

G. G. Campbell

SUSAN DUNLAP: HER DIARY

IN JANUARY, 1866, Susan Dunlap of Stewiacke began to keep a diary. She secured from somewhere two or three dozen sheets of heavy bond paper, bluish in colour, which she folded and stitched securely to make a small booklet. Then, day by day, she covered every inch of every page with her fine, crowded writing. The first page is missing, so as it now stands the Diary begins on January 18 and the first section runs to December 13, 1868. There is an entry for every day between these dates, for Susan was a creature of method.

Except in her devotion, she was not outstanding as a diarist. A few entries will suffice for a sampling.

Mar. 7: Churned. We put in a mat and worked at it a little. We went to Singing School. Heard Lucy Bentley was dead, a solom warning to us all to prepare to meet thy God. Fine day.

Mar. 8: We were working at the mat. Father and I went up to the Funeral but it was not until tomorrow. There was a silly fellow here all day. We went to Singing School. Windy day.

June 13: Churned. Mother made Mary a sack. I finished my black and green dress. Father left for Halifax this morning. The bull took mad today. Robert Pratt was buried today. (We should take warning.). Dark cold day.

A humdrum record indeed—except for the bull! And here Susan's limitations become apparent. That rampant monster, bellowing, pawing, goring, smashing through fences, overturning everything in his path; the quick summons to neighbouring farms for help; the gathering men closing in with pitchforks and the odd muzzle-loader;—material here to send a pen racing to fill the page. Not Susan's pen, nor Susan's page. Susan keeps her pen well under control. All the same, in hundreds of bone-bare entries she limns an intimate picture of the home and community she knew. It will evermore be just a picture, for the living reality is gone in the winds of change.

Susan, born in 1850, was the eldest of three children of Hugh Dunlap and Eliza Archibald; the others were Mary and Charles. When Eliza died, long before Susan began her diary, Mr. Dunlap married a Christie woman from Truro, who bore him six children. So the "mother" who figures prominently in the Diary was really Susan's step-mother. That she was a woman of sense, who won and held the affection of her step-children, is evident even in Susan's laconic utterances.

Hugh Dunlap's grandfather, also called Hugh, was one of the Scots-Irish settlers of Truro Township who moved over into the Stewiacke valley to take up land. In Susan's time, after three generations had done their work, the Dunlap property was one of the fairest in the valley, well-stocked and prosperous. It lay halfway between the church at Upper Stewiacke and the one at Middle Stewiacke. It was no small thing to the Dunlaps, devout and churchgoing, to be so conveniently situated.

The people of the valley were Presbyterian in religion. As late as the 1890s, a woman given to public prayer could rise in Prayer Meeting and give thanks that only two families in the valley had failed to find the road to salvation: these two were Baptist. At that, she was not accurate in her thanksgiving, for far away in Lower Stewiacke there were actually a few Anglicans. But episcopacy in either form was so heinous in valley eyes that its presence received the treatment meted out to incest, bastardy, and other aberrations, that is to say, it was never mentioned.

Yet if the truth were known, the Stewiacke people owed much of their inmost fibre to the episcopal churches, Anglican and Roman Catholic. In Stuart times, their ancestors had migrated to Ireland, where they found themselves on all sides surrounded by the swarming Irish, Roman Catholic in religion. Over and above them, and over the Catholic Irish as well, towered the Anglican establishment, the abode of all power and privilege, of preferment and social prestige. In this milieu, denied the right to office, to education, to social recognition, the Scots-Irish turned in upon themselves, cherished their own religious forms, hated fervently the Anglican incubus, and despised no less heartily the Roman Catholic Irish.

And so between the two, the Scots-Irish were shaped and moulded. Office and social preferment they could not have: none could deny them this world's material goods. These they could acquire through thrift, sobriety, and work, above all by work—hard, unremitting work. And if any doubted that these were necessary instruments to salvation, he had only to look about him at the feckless Irish, shiftless, idle, impoverished, improvident—and Catholic.

Some Calvinist theology went into quiet discard, and it came to be held that the prime test of a Christian man was his capacity and inclination to *work*. So the generations were purged and refined, toughened and tempered, and made fit metal for work in the American wilderness.

