

# MY INVISIBLE NOVA SCOTIA LIBRARY

A. J. CROCKETT

*"Where, my Lord?"*

*"In my mind's eye, Horatio."*

A FEW years ago, one of our modern English writers spent some considerable time in the high Selkirks of British Columbia, snow-bound in a prospector's cabin. He was pretty well provided for in many ways; there was plenty of beans and bacon, flour and fuel, blankets and tobacco, but there was no reading matter except a back number of a popular magazine and the half of an *Atlantic Monthly*. He read these through and through; and having nothing more, he spent hours upon what he called his invisible library—imagining there were book shelves round the walls of the cabin, and considering what books he would place there for travellers, storm-stayed as he was.

It was to this incident that my mind reverted when I was approached by the representative of a young people's organization in a Nova Scotia country village, and asked to prepare a list of books suitable for their village library. What they particularly desired was books which would tend to develop a robust patriotism and a faith in our part of our own Canadian land. I had, moreover, to remember the fact that their means were limited, and they therefore could not buy many books. Consequently they wanted such books as would be actually read, and not merely remain on the shelves to be looked at. I was also cautioned about the prospective readers, who were composed mainly of what John Knox called "the rascal multitude."

I knew the readers. They were not particularly intellectual; there were those who browsed upon the local newspapers and were satisfied with their fodder; there were others who would be attracted by the light and daring current magazines with their sensual suggestiveness—readers who would "greet the obscene with a cheer", as the parodist has it. Again, there were others who—like the Lotus-Eaters of old—forgot life and its duties, and spent the fruitful hours absorbed in reading romances while those who

were dependent on them suffered for the necessities of life, or like Don Quixote got a distorted view of life from their exaggerated devotion to the reading of unreal tales. We have all sorts of readers in our country villages; most of them read to pass away the time and have not yet learned the first lesson in reading, which, as Howells says, is to distinguish between literature and merely printed matter.

In short, there were few who were acquainted with the great books and the great masters of literature. Few were acquainted with our own literature or our own Nova Scotia authors. They did not appreciate the storied history of our province and its struggles of the past. Nor had they much concern with the problems of the present, except during the period immediately preceding an election. The village, like most of our Nova Scotia villages, did not share that form of patriotism which is grounded in a knowledge of one's country's past, a pride in its achievements, faith in its possibilities, respect and honour for its authors, its preachers and its statesmen.

I do not mean to say that our people are destitute of patriotism. We would not be true descendants of Scotsmen if we were. It was Stevenson who said that "the fairest lot on earth that a man can have is to be born a Scotsman." He said it because he was steeped in the history and traditions of his own land. He knew its story, its great men, its martyrs, its literature and its culture, and he had known it all his life. "How often", he says, "I have read *Guy Mannering*, *Rob Roy* or *Redgauntlet*, I have no means of knowing, having begun young." He admitted frankly its obvious draw-backs, and disadvantages; one had in his youth to learn the paraphrases and the Shorter Catechism, and to endure endless theological and ecclesiastical controversies; but in spite of all these handicaps, his mind went continually back to his own land with its storied and romantic past, and it was there he wished to lie for ever—on the hills of Home.

We have a form of patriotism, but I am not just sure that it is the right kind. The Pictonian, for instance, is so obsessed with the feat of producing an abnormal number of college presidents and other intellectual leaders that he has acquired a certain air of superiority which is somewhat resented by other portions of the province. That trait was conspicuous enough to be noted in the biography of Principal Grant where the remark is made "that to this day a Pictonian may be known by the fact that he speaks of all other countries than his own in a tone of subtle contempt."

This sort of restricted or local patriotism is not altogether a healthy sign. We are interested but slightly in the other parts of our province. We endure with complacency our lack of railway

facilities and connections. We do not appreciate our own products. We do not visit and know our own land; and owing partly to this difference of outlook and interest, we do not speak with a united voice, but too often in discordant and jangling tones embittered by partisan prejudices.

These thoughts crowded into my mind as I mentally turned the subject over and over. What I should like to see is not only books with a distinctively Canadian tone;—more than that I should like to see *some* books with a distinctively Nova Scotian tone. Is it possible to have a small group of books by Nova Scotia authors, books about Nova Scotia and its history, its geography and its people, and other books of special interest to Nova Scotians forming an alcove or section in a general library designed for a village community. Such was the problem that occupied and disturbed my mind on railway journeys, in stations waiting for delinquent trains, and other places where one is deprived of the compensations of solitaire, cross-word puzzles, newspapers, and other mental sedatives.

I know that a large part of our trouble in these provinces is due to economic and geographical conditions, but it is just as true that our mental state and our mental atmosphere are responsible for many of our troubles, for we make the world in which we live. This is the lesson that Michael Pupin learned from the peasants of his native Serbian village. It is exceedingly well told in his interesting and rather remarkable autobiography, *From Immigrant to Inventor*. He admits that reading and writing did not flourish in that Serbian village, but each youthful generation knew the songs, ballads and poetry of the race; they knew its heroes, its traditions and its history for centuries. And they loved their country because they knew these things. But a change came. "The love of the people", he says, "for the country in which they lived began to languish and finally died." "When that love dies the country also must die," was his inevitable conclusion.

