

PHILIP HENRY GOSSE IN CANADA

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A young clerk in a trading house at Carbonear in Newfoundland spent the long evenings of the winter of 1834-5 in reading the ecstatic emigration literature which was drawing wiser men than himself to make their homes in the wilderness of Canada. Philip Henry Gosse had completed a six years' apprenticeship at Carbonear; he had one or two congenial friends there; he had read a good deal, and had not been unhappy in the narrow seasonal routine of the fishing centre. But he was now twenty-four years old, his position led to nothing, the life of Newfoundland was shaken by religious storms, and he was eager to make for himself a permanent home. His best friends, Mr. and Mrs. Jacques, had decided to go to Upper Canada to the radiantly praised region around Lake Huron, and the suggestion fascinated him. He and the Jacques's were ardent members of the Wesleyan Society, and spent much time together in that expectant winter, planning a community of the type which was attempted a few years later at Fruitlands and at Brook Farm.

"We would have all things common," he wrote in December. "We could entomologize together in the noble forest, and in the peaceful and happy pursuits of agriculture forget the toils and anxieties of commerce. The land where I go is exceedingly fertile and productive, and with little more than half the toil necessary on an English farm, it will yield not only the necessaries, but even the luxuries of life.—I have learned to stuff birds, and there are beauties in Canada. We could make a nice museum."

Here was his real purpose, the crystallization of a passion which was to dominate his long life and make him one of the most productive and widely read of writers on natural history. He had begun in his last years in Newfoundland, and during a brief visit to his home in England, to collect insects and observe moths and birds. The fact that he had exhausted the entomological range of Carbonear and longed for wider fields was one of his principal reasons for going to Canada. During the voyage in the summer of 1835 he occupied himself in taking care of chrysalides, caterpillars and eggs, and he noted on July 15, "As I this day arrived at Quebec, I procured some lettuce for my caterpillars, which they ate greedily."

Strangers, to whom Gosse and Mr. and Mrs. Jacques talked in Quebec, advised them against the London district to which they had intended to go, and recommended the eastern townships. They accordingly drove in an open carriage to look at a partly cleared farm in Compton township, on the river Coaticook, near Sherbrooke. In perfect midsummer weather, the country looked very inviting and the sight of great numbers of butterflies outweighed every other consideration for young Philip Gosse. He said many years later, "I felt and acted as if butterfly-catching had been the one great business of life."

It is a reasonable conjecture that the strangers who turned the attention of the settlers from Upper Canada to the eastern townships may have been agents of the British American Land Company. In the spring of Gosse's arrival, the Company, with £300,000 subscribed, had set aggressively to work with Sherbrooke as their centre of operations. During the summer, roads were built and settlers brought in. Of this brief flare of the Company's activity, both Gosse's settlement at Carbonear and his departure from it were typical.

Sir Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* showed the father, Philip Henry Gosse, on the religious side as his narrow and deeply channelled prepossessions affected the life of his only son. In the biography *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse*, Sir Edmund reveals the scientific side of his father's strangely divided mind, quoting from his voluminous unpublished letters and journals selections which give the young man, after the passage of a century, a vivid living presence. He wrote in November 1835:

I like my location here very much; it seems the general opinion that our farm was a bargain;—110 acres (forty-five cleared) a frame house, a log house, a frame barn, young orchard, 4 tons of hay etc. for £100—£50 in hand, the remainder in two annual instalments. It is a picturesque-looking place, containing hill and dale, hard and soft wood, and streams of water.—I found ploughing rather different from bookkeeping, but not near so difficult nor so laborious as I had expected. Since then I have been collecting stones from the fields, which are very numerous on some parts, and dragging them off. My intended next year's crop will be as follows—three acres wheat, three acres oats, one acre peas, two acres turnips, three acres potatoes, perhaps one acre buckwheat: eight acres grass and four acres pasture. Sometimes at first, when weary with labour, and finding things rather awkward, I was inclined to discontent; but *that* soon wore off: the thought of projected improvements and anticipated returns, with the beauty of the country, and freedom from the bustle of the counting house, have dispelled the gloom, and I am as merry

as a cricket all day long. I made successful application for conducting of one of the Government schools through the winter.

