

Dec. 31, 1972

Mrs. Elton L.F. Silk,  
19 Acton Road,  
Chelmsford, Mass. 01824,  
U.S.A.

Dear Mrs. Silk:

Thank you for your letter and your kind remarks about my books, especially "The Governor's Lady".

I first became interested in John and Frances Wentworth when I was making research for a history of Halifax N.S. -- "Halifax, Warden of The North" -- in 1947-48. There I set forth, briefly of course, the story of John and Fannie in Nova Scotia. I noted at the time that there was good material for a biographical novel, but to make a good job of it I would have to make intensive research in New Hampshire and in England. I had other work and plans at the time, and I didn't get around to the Wentworth novel until 1957, when I went to New Hampshire.

My friend Kenneth Roberts had told me that his best informant on New Hampshire history was Miss Dorothy Vaughan, then and for many years head of the public library in Portsmouth N.H., and herself a member of an old Portsmouth family. I had written to her, but got no answer -- she was extremely busy. So I went in person, and Miss Vaughan was kindness itself. She provided me with a room in the Library where I could study the various books and documents pertaining to the Wentworths. Also she took me to see the John Wentworth house, the site of the Atkinson house, and so on. She related to me the Portsmouth traditions of Fannie's love affair with John while her husband was still living.

The Massachusetts Gazette & Boston News Letter, Nov. 17, 1769, contains a full description of the wedding ten days after her husband's death. The baptismal record of Queens Chapel in Portsmouth revealed the birth of a son to John and Frances a little less than seven months after the wedding. (Beside the entry someone later added, in pencil, the letters "p.b." in brackets, presumably meaning "premature birth"; but who made this addition, and when, remains a mystery.)

In the public library at Portsmouth, and at Concord, there are copies of some of Frances' letters. Later on, in England I discovered two collections of her letters, written over many years to the Rockinghams and FitzWilliams. All revealed her as the self-centred, dissatisfied, clever and designing creature she was. (I quoted one in full on pages 356 and 357 of "The Governor's Lady".)



Miss Vaughan showed me her collection of photo-copies of contemporary portraits (by Copley and other painters), so I was able to study the faces and figures of many of the people in my book. She also gave me a copy of a map of Portsmouth in the 18th century, showing the principal houses and other buildings, which she and a graphic artist had compiled. In addition I got large scale maps of modern New Hampshire, and charts of Portsmouth Harbour and the estuary of the Piscataqua River, giving details of water depths, tidal currents etc.

At Wolfeboro I was again fortunate in my guide, a Mrs. Gertrude Hamm who knew the whole history of the region. In an old truck (essential in traveling the backwoods roads) she and her husband took me to the site of Wentworth House, and we explored the whole vicinity, including parts of the old "Governor's Road" and his "College Road" (to Dartmouth) which still survive in the forest. I also procured an excellent booklet on Wolfeboro, and especially Wentworth's Lake, which included a large scale map of the region.

When I got home I managed to obtain a set of the Wentworth Genealogy volumes, and a copy of Mayo's life of Sir John, published by the Harvard University Press. I also gathered, by borrowing or purchase, every book I could find that touched on New Hampshire before and during the Revolution. I spent that winter in ardent study of all these materials, so that I could feel that I was actually living and moving about New Hampshire in those times. I had made a lifelong study of the eighteenth century in Europe and North America, notably as it affected New England and the neighbouring Maritime Provinces of Canada. This study naturally included costumes, architecture, furniture, ways of speech and habits of life.

In the spring of 1958 I set off for England, where I was able to follow the movements of John and Fannie there and on the Continent during their period of exile. There, too, I found the letters of Fannie mentioned above. Another useful document of the time was the diary of William Dyott, the hell-raising young army officer who confessedly "lived a life of debauchery" at Halifax, and was an intimate of Fannie and Prince William. I ended my book with the triumphant return of John as Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, with the vengeful Fannie at his side. The rest of their lives was an anti-climax.

Sincerely,