Our youth are reading and filling their minds and occupying their thoughts about countries other than their own, being especially interested, and naturally so, in the great country to the south. As they grow up to manhood and womanhood, they frequently find their life work there and they find themselves quite at home. They have already imbibed the culture and traditions of their adopted land; they know something of its great men, its heroes, something of its history and a good deal of its politics. I don't object so much to this, but unfortunately too many of them lack a knowledge of and a profound respect and admiration for the best

traditions of our own land and race, a conviction that our land is also a land of heroes, a country worth dying for and worth living for, and worth living *in*.

I am quite sure that to many this statement has something unreal about it, something theatrical or bombastic, anyhow something not very practical. It is felt that our materials are so disappointingly small. We have no great heroes, and we have no great poetry. We have not even folk songs, and our ballads are things of the past. We have, however, a few Nova Scotia singers—small material for a poets' corner. But what will be the fate of any volume that I may place there? Will it be read or will it merely gather dust?

It has been said it is the novelists who now control our thinking. They control the greater part of it, anyhow. Much as we may regret it, it is no longer the book of verses underneath the bough that delights the modern youth. Our teachers are no longer the great poets. The bards are no longer our historians and the inspirers of patriotism. Even the passing of the local poet is thus lamented by his brother bard:

Fled are those days when in harmonious strains  
The rustic poet praised his native plains.

The newspaper, the novel, the moving picture and the radio are now dictators of our manners, our styles, and even our social and moral standards. Why bother about poetry? And why think about including any? Well, people are incurably poetical, and poetical thoughts appeal to them. *Vers libre* or *Vers libertine*, as some cynic calls it, may not appeal to the average reader; but people will read poetry; at least they will read *near* poetry. If properly disguised like Walt Mason's *Rippling Rhymes*, it is as popular as a comic strip. If persistently before one in one's daily paper, like Edgar Guest's effusions, you read it of necessity, for "the newspaper has the peculiar advantage of thrusting knowledge into a man's face and making him wise whether he will or no." The process is the usual one; it is first endured, then looked at with a mild curiosity, as we watch him number syllables and play with rhyme; but finally the poet's genial philosophy is embraced, and we use it on our greeting and Christmas cards as the very acme of poetical expression. Other poets like Kipling and Service who sing of the out-door world and the far north appeal to many who quote them both frequently. But will the youth of our village read Bliss Carman? They may be induced to read single poems like *The Ships of Yule*, or *Low tide at Grand Pre*; but will they read

the rest? I do not know; and while I never tried it, I would like to see them have the opportunity. It is obvious, however, that I have room for only a very few volumes, and perhaps I can solve my problem and evade my difficulty by placing in my invisible library *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* and Garvin's *Canadian Poets*—one or both of them.

But here is another shelf waiting to be filled with history and biography. I have often wondered about the saying of Oliver Cromwell when he discussed the question of his son's education and said to his tutor, "I would have him read a little history." Had fathers and teachers and tutors in those expansive days the same difficulty as we have in interesting their sons and daughters in the history of their own country, and was the reluctant youth, forced to tread the path of that road to him so dry and dusty? I find an antipathy among our youth to this study, and an incredulity among the pupils of our common schools, who doubt whether a subject to them so futile and worthless as Canadian history could ever be of any value or have any interest. I do not say that this state of mind is universal throughout the province. Such a method of arriving at a conclusion would greatly annoy my scientist friends and my logical readers. I only say that I have found it so, notwithstanding that we have at our command so many admirable series of History Readers, and the romantic and adventurous story told by the incomparable Parkman. But some way or another so many of our boys and girls seem to miss it; perhaps because we have not developed the school library or even the public library. I am afraid too many of our teachers are not really interested, or are without that absorbing interest which they can communicate to the taught.

It has been remarked that "it takes a very exceptional talent to make the politics of an old era interesting." And by the youth of our day the politics of even the Confederation days are blithely consigned to the limbo of the past.

Possibly it is easier to interest youth in our local history. For the Pictonian, McPhie's *Pictonians at Home and Abroad* is a book to browse over and read at random. You can take it, open it anywhere and read with pleasure and profit. With a proper mentor the short step between this or such a book as this and a country history may be easily taken. From this again to biographies of such men as Grant, Tupper, Dawson, Howe, Haliburton and others is but another step. But how do it? What books shall I place here? And how get them read? I am afraid I am in as bad a position as Mark Twain in the story in which he

got the hero and heroine in so intricate a tangle that he gave it up and ended by offering a prize to anyone who would get him out of it. One thing we must recognize with Lord Riddell is that "the art of reading serious books is not natural to most people, but they must acquire the taste and supply themselves with the means of spending many happy and instructive hours." Such readers must not be discouraged by a formidable array of books. A few books or even one or two as a sort of sample is better. A library needs to be freshened continually by a constant stream or even a dribble of new books as the interest grows or is stimulated. We all have books upon our shelves that we never read or even look at. They have been there so long we have ceased to appreciate them, and have lost all desire to explore them. Consequently, I see few books on this shelf of my invisible library. What I do see are not really distinctively Nova Scotian—Siegfried's *Race Question in Canada* and John McDougall's *Rural Life in Canada*. They are there because I feel certain they would be read and discussed in almost any Nova Scotia village, for they deal with problems common to most of our Canadian villages.

