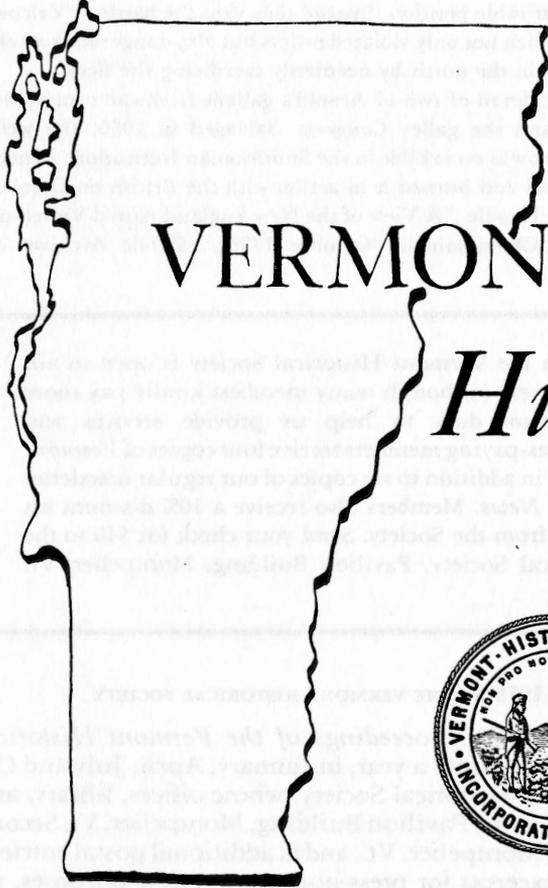


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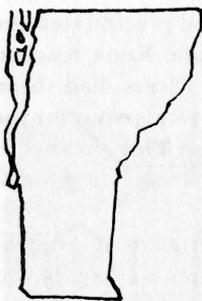


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Knox's report of the second battle states that "M^r Arnold run five ships ashore, and remained on the beach till he set fire to them, burning the wounded and sick in them."

Dr. Robert Knox's Account Of The Battle Of Valcour, October 11-13, 1776

By J. ROBERT MAGUIRE

Dr. Robert Knox was appointed "Physician to the Forces in North America" on January 1, 1776.¹ A medical graduate of St. Andrews University in 1750, he had served in a like capacity in Germany for a brief period in 1760 and had then returned to civilian practice. He was Physician at Middlesex Hospital at the time he received his second commission and obtained a leave of absence in order to serve. As Physician to the Forces, a title discontinued in 1830, he was counted among the elite of the medical profession in the Army. Physicians possessed higher medical qualifications than surgeons and apothecaries and, generally, a university degree as well. Their numbers in the service were few, not more than ten being employed at one time in North America and the West Indies during the entire period of the American Revolution. Appointed to the staff of Sir Guy Carleton, following custom, Knox became as well the Commander in Chief's personal medical attendant.²

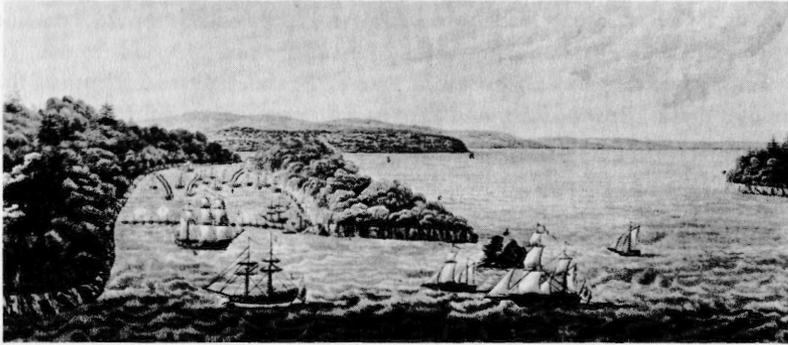
Knox was most likely among the entourage of staff officers who accompanied Generals Burgoyne and Phillips to Canada aboard the *Blonde*, which left Splithead on April 4, 1776, for the relief of Quebec. According to General Riedesel, aboard a transport in the same convoy, Burgoyne left the *Blonde* off the Isle du Bic in the St. Lawrence and went on board the *Surprise*, one of the advance relief squadron which had been held back by ice and bad weather. The *Surprise*, described as "a remarkable good sailer" by Captain Charles Douglas who commanded the squadron, was the first of the fleet to reach the beleaguered city. Coming to anchor there at eight p.m. on Sunday, May 5, she "fir'd 19 Guns Signals for the Garrison of Quebec," thus heralding the raising of the American siege.³ The following day General Carleton marched out

of the city at the head of 800 well equipped troops and precipitated the disorderly retreat of the American army. By the time Knox reached Quebec towards the end of the month, Three Rivers had been designated by the British commander as the place of rendezvous for the newly arrived reinforcements. Knox apparently got to Three Rivers in time to witness the disastrous American counterattack there on June 8. It is at this point that his brief narrative begins.

