

EARLY HALIFAX THEATRES

A. R. JEWITT

A wise nation preserves its records, gathers up its muniments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs its great public structures, and fosters national pride and love of country by perpetual references to the sacrifices and glories of the past.—JOSEPH HOWE.

HALIFAX is known as the most English city of the Dominion, though this peculiarity—if not distinction—is sometimes claimed by Victoria. Founded under the aegis of the British Crown, she owes her growth to the fixed establishment though transient personnel of the navy and army. The officers of the services carried with them the atmosphere of fashionable London, an acute sense of personal honour, a feudal sense of superiority, and a humorous fidelity to the dictates of the world of fashion. Always tolerantly exclusive, whimsically good-natured, by inheritance broad-minded, they set the pace and modelled the manners and deportment of the local aspirants to social distinction. Then as to-day, charity was a convenient cloak under which admission might be gained to the innermost circle. The theatrical performances owed their introduction and success to the *ennui* and generosity of the members of the services who tried to “enjoy life in the best manner the dreary regions of Nova Scotia would allow.” With shrewd English adaptability, they used the social ambitions of the citizens to enliven the monotony of garrison life for themselves and for their subordinates. The commoner folk flocked to the performances to view the brave show on stage and off, to meet their friends and acquaintances of the rank and file, and to hear the latest news of the town. Their wants, as well as the tastes of the upper circle, were considered by the managers in their choice of plays and farces. In the period of fifteen years covered in this account, upwards of a hundred different plays, operas and farces, were performed in Halifax, besides numerous entertainments of a miscellaneous kind given by professionals from England and the United States. Most of these pieces are forgotten; a few are still favourites with the public of to-day.

I.

Until the opening of the New Grand Theatre in 1789 on a site on Argyle Street, afterwards occupied by the Acadian School, now a printing establishment, all theatrical entertainments took place in the large assembly room in the old Pontac Hotel at the corner of Prince and Water Streets, the scene of many a brilliant and elaborate festivity under the leadership of Governor and Mrs. Wentworth, in the good old days recorded with such fidelity and zest in General Dyott's diary. Here on March 20, 1787, was performed for the third time "to a crowded and respectable audience" *The West Indian* of Richard Cumberland. Although there is no record of the first performance of this play, it is probable that the date was Tuesday, the 14th March, 1787. It marks the inauguration of drama in the town of Halifax. The notice continues thus: "The avidity with which the tickets for this play have been purchased up marks the high sense the public entertain of its merit, and proves the choice of the gentlemen under whose care the entertainment is conducted to be perfectly judicious." Those gentlemen who succeeded so well in their choice of a play were officers of the navy and army who had united to form a Theatrical Society. The primary object of this society, as stated in their Agreement or Constitution, was the relief of the poor during the bitter Nova Scotia winter. All profits, after the expenses of the performances had been covered, were handed over to the church wardens for distribution.

Two years before this event, in May, 1785, a "Comic Sentimental, Dramatic Entertainment" called *Fashionable Raillery* was performed "with proper scenery and apparatus" by William Moore. This entertainment apparently consisted of satirical readings by Mr. Moore, selected scenes from well-known plays, imitations of dramatic characters (Falstaff, Pistol, Lord Foppington, and others), relieved by dancing and singing, the performance being varied each night. To his final performance of *Fashionable Raillery*, for example, Mr. Moore "by command of His Excellency the Governor" added "An Eulogy on Freemasonry in the Character of Master Mason." That item of the programme, together with many references to Masonic activities in the *Gazette*, is an indication of the strength of the Craft and its social influence in the new settlement. This William Moore "from the Theatre Royal in England and last from Jamaica, where he has performed the above mentioned entertainment with universal Applause," enjoyed a successful stay in Halifax, and after several performances embarked for Quebec about June 15.

