

Among my mother's papers, I found this rather lengthy document about the Yeos. It is very difficult to say how she came to have this paper. On the cover it says that it was researched by Sid and Lee Dyke and was created May 26, 1989. There is an address handwritten on the cover for Syd Dyke – 5555 Greenleaf Road; West Vancouver, BC V7W1N5, but I checked the White Pages on-line and that address was for a different name. I can't see any evidence that the document is copyrighted and have no idea who Sid and Lee Dyke are. I thought it was a rather interesting read, which is why I have included it with my mother's journals.

James Yeo's Story

To pass the seas some think a toil,
Some think it strange abroad to roam,
Some think it grief to leave their soil,
Their parents, kinsfolk and their home;
Think so who list, I think it not,
I must abroad to try my lot.

Sir Richard Grenville

Bideford and its neighboring hamlets, Northam, Appledore, and Instow, cluster around a snug harbor on the rugged Devon coast, where the Rivers Taw and Torridge jointly empty into the Bristol Channel. Since a wintry day in 878 AD when Hubba the Dane beached his three and twenty long-boats and led his marauders ashore, Bideford has been part of maritime history. Hubba was met by a body of King Alfred's disciplined Saxons and left his bones and Raven banner on the shore, to become one of a treasury of local legends.

Westcountrymen have always looked to the sea for their fortunes and over the years have crafted countless ships of war and commerce, and manned them in voyages that spanned the globe. For her contribution to the rout of the Armada, Bideford received free port status and to this day no ship is charged to use the harbour. From late in the 16th Century when Sir Richard Grenville sailed to make the first attempt at North American settlement, to the American Revolution, a thriving trade continued across the Atlantic. Then it faltered, to revive again the 1807 when Napoleon succeeded in closing off British access to Baltic lumber.

Canada's eastern seaboard was forested with virgin timber the British Navy desperately required. Until steam and steel replaced the wooden sailing fleets, late in the century, commerce between Bideford and thickly wooded Prince Edward's isle became a brisk two way thoroughfare. Sailors, ship builders and settlers sailed for the new land of opportunity, rough finished Canadian built ships returned, loaded with square-cut timbers for British ship yards, and then, properly finished, loaded more passengers and supplies to repeat the cycle. The settlers harvested the New World forest lands to establish their lives.

A short distance down the coast from Bideford and slightly inland, the undistinguished village of Kilkhampton experienced little of this prosperity. In the modest stone church which still serves today, a local shoemaker, James Yeo senior, took to wife one Ann Orsborn. The year was 1788. She presented him with James Yeo junior, our hero, and three other children, and then she died. James senior did not marry again until 1807 when Grace Francis became his second wife. Not long after, her first born, Samuel, arrived, James junior, now of age, married his stepmother's younger sister, Ann. Grace's second child, Thomas, and Ann's first child, William, both arrived in 1813 and it is reported that newly minted uncle and nephew, on occasion were both nurtured at Grace's ample bosom.

James senior was poor, but well read and wrote an elegant hand. He took the time to transmit these attributes to his eldest son. It was all he had to transmit unless one counts the burning desire to escape the vicious cycle of poverty to which he was born. Through an accident, young James acquired a rigid spine that remained with him all his life, producing an intimidating posture which later served him well. He was also exceptionally strong and hardy with a keen head for figures and a talent for convincing rhetoric in the colloquial dialect. With a little capital gained beach combing, he bought a horse and van to provide a weekly carrier service to Bideford. Soon after Ann's third child was born, she died and so did the horse. James took to drink.

The contacts he had made in Bideford provided a second chance. Thomas Burnard, Bideford's reigning merchant prince, needed a strong, determined and astute representative in his flourishing lumber and shipping operation in Prince Edward's Isle and he recognized James as the very man. Then Lady Luck dealt him a second ace. Before sailing, he married Damaris Sargent, a resolute, aggressive, cross-eyed girl from Kilkhampton. A born housekeeper, she would become his greatest asset. Ann's children drop from sight at this point but William appears later, after, some say, a period spent in the slaving trade, to become Bideford representative for James' overseas enterprises.

James and Damaris arrived in Prince Edward Island in 1819, in company with Tommy Chanter, another enterprising Westcountryman destined for fame and fortune. The two men worked closely together in the interests of their employer, overseeing lumber production and delivery, disposing of imported merchandise, collecting debts and, in the process, learning the ship building business. After three years, Thomas Burnard died rather abruptly and Tommy Chanter succeeded to the firm. He sold the Prince Edward Island ship building venture to honest, hard working master-builder William Ellis, along with the considerable accounts receivable. Provincial records are vague on subsequent events but a strong suspicion prevails that most of these last that we legitimate and many that probably were not, were all in process of being collected by assiduously working James Yeo. And the proceeds were being ploughed into Yeo's rapidly expanding supply centre, located by the Ellis shipyard on Richmond Bay. It was astutely

managed by the hard working Damaris. James was well on the way to winning his personal war on poverty and the title 'Robber Baron', bestowed half in censure, half in admiration, by later historians.

