

PRESS MEMORIES OF HALIFAX

C. P. McLENNAN

I SHOULD like to be corrected if I am wrong in stating that there has been more progress in "newspaperdom" the past half century than in most other things. At the heart of the Empire there is evidence in plenty. English dailies in 1943 differ very much from those of the 'eighties and 'nineties. One wonders if Sir Arthur Pearson could ever have imagined his *Daily Express* becoming the lively issue that it is now. But Sir Arthur being obliged to part with it, owing to blindness overtaking him, Max Aitken's energy drove it forthwith into pastures newer and greener. Then when Max leaped into the "Gilded Chamber" as Lord Beaverbrook, his passion for prominence as a magnate of the Press was noticeably heightened.

To examine closely the manifold developments in London's "Street of Ink" would be interesting. But at present too heavy a task! I prefer harking back to press and pressmen of a period which has left many interesting memories. In one's youth journalism may perhaps be more glamorous than in later life. This is true of a good many occupations! But, taking them in the lump, I should say that the newspaper life stands up, in the matter of holding a man's interest throughout his days, to any of the means of honestly gaining his bread and butter.

If in Halifax the press of the years I speak of had shortcomings of its own, it certainly had some capable men on its roll of honour, men who gave no little force to Edmund Burke's tribute to the press as the Fourth Estate. This reminds me that however applicable in the career of that great Irish statesman, "Fourth Estate" no longer does complete justice to the influence of the newspaper world. In law and in tradition the three estates of the realm may remain for many a day in that order. In respect of their power to educate the public, to mould a nation's opinions and a nation's policies, they may nevertheless need revision.

A Granville Street Attic

Such considerations at the time mentioned had no place in the minds of Haligonians, who were builders of the commercial and social sides of a community which has always wanted to shine in both elements. And, I think, it has not therein been greatly disappointed. Two men who determined to see if journalism

had anything good in it were J. J. Stewart and Robert Sedgewick, lawyers of standing and of high general abilities. The *Halifax Herald* and *Evening Mail* were then giving promise, as youthful seekers after newspaper distinction, of opportunities for *political* if not financial success, for both men were very good Tories indeed. In time, both purposes were achieved. And to what extent is known to-day some distance beyond Nova Scotia's boundaries.

John Burgoyne at that time was wrestling with the business problems of the venture. "Have you an opening for a reporter?" "Well, not just at the moment. But there may be a chance almost any time." "Almost any time" came shortly. I was assigned to night duty on the *Herald*, with a chair and table in the attic of the old *Herald* and *Mail* premises, opposite R. D. Clarke's auction rooms on Granville Street. The attic turned out to be a veritable editorial sanctum sanctorum. Campbell, the historian, was then editor of the *Herald*, but he was soon followed by J. J. Stewart. S. D. Scott—a brilliant, witty and modest soul—did editorial work for the evening edition,

The Mail

William Dennis, for many years the live wire of the whole outfit, had charge of the news department of the morning paper, while Hiram Wier held a similar position on the staff of the *Mail*. All these men have gone to other rewards in other spheres. My tribute to Mr. Stewart is sincere and unstinting. Not a hustler by any means, but kindly and unassuming. Scott had given up the hammer and the anvil of a smithy for the pen and the inkpot. A wise thing, too. His editorials were classics in their way. And a very pretty turn of wit was Scott's. His later work on newspapers in St. John and Vancouver emphasized and extended a reputation which first burgeoned forth in that Granville Street garret.

Those Early Days of the Profession

I cannot leave the *Herald's* and *Mail's* early strivings for fame and fortune without a further reference to Mr. Wier's most exceptional career. It is years since I saw him. But when he was my boss, in the early 'eighties, his lithe and active figure seemed well adapted to the wear and tear of the strenuous newspaper life. For it was all that. Who and where was another journalist in Canada whose allegiance for six solid and successive decades had been true to his first love, and who would seem, so

far as I knew to be in training for an entry into the first stages of a seventh decade? If not definitely the *doyen* of his profession in Nova Scotia, Mr. Wier was the only pressman I have known or heard of whose unbroken association with one newspaper had covered three-score years. Surely a pattern of loyalty and tenacity for the young journalist of to-day!