The School for Scandal, *The Merchant of Venice*, ("The Characters by Gentlemen of the Town") and two farces by David Garrick, *Lethe* and *The Lying Valet*, were among the pieces acted in the Pontac between the representation of *The West Indian* and the opening of the New Theatre. The Assembly Room, however, was found inadequate to house the numbers who patronized so whole-heartedly these first attempts to introduce the drama in the new town, and the officers had hoped from the first to build a theatre of their own that might become a centre for association and mutual entertainment between garrison and town. They attained this ambition by the erection of a new theatre on Argyle Street, completed in 1789 and opened on the 26th of February of that year. Fortunately we have an account of this great event by the treasurer and master of ceremonies himself, General Dyott, who as a young man was stationed for some months in Halifax. In Volume I, page 61 of the diary he says: "The officers and garrison fitted up a new theatre. On the 26th it opened with *The Merchant of Venice*. It was as complete a thing for the size as I ever saw. Boxes, and a first and second Pit. The plays were very entertaining, and some of the characters were vastly well supported." Under April 16 of the same year he notes: "We continued our plays at the new theatre to crowded audiences through the winter. They went off remarkably well. We collected £400, almost the whole of which was expended on the house. Closed in June." The *Gazettes* for the next two years are not in the Provincial or Dalhousie Libraries, and Dyott makes no reference to the theatrical finances during this period, but it is very likely that the managers continued to spend large sums on improving the building. During the season of 1792 the plays are again announced as "for the benefit of the poor." The name of the theatre changed several times; New Grand Theatre, New Theatre, Halifax Theatre, and finally in 1797, Theatre Royal, when announcements of the plays were sometimes headed with the Royal Arms.

In March 17, 1793, it was found necessary to increase the accommodation of the boxes. Two rows in the first pit were railed off, and "to prevent any inconvenience in the First Pit, an additional row will be taken into that from the Second Pit." A further change was made in February 17th, 1795. "In order to remedy some inconvenience that has lately arisen from having two different prices to the Pit, the Managers have thought proper to throw them both into one, and to make all the tickets Three Shillings each. Altho' to prevent the avenues from being too much crowded, both doors of the Pit will be kept open as usual." Obviously, the drama

continued to be popular with the masses. Still another extension of the boxes was made two years later. The notice of January 17, 1797, says: "As a great number of Ladies and Gentlemen were disappointed of Box Tickets the last Night, they are now informed that the Managers have fitted up the Gallery into separate Boxes far more convenient and spacious than those below. A Door and Passage is likewise opened from them to the Coffee Room and Lower Boxes, which will afford an opportunity to pass from one to the other occasionally." Doubtless this also afforded opportunities for social and physical refreshment.

Powell and Baker, two professionals who took over the theatre in '97, determined to enlarge the stage, and on the 21st of March, next year, announced that "The late alterations and additions to the Stage permitting full scope for working the necessary Machinery, it is intended in the opening Scene of the Play to represent the novel sight of a Ship in Distress, etc. stranded on the Coast." Other elaborate spectacles were presented, including "a celebrated pantomime never performed here called *Robinson Crusoe or Harlequin Friday*, as performed upwards of 200 nights at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, with uncommon success." "This admired entertainment is (with strict adherence to the original history) compiled and adapted to the stage representation by R. B. Sheridan, Esq., author of *The School for Scandal*, *Duenna*, etc. With all the original music as composed by Mr. Linly. Entire new dresses after the manner of the above theatre." A list of places and incidents represented followed.

Under the direction of Powell, this new theatre—especially after the alterations—was as perfect in its stage machinery, as complete in its furnishings, as elaborate in its decoration and as comfortable for its patrons as officers of the services and gentlemen of the profession familiar with the London theatre could make it. It had a seating for about 500, and a good house could be confidently expected through the interest of the comparatively large numbers of people with enthusiasm for the drama and with leisure to translate that enthusiasm into action.

The doors opened in the old theatre at six o'clock in the evening, and the curtain went up "precisely at Seven". Later the time was put back an hour, the performance beginning at 6 p. m., occasionally at 6.30. This early hour was necessitated by the length of the performance. A five-act play, followed by a farce or comic opera with "extras" in the way of dances, songs, "occasional prologues" or "spectacles," required not less than three and often four hours. It was announced that the opening performance for the

season of 1799, given under the distinguished patronage of H. R. H. the Duke of Kent, was "to commence at Six and to conclude by Ten", so that, if we may judge from a notice in a Boston play-bill of 1792, "every spectator may go home at a sober hour, and reflect upon what he has seen before he retires to rest." There was no regular theatre night during the first few years, though Tuesday being the publishing day of the *Gazette* was the day on which performances were usually held. In February, 1797, it was announced that "for the advantage in the arrangement of parties, etc., the regular play night will be every Monday fortnight," but this proved unsatisfactory, and was changed to Wednesday.