You ask if we have to work *severely*: I think I may say no; our labour is occasionally *hard*, but not *severe*—not nearly so hard to learn as I anticipated. Society here is almost wholly Yankee. Their manners are far too forward and intruding for our English notions, still *all* are not so; there are some very agreeable and good neighbours. Since my arrival I have enriched my cabinet with a great number of new and splendid insects; indeed, to a naturalist, this country holds out a charming field of exploration in all branches of natural history. My agricultural labours are not so severe or so engrossing as to prevent my having some time to devote to the pursuit of my interesting science, of which I do not fail to avail myself. When I was in Quebec, I made the acquaintance of one or two members of the Literary and Historical Society, who introduced me to their museum, and promised to propose me as a corresponding member.

The prospect was, however, not as happy as the young man's letters made it appear. The farm was divided by a road into two parts—one of fifty acres with frame house and barn being occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Jacques. The sixty-acre section with the orchard belonged to young Gosse, but the farm was only one-third cleared, and had been neglected, and the soil exhausted by a careless former tenant. The plan for labour in common had collapsed immediately, and each worked alone on his own land while Gosse boarded at the Jacques house. Mrs. Jacques soon found the work too hard for her, and both men felt the pressure of loneliness and unaccustomed labour. Crops were a complete failure, winter came early, and for all their struggle and hardship, the settlers found that they were losing money. That part of the farm which was still forest was a swamp covered with pine, spruce and fir, which Gosse had neither money to pay for clearing nor strength to clear himself. Later he regretted that he had not gone to Upper Canada instead of buying exhausted land, but he was in no sense a farmer, and the isolation of his life threw him upon the enjoyment of his avocation.

As a naturalist's hunting ground, Compton township was a great success. Gosse collected with vigour and kept elaborate entomological journals which were the basis of *The Canadian Naturalist*. In the spring of 1836 he became a corresponding member of the Quebec Literary and Historical Society, and also of the Montreal Natural History Society, contributing to the Quebec society a paper entitled *Notes on the Comparative Forwardness of the Spring in Newfoundland and Canada*, and to the Montreal society *Lepidoptera Comptoniensa*, together with a collection of Compton lepidoptera.

Thanks largely to his enthusiasm for natural history, he was happy, writing eagerly of the glorious Canadian autumn, of the ruby-throated humming bird, "its throat glowing in the sun like a flame of fire", of the deer which "sometimes get into our fields and eat the standing corn in autumn". To secure a livelihood he taught school each winter, receiving free board and £10 for the season of three months.

In the spring of 1837, having devised the plan of *The Canadian Naturalist*, he wrote: "I had a large amount of material already in my entomological journals, and thenceforward I kept my eyes always wide open for every other branch of natural history."

From the first he had urged members of his family to join him in Canada, and in 1837 his younger brother came out, but he returned to England six months later, bitterly disappointed. During the summer Gosse suffered from rheumatism, and his poverty and the heavy work of the farm, combined with his brother's departure, determined him to give up his Canadian venture. He wrote gloomily to his sister in November:

I am tired of more than ten years' exile, far from friends and kindred. I have been thinking that I might do well by establishing a school in Poole or in some of the neighbouring towns. Is there any opening?—I should be very glad if you would let me know by the first spring vessel. If you give me any encouragement, I will endeavour to sell my farm, and, please God, embark for Poole next fall. I should be glad of a change of food, for I live on buckwheat and pig's meat.

The preface to his *Canadian Naturalist* stated "During a residence of some years in the Lower Province, the Author has felt it to be no common privilege to be able to solace himself by these simple but enchanting studies amidst the fatigues of labour and the stormy politics and martial alarms of the times." The depression of 1837 and the rebellion alike affected the resolution of Philip Gosse, and William Lyon Mackenzie was not the only refugee from the political storm.