James now began to own more and more of Prince Edward Island, the timber on it and, through their indebtedness, many of the settlers. In his numerous court cases, as either suing or sued, he appears to have owned most of the juries. Damaris took time out, periodically, from managing his growing retail operation, to present him with Susannah in 1824, Mary Jane in 1825, James in 1827, and Isabella in 1830. The three year lull would be due to James acquiring his first ship, which he was skipping himself.

Europe's teeming population was flooding to North America in rapidly growing numbers. Impoverished artisans and their families crowded the holds of returning lumber vessels at five pounds a head. The more well-to-do occupied deck cabins, at twenty-five pounds per person. Prince Edward Island's population almost doubled in the next fifteen years. James was already making timber and real estate deals at his Canadian ports of call but he now exchanged his command for a saddle horse, the better to exploit the new opportunities erupting on the island. "Jemmy" Yeo, a taciturn figure, slouched half asleep in a dimly lit roadhouse tavern, or on the back of a patiently plodding horse, became a familiar and legendary phenomenon. Generally fortified with quantities of rum, he could still be instantly prodded into alert action by any islander requiring anything, be it land, a loan, a ship loaded or provisioned, or even a cow serviced.

Half a century of absentee land owners had reduced land title records to chaos, compounded by the general illiteracy of the settler tenants. James mined the rubble ruthlessly. A grimly overbearing attitude, backed by intimate awareness of real estate, a computer memory, and ethics honed by his early struggle for survival in impoverished Kilkhampton, assured his success. Much better born and educated speculators, shielded from the likes of James back home, by the rigid social distinctions of the Old Country, did not fare well seeking investment in the new democracy. In fact, they were soon to be further disconcerted to find the wily, one time common courier, an elected member of the new Assembly of 1839, and allied with the land owning majority.

But there was a benign side too. James endowed an attractive little church in his community of Port Hill, which still stands there today. He and his growing family attended regularly and entertained visiting church dignitaries. Each daughter's name was sentimentally bestowed on at least one vessel of his expanding fleet. And he certainly never lacked for physical courage and resource as the oft told tale of the "Frenchman's Horse" would appear to demonstrate. Basil Greenhill recounts it in "Westcountrymen in Prince Edward's Isle":

It seems a vessel was in trouble off the northern shore and Yeo was not satisfied with the way the situation was being handled. Arriving on the

shore with an exhausted horse, he commandeered a grey belonging to a French speaking Islander. He swam this horse out to the ship, released it to find its own way ashore, successfully took charge of the situation on board and saved the vessel. Later he sought out the horse and bought it for his personal use.

Greenhill's book is filled with such revealing accounts of this controversial pioneer. His word portrait continues: "He was used to swimming horses. When the Grand River ferry was not working, which was often, he would swim his horse across the mile-wide river, resting on an oyster bed half way over. There are many legends of hi in those years, of his suddenly arriving among startled gangs of idling men who thought hi fifty miles away, taking charge of situations which defeated technical experts, of fights, of sudden acts of generosity, of drinking bouts during which foolish people would seek to persuade him to sign his name on a blank sheet of paper; they were never successful and were made to regret it afterwards. He was quite uninhibited about his drinking habits, telling the Assembly more than once that he liked his glass, but could take it or leave it alone and usually felt much better when he did the latter."

James was to remain an increasingly influential member of the Assembly and of the Executive Council which was added later, for the next quarter century, in spite of the resentments of succeeding Lieutenant Governors and the high born eland owners. He was rapidly becoming the largest and wealthiest of those land owners, with an income exceeding those of most of the Governors themselves. The power of his ledger spread throughout the Island. The child of pverty had grown to an arch conservative, averring publicly on more than one occasion, that the productivity of tenants varied directly as the rigor with which their rents were demanded.

As mid-century approached, James Yeo also became the largest shipping operator. Eventually contriving the acquire the entire assets of Ellis' ship building operation from under that honest craftsman's uncomprehending nose, he built for himself or bought over three hundred vessels, which he kept in almost constant activity. Often in one week, five fully laden Yeo ships would leave Island ports for destinations around the world.

Very often these would be new, rough finished, Island built vessels, loaded with square cut Island timber and bound for Bideford. There, after off loading, they would be re-caulked and furnished with deck houses, copper bolts to reinforce the Island 'tree nails', copper hull sheathing, and improved rigging. If they were not then sold, the holds would be fitted with bunks and cooking facilities, and painted and prepared for accommodating more of the would-be settlers, already lined up for the next voyage.

The westward passage averaged six weeks afloat. One schooner battled to within 100 miles of Newfoundland only to be forced back to Britain. A surviving

landlubber's account contrasts starkly with the ordered routine of jet flights just a century later.

"Thursday, 12th. Weather dirty – about 4 pm orders were given to close-reef all sails as a storm was expected. In half an hour every sail was furled and the ship pumped out, ready for the worst. By this time the rain had begun to fall and the wind to rattle through the ropes like thunder. This lasted but a few minutes, and we were all in hopes it had passed over easily, but as it got dark the rain began to fall, the wind to whistle and the sea to rise. By ten o'clock the storm was getting hot. Thunder is no more than a dog's bark, compared to the tremendous roar of the wind and sea. Ten o'clock all but three passengers went below, to turn in and try to sleep, and I being the hindmost left the scuttle open, thinking the other three would follow. We had scarcely turned in when a sea struck her, making her reel most awfully. It came down the scuttle like a mill-stream, washing some of us nearly out of our beds. Two of our boxes broke from their lashings and rolled about from side to side, strewing their contents as they went.