Knox's account is contained in a fragment of a letter to an unidentified correspondent, evidently in England. The letter was written at Crown Point, while "dreadfull cold in a tent," on October 29, 1776, a few days before the British withdrawal to winter quarters in Canada. The extant part of the letter consists of a single sheet of foolscap folio closely written on both sides in a clearly legible hand. The narrative breaks off in the middle of a sentence, the balance of the letter being missing. Although it has no signature, Knox is clearly identified as the writer by the statement that "upon forming this expedition [Carleton] appointed me Physician to himself, and Inspector General of y^e Hospitals."⁴

As an eyewitness report, however brief, of the naval action on Lake Champlain fought off Valcour Island on October 11, 1776, and the running battle between Split Rock and Arnold's Bay on October 13, Knox's letter possesses a particular interest. Throughout both engagements, and during the intervening day, he was on board the British flagship *Maria*, commanded by Lieutenant John Starke, in company with Sir Guy Carleton and Captain Thomas Pringle, the commodore of the fleet. From their common vantage point aboard the *Maria*, Carleton, Pringle and Starke viewed the events of the three days in such irreconcilably different ways that their respective reports of the battle provoked a bitter dispute among the naval officers involved. In an attempt to get at the facts, Captain Charles Douglas, the senior naval officer in Canada, who had not been present at the battle, gathered "with the most scrupulous circumspection" what particulars he could from participants and submitted his own report to the Admiralty. In describing the events of the first day's action, Douglas concluded his account with the remark that "the *Maria*, because of her distant situation . . . and baffling winds, could not get into Close action."⁵

Lieutenant James Hadden, who was in the battle, attributed the "distant situation" of the *Maria* in the first engagement to the fact that "the Com'r in Chief was on Board the Commodore [i.e., the Commodore's flagship], which prevented that Vessel attempting to get into a partial engagement."⁶ Carleton was criticized for his decision to go in person in pursuit of the American fleet, according to Lieutenant William



The well known watercolor from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle by Henry Gilder is based on a "Sketch taken by an Officer on the Spot" and depicts the action of the Battle of Valcour Island. Arnold's fleet, drawn up in a semicircle between Valcour Island and the New York shore of Lake Champlain, is being engaged by a line of advancing British gunboats supported by the schooner Carleton (in front of the gunboats) and the armed ship Inflexible. The contrast is striking between the Inflexible, the Loyal Convert and the Thunderer, shown maneuvering under full sail, attempting to join the battle, and the flagship Maria, shown riding at anchor with canvas furled well out of range.

Digby, who noted that "many blamed his hazarding himself on an element so much out of his line"; and, by giving command of the fleet to Pringle, "he was of very little service on board, excepting proving his courage, which no man in the army has the least doubt of."⁷ Digby regarded Carleton as "one of the most distant, reserved men in the world" and found the "rigid strictness in his manner very unpleasing," while acknowledging that "in time of danger, he possesses a coolness and steadiness . . . which few can attain."⁸ Knox was struck by this remarkable quality in Carleton, observing with obvious admiration the General's unruffled composure throughout the action, as he "walked the quarter deck the whole time with the most uncommon complacency of mind and intrepidity." Lieutenant Thomas Anburey, who was not present, recounts Carleton's "very narrow escape, a cannon shot passing close by him as he was giving directions to an officer . . . which the General with that coolness and intrepidity that so much distinguishes his character took notice of, but turning round, gave his orders with as much composure as if he had been in the most perfect state of security."⁹ Knox, who was leaning on a boom alongside the General observing the dramatic scene before them at the moment the 18-pounder from the *Congress* passed menacingly over head, records Carleton's nonchalant reaction: "well Doctor, says he, how do you like a

sea fight?" Knox may well have been Anburey's source of information about the incident.