The prices varied considerably. William Moore charged \$1.00 admission to his entertainments. The charge for one performance acted in the Pontac was three shillings. For another—*The Merchant of Venice*—with Garrick's farce of *Lethe*—\$1.00. In the New Grand Theatre, boxes were five shillings, first pit three shillings, and second pit two shillings. Patrons had to secure their tickets from Mr. Howe, printer, or from Mr. Gallagher, and no money was taken at the door of the theatre. The pits, as already noted, were afterwards made into one, and the admission fixed at three shillings. The theatre was supported also by subscriptions on the part of the gentlemen of the garrison and of the town. There is notice of a subscription night in April, 1796, when *The Padlock*—a comic opera by Isaac Bickerstaff,—and Garrick's farce of *High Life Above Stairs* were performed. The aim of the institution is stated in a note apologizing for a postponement caused by the sudden indisposition of one of the leading gentlemen: "The primary object which the gentlemen who compose the Theatrical Society have in view is the relief of the Poor at this inclement season; and they pledge themselves to the Public that the last article of their Agreement expressly stipulates—"That all the profits which may arise in the prosecution of this charitable institution shall be paid into the Hands of the Church Wardens, who will faithfully and religiously apply the same to the relief of the indigent and distressed of every description and denomination who may be either known by them or recommended by others as objects of charity.'" The wardens of St. Paul's Church, acknowledging the receipt of £20, express the opinion that "Such disinterested Acts of Benevolence from Gentlemen who from their Rank and Situations are in the Enjoyment of Ease and Independence reflect an Honor on Humanity and must place their Conduct in the most amiable point of View." By 1797 benefit nights had been introduced in imitation of the English custom, and in the same year the professional gentlemen, Powell and Baker, took over the management.

The Theatre always enjoyed distinguished patronage. On December 22, 1792, Molière's *The Mock Doctor* or *The Dumb Lady Cured*, together with the famous eighteenth century farce *High Life Below Stairs* was performed "at the particular Request of the Governor and Mrs. Wentworth." *The Mock Doctor* was also a favourite with H. R. H. Prince Edward when he came to Halifax in 1799. In March, 1794, there is a notice of *She Stoops to Conquer* performed "at the particular Request of Mrs. Wentworth." Even Mr. Hackley, the Balance Master, who held his exhibitions in a large and commodious room in Noonan's Tavern near the theatre, secured His Excellency's permission. A special performance was arranged in midsummer "as a compliment to the Hon. Vice Admiral Murray and the fleet under his command, previous to their going to sea." Powell and Baker were able to head their first announcement with "Under the Sanction of H. R. H. Prince Edward and His Excellency, the Governor."

The occasional postscripts to announcements of plays have a peculiar interest for us, for they show that managers had the same difficulties with their audiences as they have to-day, and that want of consideration for the comfort of actor and audience was not unknown, though confined then, as now, to a few ill bred persons amongst the gentry and common folk. As early as the second performance in the new theatre the attention of ladies of quality was drawn to the following notice: "It is particularly requested the Ladies will dress their Heads as low as possible, as otherwise the Persons sitting behind cannot have a Sight of the Stage." That this was necessary, the drawings of the fashionable head-dresses of the period are sufficient proof, and, sad to say, the notice had to be repeated in more insistent terms which, though very politely phrased, were nevertheless quite firm. This exhibition of bad manners in the classes was, of course, copied by the masses who in the pit were restlessly lasting out the "serious play" in expectation of the farce. The crying child, the whistling fiend, and the person fond of his own voice, still with us, outraged the sense of decorum and the nerves of the lover of drama. On one occasion the respectable citizens were "inconvenienced by the admission or intrusion of several persons who had no tickets"; "to prevent the like from happening in future, some precautions have been taken which we hope will prove effectual, and the number of pit tickets will be reduced." The admission of people during acts still goes on, to the discomfort of actors and audiences alike. On the 30th of January, 1798, the following notice appeared:

No children in arms. It is requested that persons will not stand on the seats or wear their hats at time of performance. It is also wished that whistling or any other unbecoming noise may in future be omitted.

