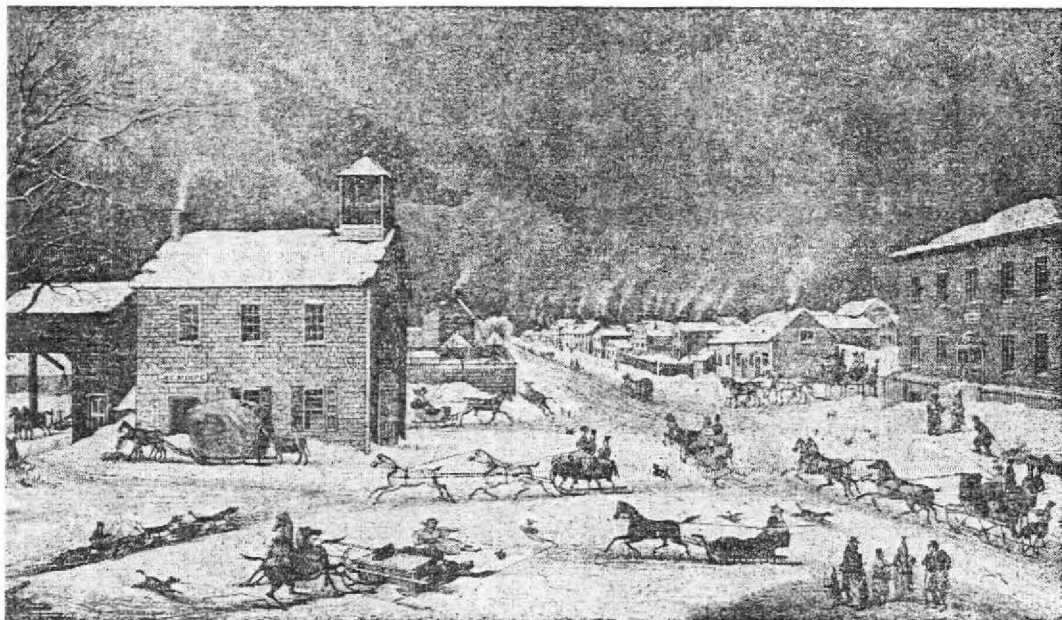


Philip Booth

SOLDIERING IN BYGONE DAYS IN CANADA



IN THE EARLIER HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, soldiers in the United Kingdom were kept under rigid control and often employed on the odious duties of Aid to Civil Power during disturbances caused by the Industrial Revolution. This work tended to increase the dislike of the civilian population, many of whom most unjustly regarded the Army in peace as an unwarranted burden on taxation and a refuge for all ne'er-do-wells. There is therefore little doubt that the change to the relative freedom of life in Canada was generally popular; old regimental orders show that the men were even allowed to take on part-time civilian work helping the settlers. Still more popular must the move to Canada have been for troops from the West Indies, since, before the white man had learned how to cope with tropical disease, the Caribbean climate tore through the ranks with the deadly effect of a machine gun. Moreover, crowding the men into insanitary barracks and dressing them like armed

flunkeys with tight collars and hats like small coal buckets made them ripe for slaughter. Even so, it is a wonder that wherever fate has taken the British soldier, whether to the fever-ridden West Indies, the scorching plains of India or the frostbiting blizzards of the Crimea, after climate, ignorance, and stupidity have done their worst, there seems always to have been left a core of case-hardened and almost bullet-proof indestructibles.

Sir Richard Levinge wrote *Echoes from the Backwoods* (Colburn, 1846) describing sport and soldiering in those days, and like others since, he burst into fury at the shocking and callous treatment of troops in transports, stating that the men were squeezed into small tubs so tight that a third of them had always to be on deck, regardless of the Atlantic weather. He added that even conditions in emigrant ships with their foul reputation compared favourably with those in troopships. A transatlantic voyage lasted more weeks by sail than it now does hours by air.

