

TRAVELS IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND IN 1820

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SOMETIMES from out the past there arises the echo of a voice that had not before reached our ears, telling us of an unremembered day and re-creating for us the very essence of a vanished time. Such a message comes from the yellowed pages of a book with the title *Travels in Prince Edward Island in 1820*, which recently came into possession of the present writer. That the volume is rare is evidenced by the fact that an enquiry inserted by an Edinburgh bookseller in a London trade journal elicited only one reply. The copy thus obtained found its way back to the Island where its author had recorded his observations something over a century ago. He was Walter Johnstone, a shoemaker of Dumfries, who—like many another cobbler of the past—saw visions and dreamed dreams quite outside the range of his daily tasks. The little brown book is inscribed to Sir James Montgomery, Bart., M. P. for Stanhope; also to Robert and Archibald Montgomery, extensive landed proprietors on the Island at that time. The narrative begins thus:

Many a traveller from Great Britain has visited the western continent and given us elegant and elaborate descriptions of the scenery of nature and the manners and customs of the people. But the moral scenery exhibited there seems to have been but little noticed by any of them, and therefore faintly described. Perhaps, however, none of them trode in the same path which I had marked out for myself, and therefore had not a similar narrative to detail.

He relates how he had embarked for Prince Edward Island at the foot of the river Nith in Dumfries-shire on 19th April, 1820, with several distinct objects in view. The first was to dispose of some articles for the support of his family at home, the second to "erect Sabbath-Schools wherever it was practicable," the third to investigate the country and provide a faithful picture of it for possible emigrants. Of limited education, he had laboured in Sunday-School work for over twenty-five years, and then offered his services to the Scottish Missionary Society, though in such an enterprise he declared himself fitted only to be a "hewer of wood and drawer of water." But he hoped to see his four sons take up the same work

when they should have learned the language of the country, "if God gave them grace and the Society gave them learning." In this he was not encouraged, so turned his thoughts to a missionary voyage of his own. So long as he could find employment at his trade, his wife would not consent to let him go; but the business failure of his employer brought matters to a head, "and by the help of a few friends I was fitted for the expedition."

The voyage appears to have been fairly pleasant, with dry and comfortable beds, good water, and friendly sailors to whom the travellers gave in return nearly the whole stock of spirits they had laid in! "For few of us could swallow anything stronger than water or beer; our taste was so much altered by the sea air." The society on board was not the best, with "the language of Ashdod constantly in their mouths." The sailors were most profane, and it was not until the fourth Sunday of the voyage—while fog-bound upon the banks of Newfoundland—that he ventured to call a "Sabbath-School," setting tasks for the children from such catechisms, Testaments and Bibles as could be procured. The children set to work with the greatest alacrity, "often asking before the hour had arrived what of the clock it was." At the time appointed they were seated on trunks along the front of the beds on one side of the vessel, while their parents were on the other:—

No sooner the voice of sacred melody was raised than the sailors assembled and seated themselves round the hatch mouth, while the captain walked backward and forward within hearing the whole time. The tasks were repeated by the children in a superior manner, a word of exhortation was then given, and praise and prayer concluded the whole.

On Friday morning, May 26th, Prince Edward Island was discovered, "rising like a dark cloud from the bosom of the ocean." The travellers were much surprised at its appearance, for the dark colour and closeness of the woods made it look exactly like a heath-covered plain in Scotland. Clearances were noted here and there next the houses, which seemed rather neat, and smoke ascending from a chimney was announced as an object worthy of the attention of all on board. Shots were fired to summon a pilot, and in reply three young men came in a canoe cut from the solid tree. Mr. Johnstone "examined every part of their dress particularly," and describes it thus:—

It consisted of jacket and trowsers, all of Island manufacture, home-dyed blue, some of it variously shaded, the warp from the waft. They had mocaskins upon their feet, and upon the whole had rather a rough appearance, but discovered great agility, pol-

ished manners, and spoke the English language as fine as Londoners.