The building was heated by a number of stoves. The repetition from time to time of the note "Every Attention will be paid to render the Theatre as comfortable as possible" needs no explanation, to one living in Halifax even in these days of central heating. "Great Care is being taken to make the House warm and convenient *since the last Night of Performance*," runs a notice one January, and the following month two more stoves were placed in the building. Doubtless the Halifax theatre-goer of the seventeen-nineties chose his seat with an eye to the nearest stove.

All the actors until Powell and Baker came were amateurs, gentlemen of the navy, army, and town. The female parts were acted by Halifax ladies; even before Powell's time there were benefit nights for ladies of the Theatrical Society. Dyott, however, records of *The School for Scandal* which he saw in 1788, "the female parts were done by two young boys of the town." He continues: "On the whole, I declare, I never saw a play better performed out of London. I was appointed treasurer and master of ceremonies, as I did not feel equal to taking a part, my talents not at all suiting the theatrical line."

Charles Stuart Powell, who came to Boston from England in 1792, belonged to a family of actors. Three of this name are mentioned in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as actors of some repute. His father was a theatre manager in England, and his brother Snelling Powell is credited with having put the Boston theatre on a firm basis, in spite of opposition from many citizens of that Puritan stronghold. Charles Stuart, already known in Covent Garden as an actor of promise, was "the first manager of a regular theatrical establishment in Boston." Having in all probability heard of the success of the drama in Halifax, he forsook the austerity of New England for the more congenial atmosphere of a community where the amenities of life had freer play. The reception given him by the people of Halifax, if we may judge from the unusual number of plays and entertainments during his first season, was a very hearty one indeed.

To the announcement of his first performance, which has been quoted above, he added this note: "From the efforts of Messrs. Powell and Baker the lovers of Thespian amusement may expect a pleasing entertainment.—The former of these gentlemen has frequently shone conspicuous on English boards, and at different

times two of the first Theatres in America have been directed by his management. Mr. Baker, also as a performer, has ever been acknowledged to possess much merit in the departments of both sock and buskin."

As a result of their activities, plays were given more frequently. There were four different bills for the month of March 1798, performances continued throughout the summer months, a wider range of plays, operas, and farces was introduced, the plays were often supported by spectacle, dancing and singing, (Powell was a dancing master as well as an actor), and benefits were common. The quality of the performances, too, was no doubt improved by the infusion of new talent, for Powell and his daughter who took leading parts in the operas were actors of no common merit.¹

The legitimate stage in Halifax, like its model in London, was not exempt from the competition of pantomime, spectacle and musical entertainments. "A plain Play, without Entertainments," Colley Cibber's ideal, seems to have satisfied the Halifax audience until 1793 when, coinciding with the inauguration of Haydn and Bach concerts at the British Tavern and the Coffee House, the expedient of compromise was adopted and comic operas formed part of the evenings' entertainments. The first piece was Sheridan's *Duenna*, which was acted in Covent Garden on 74 nights successively. This lively production held first place among the lighter musical pieces on the Halifax stage. The experiment was a decided success. *The Duenna*, embellished with "Some new Songs" and occasional prologues, was repeated several times before the end of the season. Next month the regular play and farce were supported by "an Interlude called *The Stage Coach* with a Variety of Songs," and the audience at the last performance of the season saw, between a comic opera and the farce, "an Italian dance called *La Fricandol*, as done at Asley's Ampitheatre in London." Thus had the "foreign Novelties, these Gin shops of the Stage that intoxicate its Auditors and dishonor their understanding with a levity for which I want a name" infected even the new theatre in far-away Nova Scotia. Powell was the first to introduce into the theatre medleys and spectacles on any large scale. In his first two appearances not even a farce was acted; but on September 12, 1797, the bill was:

Collins Evening Brush for Rubbing off the Rust of Care.

CHIEF SUBJECTS OF LAUGHTER.

Modern Spouters, Stage Candidates, Tragedy Struck Taylors, Butchers in Heroics, etc., etc.

1. Powell revisited Boston in 1806, and died in Halifax in 1810.

Interspersed with a variety of Comic Songs.

Between the parts, Mr. Baker will speak a Prologue in the Character of a Country Boy; ditto in Character of a Covent Garden Buck, and Garrick's Epilogue in Character of a Drunken Sailor.