Knox claims to have been the first to sight the American fleet, at the moment the *Royal Savage* disappeared from view behind Valcour Island, whereupon he says that he persuaded Commodore Pringle to send one of the armed tenders to investigate. At the firing of the signal gun by the tender, confirming the presence of the American vessels, Pringle signalled the fleet to execute a turn to windward, the wind being then NNW, to attempt "to weather the point of Valcour Island" in order to engage the American ships. In performing this maneuver the *Maria*, although described as "the best sailer" in the fleet, was among the least successful. She was brought to anchor at a prudent distance from the action, by Pringle himself, the ship's captain, Lieutenant Starke, having refused to do so "as an act truly unbecoming on such an occasion."¹⁰ Knox indicates that as the battle progressed Carleton became dissatisfied with the "distant situation" of the *Maria*: "about one o'clock he thought the *Maria* was not close enough in." It was at this stage in the action, "close to one o'clock in the afternoon," in the words of Capt. George Pausch of the Hessian artillery, who was in the thick of the fight, that "this naval battle began to get very serious."¹¹ This was the moment as well, according to Knox, that the close call with the 18-pounder occurred. The *Maria* apparently kept to her anchorage: as Starke and other dissident captains charged, she "lay too with the top-sails, and [Pringle] was the only person in the fleet who showed no inclination to fight."¹² "At half after seven," according to Knox, "the ships were ordered into their stations, and every man to remain at his quarters till morning when we were to renew the fight."

How Arnold managed the incredible escape of the American fleet that night has been the subject of some disagreement. The view that he sailed around the north end of Valcour Island was first seriously put forward by two highly respected nineteenth century historians, Peter S. Palmer and Winslow C. Watson, and the idea continues to find adherents.¹³ Knox reports that "to our utter astonishment, under the cover of y^e night M^r Arnold sailed thro' a part of our fleet." This confirms the graphic evidence provided by another participant, Lieutenant James Hadden, on whose map, "Sketch of the Action in Lake Champlain 11 Oct. 1776," the escape route is shown to have been in the other direction, to the south, through the British fleet, as it is in William Faden's engraved plan published in London two months after the battle, based upon "a Sketch taken by an Officer on the Spot." Pringle's accusers put the blame for the escape directly on the Commodore, for anchoring the British ships for the night at too great a

distance from the mainland to form a successful blockade.¹⁴

Knox's account corrects an error which originated with Riedesel, who was not present, to the effect that in the second engagement "General Carleton . . . received a slight wound in the head from a splinter torn up by a ball."¹⁵ Knox says it was Colonel Thomas Carleton, the General's younger brother, who was also aboard the *Maria*, who "was wounded in y^e head but slightly," for which he was undoubtedly treated by the Physician.

Of foremost significance is Knox's report of the second battle in which he states that "M^r Arnold run five ships ashore, and remained on the beach till he set fire to them, burning the wounded and sick in them." This ghastly episode has from the beginning been the subject of a dark rumor surrounding the battle, the authorship of which has been credited to Riedesel. Riedesel was at Isle aux Noix during the two engagements and did not arrive at Crown Point until ten days later. In his account of the action, the details of which he had from General Phillips, who likewise was not present, Riedesel wrote: "About this time a dreadful report was current, viz: That General Arnold, while burning his five ships had also burned about thirty sick and wounded men who were on board."¹⁶ The English writer and historian A.G. Bradley in his biography of Carleton saw the report as an attempt to discredit Arnold: "Most of [Arnold's] exploits . . . seem in a measure dimmed by some rumour calculated to discredit them. There is a story here, for which Riedesel is the authority, that he left his wounded men in the burning ships, their cries being audible to the British on the lake."¹⁷ It is difficult to believe that a non-military observer in Knox's position, as senior medical officer and Inspector General of Hospitals, would have been capable of fabricating such a charge, for whatever motive; it seems inconceivable that he would have been prompted to do so for such an inconsequential purpose as discrediting a defeated enemy in a private correspondence. His account constitutes the only known eye-witness testimony on this gruesome incident of the battle. By any objective assessment, it seems as entitled to acceptance as the rest of his circumstantial report.

