

# Robert Gourlay Biography

## Robert Gourlay

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# Biography

Robert Gourlay (1778-1863) was a British reformer who attempted to bring about reforms in the system of land ownership in early-19th-century Upper Canada.

Robert Gourlay was born on March 24, 1778, in Ceres, Fifeshire, Scotland. He was educated at St. Andrews University, and in the summer of 1817 Gourlay arrived in Upper Canada. He immediately began to interest himself in the system of land ownership. In the official *Upper Canada Gazette*, Gourlay published an address and a series of questions and had them distributed throughout the province. The answers to his questionnaire strengthened his belief that the methods of granting land tended to stifle immigration into the colony.

In February 1818 Gourlay published a second address, demanding an inquiry into the abuses he had uncovered, but the legislature failed to act. He now saw not only the system of landholding as corrupt but the whole system of government as unresponsive to the needs of the settlers. In yet another pamphlet he urged the people to petition collectively for needed reforms.

The ruling oligarchy in Upper Canada now began to move against Gourlay. Arrested twice in June 1818 on charges of criminal libel, he was tried in August but acquitted of both charges by juries sympathetic to his aims.

Gourlay now unsuccessfully turned to the newly arrived governor, Sir Peregrine Maitland. Frustrated, Gourlay became more radical in his pronouncements. In December 1818 he was arrested once more and given 10 days to leave the province. When he refused, he was jailed, and in August 1819 he was ordered to leave the province, with the threat of death if he returned. He went to the United States and returned to England before the end of the year.

In 1822 Gourlay published a *Statistical Account of Upper Canada*, detailing the conditions in the province. In 1842 the government of Canada erased the 1819 sentence against Gourlay. He returned to Canada in 1856 and in 1860 ran for a seat in the Legislative Assembly. He lost and shortly afterward returned to Scotland, where he died, in Edinburgh, on Aug. 1, 1863.

Many of Gourlay's charges, though exaggerated, were not without substance, and he was instrumental in focusing attention upon some of the real grievances of the common people in the colony and in encouraging the reform impulse there.