In March, 1838, having sold his farm and stock, without waiting for news of possible openings in Poole, he left Canada for Alabama where he hoped to get a teaching or commercial opening. He had not yet made a successful start in life, his three years in Canada had been a failure, and he had nothing to carry away but a few specimens, a broadened experience and the journals which preserved the material afforded by his close observation.

The real fruit of the years in Canada was the *Canadian Naturalist*, published in February 1840, his first book. Several works such

as that of Mrs. Traill, which Gosse may have seen, had dealt with the fauna of Canada, but Gosse's was the first accurate treatise on Canadian natural history in its broad sense. The book opened a new literary field, touched only by Gilbert White and by Alexander Wilson in his *American Ornithology*. It united careful observation with fresh enthusiasm and a vivid power of description to make a very popular work, the first of a long and popular succession. In the preface the author wrote: "Having lived in the far-off wilds of the West, where systems, books and museums are almost unknown, he has been compelled to draw water from Nature's own well, and his knowledge of her is almost confined to her appearance in the forest and field." It was this appreciative intimacy with Nature "in the forest and field" which, when joined with comprehensive formal knowledge, constituted Gosse's real contribution to the natural sciences.

The style of the book took the form of a dialogue between father and son which, with its "Sir, I perceive a bird on yonder tree", has an unfortunate stiffness. But the explanations of the father are lively enough, and interesting not only for vigorous descriptions of trees, birds, animals, insects and weather conditions but for glimpses of life in Canada between 1835 and 1838. Gosse described the winter work of the farmer: "He then kills his fattened cattle and hogs, either for market or for domestic consumption. Many sled-loads of frozen sheep, pigs, etc. may be seen during the season, going to market, so hard and solid that they can be divided only by the axe or saw. The grain is threshed and cleaned and carried to market with other produce. After this, or at intervals, the greatest portion of the winter's labour is performed in the forest, in felling and splitting cedars for fencing-rails, cutting of hardwood for the twelve months' supply of fuel, and cutting and drawing logs for the saw-mill."

Gosse was in a position to understand the difficulties and disadvantages under which the farmer laboured. "Early frosts frequently destroy or greatly injure the wheat before it is ripe, and often quite cut off the buckwheat and potato plants." "One of our greatest evils is the want of hands in busy seasons, such as hay-making, harvest etc." "The length of time necessary to stable his cattle is one of the greatest drawbacks to a farmer's profit in this country. We put up our cattle in October, and it is the latter part of May before they can support themselves in the fields, so that we have to provide dried fodder for our stock for upwards of seven months of the year. On this account we are compelled to

leave a very large portion of our farms in grass, which otherwise might be more profitably put under tillage."

Out of his own experience, he made a spirited attack on untruthful emigration literature. "Very highly coloured, if not absolutely false, statements have been made in many of the pamphlets, and in some works of higher pretensions, holding out expectations to the settler which, in a majority of cases, he no more realizes than the loon who chased the rainbow, in the hope of obtaining the golden cup. Travellers come here generally in the summer, when the country is clothed in beauty; they see the crops growing, they have no anxieties, no labours; they pass a few months in going through the pleasantest part of the country, and then think themselves qualified to give a description of Canada, setting forth all the pleasures and never noticing the disagreeables." Favourable accounts written by actual settlers he thought were produced either by persons with capital or by those who, like the fox who had lost his tail, wished to see others as uncomfortable as themselves. "I do not know an instance, with one single exception, of an English emigrant who is not dissatisfied with his exchange." The exception was that of a man who brought with him some capital.

Though Philip Gosse remained for only three years in Canada, he made the country of his disillusionment no small gift, not only in an authoritative treatment of its trees and birds, but in a moderate and practical account of its real advantages to the English emigrant, and its no less real disadvantages.