The second performance was described as "An Olio, or Attick Evening's Entertainment, composed of the Sublime, the Pathetic, the Humorous, and the Musical."

In 1794 came "the celebrated Mr. Maginnis from Sadler's Wells, London (equal if not superior to the famous Jonas) who had the Honor to perform repeatedly before the Nobility and Gentry of Great Britain with Universal Applause." His first announcement will be of interest as giving an example of what may be called eighteenth century vaudeville:

A GRAND MEDLEY OF ENTERTAINMENTS.

In Three Acts—viz.

Act 1. Consists of a number of surprising Philosophical Experiments and Deceptions, astonishing to the Eyes of the Spectators.

Act 2. By a curious piece of transparent Machinery will be performed the broken Bridge or the disappointed Traveller.

Act 3. A Grand View of the Siege of Gibraltar; on the left a view of Spain; on the right a view of Barbary; in the centre a just appearance of the sea, likewise the Approach of the floating batteries, their repulse, etc. attended with the cannonading; with a view of Neptune in his car and the fishes sporting in the waves.

Pit, 2 shillings, Gallery 1 shilling, Small Children 6d.

N. B. Different performances each night of exhibiting.

This medley held in Noonan's Tavern near the theatre was well received. In addition to the public performance, private exhibitions were given at the request of gentlemen of the town.

Mr. Hackley, Balance Master or Tumbler, arrived soon after Mr. Maginnis, and managed to secure the theatre for his first performance. Although a severe injury prevented him from fulfilling his engagements as announced, and "there arose injurious doubts of his perfect abilities to perform whatever the public might expect from his Advertisement," he was able after his recovering to perform several times "in the room lately occupied by Mr. Maginnis." He announced that the third act of his exhibition would conclude as follows: "An elegant collection of Figures (which the Performer flatters himself will be much applauded)

will perform the first part of *The Mock Doctor*, and *The Relief of the King of Egypt's Daughter from a Sea Monster by St. George*.

It is to be hoped that this ingenuous interpolation as to the reception desired for the exhibition was at least as efficacious as the more refined modern method of attaining the same end by the judicious distribution of free passes where gratitude is expected to stimulate applause. If variety is the spice of life, the people of Halifax took care to have their amusements highly spiced, as the following strangely capitalized announcement plainly shows:—

Jan. 1, 1799.

MR. Martin & Co.

Inform the Ladies and Gentlemen of Halifax that they will exhibit surprising Feats of Activity on the

Tight Rope and Slack Rope
by Mr. Martin.

Grand Lofty Tumbling.

Mr. Martin will jump over twelve Men's Heads in Somerset; will jump over a hogshead and pass through the fire and flame. He will jump the Trampler; Dance Fisher's hornpipe on the Tight Rope; place a Table and Chair, and Eat and drink in the greatest ease. He will jump the ribbon from the tight rope, 5 feet high, backwards and forwards; and will dance the tight rope with a boy tied to each Foot. He will also jump a ribbon 5 feet high from the ground in Somerset. Mr. Martin will perform the Fork and Orange, and stand on the Tight Rope in the attitude of Mercury; and will turn Somerset 15 feet high, and in the act of turning, will shoot two pistols in the air, which has not been exhibited by any in British North America but by himself. The evening's exhibition will close with a Comic Dance by Mr. Martin, and the young American, and many other manoeuvres too tedious to mention, and flatters himself that he shall give general satisfaction. Boxes 4s. Pit 2s. 6d.

For this performance Mr. Martin "built a suitable House at Mr. Hussey's in Water Street.

The number and variety of these performances by professional entertainers is proof that they were popular among a large class of people in Halifax, whose tastes perhaps were not yet educated to appreciate the "serious" productions of legitimate drama. Powell himself, though he returned to the stock programme of play and farce after the two medleys mentioned above, gave performances of Collin's *Evening Brush* regularly the next season in addition to conducting the business of the theatre. Besides being a clever and successful entertainer, he was a ready versifier and composer,

never at a loss for a new song or an "occasional prologue." The variations in his bill for January 8, 1799, are of particular interest:

Preceding the Brush, will be delivered an Address as Spoken before their Majesties and the Royal Family, October 4th, on Nelson's late Glorious Victory. After the Brush a Satirical, Humorous, Critical Dissertation on Noses, according to Lavater. Between the Parts, a Song written by Mr. P. to be sung in Character of a San Culotte, giving a whimsical description of the action off the Mouth of the Nile.