"It was an anxious time; females shrieking, the water almost floating our things and the pails, cans, etc, knocking about. It is impossible to convey an idea of such an awful night. We had very little sleep this night.

"About 4 o'clock am Friday there was a dead calm which lasted until about 7 am, when the storm recommenced with all its fury. The sailors on deck were obliged to be lashed as they could not stand. We could cook nothing today, but the steward brought us some coffee, etc. and the Capt. comes down now and then to see us.

"I went to the top of the steps this morning, just to see the sea. I never witnessed such a sight before; it was one mass of foam, and rolling as high as our topmast, threatening every moment to swallow us up. About 2 pm another sea struck the ship, smashing in the cabin skylight and some of the bulwarks. This completed the disaster of last night. We were now fairly washed clean out. This appeared to be the height of the storm, for it began to abate, and, thank God, by his aid we were carried safely through it."

Possibly some of the credit might have been awarded those same Devon sailors, lashed all night to the deck. By the grace of their skills and James Yeo's thoroughgoing concern for sound design and construction, not one life was lost in over thirty years that his ships conveyed settlers by sail across the North Atlantic.

Master minding the Devon connection was the first Mrs. Yeo's son William. With all the zeal of a gung-ho corporate president on a development roll, William eliminated the costly practice of refitting only during low tide as ships rested on their beam ends in the mud, by constructing the largest dry dock then in existence, complete with forge, foundry, and rigging shop. The Richmond House, magnificent Georgian manor looking arrogantly out over the harbour to Tapleigh

on the far shore, where the aristocratic lords of all the Bideford area once reigned, Richmond House still stands, renamed “The Holt” and contains five luxurious apartments. Residence was linked to dry dock by Richmond Road, lined with one hundred P.E.I. evergreens. The name was drawn from the sweeping bay that fronted James Yeo’s Port Hill ship yard on Prince Edward Island.

James’ family too was growing, in size and influence. John Adams, a Kilkhampton nephew, came out to live with his cousins and became James’ accountant, deftly managing the weighty ledger even after its owner had died. James junior, Damaris’ eldest son, set up his own ship yard on Campbell Creek, and built a large house in a lush wooded setting which he called ‘Green Park.’ At least twenty three ships, including several of the families’ largest and finest, were launched there. Today Green Park and the moss covered remnants of the ship yard have been restored to an impressive and instructive Historic Park. After Confederation, which the Yeos opposed, James served as MP for twenty-five years. John, the youngest, was elected to the Assembly in 1858 and served as member and speaker. He was elected an MP and finally appointed Senator. His sixty years in parliament, colonial, provincial and federal, are almost certainly a Commonwealth record. Susannah married the dashing William Richards of Swansea, Wales, one of James’ most competent ship masters and a very successful entrepreneur himself. The couple honeymooned, appropriately, on board ship bound for Devon. Richards re-activated the Ellis ship yard, where half the ninety-three ships he produced were built. William’s brother Thomas became enamored of Mary Jane Yeo, but, persuaded that she loved another, gracefully bowed out in a letter penned at sea aboard his own ship. His letter has been handed down to us and his plaintive poem, composed for May Jane’s celebrated ‘day book’, appears in the Footprints family poetry collection. Mary Jane elected to marry John Ings, owner/editor of “The Islander”, Charlottetown’s daily newspaper. The Islander reporters could be pungently critical of ‘the ledger Giant of Port Hill’, but essentially James had the local media in his corner now.

As the Maritimes’ hey-day of “Wooden Ships and Iron Men” drew to its close along with the 19th century, so did the eventful era of settlement dominated by this extraordinary man. Liberal electors eventually forced the sale of proprietor holdings to the provincial government, which sold the land back to individual tenants. The reign of ‘the last of the barons’, who had both pillaged and profited the Island province, was over. In 1868 both Damaris and James died after brief bouts of pneumonia. A small excerpt from the extensive obituary in The Islander pays fitting tribute to James Yeo and his impact on the land he adopted: “...his business led him into all parts of the Island – into every harbour, every bay, and every river. His vessels might be seen round all parts of the Island during the whole of the navigable season of the year. Others were being built or launched for him in many parts, and at wonderfully short intervals after one another during the same season. In superintending these and other affairs, he was incessantly traveling from place to place, by night and by day; in the extremes of heat and

cold; in wet weather and in dry; impassable to everyone else; across bad bridges and over still more dangerous ferries and as a matter of necessity, all this time he was learning more and more of the real circumstances and wants of the country. Few constitutions could endure unbroken the incessant toils and hardships he underwent...”

James and Damaris lie together under a massive rough stone sarcophagus in the grassy cemetery surrounding the little church at Port Hill

Sidney L. Dyke, West Vancouver, 1989