By Susan's time, a century after the Scots-Irish founded Truro, the lessons learned in Ireland had not been forgotten. Indeed the work of taming the wilderness had only verified and sanctified them. And as a salutary lesson to any who might backslide, there came the occasional dire reminder from Ireland. One such strayed into the valley in the summer of 1867. He was one of the "shanty-town" Irish, who were building our railroads and whose squalid shacks blemished the countryside for a time. Susan, so careful of names and courtesy titles, notes his arrival thus:

Aug. 8: Father hired a Paddy. To help with the hay. . . .
and his departure:

Aug. 11: . . . The Paddy went off today. He loused the sheets. . . .

The iniquities of Rome!

Susan's frugality allows no fragment of paper to go uncovered by her cramped writing. Her only extravagance occurs quarterly when, in large capitals, she reverently announces the advent of SACREMENT SABBATH. This holy season was preceded by a Saturday of preparation, when the family went to church for catechising, soul-searching, and prayer. Susan did well to use capitals. Hugh Dunlap was an Elder of the church and he and his family took their religious duties very seriously indeed. Each day began and ended with scripture reading and family prayers. On Sunday, in all weathers, the family went down to morning service in Middle Stewiacke. Even the two-seated buggy could not take everyone, so the older children often walked. Mr. Dunlap was much away on church business, to manse meetings, to Session, to Presbytery, to Conference. This last took him all the way to Pictou, for a week at a time.

It was said by the ungodly that if Deacon Dunlap stayed more at home, and spent less time gadding about on church affairs, his wives would live longer. He had three. The last outlived him, but only because of a mischance. He had built a load of hay and as it moved into the barn floor a swinging rope knocked him to the floor. He was eighty-eight at the time. But this was long after Susan began work on her Diary.

It goes without saying that Mr. Dunlap was a strict sabbatarian. Only most urgent tasks were done on Sunday, and the roads were reserved for traffic to and from church. A lad from the lower valley should have known this when, late in 1866, he essayed a passage home on the Sabbath. He had worked his horses in a woods camp at the head of the valley all through the early winter, looking eagerly for the mid-winter break and a week at home. He worked till quitting time on Saturday, gave his horses a few hours rest and an extra feed of oats, and was on the road long before daybreak, his harness bells carefully muted. But the Deacon caught him anyway, stopped him midway in his sinful career, stabled his horse, cared tenderly for man and beast, and let him go on Monday, after prayers, a chastened and wiser young man.

The Sabbath-breaker was an involuntary guest. There were many, many others who willingly partook of Dunlap hospitality. Truro and the railhead at Brookfield were each distant from the upper valley, and from the Musquodoboit, a good day's journey. Conveniently placed, about halfway, was the Dunlap menage. Friends and relatives, and many who were neither, were continually on the move in one direction or the other. From Susan's jottings it is clear that three days out of four the Dunlaps had guests for dinner, or supper, or both. More often than not, they had overnight guests as well—relations, travelling ministers, colporteurs, medicine-sellers, pedlars, and plain wanderers. "A Scotch beggar stayed last night," and "2 French fellows here all night," says Susan.

Even without the coming and going of guests, the Dunlap women had a heavy load of work. The family lived mainly by selling butter, so churning was a daily chore. When the cows were milking well, there would be two churnings. The preparation of cloth used in the household was a long and complicated operation. Fleeces had to be washed and picked and carded before the spinning wheel could go to work. Then for weeks on end it was seldom idle, Mrs. Dunlap and the two girls taking turns. Then came the scouring and sizing of the yarn, the twisting and the spooling, before the web was ready and weaving started. Ama Bentley, apparently an expert weaver, came for ten days in the Fall, and in one stint wove twelve blankets and an unspecified yardage of "shirting." But the Dunlap women did much weaving themselves. In five days, with time out for household chores, Mrs. Dunlap wove 32 yards.