II.

Restoration drama is represented in the list of plays acted in Halifax, during the period under consideration, by five excellent comedies: Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Husband* and *The Mistake*. Mrs. Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, and—what seems to have been one of the most popular plays in the town—*The Beaux' Stratagem*.

The vices, follies, humours of the fashionable circle in London formed the subject of Restoration comedy. Vanbrugh stated the aim of himself and his fellow dramatists when in the prologue to *The Provoked Wife* he said:

'Tis the intent and business of the stage
To copy out the follies of the age;
To hold to every man a faithful glass,
And show him of what species he's an ass.

The pathetic was carefully excluded, virtue was held synonymous with hypocrisy, good people were as few in the plays as they were in the life mirrored there, the ideal gentleman is he who "keeps his five senses keen and bright as his sword, that has 'em always drawn out in their just order and strength, with his reason as commander at the head of 'em, that detaches 'em by turns upon whatever party of pleasure agreeably offers, and commands 'em to retreat upon the least appearance of disadvantage or danger." The dialogue was of uniform and stony brilliancy, full of satirical observations on human nature, and generally of a hothouse indelicacy that has nothing in common with the freedom of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The one reflected a diseased state of society; the other was the exuberance of a robust and virile age. "We are surrounded by foreheads of bronze, hearts like the nether millstone, and tongues set on fire of hell."

I intend at another place to consider the reaction against this licence and inhumanity, but it may here be pointed out that all Farquhar's plays,—the popular *Beaux' Stratagem* included,—

appeared after 1698, the year of Jeremy Collier's attack on the Theatre, when the reform was beginning to be felt. Farquhar is the last Restoration dramatist, and while his plays have the wit and sparkle of the earlier writers as well as a liberal dash of their immorality, the atmosphere is fresher and the two plays performed in Halifax have something of the humanity of Goldsmith in them. Although his assertion that "Comedy is no more at present than a well-framed tale handsomely told as an agreeable vehicle for counsel or reproof" is not to be taken seriously, his plays show a distinct advance in morality and general tone, without falling into the mawkish sentimentality of the conscious reformers.

The groundwork of *The Beaux' Stratagem* is typically Restoration; two gentlemen adventurers, a country wife who laments that "There's no form of prayer in the liturgy against bad husbands," and the sullen husband himself, are the chief characters. A separation between husband and wife is conveniently arranged in the fifth act on the principle that

Consent, if mutual, saves the lawyers' fee,
Consent is law enough to set you free.

and the beaux come into their own. It is in the characters and incidents of minor importance that the departure from Restoration conventions is felt. There is a welcome humanity in the characters of Boniface, the humorous inn-keeper, with his "anno domini" Litchfield ale and of Lady Bountiful, the charitable old gentlewoman who "has cured more people in and about Litchfield within ten years than the doctors have killed in twenty, and that's a bold word."

Cherry, the inn-keeper's daughter, with the freshness of the country about her, is remembered at least as a name from Miss Hardcastle's reference in *She Stoops to Conquer*. For its genuine humour the following sketch has no parallel in the earlier plays:

The appearance of a stranger in a country church draws so many gazers as a blazing-star; no sooner he comes into the cathedral but a train of whispers runs buzzing round the congregation in a moment; "Who is he? Whence comes he? Do you know him?" Then I, sir, tips me the verger with half a crown; he pockets the simony, and inducts me into the best pew in the church. I pull out my snuff-box, turn myself round, bow to the bishop, or the dean, if he be the commanding-officer; single out a beauty, rivet both my eyes to hers, set my nose a-bleeding by the strength of imagination, and show the whole church my concern by my endeavoring to hide it. After the sermon the whole town gives me to her for a lover, and by persuading the lady that I am dying for her the tables are turned, and she in good earnest falls in love with me.

The Beaux' Stratagem marks the close of Restoration drama; a revulsion of feeling had already set in.

The reality and strength of this reaction is attested by the reception of Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (1698). Though sometimes laboured in argument and unreasonable in many of its criticisms, the book was a sign of the times, the expression of the inarticulate feeling of the great mass of people. Cibber observes that, despite the replies of Congreve and Vanbrugh, and the success of a few plays in the old style, "his calling our Dramatic Writers to this strict account had a very wholesome Effect upon those who writ after this time. They were now a great deal more upon their Guard; Indecencies were no longer Wit; and by degrees the Fair Sex came again to fill the Boxes on the first day of a new Comedy without fear or censure."