To this eager band of home-seekers the country as viewed from the deck of the ship appeared so wild and uncultivated that it "struck a damp" upon them all. Next day, when some of the company went ashore with firelocks in search of game, they returned in the evening with rueful countenances, having found nothing to shoot. Mr. Johnstone expresses the opinion that no one brought up in an old cultivated country can imagine what land looks like in its natural state. The forbidding appearance of the place induced three families to go over to Nova Scotia in the hope of meeting with something more like home. But in this, he adds, "they were completely disappointed."

Their point of call was Three Rivers (now Georgetown Harbour), but Mr. Johnstone received a much more favourable impression when he reached Murray Harbour:—

We were better comforted with the appearance of this settlement, which is not large, but cleared a considerable way back from the water's edge. The land is all of a dry soil, and assuming in different shades a beautiful verdant hue. Had it been enclosed with dykes and hedge-rows, it would have equalled in beauty many parts of the old country; but their manner of fencing with wood has a rather uncouth appearance to the eye of a Briton.

Here the travellers experienced some of that hospitality which has ever been proverbial of "Island folk," Mr. Cambridge—the proprietor of that lot—giving the weary passengers free use of a house, and some passing fishermen presenting them with luscious fish for their first meal on shore. Mr. Johnstone took lodgings with "a shoemaker from Guernsey, who permitted me to expose some straw bonnets for sale in his house," as well as a collection of books including Boston's *View of the Covenants* and Fuller's *Holy and Profane States*. Thence forward for two summers and one long severe winter he travelled on foot through all the settlements, from the extreme east point to Malpeque and Bedeque in the west, carrying on his back his stock of bonnets or hardware—difficult to dispose of because of the universal scarcity of cash. In his pockets he took a generous supply of religious tracts "purchased with the greatest cheerfulness in almost every house," and labouring most of all for the erection of "Sabbath-Schools"—an institution previously almost unknown on the Island.

Not by the safe and well-trodden roads of the old land did his pathway now lie. Once on his way to Charlottetown he stopped at Cambridge's Mills, where this generous proprietor kept another

inn for the free use of travellers, and in which they usually stayed overnight, because it was set at the edge of a dense forest where the road lay for seventeen miles without a single house:—

I had not well finished supper till a young man arrived from town with the alarming news that he had seen two bears on the road that day. He was on horseback, and I had to travel on foot and alone, with no weapon of defence save a walking-staff. Thus my trust in Providence and also my natural courage were put to a severe trial. I slept little, rose early, and committing myself to the care of Him who once shut the lions' mouths that they could not hurt His servant for whom He had more work to do, I entered the wood at four o'clock in the morning, and passed all the solitary way without either missing it, of which there was danger, or seeing anything to harm me.

On a certain windy evening he made a "rough and tedious" passage in a small boat across the Bay of Fortune, where a few years before Captain Marryatt had tarried for two or three weeks on board a man-o'-war, and which furnished the setting for Marryatt's earliest tale, *Frank Mildmay*. Shivering with cold and soaked with spray, this solitary wayfarer was "put to land at the foot of a high bank of freestone rock, about 50 or 60 feet high"—now the beauty spot known as Abel's Cape, where a colony of leading American actors have their summer home:—

The shades of night had now fallen so thick as to render it impossible to discover how the land lay. Even had I been able to ascend the bank I could not have walked there, as the wood formed an impenetrable thicket. I had therefore to make my way along the bottom of the precipice, scrambling over great rocks that were lying in the most confused manner possible. And from the dark shade cast by the overhanging banks it was with some difficulty I could discover a few yards in advance, or anything but water. . . . When I cast my eyes to the rocks which hung in terrific majesty over my head, it brought to my recollection that dreadful day when the wicked would be calling upon the rocks to fall upon them and the hills to cover them. After a time I found the land cleared. The barking of a dog sounded now like sweetest music in my ears. But, alas!—it was at a great distance, and impassable creeks lay in the way. But soon I heard the sound of music from some habitation which continued till I came close to the house. Two young lads had come without doors that night to play on a flute, which they said they did not recollect ever having done before.

