



## Selkirk and His Settlers

Christine Woodcock examines the life of Thomas Douglas, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Selkirk

**I**N 1764, SURVEYOR GENERAL SAMUEL HOLLAND APPRAISED each township on St. John's Island as to its convenience for fishing as well as for the quality of its soil, ranking the soil as "bad," "indifferent," "pretty good," "good," and "very good". Once the island was surveyed, it was divided into 67 lots of 20,000 acres each. Lot 66 remained as Demesne Lands of the Crown and was not auctioned for settlement.

In 1767, a lottery was held for the 66 lots which were allocated to British officials, merchants and then to landed families.



Thomas Douglas, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Selkirk. (Public domain)

Each grantee was required to settle 100 protestant families within 10 years of receiving their land grant. Many of these new land holders ended up being absentee landlords, making life difficult for any families they did recruit to emigrate.

St. John's Island was renamed Prince Edward Island in November 1798, after the then Duke of Kent, Prince Edward. This came about to prevent confusion with St. John's Newfoundland and St. John New Brunswick.

The second large group of Highland Settlers were those who came with Lord Selkirk beginning in 1803. Selkirk had long fashioned himself as a colonizer.

Thomas Douglas was born at St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland. He was the youngest of seven sons born to Dunbar Douglas and his wife Helen Hamilton. Never expecting to become heir to the Earldom, Thomas went to the University of Edinburgh where he studied law. While in Edinburgh, Douglas learned of the plight of the displaced Scottish highlanders and wanted to do something to make life easier for them. He investigated various ways to find land for them in the colonies.

In 1799, Douglas became the 5th Earl of Selkirk. Although he was the 7th son, he had lost two brothers in infancy, another two to tuberculosis and the remaining two to yellow fever. That meant that upon his father's death, the Earldom was his. Selkirk decided to use his new wealth and political connections to secure land in Canada.

Douglas purchased Lot 57 from merchant Samuel Smith and Captain James Smith. He immediately set about arranging for ships to take his settlers to Canada. The ship's owners were to provide enough space and provisions for the passage. He secured three ships: the Dykes, the Polly and the Oughton. Further, Selkirk ensured that part of his land