The fullest description of what happened at Arnold's Bay that afternoon is provided by James Wilkinson, who, while not present himself, based his account on information obtained from someone who was, his "valued friend and companion in arms, the late Brigadier-general Cushing, who served as sergeant of marines on board Arnold's galley under his brother Captain Nathaniel Cushing of the Massachusetts line." According to Wilkinson's secondhand account,

[Arnold] ran his own galley and four gun boats ashore in a cove, on the eastern shore of the lake, and set them on fire, but ordered the colours not to be struck, and as they grounded, the marines were directed to jump overboard, with their arms and accoutrements, to ascend a bank about twenty-five feet elevation, and form a line for the defence of their vessels and flags against the enemy, Arnold being the last man who debarked. The enemy did not venture into the cove, but kept up a distant cannonade until our vessels were burnt to the water's edge, after which Arnold commenced his march for Crown Point, about fifteen miles distant, by a bridle way through an unsettled wilderness.¹⁸

By his own account, Arnold "reached Crown Point thro' the Woods that Evening, and very luckily escaped the Savages who way laid the Road in two Hours after we passed."¹⁹ Arnold was aware that the parties of Indians under Captains Christopher Carleton and Alexander Fraser that had harrassed him with musket fire from Valcour Island and the mainland during the first engagement had crossed to the east side of the lake and were closing on him for the final stage of the battle. Undoubtedly it was as clear to him that to attempt to carry the sick and wounded through the wilderness to Crown Point with any hope of out-distancing his nimble pursuers was as unrealistic as to abandon them alive with any hope that the Indians in the hour of victory would be disposed to show quarter. His only real alternative was to strike the colors of the remnant of his fleet to the British, a course obviously more unthinkable to Arnold than the grim one he chose.

General Gates, noting that "few Men ever met with so many hair Breadth Scapes in so short a space of time," informed Schuyler that "upwards of 200 with their Officers escaped with Genl Arnold."²⁰ Wilkinson says that "when the action commenced on the 11th, Arnold's galley mustered seventy-three hands including himself, of whom twenty-seven were killed or wounded, and of the last, three only survived, and these with the loss of limbs."²¹ Arnold himself reported to Washington two days after the battle that "on board of the *Congress*, we had twenty odd men killed and wounded. Our whole loss amounts to eighty odd."²² There is no hint among the contemporary American sources of Riedesel's "dreadful report," for which Knox's account must be seen as providing firsthand corroboration.

[THE NARRATIVE OF DR ROBERT KNOX]²³

In Camp Crown Point Head Quarters
Oct^r 29th 1776 dreadfull cold in a tent
Dr Sir

The hurry and tumultuous scene in which I have moved ever since my arrival in Canada, have in a great measure engaged my mind and my

time, so as to prevent me, from paying that attention to you, which the general tenor of y^r conduct towards me merited; nevertheless I am sure y^r goodness will form excuses sufficient for my taciturnity. I landed at Quebec after nine weeks voyage, just at the time the Rebels were flying before the victorious arms of Gen^l Carlton, therefore had not time sufficient to make any observations of the City or its inhabitants, but by orders left for me (as the Gen^l expected my arrival) I pursued the army, midway between Quebec and Montreal, at a place call'd Trois Rivieres beautyfully situated in the river St^l Lawrence, the Rebels to y^e amount of 2500 under y^e command of Gen^l Thompson attempted an attack, but were routed and their Gen^l taken with many other prisoners, and a great loss of men, without much inconvenience on our part; they cross'd the river *Sorrell* and we pursued them to *Chambly* a fort of ours which they took in the beginning of the Autumn [1775] in their passage they burnt this fort, and went forward to St^l Johns above the rapids of *St Terest* we pursued but were not able to prevent them setting fire to St^l John's, which we found in flames upon our arrival, from thence they took to their Bateaux, and proceeded across Lake Champlain to Crown Point, here [St. John] we were obliged to put an end to our pursuit, having no boats to convey our army; in this state we remained nothing material happening except some skirmishes with our out scouting partys in the woods, and taking prisoners, at y^e same time orders being given, to build Bateaux and other vessels for the purpose of transporting us across the Lake in order to possess ourselves of *Crown Point*, which was believed to be impracticable, upon account of the close approach of y^e winter which in this country is exceedingly inclement, still the perseverance and good conduct of Gen^l Carlton did in seven weeks create a fleet able to defend and Bateaux to transport 10000 men. In the course of y^e summer from the Heat, and at the same time rainy weather most of our General officers were seized with the Camp flux and Fever, Gen^l Carlton among the rest, I attended them all, and was so far successfull as not to lose one, upon the forming this expedition he appointed me Physician to himself, and Inspector General of y^e Hospitals, with the liberty of appointing such medical people as I thought proper to go; on the 4th October his own family consisting of a few sailed from Isle au Noix to Point au fer on board the *Maria* where we remained six days, till all the other vessels were prepared, the army all in readiness to embark, at y^e different posts of St^l John's, Isle au Noix, Riviere lacole, and Point au fer, but from information he had received that M^r Arnold had a fleet of 16 ships in Cumberland bay about 16 leagues from where we were, he resolved to go without y^e army, and endeavor with his small force to drive them off the lake, and so secure an