The man who made the *Herald* was, of course, William Dennis. When I first knew him, he was just out from England and identified, if I remember rightly, with the temperance movement in Truro. It was in Truro, at any rate, that he met Miss Agnes Miller, that distinguished lady who is known the Dominion over as Dame Agnes Dennis. Would William Dennis have been as successful as he undoubtedly was had that meeting not taken place? A nice speculation, and one that could be given very wide application, no doubt. This I do happen to know, that being a woman of unusual ability, Mrs. Dennis was an invaluable aid to the development of her husband's natural gifts.

After dwelling in the gods for several years, the *Herald* and *Mail* men moved down to the middle floor of their three-storey wooden structure. There a young man came upon the scene who has since won an enviable Dominion-wide reputation. Charles Hazlitt Cahan was one of those Nova Scotians—a Yarmouthian, by the way—who have unlimited ambitions. I could mention others, and quite a few. But this is an article, not a book. When Cahan came to Mr. Stewart's assistance in the editorial field, he had for some time been reading law. I am certain, however, that he soon loved the atmosphere of an editor's den. After all, there's nothing quite like it elsewhere. It is not all hard work. Fun and fascination are part and parcel of an editor's daily round, to say nothing of a lively if unconscious sense of participating, even though merely in a minor key, in the formation of public opinion.

From the Press to Politics was a natural leap for Cahan. And there I must leave him, as these reminiscences deal particularly with the 'eighties. Robt. Sedgewick, whom I have mentioned as Stewart's law partner, I should perhaps make perfectly clear was never a newspaper man. If his interest was financial and political, it ended there. When he accepted a seat on the Supreme Court Bench at Ottawa, he settled down in his right element. And, in passing, the name of Sedgewick has always struck me as being associated in some way with good abilities. I happen to know of a family in Amersham, England,

who are spoken of locally as "the brainy Reeves". Similarly, "the brainy Sedgewicks" would seem to apply to the Province of Nova Scotia.

Halifax's Oldest Paper

In the next block, northward, the *Acadian Recorder* gave fortune as well as local fame to the Blackadar family. It was one of the oldest papers in North America, even when I was almost daily slipping "copy" on a file just inside the door of the business office. It had struggles enough in its early 18th century days. So much so that when, at a considerably later time, the Ottawa Government of Alexander Mackenzie offered Hugh Blackadar the postmastership at Halifax, his father urged him to accept it and retire from the *Recorder* business. This he did; a step, I think, he may have regretted in later life. For the two brothers, Henry and Charles, not only remained in the *Recorder* Office, but prospered most amazingly. In that prosperity Hugh would have participated, had he continued in the business. However that may be, the men who actually put the *Recorder* on a sound financial footing were the two younger sons of Blackadar senior.

The *Recorder* was of the "Grits" gritty; a hundred-per-cent organ. The guiders of its destinies were steeped in partisanship. Yet not alone. Oh, dear no! All Halifax dailies of that time "went the whole hog" in supporting either Tories or Grits. If there is more independence nowadays, it has been a gradual development. The life and soul of the paper for the last quarter of the 19th century was Henry Blackadar, whose third-page "Walt Whitman poetry"—as J. J. Stewart delightfully if maliciously described it—was a feature, along with endless, though always apposite, quotations from Dickens, of whom Henry was a constant reader and a devout admirer.

If necessary I could write at some length about the *Recorder* as I knew it. My first editorial in its pages was, I believe, in 1887. An Interprovincial Congress was held at Quebec that year. That gave me a chance. An article on the subject was simplicity itself, even for a 'prentice hand. H. B. encouraged me to continue. Hon. J. Wilberforce Longley—a bright particular star in Halifax Liberalism of that time, and for thirty consecutive years all told—had been editorializing for the *Recorder* for about a decade. I had myself been doing a little for the *Morning Chronicle*. So we conveniently swapped over. I

ceased my connection with the *Chronicle*, and Longley ceased his with the *Recorder*.