The pulling, retting, breaking, hackling, and scutching of the flax fell mostly to Susan and Mary, and they were trusted to weave the tow. But Mrs. Dunlap reserved to herself the tedious task of spinning and weaving the linen

thread. The girls kept the family supplied with tallow candles. In one day's work Susan made 24 dozen; a few months later, Mary made 32 dozen. They had also to make the soap. Periodically, the ash barrels were hoisted into position, water was poured through to leach out the lye; then, with fats from butchered farm animals, the operation got under way. Susan says: "Made a barrel of soap today. Fine day."

Monday, of course, was washday. In the open seasons, Susan's entry for the day usually has a cryptic, "I to the spring," or "Mary and I to the spring." "To the spring" led through a narrow belt of woodland to where a copious flow of water lay between green banks. There the family wash was pounded and scrubbed into cleanliness, and put to dry in the sun.

The picking, pickling, and preserving of wild and garden fruits; the curing of meats and fish; the care of poultry and other animals, from birth to butchery—these and many more activities Susan faithfully records. And week in, week out, there was the sewing. Almost all the clothes worn by the family were home-sewn, usually of homespun. Susan does refer to "store cloth" and "cotton," but always to indicate they are special fabrics. For important occasions, the girls had dresses bought in Halifax. But Susan was usually garbed, from the skin out, in clothes of her own manufacture.

In the steady round of household tasks there were few days of respite. Susan refers to a picnic in celebration of the Glorious Twelfth, but oddly enough there is no mention of Christmas or Easter observances. Apparently, the nonconformist animus against Roman and Anglican practices still inhibited recognition of these Christian festivals. Here are Susan's entries for two Christmas days:

1866: Christmas day and a rainy one. Mother and Mary scoured fifty skanes of filling. Mother spun 2 skanes. Mary made Howard's cap. Aunt Ellen was over. Mother stitched a sack for Mary.

1867: Holidays commenced. Mother making David's coat. Mary making a dress. I working at mat. Father got home this morning. Cold day.

Clearly, our Christmas frenzy did not have its beginning in the Stewiacke.

The first Confederation Day got short shrift from Susan, and for good reason. The valley people had no liking at all for the Confederation business. Their Irish past came haunting, with recollections of episcopal oppression and papist delinquencies. What of Quebec? . . . There were meetings up at the village and Mr. Dunlap was often on the road.

May 24: The Queen's birthday. Mother and Mary cleaned the Room. Father up to a Confederation meeting . . . Beautiful day.

June 5: Churned. Mother painting the Room. . . . Father up to a great Confederation meeting. Howe and Archibald were there. . . . Fine day.

June 14: Churned. Mother made pants for Howard. Mary Charles and I washed 50 fleeces of wool. Father up to a Confederation meeting. Fine day.

But all the meetings and all Joe Howe's eloquence went for nothing. Then came on the First of July.

July 1: Monday. Churned. I was working at my white Garibaldi. We commenced to study Geometry today. Fine day.

The Dunlap women were much involved with Garibaldi's that Confederation summer. Susan had already tried her hand at a purple one before she got to work on the white, and Mrs. Dunlap and Mary were each making one. The Garibaldi, it is clear, was an article of female dress. What is not clear is how the famed leader of the Risorgimento came to influence fashions in the Stewiacke. Anyway, what with the Garibaldi and Euclid, and what with her father tearing off every whipstitch to anti-confederation meetings, Susan did right to consign Confederation itself to the category of things-not-to-be-mentioned.

This category, by the way, was extensive and diverse. It included such things as pregnancy and childbirth. Early in 1868, Susan is much concerned with her mother's health: "Mother not well today," "not much better," "trying to weave," "tried to churn." And then—

Feb. 28: Father, Mary and the boys up to Association meeting. Mother ill all day and sick tonight. Aunt Nancy and Mrs. Rutherford were here. . . . Moderate day.

"Sick" is the operative word. It means that Mrs. Dunlap was delivered of a daughter. And it is all of three weeks before Susan, casting discretion to the winds, makes guarded reference to "the baby." For Susan was aware that the facts of life, like the female form, do not suffer from being discreetly veiled. *O tempora, O mores!*

Susan seldom ventured outside the valley confines. In three years she made four trips to Truro, a ten-mile drive. Mr. Dunlap ranged farther afield; three times a year he went to Halifax.