I have now reached the shelves where fiction stands invitingly. While many interesting questions might be raised and discussed, I do not intend to spend any time over them. The very question of reading novels, and especially novels for the young, I turn aside from. I am content to recognize the fact that fiction has a universal appeal; I love with Herman Melville "to sail forbidden seas and land on barbarous coasts." I hardly go so far as to agree with the poet Gray who said that to lie upon a couch and read new novels was no bad idea of paradise, but I am not sure that Benjamin Jowett, was far wrong when he remarked that "there are few ways in which people can be better employed than in reading a good novel." In my present musings, I am interested in only one aspect of the novel, its setting, its Nova Scotia atmosphere. I ring out the flood of novels which glorify the United States or the Great West, books with the purple patches—the supermen with red blood in their veins, great open spaces, nights full of stars, clear mornings, mustangs, cowboys, prospectors, mines and the rest which our youth feed upon until they look upon our own people as

An ill used race of men that cleave the soil,  
Sow the seed and reap the harvest with enduring toil.

I remember, in my very early boyhood when I first read Kingston's *In the Wilds of Africa*, I was like stout Cortez on his peak

in Darien. And when Du Chaillu followed with his *Wild Life under the Equator* and a half-a-dozen other juveniles, I resolved to be an African explorer and a mighty hunter before the Lord. Another boyhood passion was the desire to go to an English public school, derived mainly from the reading of *Tom Brown's School Days* and the school stories of Talbot Baines Reid and others which in those days were found in that famous annual, *The Boy's Own Paper*. I can afford also to admit at this late date a desire to go west, fostered by the reading of *Deadwood Dick* and the other dime novels of Mr. Beadle. I have nothing to say for myself, only that *Deadwood Dick* was much better than a great deal of the stuff sold and read to-day.

When I turn from these seductive volumes to my Nova Scotia books, I may seem to be very prosy and proper. The books appear so, but I am confident they will all be eagerly read and reread and treasured in memory. There, for example, are the row of Miss Montgomery's popular series of books beginning with *Anne of Green Gables* and ending with *Emily Climbs*. Anne, who brightens life for the people on our neighboring island, is, of course, a Nova Scotian girl. Here also are MacMechan's *Old Province Tales*, *Sagas of the Sea*, and Grace McLeod Rogers's *Stories of the Land of Evangeline*. Nearby I see Marshall Saunders's *Rose a Charlitte Roberts's Sister to Evangeline*, *The Forge in the Forest* and *The Heart of the Ancient Wood*. And if I should place there Norman Duncan's *Billy Topsail* books and T. G. Marquis's *Marguerite de Roberval*, I may be going outside the confines of the province for the setting of the stories, but the fishing villages of the Newfoundland coast sufficiently resemble our hamlets to give the readers of *Billy Topsail* adventurous and stirring tales of heroic youth who overcome under familiar difficulties and obstacles. And I have known the pathetic story of Marguerite to be read and discussed in a country village for months.

But I have some books by authors who are not Nova Scotians or even Canadians. What thoughts and questionings arise as I turn to *The Master*, that extraordinary book of I. Zangwill's—a book that fascinates one so much. How did Zangwill ever come to know so much and so intimately about the life and aspirations of a Nova Scotia boy from the marshes of Masstown? Was he ever here, or did someone tell him, or did he read endless diaries, journals and letters detailing the struggles of that generation? But where are such letters? The struggle was too absorbing to afford much leisure to write, and the literary remains are consequently few. I am told that the Nova Scotia boy with his yearning

Such was the trend of the thoughts and considerations which influenced me as I gradually made up my list and planned my library. It is not an ideal list; it is certainly not a model library; it is not even complete; it is merely an attempt to deal with one phase of a very difficult problem and, of course, must be judged by its aim.

I read with unfailing delight the various books of Christopher Morley. He has a small volume of poetry which he calls *Chimney Smoke*. Here he sings of the joys of his fireside and of his home in the country, and he includes a short poem with the title "Epitaph for a poet who wrote no poetry." It was what he wanted to say for the man who knew and appreciated poetry, and who had within his breast the poetic impulse, but who for some reason never gave outward expression in melodious verse to the wonderful things he thought. I wonder sometimes what this genial writer would say for the *Librarian who had no Library*.