I was sorry when the *Recorder* passed out. A landmark, truly, in the journalism of the Province. A small but hard-working staff for a long time kept it going. Probably few will remember William Smith, the chief reporter, a conscientious and clever journalist. But "Jim" Power, the sporting editor, not only belonged to that generation but to another as well, right down in fact to his recent service with the *Evening Mail*, where he was responsible after the *Recorder's* collapse, for the columns always dear to the heart of a good sportsman. Stewart Macaulay was a junior reporter for the *Recorder* at the time, but later shook Halifax dust from his feet, settling down to whatever Glace Bay had to offer him.

One of the Haloes Over Halifax

The headquarters of a number of Halifax pressmen of this period formed an almost correct triangle, which might have been seen by an airman making a reconnaissance flight down Prince Street to the waterfront. The *Morning Chronicle*, near the foot of Prince Street, would have been seen as the apex of the triangle, the *Recorder* and the *Herald* offices forming the lower vertices north and south respectively. All of them long ago ceased to exist in those capacities. With the *Recorder's* old headquarters it was a case of senile decay. The *Herald* and *Mail* moved to Kenny's corner and, after a devastating fire there, the managers acquired the present premises. As for the *Chronicle*, it found its long-leased Prince Street home so utterly out-of-date as the years passed that the building it now occupies along with the *Star*—successor to the *Evening Echo*—simply had to be erected for its more adequate accommodation.

As far back as I can remember, a halo of respectability hung loftily over the *Morning Chronicle*. Joseph Howe and William Annand gave it considerable prominence in their day. In England it is said that "Bible, Beef and Beer" are three of the nation's most important assets. In like manner, in Nova Scotia the Bible and the *Morning Chronicle* formed an extremely formidable combination in Liberal circles. Charles Annand, who came into the property from his father, was not in any sense a journalist. When I knew him his interest was in gold mining, in Halifax County, rather than in his newspaper. As he spent most of his time in England, his heritage on Prince Street was kept alive chiefly by the exceptional application and fidelity

of its business manager, John Dunn; also, by the good fortune of having W. S. Fielding in editorial control. Entering the *Chronicle* office in his 'teens, there was an excellent opportunity for Fielding's natural gifts to expand, and to expand so rapidly that by the time he was thirty he was editor-in-chief.

May I say, at this point, that I speak only of my personal contacts and not from hearsay, and only, too, of a certain period—the 'eighties? To me Fielding was a definite inspiration. Going direct from the *Evening Mail* to the *Morning Chronicle* as a reporter in 1883, I soon found that Fielding was the whole show. There were others, of course, namely, W. R. Dunn (son of the business manager); John Baxter, the shipping editor; Stearns, the chief reporter; W. D. Taunton; Moses Nickerson, the talented "Nova Scotia poet" of that time, and "Jimmy" Macquin, a pungent writer on political subjects.

However, journalism was not to be Fielding's life work. It merely enabled him to strike out into his life-long energetic stride as one of the band of thoroughly successful politicians which Nova Scotia has produced. When elected for the Provincial Legislature in 1882 by the constituency where he was born, he fell at once into the place for which Nature had best fitted him. Very soon he was Premier of the Province, which obliged him to relinquish his job as a journalist. Then a curious thing happened. No immediate successor to Fielding was appointed. John Dunn became the head and front of all sides of the business. The bulk of the editorial matter—from which daily selections were made—was sent in to Mr. Dunn by lawyers of the Liberal faith. Among them was Senator Power ("Larry" to his friends); Frank Bell, at a later date Solicitor for the City of Halifax; John M. Geldert, for many years chief compiler of *Hansard* for the House of Assembly; "Ben" Russell, who shone brightly in the Liberal firmament, and one of Fielding's closest friends; Fred Congdon, who became the first Governor of the Yukon Territory, and Mr. Mills, who subsequently joined the editorial staff of the *Halifax Herald*. There was another outsider, an Irishman named Foley, who wrote for the *Chronicle* for fully a decade, a most brilliant contributor. This improvised editorial system, if it could be called that, endured until Mr. Maclellan was appointed editor, when outsiders, myself amongst them at that time, were rigidly excluded from further enjoyment of the crumbs which fell from the *Chronicle's* table. I may add that during all the years, from Confederation down to the end of the century, the office of the *Morning Chronicle*

was the nerve-centre of Nova Scotia Liberalism. I could say more. But its later history does not come within my scope at the present moment.

