

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER SPEAKS

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TWO heads bending eagerly over a yellowed paper in a low, white Nova Scotia homestead—stiff, closely written sheets, folded carefully and addressed in a flawless Spencerian hand with appropriate flourishes to Mr. Hugh McIvor, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia!

And just a hundred years earlier a homesick Irish schoolmaster, Andrew Henderson, sitting down with his quill pen, his blotting-sand and sealing-wax, to give his old friend and countryman an account of his adventures since he had left the dear old land!

A faded letter brought to light in an old hair trunk—and another link added to the broken chain of Nova Scotian history . . .

The ordeal of getting an education was a painful one in the old days. Most of us have heard from our grandfathers of the long hours, the benches without backs, the dull text-books. The rod was constantly in use, and the masters seemed to lay themselves out to think of original schemes for keeping our obstreperous ancestors in their places; such as compelling an unlucky youngster to balance himself, barefooted, on two small stone ink-bottles; or to stand for a given time with his arm lifted to touch a chalk-line on the wall. There is even a tale of one lad in Barrington who, on his way to evening school, spilt some of the oil from his tin lamp on his book, and was made to lick it off for punishment. Schoolhouses in the Maritime Provinces, after the log-cabin period, were square, ugly buildings, usually a dirty white, heated after a fashion by big box-stoves in the centre of the room, with fuel provided in turn by the pupils. When parents assumed the responsibility for the wood, the room may have been comfortable within a certain radius; but when some poor little urchin had to depend on picking up sticks on the way to school to keep the fire going that day, the temperature must have varied.

It is natural that, on looking back, our sympathy should go out to the weary little mortals swinging their legs on the hard benches. Their schemes to torture the teacher cannot be taken seriously. But the way of the early schoolmaster in these provinces was paved with anything but roses. He had to provide, at first, not only the instruction but schoolroom accommodations as well. And the profession not being very profitable, it was combined

ingeniously with other ways of gaining a sort of living. Here are some advertisements taken from the *Halifax Gazette* of the seventeen-fifties, a few years after the rough garrison settlement was founded:

At the sign of the Hand and Pen at the south end of Granville Street are carefully taught by Leigh and Wragg, spelling, reading, writing in all its different hands, arithmetic in all its parts, merchants' accompts. Sold at the above place, quill pens, inks, writing papers, writing and spelling books and slate pencils.

Reading school for children kept, and gold and silver lace cleaned and all sorts of silk, also mournings stiffened by Elizabeth Render, near Rev. Mr. Tutty's new house on Barrington Street.

At the Academy in Grafton Street, young gentlemen are speedily instructed and well grounded in the true art of spelling by rules short and easy, but expressive and comprehensive to almost the youngest capacity. They are likewise taught reading, writing, arithmetic, French, Latin and dancing by me, Henry Meriton.

William Green, who opened an English School for the Education of Youth in Saint John in 1787, offered a course in "Literature in the most approved order from the best authors used in the principal Academies of Great Britain and Ireland." His curriculum included "Geometric Surveying, Navigation, Dialling and other parts of Mathematics", and he also promised his pupils strictest attention to "natural genius and their moral abilities."

The next year in Saint John a Mr. Marriott, who according to his advertisements had been doing a flourishing business in what we would call the *Delicatessen* line, with shaving and hair-dressing on the side, turned to teaching young gentlemen to "speak emphatically in order to complete an Unfinished Education", along with drawing and fencing. A little later he announces a new enterprise, "a Spouting Club for young men to learn public speaking". He mentions his "having attempted every mode to gain a winter subsistence with the worthy inhabitants of Saint John", and his "humble hopes that his summer endeavours will not prove fruitless." He seems to have put on a play or two, with himself and his wife in the leading parts; but there was little time for amusement in those days of bitter struggle for existence, and his teaching ability could not have been very substantially appreciated, for we read finally of a benefit performance being given for his family.

When the provinces began to take enough interest in education to build schoolhouses, and the master was hired by the district, he was still meagrely paid and obliged to work with the

most primitive equipment. The horn spelling-book, practically indestructible and handed down from father to son, was the standby for beginners. Often the page, clamped between the two sheets of semi-transparent horn, contained nothing but the alphabet and the digits. The New England Primer seems to have been the real bulwark of early education in Nova Scotia, and if we may judge from its appearance to-day, could hardly have been of much help to a teacher in making the road to knowledge attractive. It was shaped like a catechism, and illustrated by coarse woodcuts of such cheerful subjects as John Rogers perishing in the flames while his wife and ten children stood by. The alphabet was taught by scriptural rhymes beginning:

In Adam's fall
We sinned all:

and ending with

Zaccheus he
Did climb the tree
His Lord to see:

accompanied by appropriate pictures.

