

## JOSEPH HOWE AS MAN OF LETTERS

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JOSEPH HOWE occupies a peculiar place among the statesmen of our Dominion: almost alone he may be said to have excelled in literature as well as in politics. His literary tastes were wholesome; his own literary productions were creditable enough; and he loved books with a fondness that almost amounted to a passion. But, while the schoolboy remembers the six-hour speech at the outset of Howe's career, and the student of political history readily acknowledges his contribution to the cause of responsible government, few people now remember his attainments in the field of literature. Even in his own province of Nova Scotia, where the memory of his life and work is still very much alive, it is doubtful if the breadth and urbanity of his interests are now appreciated. It may be profitable, therefore, to examine this neglected side of a great career.

First, let us spend a glance on the sources from which Howe's tastes were derived. He was not educated in the usual manner, and his attendance at school was irregular and brief. The religion of his father, who was a Sandamanian, closed the doors of King's College to him, though it seems unlikely that he would have been able to attend in any event. The office of schoolmaster, therefore, fell upon the elder Howe, who apparently discharged the duties with exemplary patience, energy and success. Certainly he earned the respect and admiration of his pupil, who, at sixteen, wrote:

Religion's self is there combined  
With grace, and truth, and manly pride,  
Which to religion are allied—  
You'd find, if you his life could span,  
God's noblest work, an honest man.

And years later, speaking in the Assembly, the son could say, "From the old man between whose knees I was trained—who was, in fact, my only professor—I learned to respect all creeds and all professions, to prize knowledge for its own sake."

Howe's early tastes were, therefore, a reflection of his father's, and these were wholesome enough. The Bible and

Shakespeare have set many a lad upon the highroad to literary fortune, and there is much in Howe's later work to show that these were the foundation on which he built. The *Speeches* are filled with biblical allusions, allusions which are invariably apt though they are sometimes rather obscure to the present-day reader, and must occasionally have taxed even the Victorian listener. The *Book of Job*, the *Psalms*, the *Song of Solomon* and the *New Testament* appear to have been Howe's lasting delights, providing him not only with a model of simple and terse style, but also with a note of deep earnestness and inspiration which he learned to emulate. The influence of Shakespeare is equally clear. The *Speeches* teem with references from the dramas; the poems hum with a lyric quality that is similar, though slighter than that of the Elizabethans; and the tercentenary oration is a lasting proof of Howe's great debt to the most honoured name in our literature. Here, then, are the two pillars on which the structure was built.

This method of education was well suited to whet a lad's enthusiasms, but it was lamentably narrow. In later years Howe used to say that he knew the value of education from the lack of it and, while this was not strictly true, he probably felt that his knowledge was all too sketchy when, at the age of thirteen, he was sent to work in a print shop. At least he began at once to fill in the gaps. We can only guess what he read at this time from his later enthusiasms; but it seems clear that, like Ben Franklin, he soon wore a path from his shop to the library, where he probably read Waverley, Byron, Moore and Macaulay, like all the other youths of his generation. He also became familiar with the classics of Rome and Greece. Whether or not he read them in the original is not clear, but in Mitford, Arnold and Grote he could have found adequate and reliable accounts of the ancient world, and it may have been from such books as these that his information was mainly derived. Wherever the well, he drew very deep. Surely it is unusual to find one, educated in the manner we have just described, punctuating his early speeches with minute descriptions of Periclean Athens or a commentary on the condition of women in Sparta. From ancient history, like most readers of Waverley, he turned with enthusiasm to medieval Europe, thence to the stirring episodes in modern British history. Here he acquired an assortment of knowledge that must have dazzled his hearers in the Institute or the Assembly when, with graceful phrases, he lectured them on the Florentine renaissance or paused to

pay tribute to obscure heroes like Hergetorides and Scaevola. These instances are by no means isolated ones and, by their appropriateness and variety, they suggest a liberal education that would have done credit to Macaulay's Trinity or George Ticknor's Harvard.