Other Halifax Journals

For the *Halifax Reporter*, which made its reputation during the Franco-Prussian war, there is room here for only the briefest reference. It was a training for John Burgoyne, who went from the *Reporter* office on Hollis Street—then the second building going south from the ticket office of the National Railways—to the business side of the *Herald and Mail*. Not many will remember Crosskill, or “Jim” Johnson, both on the staff of the *Reporter*, the latter in the news department. But, so far as I know, there was no member of the *Reporter's* staff whom the newspaper profession of those days could place in a recognised niche of local fame. “Jim” Johnson survived the crash of the *Reporter* by figuring in an enterprise fathered by a man named Dakin. The *New Era* was a weekly; perhaps “weakly” would be more appropriate. It had an office on Bedford Row, near McNab's printing works. But the length of its days did not suggest the longevity of Methuselah. “Jim” was indeed a rara avis. He and Dakin got hold of me as a willing and callow youthful scribe. For a year or two—1881-1882—I was guilty of the crime of filling up its editorial columns with a jumble of stuff which makes me blush when I think of it. Never, however, having received more than a very formal and tasteless “thank you”, my conscience has remained as bright in this connection as a new coin.

A very different Halifax weekly was the *Presbyterian Witness*, then edited by the Rev. Robert Murray, and for some time after. If not a born preacher, Mr. Murray was undoubtedly a born writer in so far as editorials for his paper were concerned. While his articles were largely of that controversial character inevitably associated with the polemics of sectarian religion, there was wit no less than wisdom flowing from a pen which was not always dipped in gall and wormwood. One of the ablest of the “Pressmen of a Period” is a tribute which I feel well able to pay to the man whom the Barnes family found so useful as the prop and mainstay of their very readable *Witness*. And a most friendly man! When I felt an arm being linked into mine by someone overtaking me, say on Barrington Street, I would not often be wrong if I turned and said “Good morning, Mr.

Murray". The editor of the *Witness* resembled Abou Ben Adhem in this respect, if in no other—"he loved his fellowmen".

The *Maritime Merchant* does not belong exactly to the time of which I am writing—the 'eighties. But it came so soon after—early in the 'nineties—that I may be justified in pointing out that long ago it developed into one of the striking features of Eastern Canadian journalism. As its first editor—when it appeared under the name of *Maritime Grocer*—I have perhaps the right to say that there was a good opening for it, which a half century of unqualified success has fully established. Mr. R. M. Hattie, who for so many years has controlled its columns, clearly found his *metier* when he joined the staff.

A paper definitely belonging to the 'eighties was the *Mayflower*. That Mr. Baker, its founder and leading spirit, could be called a "pressman" is much less definite. He had been a lobster packer before opening an editorial office opposite the Halifax Club, the same locality in which *The Critic* was edited shortly after by Frederick Fraser, head of the Halifax Institute for the Blind, and himself blind. But vastly different were these two publications. The *Mayflower's* delight was to hold up to ridicule certain people figuring somewhat prominently in Halifax society—notably "Shawles"—the man with the monocle. *The Critic*, on the other hand, was most serious-minded. Mr. A. Milne Fraser was associated with his brother, mainly in the business management. In view of his very severe handicap, Frederick Fraser was a good editor. If anybody now has a file of his paper, its columns will be found worthy of a man who not only had no lack of brains, but, of more account, possessed as fine a character as one could wish for in journalism, or, for that matter, in any capacity.

If I have not given full justice in this brief review to any of my colleagues and friends of those distant years, I can now only crave the forgiveness of the living, while at the same time praying for the peaceful repose of the men who are, no doubt, dwelling in some Valhalla set aside for journalists of the Bluenose brand.