This family, whose kindly ministrations he records with gratitude, was probably one of the party of emigrants wrecked near Halifax, whom Lord Townsend—the proprietor of Lot 56 (and

“Captain Thunderbolt” of Marryatt’s tale)—had persuaded to come in Marryatt’s ship and settle on this point. The story describes how, with the help of Townsend, they cut and dragged out the big trees to construct their primitive homes.

Like a warm undercurrent through Mr. Johnstone’s narrative runs his appreciation of the whole-hearted hospitality received from Roman Catholic and Protestant alike:—

At this time night came on, and the snow was so deep that I was obliged to turn from the road and ask for quarters at the house of a Highlander with whom I had no acquaintance. The favour was granted without the least appearance of reluctance or difficulty. The family consisted of the man and his wife with one son and daughter. I got a bed in the kitchen, with blankets, feather-bed and bolster. But, while I was so well accommodated, I knew nothing how the rest of the family were supplied with these necessaries. A board partition divided the house, and the family slept in the other apartment. But on the Monday morning when I stept beyond the partition in search of my bundle, how greatly was I surprised to see two bedsteads with nothing but dry hay in both of them, and neither blanket, mattress nor bolster in any of them. I came to know the fact that the people had lain both nights with their clothes on, and that I had got all the bedding in the house for my accommodation. I am sorry I cannot insert the name of the Highlander. He was so ignorant of English that I could not exchange one word with him. . . . but I gave them several religious tracts in return for their kindness.

Passing through woods where “had it not been for a chip upon the trees one would have thought the foot of man had never trode,” and travelling along the shore “where the print of a solitary traveller’s foot upon the sand was the most heart-cheering sight one could see” he reached at last the settlement of Souris:—

The inhabitants are descendants of the first French settlers, and are Roman Catholics. I was pressed to stay over night in the first house I came at; but the master of the second knew me, and it was impossible to resist his kindness. Here a piece of honour was done me I did not understand at the time, nor properly appreciate. It was no sooner reported to the neighbours that a traveller was at the house, and that he was respectable, than they gathered in and kept me company till it was time to go to rest. This, I was told afterwards, was a custom among these French settlers when they wanted to show the highest respect in their power to a stranger. Their countenances wore the smile of cheerfulness and love, and their conversation was friendly and animating. After the master of the house and I had finished supper, they all joined in prayer before they parted. The master of the house repeated the prayers from his memory, and continued a long while at this exercise; but as it was in French, I could not judge of the petitions.

In this case also Mr. Johnstone expressed his gratitude by leaving some of Flavel's tracts.

He was amazed at the hardiness and longevity of the people in spite of hardship. He met with a Frenchman ninety-three years old still following his daily task of fishing. He came across a man named Dingwall who had looked on while the battle of Culloden was being fought, and who—when it was over—carried a musket home from the field with him. Children appeared to thrive uncommonly as infants, and Mr. Johnstone thought them as big and stout at twelve months as those in Scotland at fifteen or sixteen. He adds that just as the children's bodies grew faster than in the old land, so the vigour of their minds seemed to grow in proportion. "I was told by a teacher from Scotland that the children here would learn as much in three months as they would at home in twelve. At the age of ten they have the freedom of speech and the fortitude and boldness of a Scottish boy of twenty." But in a long homily he points out the dangers accompanying such juvenile vigour,—the "engendering of levity, pride and haughtiness in the minds of youth; in short, of having more cork than ballast." About the girls he remarks: "If they were as blooming as they are stately and straight in their make, it would not be for the advantage of the Scotch girls that any number of them were imported there. But the heat of the sun in summer and of their great fires in winter bleach or darken the rosy hue of every cheek. Their dress is mostly of homespun duffles, stuffs, and druggets dyed blue; and when they have a web to thicken, as they call it, they collect a dozen girls or more to perform the operation, and after it is over the young men assemble, and a merry night is made of it in drinking, dancing, and making up of matches."