After he entered politics, Howe found his leisure very much curtailed; yet his interests continued steadily to grow. His own political opinions closely resembled those of the English Liberal Party, which was rapidly emerging from its Whig chrysalis during the years following 1831, and he therefore came very naturally to worship at the shrines of Sheridan, Fox and Burke. Sheridan increased his enthusiasm for the drama; Fox supplied him with new and higher standards in oratory; while Burke introduced him to the theory and philosophy of politics. Nor is it surprising that these new interests, combined with his newspaper training, should have made him far more occupied with the contemporary scene. Movements of great consequence were stirring Europe and America and, sooner than most of his generation, Howe came to appreciate the educational reforms in Prussia, the reactionary tendencies of France, the importance of the industrial revolution and the inevitable expansion of the United States.

In mid-career Howe enjoyed one brief respite from politics, during which he retired to the quiet countryside of Musquodoboit. Life there was idyllic. "We rose at daylight," he wrote afterward, "breakfasted at seven, dined at twelve, took tea at six and then assembled in the library, where we read four or five hours almost every evening. . . I read the *Edinburgh Review* from the commencement, and all the poets over again; wrote a good deal and spent the best part of every fine day in the fields or in the woods. . . Although I had cares enough. . . I shall never be so happy again." This was the closest Howe ever came to enjoyment of the scholar's leisure and, measured in quantity alone, the work of this period might be disappointing. Most of the writing of which he speaks was probably prose, for most of the poetry seems to have been written before this time; yet, even if he had produced nothing else, the speech *On Eloquence* would be a creditable monument to these months of quiet study and reflection. All too soon, however, the respite ended and the election of 1847 summoned him again and finally to the public service.

The intensity and breadth of Howe's literary enthusiasm naturally fostered a love for books. He looked with pride and

satisfaction upon his own bookshelf, realizing his heavy debt to it, and in later life he made repeated efforts to share his good fortune with the common man. To Howe the public library was the most effective instrument of popular education, and it became the very core of his plans for the Mechanics Institute and later for reform of the provincial system of education. This faith in the value of books may have been somewhat blind, for not all men would use them as well as Howe did, but at least it is an indication of his own intense enthusiasm. Such a belief, however, does not necessarily produce an impulse to create literature unless it is mixed with other kindred enthusiasms, such as love for one's fellow men or, among poets, a love for natural beauty. Both of these Howe possessed in no small measure. His political campaigning carried him into almost every hamlet in the province, and wherever he went the memory of "Jo" Howe's familiar and homely stories made for him a host of friends. Whether in Halifax or Cape Breton, Annapolis or Lunenburg, he was perfectly at home among men and women who knew him to be honest and sincere. And nature was to him a source of equal joy and inspiration. Wordsworth loved his Wye and Rydal Water; Browning, his English spring; Scott, his Border country; and Howe felt the same strong attachment for the rugged scenery of his native Nova Scotia. Not once, but many times, in his poems and his addresses he fairly bursts out with the praise of the sea, of the streams, of the cultivated meadows and the virgin woods. No doubt his fondness for these things increased after he reached maturity, but they were deeply rooted even in his youth and their presence, in however small a measure, made him attempt to express himself in literature.

## II

Howe's own literary work may be divided into three parts—the poetry, the letters and the orations. The first is very miscellaneous; varied in subject, uneven in quality and not very large in volume. Nor is this surprising, for it is doubtful if Howe ever considered himself seriously as a poet. He wrote poetry as some men will cultivate flowers, purely as an amusement and from a love for the beautiful. Much of his poetry is personal, though the best of it is either descriptive or patriotic. All of it is lyric which bears the unmistakable imprint of Byron and Scott. There is in it little subtlety of metre or rhyme, it is touched with no great measure of fancy or imagination, and

one feels that its merit lies principally in the deep sincerity which is a characteristic of all good verse. The shortcomings suggest that Howe was led astray by his masters, for, although he never wearied of the lyric masters like Shakespeare and Burns, his models seem rather to have been his own contemporaries—Scott, Byron and Moore. The facility for colorful description and the rather boisterous rhythm are reminiscent of *Don Juan* and parts of *Marmion*, though Howe was never, even at his best, quite the equal of his masters. Nevertheless his work is not inconsiderable, and there is nothing in Canadian poetry before his time and not a great deal since that is of greater merit.