Rakes were no longer admired, but converted in the fifth act. Virtue in distress rather than the follies of mankind became the proper subject of comedy, and morality of a kind familiar in the character of Joseph Surface took the place of wit and satire. With the dramas of Lillo and Cumberland the pendulum had swung the other way, and "the goddess of the woeful countenance, The Sentimental Muse" had taken a place beside her rapidly declining sisters.

In the Halifax *Royal Gazette* of February 19, 1793, appeared the following letter:—

Mr. Henry.

Sir:—

A Fondness for Theatrical Amusement has induced me to be a constant attendant at the Theatre this Winter; and I must do the Gentlemen concerned the justice to observe, they have been uniformly felicitous to give the Audience pleasure and amusement. The Pieces performed have been replete with Humour, and the Characters in general have been well supported. But we may have too much of good things; sweets will often cloy, and Mirth carried to excess becomes tiresome.

I consider the Stage as a School of Morality (at least it ought to be so) where vice and folly are ludicrously exposed, and sentiments of virtue and morality inculcated; this is evidently the intention in many modern productions which are rich in moral and sentimental lessons. I therefore think, with all due deference to the Gentlemen concerned, that a Comedy of this kind (many of which also abound in humour) would have a better effect in filling their house than Farces which are in general devoid of Plot, and only calculated to raise a laugh—It may here be said that humour is the only thing to please the multitude; but there are two sorts of People, and I hope everyone is not so depraved as to yawn at sentimental sorrow or delicate distress; the plaudit

of hand and the roar of approbation may not be so great—but the sentimental heart will commend in expressive silence.

When we consider the intention, which is truly laudable, and has been the means of softening the distresses of numbers, and that many persons have been induced to attend partly from charitable motives, such Plays must be congenial to their feelings; at least the different dispositions that compose the audience should be attended to; a sentimental Comedy if acted with propriety, with a humorous Farce would, I conceive, please all;—I am certain it would please a great number, and none more than

Your humble Servant,

Theatricus.

If we may judge from the plays that followed, this plea had no effect on the managers of the theatre. The next season opened with Vanbrugh's *The Mistake* and a farce called *The Irishman in London*.

Richard Steele has been called the founder of sentimental, or "genteel" as opposed to "low" comedy. He was, at any rate, a conscious reformer of the stage from its former immorality, and realized that he was introducing into comedy situations and emotions excluded according to the canons of criticism. In a man of Steele's temperament, sentimentality was the inevitable form that reaction against Restoration inhumanity would take. "You find our author treads the stage with just regard to a reforming age," he says in the prologue to *The Lying Love*, 1703, and in the preface, "Thus he (the spark of this play) makes false love, gets drunk, and kills his man, but in the fifth Act awakes from his debauch, with the compunction and remorse which is suitable to a man finding himself in a gaol for the death of his friend without his knowing why. The anguish he then expresses and the mutual sorrow between an only child and a tender father in that distress are, perhaps, an injury to the rules of comedy, but I am sure they are a justice to those of morality."

The first four acts of Steele's play are excellent comedy untainted with any coarseness. Young Bookwit, the irresponsible, debonair gallant who exhibits amazing dexterity in the nice art of lying, and his pseudo-servant Latine are an excellent pair drawn in the manner of true comedy. A variation of this part of the play by Samuel Foote called *The Lyar* was a popular piece on the Halifax stage. This Foote, by the way, was the same who proposed to "take off" Dr. Johnson, and boasted that he had "added sixteen new characters to the English drama of his country."

Even after he believes that he has killed his friend Lovemore in an affair of honour, young Bookwit maintains his careless manner, and readily falls in with the bravado of his fellow prisoners in Newgate. With the sudden remorse next morning, all is changed.