easy passage for his army afterwards; on the 10th in y^e morning we sailed, taking me with him and his brother Co^l Carlton y^e Quarter Master Gen^l and his aid de Camps, we anchored that night at Isle au Motte, where Captⁿ Carlton and a party of Savages and Canadian Volunteers were incamped, they received orders by sunrise to go thro the woods to y^e other side of Cumberland Bay. we sailed from that at 7 o'clock, first preparing our ship for battle, and about half after nine came in sight of the bay, but to our great mortification, we cou'd discover no ships, about ten o'clock, as I was walking the Quarter deck with the Gen^l, I descried a vessel close in shore, which suddenly disappeared, and almost made me think I was deceived, but my glasses being good, I persisted in it, and induced the Commodore to send a Tender down, with orders, to fire a gun and heist a signal if he saw any ships; he no sooner arrived at y^e mouth of y^e river Valcour, than he fired, and the Commodore immediately made a signal for all the fleet to heist sail, and endeavor to weather the point of Valcour Island, fearing they might escape, about eleven o'clock the battle began, and continued till half after seven o'clock in y^e evening, in which time we lost thirty men, and one gunboat blown up, the enemy, by the prisoners accounts three times that number, with a Schooner call'd the Royal Savage, which struck the first broadside in y^e morning, and as we cou'd not get her off, she having run ashore, was blown up at sunset; during this action the Gen^l walked the quarter deck the whole time with the most uncommon complacency of mind and intrepidity, one anecdote I will relate, about one o'clock he thought the Maria was not close enough in, at y^e instant an 18 pounder came from Arnold's ship, and went just over the boom where he and I were leaning, well Doctor, says he how do you like a sea fight. at half after seven, the ships were ordered into their stations, and every man to remain at his quarters till morning when we were to renew the fight, but to our utter astonishment under the cover of y^e night M^r Arnold sailed thro' a part of our fleet, and in the morning we saw them 3 leagues ahead of going towards Crown Point, all this day the 12th was employed in beating to windward, but without success; as it blew hard we came to an Anchor, and at night attempted again, the 13th at twelve o'clock we came up with his fleet, when the battle became bloody and continued for two hours, when victory declared for us, Co^l Carlton on board the Maria was wounded in y^e head but slightly, M^r Arnold run five ships ashore, and remained on the beach till he set fire to them, burning the wounded and sick in them, afterwards made his escape thro' the woods to Ticonderoga, and we to Crown Point which we took possession of that night, the Rebels had burned all the houses before they left it, and robbed the poor inhabitants of everything they had; the Gen^l sent down

orders to Isle [manuscript ends]

To Admiral Mahan, Valcour was one of the decisive battles of the world. While it is doubtful that Dr. Knox could have viewed it in this perspective, the battle must nevertheless have been for him a thoroughly unforgettable experience. It apparently satisfied the taste for military life which had led to his tour of duty in Germany in 1760 and his later service in North America. He saw no further action in the war and two years later went on half pay. A year before his death, which occurred at his home in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, London, on May 22, 1792, the whole wild scene of the battle must have been vividly recalled for him when Benedict Arnold, returning from his unsuccessful commercial venture in St. John's, New Brunswick, settled into a house only a few doors from him. The vicinity of Cavendish and nearby Portman Squares was the preferred neighborhood of a small colony of American Loyalists as well as some former officers of Burgoyne's army. While this was a society into which Arnold was not universally welcomed, in time certain of its members came to make up his and his family's most intimate circle, and 18 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, was his home on and off from the time of his arrival in London early in 1782 until his death there almost twenty years later. Shortly after his first appearance in England, Arnold was received at Court by a grateful King George III. To Knox, the spectacle of the crippled Arnold, wounded in the cause of America and for five years the scourge of the British army, supported at the presentation on the arm of Sir Guy Carleton, must not only have called to mind a vision of the rival commanders in the smoke and confusion of the great "sea fight" at Valcour, but also have caused him to wonder anew at this unexpected demonstration of his former Commander in Chief's "most uncommon complacency of mind."