The old agreements with schoolmasters read rather quaintly. One from Truro says:

We whose names are annexed to this paper agree to engage Thomas Jones to teach school for us for the term of three months, and we agree to pay him 8 shillings for each scholar sent to him by us, and we also agree to board him each one in proportion to the scholars sent.

John Brown 1 scholar; Wm. Smith 1½ scholars; John Archibald 2¼ scholars, and so on.

Teachers were expected to take one poor scholar (a whole one, not a fraction) to every eight or ten paying scholars. And their fees were payable not only in coin of the realm, but in vegetables, grain, weaving, cobbling or almost any commodity.

Early education seems to have been pretty well monopolized by boys. Girls were sent occasionally to a "dame school" to learn a few rudiments and fine needle work; but "the first important female quality," according to a schoolteacher of the time, "is sweetness of temper." That could be learned at home.

Boarding round the district may have broken the monotony of the teacher's life, but some of his experiences were not too agreeable. Even in prosperous localities log cabins were small, and seldom knew such luxuries as spare chambers. The master dinned the three R's into his pupils all day and shared their beds at night. Sometimes he was fed like a fighting cock; at others he was on a

steady diet of Indian meal, porridge without milk or sweetening, or, in a fishing community, on salt herring and potatoes. One week he might have a comfortable feather bed, and the next he might be shivering on a straw tick (or even loose straw without the tick) on the floor, with no covering but old clothes, and a variety of bedfellows, including mice.

"Little better than pauperism", an early Maritime writer says of the schoolmaster's position. No wonder the profession did not always draw men of the highest class. A motley collection those early pedagogues must have been—ne'er-do-wells and derelicts, many of them, cast up on this northern shore, who had seen better days and turned to teaching as a last resort. But among them were men of real scholarship and refinement, who gave their lives to instilling a thirst for knowledge and high ideals into the youth in their charge. Their names have been largely forgotten, and they were never (as is too often the case with teachers) rewarded in proportion to their worth to the community; but the provinces by the sea owe them a debt that can never be repaid. If the Maritimes have a reputation for loving learning, how much of the credit for it should go to these old-time teachers?

This brings us back to Mr. McIvor's letter.

Calnek and Savary, in their *History of Annapolis County*, mention Andrew Henderson, a teacher in the Academy and later in a private school, who had come from Enniskillen, Ireland, early in the nineteenth century. He gives us the date in his letter. It was at the beginning of an active period of immigration, and the newcomers were mostly poor. We read, in the year that he landed in Saint John, of a meeting for the relief of distressed emigrants. Some time later the Speaker of the House in Fredericton refers to the "clouds of wretched people who have landed on our shores during the past season". Most of them dropped out of sight. Their names may be honoured through their descendants spread over the Dominion, but their early struggles with a bleak, inhospitable wilderness are forgotten. Even when they attained some little place in local histories, we can glean very little of the joys and trials these hardy pioneer ancestors of ours encountered, or of the exciting stuff of their private lives.

By the time Mr. Henderson's letter was written, the Maritime Provinces were emerging from their crudest beginnings. Saint John and Halifax are described as flourishing towns, though log houses had not been altogether replaced by frame buildings, pigs and cows pastured in the streets, and water was peddled at a penny a bucket and used sparingly. Houses were still heated by fire-

places, cooking done on cranes. Clothing was chiefly homespun, and roads were nothing to boast about.

Yarmouth was already a busy shipping port, and Annapolis, though it looks small enough in the old pictures, was dignified by being a garrison town, with a company of the 83rd Regiment stationed at Fort Anne. The great event of the year was to be the setting out of the *Royal William* from Pictou in August, to accomplish the first trans-Atlantic voyage entirely by steam. And the great fear of the day may well have been the series of cholera epidemics which had been sweeping, every few years, over the provinces and did not reach their climax till the "cholera year" of 1854. Yarmouth had a penny-postman then. We may imagine him trudging up to Mr. McIvor's door with his bulky epistle and collecting his penny. When the money was not forthcoming, he carried the letter back to the post-office. But Mr. Henderson's precise, courtly sentences give us a more vivid picture of his times than all we may dig out of musty histories. This is what he writes: "Dear Friend,

I duly received yours of the sixth instant, and seize upon the first hour of leisure to thank you for the expressions of kindness which are so perceptible in every line of your affectionate epistle. Since my arrival in this Western World, I have had an extensive correspondence with numerous individuals, but sure I am that *no* letter ever made just the same impression on my mind. It brought to my mind the thoughtless, happy days of my childhood, a father's fireside, with brothers and sisters and *not the least* my school and school companions. All these flashed like lightning on my imagination, and manhood forsook me in a flood of tears.