Mr. Johnstone found that few settlers upon the Island were more prized than those coming from his own Dumfries-shire or from the southern counties of Scotland. None excelled these in knowledge of agriculture, in domestic economy, or in industrious habits. None were better able to supply their own wants with their own hands, to submit without murmuring to mean fare, or to increase their comforts through sustained exertion. He had to make exceptions, of course. Even from Dumfries-shire some arrived who were neither diligent nor sober. But next to the best from his own county he ranked the Highlanders as most "eligible," and "the well-behaved Irish" as next if not equal to these. The English he found "the most unsuitable of all." Our narrator explains that in the Island and in America everything was new to every European, but that the change was greater to an English family than to almost any other:—

Such of them as bring property with them generally keep up their old mode of living till they are as poor as their neighbours, and then they are destitute in the extreme. Their women can spin neither flax nor wool, and many of them are both unable and unwilling to take the hoe and assist their husbands in planting the seed and raising the crop.

As an example of what could be accomplished by thrift, the case is quoted of a settler (from Dumfries, of course)—Mr. Archibald McMurdo, founder of the well-known P. E. I. family of that name, who emigrated to the Island on the advice of a former neighbour:—

His friend had a farm ready bespoke for him on his landing at Bedeque; and the second day after setting foot upon the Island he was at work felling the trees where his house was to stand and his first crop of potatoes was to be planted. He got his house erected for eight pounds, after purchasing boards at a saw-mill for the floor and cover; he digged the cellar and built the chimney himself, assisted by his three sons. He sold a pair of fanners which cost him £4 in Scotland for £9; a plough which had new timber and old irons he sold at £5, and by giving a pound in with the plough he got a good cow. He had as many potatoes planted the first year as served the family till the end of April, and after earning £15 with victuals for sinking a draw well to a neighbour he had ten acres of land ready the second spring. His wife told me they had only missed one thing, to take as much oatmeal with them as to serve them 12 months; this they could have done had they known flour was to cost them three pence per pound.

We get a graphic and picturesque account of olden methods in house-building, in planting and hoeing potatoes at a time when there were very few ploughs, of a forest fire, of the heat in summer and the intense cold in winter, of the many interesting forms of wild life. Mr. Johnstone was much troubled by "musquitoes" that "displayed neither fear nor shame in prosecuting their designs." Grasshoppers next made their appearance, some of them rattling their wings in the air, others leaping before one so thick on the road that it seemed all in motion:—

In a still evening they would join in millions in singing a kind of chirley song like a flock of birds at home in winter; and in a calm dusky night the fireflies will make their appearance moving about like twinkling stars. In the minds of many new settlers these insects have excited no small surprise and terror—some taking them for real sparks of fire ready to set their houses in a flame, and others for evil spirits dancing in the air.

It had been Mr. Johnstone's intention to spend the winter months in school-teaching; but since every settlement made it a practice to pay the teacher mostly in produce, this did not suit his

circumstances and he continued his travels, taking up in addition the business of buying the skins of animals trapped by the settlers. He was thus probably the earliest buyer of fox-furs in the province. But his chief interest ever lay in the "moral scenery." His one great desire was the establishing of "Sabbath-Schools," and in this he was eventually successful, though from many quarters "a wind of opposition blew." Scottish Presbyterians especially looked upon laymen who took charge of any public service as usurping the office of the minister. He tells us of his experience in Malpeque, where in the settlement of Princetown was a Presbyterian minister named John Keir, deservedly held in high respect, but of such weak frame that he had to "strain himself" in order to be heard on Sundays. Mr. Johnstone had announced his purpose of holding a school for the children near the church at five o'clock on the Sunday afternoon. Twice on the same day he had already listened to Mr. Keir. The sermon, the lecture, and the familiar Scottish version of the psalms made the visitor feel as if he were at a service in Scotland. But the music was "altogether foreign and new to me." A teacher of music from the United States had introduced "new tunes of what they called Yankie origin!" The time was so quick and the tone so various that very few of the congregation could join in the singing at all. When the hour arrived for the school, a great many grown-up people appeared, but not one young person to be entered as a scholar.