Father got home from Halifax last night. He brought Mary and Maggie hats, Mary a mantle, me a parasol, Mary and I kid gloves and cotton dresses, Mother a luster dress, boys and Maggie boots. Beautiful day.

A brave man, Mr. Dunlap, to buy dresses for his wife and teen-age daughters! Perhaps the women of the valley were not yet emancipated.

Even if she did not move far from home, Susan led an active community life. She and Mary took turns attending school, a month at school, then a month helping out at home. Every winter a singing master conducted nightly classes for several weeks, instructing in the tonic sol-fa. The Sewing Circle and the Missionary Society met in alternate weeks. Mid-week Prayer Meeting was held in the different homes in turn: in the middle of haying, Susan records an attendance of twenty. The Sons of Temperance met regularly, and in 1867 an organization known as the Young Men's Christian Association began operation. The Agricultural Society met monthly. In all except the last of these Susan took an active part.

With so much in the way of organized uplift and high endeavour, the young people of the community very seldom got together for the simple purpose of having fun. Dancing and cards, of course, were not to be thought of. The two purely social affairs that Susan mentions were "candy" parties,—and there is much to be said for ropes of molasses taffy as a device for removing social tension. Informally, no doubt, the young people contrived to have fun enough. In the Fall of 1867 there were many golden opportunities to do so. For some reason, Confederation seems to have ushered in a great burst of military activity in the valley. Twice weekly the farm boys gathered in Upper Stewiacke for drill and manoeuvres. It goes without saying that the girls went along to see the show. Indeed, the only evidence in the Diary of serious dereliction on Susan's part is that she once passed up Prayer Meeting to go "up to drill."

On this nefarious escapade, Mary was Susan's companion; more than likely she was the instigator. The sisters, though so close and so much together, could not have been more unlike. Mary early makes her appearance in the Diary in characteristic fashion:

Mary killed a turkey. To see how good they were.

This was Mary all over. All her life long she was forever doing the most implausible things for the best possible reasons. While Susan walked sedately to church, or sat poised and erect in the back seat of the buggy, Mary went off riding bareback—though how she contrived this in the Sunday garb of the

period is hard to know. While Susan was busy with pots and pans, Mary was up a tree picking apples, or off in the woods gathering maple sap—just as busy as Susan, but busy in uncommon ways about uncommon things. The truth is, Mary was a hoyden, a wit, an inimitable mimic, one to whom conformity came hard. Years later when, grandmothers both, they visited back and forth across the width of the continent, it was still Mary's delight to split in fragments Susan's armour of reserve, sending her off into fits of uncontrollable, whooping laughter. Very unladylike!

Susan kept her Diary for sixty years. A farmer's daughter, she in turn became a farmer's wife and the mother of farmer sons. As such, she had a sturdy faith, and was finely attuned to cosmic stirrings—weather, the changing seasons, the surge of growing things, the cycle of death and renewal. But in her Diary she chose to record the timeless trivia of a woman's days, in volume after volume after volume . . . There came the day when mind and fingers failed her in the middle of a word. And Susan's pen, out of control at last, went off in a meaningless squiggle. *Requiescat.*

PUBLIC APPEARANCE

Sara Van Alstyne Allen

When a poem has been printed on the white page,
 Passing successfully through trial by secretary,
 Editor and proof-readers, it emerges from the copy-room
 Like a child torn from the complacent womb.
 Stark, alone, offering itself to a critical world.
 No glitter of fame, no comfortable place in the rostrum
 Of letters can give it protection. It will be scratched perhaps
 By dirty nails, spat upon by vacant mouths, smoothed by
 Elegant, deceitful fingers, viewed by the terrible
 Impartial Mind, gigantic and sometimes silent.

But there is a chance that what the poem says
 Will be remembered, a phrase or two quoted
 Under an adolescent tree or whispered in an old room
 Or shouted from a tall hill on a rude autumn day!
 Have courage then, but consider the perils before you
 Take the quiet loom and begin to weave.