NOTES

¹Benjamin Franklin Stevens, ed., *General Sir William Howe's Orderly Book* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1970), p. 283.

²William Johnston, *Roll of Commissioned Officers in the Medical Service of the British Army Who Served on Full Pay . . . 20 June 1727 to 23 June 1898*, ed. Harry A.L. Howell (Aberdeen, 1917), pp. xxxvii-xxxviii; 33.

³Log of H.M.S. *Surprise*, May 5, 1776, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, 1969), IV, 1413. Burgoyne's change of ships in the St. Lawrence has resulted in some confusion regarding his presence at the raising of the siege of Quebec on May 6, 1776. A recent biographer states that he did not arrive until some days later, apparently on the assumption that he remained aboard the *Blonde*. James Lunt, *John Burgoyne of Saratoga* (New York, 1975), p. 107.

⁴[General] O[r]ders Chamberle, 11th July, 1776 . . . His Excellency the Commander in Chief has been pleased to appoint Doctor Robert Knox to be Physician . . . to the Staff." Lt. James M. Hadden, *A Journal Kept in Canada . . . in 1776 and 1777* (Albany, 1884), pp. 216-218. Knox was later appointed "Inspector General of the Hospitals to the Army under [Carleton's] command," *Ibid.*, p. 218, n. f. He

went on half pay as Inspector General of Hospitals in Canada, September 13, 1778, and continued to receive half pay until his death in London on May 22, 1792. Johnston, *Roll of Commissioned Officers*, p. 33.

⁵Douglas to Philip Stephens, Secretary of the Admiralty, "October 29, 1776, *Isis*, Quebec." Public Archives of Canada, M.G. 12, Admiralty 1, Secretary's Department In Letters: Captains Letters, MDC-CVI.

⁶Hadden, *Journal*, p. 32.

⁷James Phinney Baxter, ed., *The British Invasion from the North . . . with the Journal of Lieut. William Digby* (Albany, 1887), pp. 157-158.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

⁹[Lt Thomas Anburey], *Travels through the Interior Parts of America in a Series of Letters by an Officer* (London, 1789), I, 135-136.

¹⁰An Open Letter to Captain Pringle," from John Schank, John Starke and Edward Longcroft, St. Johns, June 8, 1777, *The Bulletin of the Fort Ticonderoga Museum*, I, No. 4 (July 1928), 14-20.

¹¹*Journal of Captain [Georg] Pausch*, trans. William L. Stone (Albany, 1886), p. 83.

¹²"Open Letter to Captain Pringle."

¹³Peter S. Palmer, *History of Lake Champlain* (Albany, 1866), p. 129: "Colonel Wigglesworth got the Trumbull under way, and bearing around the north end of Valcour"; Winslow C. Watson, *The Military and Civil History of the County of Essex, New York* (Albany, 1869), p. 170: "The fleet, silently and unmolested, passed around the north end of Valcour."

¹⁴"Open Letter to Captain Pringle." Another participant, Lt. John Enys of the 29th Regiment, recorded in his journal that "the firing continued until evening when the boats withdrew leaving the Rebel fleet formed in a line in the Bay whilst our fleet formed in a Semicircle round the mouth of it, in Such Manner that it might well be thought they could not have escaped, which however they did in the course of the Night by passing between us and the shore unpersieved by any one." *The American Journals of Lt. John Enys*, ed. Elizabeth Cometti (Syracuse, 1976), p. 20.

¹⁵*Memoirs, and Letters and Journals, of Major General Riedesel*, trans. William L. Stone (Albany, 1868), I, 72.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁷A.G. Bradley, *Sir Guy Carleton (Lord Dorchester)* (Toronto, 1966), p. 156.

¹⁸General James Wilkinson, *Memoirs of My Own Times* (Philadelphia, 1816), I, 91-92.

¹⁹Arnold to Gen. Philip Schuyler, "Ticonderoga 15th October 1776." *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, 1972), VI, 1276.

²⁰Gates to Schuyler, "Ticonderoga 15th October 1776." *Ibid.*, VI, 1277.

²¹Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, I, 92.

²²Washington MSS, XXXV, Arnold to Washington, Ticonderoga, October 15, 1776, Library of Congress, Microfilm, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vt.

²³Knox's letter is given as written; the spelling, capitalization, punctuation and nonparagraging of the original, in the possession of the writer, have been preserved.