Mr. Johnstone, holding the Sabbatarian ideas of so many of his countrymen, was deeply grieved with the laxity of Sabbath observance in the new land. He writes:—

I shall next turn the reader's attention to a Sabbath-Day's scene in a private house. In the morning I was awoke with the sound of whistling so loud as to be heard through the whole house. I rose in haste to see what was become of the older branches of the family, that a boy should be sitting by the kitchen fire, amusing himself in this way unadmonished by anyone. When I stepped into the kitchen, I found his parents so near that it was evident the boy's whistling on the Sabbath was not a new thing, or meriting in their estimation a severe censure. A young man from a distance had also been in the house over night. I saw he wished to make love to one of the daughters. He attended them to the milking of the cows, where levity had full swing. I left the house through the day, hoping to find better company. As I returned in the evening, two young men on horseback passed me in great haste, who—I learned afterwards—were also of the tribe of lovers; and when I reached the house I found no little gigling (*sic*) and sport going on among the young people. The mistress of the house was standing at the door, and one of her young sons passed her into the kitchen whistling all the way, and continued to do so till I had seated

myself beside his father who was reading religious tracts in the opposite end of the house. The sound of such music on the Sabbath was so grating to my ears that I asked the gentleman if that boy in the kitchen was a son of his. He directly understood the reason of my inquiry, and called out, "Give over your whistling, sirrah, or I'll come and give you a thrashing." Soon another of his sons was playing upon the Jew's harp. The gentleman now thought proper to make some apology for his children's conduct. "We cannot bring up children here with the sober habits you can in Scotland." "Why?" said I. "Because," replied he, "the children here know that their parents are dependent on them for help as soon as they are able to do anything; and if their parents will not give them a good deal of their own way they will go off and leave them altogether destitute, it being so easy for young people to begin the world here, and so difficult to pay the wages of servants to fill their place."

Here was an opportunity for words of admonition from their guest, in which he was fully supported by the mistress of the house. "I have often told my goodman," she said, "that this way of doing was to bring up our children perfect heathens." And before they parted for the night an agreement was made that the neighbours should be called together for religious study on the Lord's Day.

To be able to claim descent from Lord Selkirk's settlers is to-day in Prince Edward Island somewhat equivalent to the pride of a New Englander whose ancestors came in the Mayflower. But, according to Mr. Johnstone, those settlers were lacking both in piety and in education. He was told that they were in the habit of "spending their Sabbaths in the most unprofitable manner possible." Many of them could not read at all, and scarcely any possessed a single copy of the Scriptures. They used to meet on the sacred day in crowds in an open space of the woods, where "all kinds of amusements went on,"—running, wrestling, leaping, throwing the stone. The older people watched and laughed at the feats of the young, "filling up the vacant moments with wordly conversation." Mr. Johnstone had seen young men retiring on horseback from a place of worship "in all the precipitate hurry of cattle-dealers from a Scotch fair," after they had "sat too long at the bottle." A law paper was sometimes read in the middle of a group after service was over, and the merits of a case were freely canvassed as if on a week-day. Even young women who had been riding on a Sunday visit would try a horse race as they returned home.

Another failing of the Islanders called forth his denunciation. The habit of drinking rum was so established that all else was sacrificed "to the gratification of this propensity." They would have their rum even on the way home from church, if they could find

a tavern, and for travelling any length in the woods they must carry a bottle in their pockets. Mr. Johnstone details a series of gruesome tragedies caused by the prevailing intemperance. He describes a "vociferous" court of law held in a tavern at which he happened to call, where the three magistrates sat on a plank with their coats off, and a free fight seemed imminent, almost everyone being more or less under the influence of liquor. No Bible was to be found on this occasion, and the witnesses were sworn on the Book of Common Prayer.

