a positive note. *

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