The prose is obviously the work of a political journalist. Both in his editorials and in his public letters, Howe was the forceful protagonist of popular causes, and the power of his writing seems to lie in the wealth of illustration and logical arrangement of his argument. From his knowledge of literature and history he could readily draw innumerable and pertinent instances to strengthen his case, and these he chose with considerable care to suit the audience he was addressing. Writing to his fellow citizens, he dipped into local and provincial history: addressing Lord John Russell and the British public, he used everything, from the Delian League to the Peninsular War, to support his arguments. Though, in the prose, there is little humour, the style is lively and pungent and there is in it much that resembles the works of Swift, Junius and Franklin. He is not their equal as a satirist—there is nothing to match Swift's *Modest Proposal* or Franklin's offer to trade rattlesnakes for convicts—yet his logic and illustrations give his writing almost equal force. Undoubtedly it deserves a place in the literature of politics, and a tired democracy may well find in it much that is stimulating and inspiring.

But it is in the orations that we see Howe at his best. These fall into two categories—the political speeches and the occasional addresses, many of which were delivered before the Mechanics Institute. In tone and manner they are remarkably even, though satire, occasionally tinged with bitterness, runs through most of his political work. When Howe struck back at an opponent, he did so with terrifying candour, using his knowledge of Juvenal, Swift and Junius with telling effect. He was, of course, using an old political weapon, which had been used from Demosthenes and Cicero to Chatham and Burke, and certainly his speeches are far less bitter than many of those he listened to. But the success of a political speech depends

very largely on the atmosphere of the moment, and it invariably loses much of its fire when translated into print. Nevertheless, in their broad approach, in their penetrating analysis and in their sound logical basis, Howe's political speeches are still of interest, not only to the student of history and politics, but to the student of literature as well.

The public addresses have an even greater appeal. These are, for the most part, uncontroversial, and they therefore retain much of their original interest and freshness. In the form of essays, while the language is somewhat flamboyant at times, they may still be enjoyed, and one feels that on the lips of the author they must have approached very closely the standard of oratorical perfection. They are direct, well-arranged, colorful and brief; warm, yet restrained; and they contain that mixture of rhetoric and drama which oratory demands. Several are shot through with a patriotic note, quite typical of the Victorians, but even the modern cynic could find little ground for objection in Howe's urbane approach. The secret of this success seems to lie in the choice of his illustrations, which were drawn from the history of every nation. Paying tribute to Shakespeare, for instance, he turns from the New Testament to Burns; beside the English critics he places the Germans, Goethe and Schlegel, and the French Voltaire; and, if he applauds the dramatist for having stimulated an interest in British history, he counts it an equal service to have made audiences familiar with the classic stories of Rome. Here was a wealth of illustration and a breadth of view that must have included all, or nearly all, his listeners, giving to each some reason for pride. And it seems abundantly clear that Howe intended to use this local and national pride in the service of a larger patriotism. His devotion to his native province in no way detracted from his love of the Empire; he probably appreciated the greatness of the United States more than any of his contemporaries; and through many of his speeches there runs a note of refinement and understanding that suggests the citizen of the world. Nowhere is this more easily distinguished than in the address *On Eloquence*. There he begins with the epigram—*Speak the truth, and feel it*—and, choosing a number of examples from universal history, he tests each for sincerity. He turns from Thrace to Trafalgar, from Demosthenes to David, from the New Testament to Knox and Wesley, crowning his list of illustrations by likening George the Fourth to Alcibiades. This is, perhaps, the finest of his speeches; abounding in common sense, couched

in powerful and appropriate language, and reflecting a measure of knowledge as broad as it is profound.

Here, then, we find the ripe fruit of Howe's literary taste. A long life of extensive reading built upon the two chief masterpieces in our English literature, combined with a warmth of heart and alertness of mind that must ever distinguish the artist, gave birth to some very creditable literary productions. And those who nowadays turn to Howe, may very well discover that one of the earliest names in Canadian letters is also one of the greatest.