But, as he travelled through the scattered settlements, our visitor saw always more to praise than to blame, and high indeed was his appreciation of the pioneer clergymen in their strenuous labours. There was the venerable "Parson" Desbrisay, a courtly figure in his eighteenth century costume, who for over forty years had been garrison chaplain in Charlottetown. There was Bishop McEachern, beloved by Highlanders of all creeds, "who has gone through more bodily fatigue in attending to the duties of his office than any other man I know of on the Island." But with him the author once crossed swords on the subject of teaching the Indians to read. The bishop declared, probably with much truth, that "they would not thank any person to teach them to read, and would rather go a-fishing." Mr. Johnstone describes how the Highlanders came in crowds to Panmure Island where the bishop was celebrating mass in a gentleman's house, and how the Indians were there too, with their children in their arms, packed up in cases like fiddle-cases, open in the front, the children fixed in with small spars of wood across and stuffed all round with moss or fog.

A fireside at which he loved to linger was that of a brother Scot, Alexander Crawford, pioneer preacher among the Baptists, and a graduate of the famous Haldane seminary in Edinburgh:—

His farm, it was evident, had been ill attended to, and some marks of poverty might be seen about his house; but, if the reader judges as I did, he will consider these as badges of honour to Mr. Crawford, when he learns that his poverty was occasioned by his abundant labours in the vineyard of his Master.

The Methodist clergymen of his day were Mr. Robert Alder from Berwickshire, Mr. Millar from Ireland, and Mr. Bamford in Charlottetown. We hear too of so many excellent local preachers as to ensure that a sermon was seldom lacking in their places of worship, and Mr. Johnstone says it must be "acknowledged" that, wherever the Methodists abound, vice and immorality are made to hide their heads. He does not appear to have come much in contact with

Dr. McGregor, the great pioneer of the Presbyterians, but was once told by him that when he (Dr. McGregor) came to the Island there were persons in the Malpeque settlement nineteen years of age who had not so much as seen a Protestant preacher.

Of Peter Gordon, who succeeded Mr. Urquhart as Presbyterian missionary, the writer relates the following anecdote:—

A Mrs. Higgins, belonging to the Covehead settlement, one day was crossing a bay with him in a canoe. The wind was high, and the water much troubled. Mr. Gordon discovered some evidence of fear, and Mrs. Higgins rallied him by saying "Mr. Gordon, you seem to have no faith; what makes your faith so weak?" "I wish," said he, "to have some foundation for my faith. I never wish to build a strong faith upon a bad foundation, but this canoe is very unsteady at present indeed."

Mr. Nichol of Teviotdale, whose charge was upon the west side of Richmond Bay, was "reckoned the best composer and deliverer of his discourses of any Presbyterian preacher on the Island." Besides John Keir the visitor mentions as his contemporaries Mr. Pidgeon—sent out by the London Missionary Society; William McGregor of Scotland, who succeeded Mr. Nichol; Mr. Hyde of the English Independents who joined the Presbyterians on the Island, but "was not placed for want of support." Mr. Johnstone adds, "Indeed I found the prevailing opinion of the settlers was that English preachers did not answer the Island." He has a word too about Robert Douglas from Teviotdale (grandfather of Sir Robert Falconer) "who preaches at St. Peter's, Covehead, Bay of Fortune, and East Point." The nearest of these stations to Mr. Douglas's home was twenty-two miles distant, and the farthest was near forty miles off.

True empire-builders were these ministers of the olden time, laying wide and deep in this young country a foundation of spiritual rock; and since among those who faithfully wielded a trowel in this task was Walter Johnstone—peddler, and bearer of evangel—is it not fitting that in the fair temple which has arisen out of their labours there should be for him a little niche of remembrance?