Act Five becomes largely an exposition on that favourite subject of Steele's, the evil consequences of duelling. Young Bookwit breaks out into moralizing and halting blank verse; hearts are broken and copious tears shed; emotions of remorse, self-sacrifice, filial piety, and love are torn to shreds in true sentimental style so familiar to us in the moving-pictures of to-day. When the spectators have not yet dried their tears of woe, the wounded Lovemore reveals himself, more heroics follow, and they prepare to shed tears of joy. Such, in a somewhat heightened form, was the sentimental comedy. The epilogue strikes the keynote of the plays that were as follows:—

Laughter's distorted passion, born
Of sudden self-esteem and sudden scorn;
Which, when 'tis o'er, the men in pleasure wise
Both him that moved it and themselves despise;
While generous pity of a painted woe
Makes us ourselves both more approve and know.

Just as was the motive that produced these plays, to a modern taste they appear shallow and insipid, and deserve their oblivion. "In these plays," says Goldsmith, in the best contemporary criticism of them, "almost all the characters are good and exceedingly generous, they are lavish enough with their tin money on the stage; and though they want humour, have abundance of sentiment and feeling. If they happen to have faults or foibles, the spectator is taught not only to pardon but to applaud them in consideration of the goodness of their hearts, so that folly instead of being ridiculed is commended, and the comedy aims at touching our passions without the power of being truly pathetic."

Cumberland's *The Jew*, *The West-Indian*, *The Brothers* and Lillo's *George Barnwell*, or *The London Merchant*, are among the sentimental dramas, popular on the English stage, that were performed in Halifax. *The Jew* and *The West-Indian* represent one type of sentimental comedy that undertook the defence of popularly despised members of the community. The very purpose of these plays causes one to wonder that the term comedy was allowed them. In *The Jew*, Cumberland who, by the way, is the original of Sheridan's Sir Fretful Plagiary, attempts to vindicate money-lenders in the character of Sheva, an impossible creature starving himself to help his neighbours. Possibly an audience of 1798, when Halifax first saw the play, departed improved in mind, but to-day it would excite contempt and incredulity rather than tolerance, and one returns with fresh appreciation to *The Merchant of Venice*. *The West-Indian*—as far as I have been able to determine, the first play acted in Halifax—submits the character of a supposed-

ly typical West-Indian. Although on the whole a likeable play, it is done in the true sentimental style; we are expected to condone or even admire the erratic young man's faults in consideration of his lavish generosity and chivalry—superficial as these qualities in him appear to a reader to-day. As usual, the play abounds in sentiments. The following mild specimen, given to the hero Belcour, describes a character dear to the heart of the sentimentalist: "While I have hands to hold, I will hold them open to mankind; but, sir, my passions are my masters; they take me where they will, and oftentimes they leave to reason and to virtue nothing but my wishes and my sighs." *George Barnwell*, long popular on the English stage and famous in its day for converting erring apprentices, was performed in Halifax in the spring of 1798. As a *tragedie bourgeoise*, written in something printed as prose, it is of importance in the history of drama; yet one is relieved to note that the people of Halifax endured but a single performance of this sentimental atrocity.

Besides the dramas already mentioned in this account, numerous 18th century plays, operas and farces were performed. Shakespeare was not popular in Halifax. Few of his plays were acted, and these never presented more than twice. "A Comedy of three acts called *Catherine and Petruchio* or *The Taming of the Shrew* written by Shakespeare", evidently an 18th century version, was given two performances. *The Merchant of Venice* was, as we have seen, acted once in the Pontac, and formed with *The Citizen* the first bill of the New Theatre. "The Celebrated Comedy called *The Tempest* or *The Enchanted Isle*," another revision, and *Richard III* complete the list.

Dr. MacMechan in his *Headwaters of Canadian Literature* has well said, "Nova Scotia has a history; Nova Scotians write history, and some of them have made history". Although Nova Scotia cannot claim a single great actor or, if we except the stage adaptation of De Mille's *The Lady of the Ice*, a single great play, yet she has the pre-eminence of being the first province in Canada to have an established theatre in which plays were regularly acted. Blazing the trail in literature, law, religion and government as Nova Scotia has done, it is not too much to hope that she will, in due time, give to Canada a play-writer or actor of repute; for Howe, in a newspaper article, makes reference to "a young native of Nova Scotia,"¹ who "has for many years sustained the first characters in genteel Comedy in the theatres of New York."

1. Henry James Finn, born Sydney, Cape Breton 1785. Perished in the burning of the ship Lexington, Long Island Sound, 1840.