The 43rd Light Infantry (now the 1st Royal Green Jackets) landed at Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1834, half remaining there while the other half went on to Fredericton. An engraving of Fredericton in winter at this period shows officers and men and their families in various forms of sleigh transport ranging from a single-seater dog-drawn to an imposing coach-and-four. Stray cattle are wandering in the street like Hindu sacred cows, and most of the houses are little more than log cabins. In winter, troops were often called out to deal with fires, but since all water was frozen, action was limited to preventing a conflagration. Another incident of this period has survived in a sketch and short account of officers arriving in their sleighs for a party at Long Island, halfway between Saint John and Fredericton; it must have been a good old-fashioned evening because mine host, with the farcical name of Mr. Blizzard, increased the bill by twenty-five Pounds for "cracking on", his euphemism for the night's damage.

In 1837, "The Sons of Liberty", some malcontents about Quebec and Montreal, attempted to spark off a rebellion, but their leaders failed to appreciate that in the Commander-in-Chief, Sir John Colborne, they were up against the greatest soldier of his day; both as Lieutenant-Governor and then as Commander-in-Chief he served Canada well. His prompt action with limited resources crushed the rising without much loss, but at the start the potential danger was such that the Governor of New Brunswick's offer to send troops was accepted. As a result, the 34th, 43rd, and 85th Regiments made a famous march in the depths of the Canadian winter from Fredericton across New Brunswick to Madawaska, then up the St. Lawrence to Quebec—370 miles

in 18 days. Extracts from Captain Mundy's account of the 43rd's march read:

Dec 11th—The Headquarters (Colonel and Adjutant, and my Company) after much trouble in fitting the men and baggage into sleds (14 in number) left Fredericton. . . . The cold was great, and the ground too bare of snow for good sleighing. At the River Tobique we encountered our first serious difficulty, being upwards of four hours crossing our eighty men over the stream, which was running blocks of ice. Beyond this a few sleds were smashed. . . . Left the Grand Falls on the 16th morning and driving 33 miles on the frozen river reached the French settlement of Madawaska. Some horses knocked up—dreadfully cold—piercing wind with sleet. . . . On the 17th we fairly plunged into the eternal forests from whence we did not emerge until the 22nd evening on the banks of the St Lawrence. From Madawaska the little track of the courier from Canada to New Brunswick had been roughly widened by cutting down trees; it was barely passable and the men walked the whole way, the horses being capable of drawing the sleds and accoutrements only, and at many passes it required fifteen to twenty men to draw each sled. I brought up the rear always, and you may imagine the difficulties of our route when I tell you that three or four days I was from daybreak till dark getting my men over 15 miles, and after all this excessive cold and fatigue, a wretched log camp (there were six of them on the route built for us) open at the top, smoking so dreadfully that we could not open our eyes; a bed of pine branches, a supper of salt pork, biscuit and unskimmed tea in a tin pot, the heat of the fire singeing our moccasins, the snow on the roof melted by fire, dripping through on our luxurious couch. Many of the soldiers would not enter their camps and slept out before mountains of burning wood. The surgeon's thermometer went down two evenings to 24 and 30 degrees below zero. . . . At one of the camps when we rose in the morning the sleds and baggage were found entirely buried in snow and one's strength could not fold the frozen blankets covering the poor horses. . . . I can give no idea of the dreariness of our forest marches, but to the extreme thickness of the trees covered with snow we owe an efficient shelter from a wind that would have cut us in two. . . . We passed the 36 miles of the famous portage (a track over the mountains connecting the lake with the St Lawrence) in two days. . . . During our four days strange march along the river (150 men and baggage occupying a 100 carriages) we were daily fed and lodged by loyal Canadians and priests. . . . the 26th was a day of great suffering from cold—nine hours going 30 miles. I was frostbitten in the cheek but not severely enough to break the skin. . . . several persons came from Quebec to meet us and offer assistance en route, and our passage of the river and arrival at the city were extremely exciting and striking. . . . nothing had been talked of for a month

but the 43rd's march, and the 1st Division being of course the most adventurous came in for all the honours of the reception (the 2nd Division came in two days later). Two companies were thrown across the river (one mile wide) in canoes at once—the paddles singing merrily—the quays and wharfs crowded with spectators and lined with several corps of Volunteers, and as the officers' boat touched the ice on which we landed all gave a most terrific cheer. The only casualty had been one soldier who went sick at Madawaska. . . . Thus on December 28th, the ragged, unshaven, smoke dried, toil worn, 43rd, entered triumphantly their barracks—an ancient Jesuit Convent.