"I rejoice to hear of your welfare. I am glad that in Yarmouth there are some who appreciate your rare talents; however, I fear you will never acquire such eminence in your profession as you deservedly had in Ireland. I do not say it by way of panegyric, but through the utmost deference to your professional character, that you commanded more respect for your abilities, assiduity, and gentlemanly conduct than all the pedagogues whom I ever knew.

"For the last two or three years I have frequently heard of you, and as frequently resolved to visit you *in propria persona* or to drop you a line. On the score of the latter your greatness and my insignificance as a scholar always deterred me. And as to the former, frequent attacks of a dangerous and located disease having frustrated my design of seeing you and your kind family at Yarmouth.

"As the channel of communication is now open for the benefit of future correspondence, you will bear with me while I narrate the outlines of my peregrinations since I left 'my own, own native isle of the ocean'. In the meantime as I write for the private inspection of a dear friend, you must not be disappointed in not finding either the blaze of eloquence or the beauties of style and penmanship. You will therefore overlook all inaccuracies.

"On the morning of Saint Patrick's, 1818, I for the last time saw my native village and its happy and affectionate inhabitants. I was full of youth and vigor, and though almost penniless, yet such were my ill-founded notions of the country in prospect that I feared neither winds nor tide and never once dreamed of adversity. My little patrimony of about four hundred pounds value was almost entirely swindled out of my hands by a very near relative; so that on landing in Saint John, New Brunswick, with my wife and two little ones, I found myself both moneyless and friendless, and to all appearances in one of the most sterile parts of the habitable globe. A few days after our arrival our second child, then an infant, breathed its last and was interred by a few of my feeling countrymen. I sought for respectable employment through the influence of Mr. Buchanan, British Consul at New York, then on a visit to Saint John, but failed in my attempt. My last resource was manual labour on one of the wharfs, where I earned sufficient to bear my expenses up the River Saint John.

"During my two years residence near Fredericton I was sometimes engaged with a little school; sometimes mending old shoes and making new ones; sometimes in tilling the ground and earning, by the sweat of my brow, my daily pittance; lastly I was lumbering, as the woodmen phrase it. This last employment was too laborious for a slender constitution, and after seventeen toilsome days and as many wearisome nights spent in perfect misery, having nothing on which to sleep but a few spruce boughs, I packed up my clothes, shouldered my knapsack, and with a few pence in my pocket and staff in hand set out for home. My path was on the ice, and for thirty-six of the hundred miles that lay before me I was not to see a single house—no, nor the impress of a single foot, save the wild beast of the forest to cheer me on my journey. It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon when I departed from the rude and uncomfortable wigwam, and tho' in the depth of winter, at dusk I saw the first inn. This was without exception the most joyful sight I had ever beheld through the whole course of my life.

"My journey that day was the most dreary that can well be imagined. Picture to yourself the lofty and overhanging crags on

each side of the stream—the condensed state of the atmosphere and absence of the sun—the fear every minute of dropping through the ice and rising no more till the morning of the Resurrection—the agitation of mind concerning my absent family, and above all the dread of having to brook the insulting frowns of my employers—all tended to heighten my natural gloomy turn of mind. But just when thinking that the snow must be my bed, the joyful sound of the smith's hammer reached my ear, and the sight of buildings exhilarated the tone of languid nature; so that all my fears vanished, and again I felt hope expanding in my bosom.

"It would be impossible in the compass of a letter to give you even an outline of my chequered scene for the last fifteen years. Hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, health and sickness, pains and pleasures, with no small share of adversity and some little prosperity, have been my constant attendants. In 1820 I crossed the Bay of Fundy and landed in Wilmot, County of Annapolis, where I taught a large school for three and a half years. Here I availed myself of every moment of leisure, and spared no pains in the acquirement of those useful branches of Education which I now profess.

"In 1825 I opened a school at Bridgetown, a beautiful and rising village on the north side of the Annapolis River, and flatter myself that few of my successors will do more in the same space of time for that respectable and ambitious community. I remained eight years there, and might have been there still, had it not been with a view to bettering my circumstances that I located myself at Annapolis last year. My situation here is tolerably good. Besides more than one hundred and twenty pounds which I realize from the scholars, I am in the receipt of the annual grant of thirty-five pounds granted by the last Legislature for the support of combined Grammar and Common Schools.