A correspondent of the *Quebec Morning Herald* wrote of this operation:

Sir. I have the pleasure of acquainting you that a merchant of Montreal who left that city on the 6th inst has brought the information that on that day a steamer from Quebec brought intelligence of the arrival of the 43rd Regiment on the banks of the St Lawrence from New Brunswick. Knowing Lieutenant Colonel Booth and his fine regiment we expected great exertion on their part to reach Quebec but they accomplished this task beyond the expectations of the most sanguine man in our trade.

In his *Life of the Duke of Wellington*, Sir Herbert Maxwell wrote:

Wellington was no unfriendly critic of the performances of his successors in the Army. He expressed high admiration of the handling of the forces in Canada and especially of the journey by sledges, which he observed was a great proof of the improvement of Regimental system and arrangements within the last 25 years. It showed the excellence of the subaltern officers, of their notions of duty and determination to employ all their energies and resources when called upon for exertion. He considered it to have been a very arduous undertaking and highly creditable to the Commanding Officers.

The 43rd then moved quickly to Montreal to round up rebels, and in June up the St Lawrence and the Ottawa Canal to Kingston, and finally in July to Niagara to stop rebels from crossing into the United States. Levinge gives the following account of the march to Niagara and of life there:

At sunrise we again embarked for the Heights of Queenstown where disembarking we found the march to Drummondsville awfully fagging. The sun was burning; the thermometer stood at 96 degrees; the glazed patent leather tops of the men's shakos concentrated the rays of the midday sun, and many poor fellows fell as if they had been shot. . . . A very long streak or column of spray soon

became visible above the lofty forest, and a low murmur announced the Falls of Niagara. These signs of our approach to the mighty cataract had an instantaneous effect on the spirits of our men. . . . In a quarter of an hour the divisions wheeled into line and marched straight down upon the tableland above the Falls. . . . No sooner had arms been piled and the order given to fall out than the men broke in en masse and rushed to the edge of the precipice. Nothing could be more beautiful than the coup d'oeil presented by our encampment. . . . The tents of the men were pitched with scrupulous exactness . . . in the centre of the plateau stood one solitary magnificent butternut tree, the branches of which lifted a canopy of leaves high over the sward. Under this the band played every evening to the amusement of countless visitors who came for the double purpose of visiting our encampment and beholding the grandest of all stupendous sights. The 43rd had marched a thousand miles between New Brunswick and Niagara.

An old engraving dated 1839 shows the officers with the frozen Falls in the background as they were long before the days of electricity and power stations.

Farewell addresses to British Regiments from the citizens of various places in Canada show appreciation of the good conduct of the troops, proving as always how well men with good discipline react to reasonable treatment. The somewhat fulsome address to Colonel Blois of the 52nd Light Infantry on leaving Fredericton may be quoted as an example:

We are aware Sir, that nothing we might say could add to the great renown that has always been attached to your Regiment, as one of the finest and most distinguished in Her Majesty's Service; but, when a body of soldiers (stationed in a town like this, where spirituous liquors are so easily and so cheaply obtained, and where men have in consequence so many temptations to transgress) conduct themselves with such strict adherence to the rules of discipline, accompanied by such orderly conduct on the part of all, as has been so prominently displayed by your Regiment during its occupation of this garrison, it speaks volumes in favour of the judicious management of the person in command, of the ready attention to discipline by the officers under him, and of the good dispositions of the men. . . . We are prepared Sir, to expect this from our knowledge of this Regiment while quartered in this garrison at a former period; it was therefore with more pleasure we heard of its coming again here. . . . We felt its return was that of an old and highly valued friend; we are happy in having it in our power to assure you that our high esteem and warm regard for the Regiment, arising from our former intimacy with the members thereof cemented, and if possible strengthened, by our acquaintance with those of the present day, which leaves us more to regret your leaving so soon. . . .