"I have six steady boarders, for each of whom I receive twenty pounds per annum. Two of these are the sons of wealthy and respectable gentlemen in Halifax. Two are from Newport, one hundred miles distant to the eastwards of this; so that you perceive they have passed by Windsor College and Horton Seminary to come to me. One of the other two is William Bell, an old school-fellow of my own from Ballycassidy. He is twenty-four years old and has been in this country only one short year, during which he taught a respectable school in Wilmot. He has come to me for English Grammar, Book-keeping and Geography.

"I am the father of nine children, seven of whom are living and in good health; their names are as follows, viz. George, now in his seventeenth year and about five feet nine inches high; he

is a quiet, inoffensive lad and of great service to me in the school. At the age of fourteen he was duly licensed by the board of commissioners, and taught for the next fifteen months a regular English school in which he gave good satisfaction to me and his employers. Like his father, the English Grammar is his strong fort.

"Susan Ann, a child of good intellectual endowment, and now in her thirteenth year, teaches in the Academy a class of seventeen little boys. Eliza, named after my mother, is a rather genteel-looking child of eleven years and teaches a class of eleven little misses. William Kerr, a coarse-looking fellow, is now turned of six years. Thomas Desbrisay, Sarah Jane and Richard Williams are the names of the other three, the youngest of whom is now four months. Did you know what I have endured from relations, you would not be at all surprised that I have so few family names among my children, and that it is my firm determination never to add any more.

"Since I have said so much about myself I shall, with your permission, say that while at Bridgetown I had the position of Librarian, Secretary and Treasurer for the Village Library. I was Secretary for the Temperance Cause, Secretary for the American Tract Society, Superintendent of the Sunday School, Methodist Class Leader and Local Preacher. And now I fill the very responsible office of Circuit Steward. For the last fifteen months I have not been able, till a Sunday or two ago, to take an active part in public worship. . . I fear you will hardly believe me when I tell you that the single article of molasses has saved my life.

"In April of 1832 I was taken with a violent hemorrhage which continued with little cessation for three or four months. I had the medical assistance of Dr. Piper, Dr. Sinclair, Dr. Bayard of Annapolis, Dr. Lawson of the Garrison, Dr. Leslie, Dr. Bayard of Saint John, and Dr. Dexter; from the force of the most powerful and poisonous medicines, with numerous blisters and a seton between my shoulders, the bleeding subsided, but I was left so diseased and feeble that no person had the least hope of my life. . . A particular friend wrote me to use a half pint of molasses daily which he thought would help me. I did so, and in a few days a visible alteration was incident in my person and feelings. I am now able to walk through the space of a mile and ride my horse on the full trot. I rode to Bridgetown, a distance of fifteen miles without stopping. . . .

"My dear friend, I fear by so much egotism I have transgressed on your time and patience, and that you may conjecture that I wish to intrude myself upon you as a *Great* and *Good* man. Alas Sir, I have no cause to boast; things extremely simple have at times hid

their face from me and bequeathed me, instead of vain glory, mortification and humility. . .

"With love to Mrs. McIvor and the children, both from myself and companion,

"I am, My dear Friend, sincerely and affectionately yours &c.

"ANDREW HENDERSON

"To Mr. Hugh McIvor."

Mr. Henderson must have survived the blisters and setons: for he lived on, we are told, to be "a strong pillar of Methodism" in Annapolis, an able magistrate, postmaster of the town and in every way an exemplary citizen. His boarding-school was a little way out, at Albion Vale. His son George, the inoffensive lad with the weakness for grammar, became a schoolmaster in Digby and filled as important a place there as his father had in Annapolis. It would be interesting to know what became of the intellectual Susan Ann and the gentle Eliza, initiated so early into the mysteries of pedagogy, and of their brothers and sister. Their descendants, scattered through Nova Scotia and the other provinces, might tell us something of them; but it is more possible that this letter, emerging after a century from the shadowy pre-Victorian days, will give the Henderson family new light on their ancestor. For any of us, this intimate glimpse of one of the finest types of our pioneers is the past come in a startling way to life. The allusion to a Village Library in Bridgetown some time between 1825 and 1833, pretentious enough to have a Librarian, is interesting. If all the old records could be unearthed regarding early Libraries in the Maritime Provinces, Yarmouth and Pictou might have to look to their laurels.

Family records have, in these crowded days, a way of growing vague. Even in the tradition-loving Maritimes, they are far from complete. Before we realize it, the old people have slipped away, one by one, and with them a store of valuable information. But there are still ancient bits of paper in the dust of low-eaved attics which could do much toward brightening the faded tapestry of early province history. No nation grows great by depending or living too much on the past; but the land which allows old days to be forgotten misses a source of enrichment and strength. The history of a country is, after all, but the collected stories of individual lives. And old letters, still throbbing with life after all the years, may be priceless treasures which must be preserved for generations farther and farther removed from our country's beginnings.