

NOVA SCOTIAN CULTURE FIFTY YEARS AGO

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THE era under investigation in this survey, namely, the period during which the men now forming the responsible body of citizens in Nova Scotia were attending school, has been taken, perhaps a little arbitrarily, as the decade of 1887-97. This decade began with the celebration of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and ended with the celebration of her Diamond Jubilee, two events which, although now of minor historical interest, were matters of concern to British subjects all over the world, and which were brought to the attention of every Nova Scotian; while other incidents, destined to have greater consequence, may have escaped the notice of a considerable minority or, perhaps, even of a majority of the people of the province.

Never had British prestige stood higher, and never had the British peoples been more complacent, than during this period. In 1898, Canada issued a postage stamp showing a map of the world with the British possessions coloured red and the legend, "We Hold a Vaster Empire Than Has Been." It is true that the death of General Gordon at the hands of the Dervishes had caused a ripple in British political life; but only faint echoes reached Nova Scotia—sufficient for a number of parents to have their sons christened "Gordon"—and full retribution upon the perpetrators of the outrage was considered merely a matter of time. On the continent, Bismarck was coming to the end of his long career, and was marking his last years in office by making large increases in the German army. France began, in 1888, that flirtation with Russia which was the first step in aligning forces for the conflict in which numbers of Nova Scotians were to lose their lives. During the period under review, too, France engaged upon that policy of pin-pricks culminating in the Fashoda Affair that was to reach the improbable conclusion of an Anglo-French alliance and the departure by Great Britain from her isolationist policy with regard to continental affairs. Whether it was the result of contemporary French "insolence", or whether it was a matter of tradition and the teaching of the school texts, there is evidence to show that no article of boyish faith was more tenaciously subscribed to than that one Britisher was fully equal to three Frenchmen in a fair fight.

As the decade drew to a close, events occurred that shook British complacency even though they did little to lower British prestige. The year 1895-96 was, in many respects, an *annus mirabilis*. In that year Cuba was in revolt against Spain, and Japan emerged fully from the self-imposed obscurity of centuries by conquering Korea and heavily defeating China. The double victory occasioned some surprise, but little or no foreboding. More than surprise was aroused by the Jameson Raid in the closing days of 1895, and the Kaiser's telegram of congratulation to President Kruger. But a still greater shock was in store for Britons, and they experienced it to the full, when President Cleveland sent his famous Monroe Doctrine Message to Congress. A wave of warlike enthusiasm swept across the United States, and another of scarcely less truculent spirit stirred British subjects, in Nova Scotia as elsewhere, when, apparently circled by potential foes, Great Britain organized the Flying Squadron of the Royal Navy and sent it steaming in a general defiance up and down the Atlantic.

Canadian relations with the United States were not at their best. American encroachments, after 1885, on Canadian fishing grounds were resented with some bitterness, particularly in a province so deeply interested in the fishing industry as Nova Scotia. The determination of the Canadian Government to enforce its regulations led to many seizures of American fishing craft, and Canadian fishery patrol boats with their captures were frequent sights in Nova Scotian ports.

Nova Scotia settled down, in 1882, for the long reign of the Liberal Party, whose tenure of office was to last for forty-three years. The course of provincial affairs was to remain a smooth one for a long time to come; but in the Dominion at large, events took place that had reverberations in Nova Scotia. A Nova Scotian contingent left Halifax, in 1885, for service against Riel in the North-West. From 1890 to 1895 the Manitoba Schools Question inflamed religious difference and created suspicion and intolerance. In 1896, a Nova Scotian discovered gold in the Klondike and, in the same year, the Dominion Government, tottering since the death, five years previously, of Sir John A. Macdonald, was overturned by the general elections.

Such, in brief, was the world of 1887-97 as Nova Scotia saw it. There was, however, only the slightest reflection of it in the course of study provided in the schools of the province. In those days, perhaps even more than to-day, the core of the curriculum was found in the literature courses. The "reader" was the supreme

textbook in the lower school; and children were asked, not what grade they had reached, but "what book they were in".

Some years before the period discussed in this survey began, the educational authorities adopted a new series of texts for use in the public schools. They did so with a full consciousness of the gravity of the step they were taking, possibly with some misgivings, since *The Journal of Education*, official publication of the Department of Education, in 1885 and in subsequent issues for ten years or more, carried the comment that "Change in authorized texts is *in itself* a very undesirable thing: and it is hoped and believed that matters may remain where they are now for years to come without substantial alteration".

The readers, a series originating in Great Britain about a generation earlier and made suitable for Canadian use by slight editorial adjustments, proved to be highly popular, and are recalled at the present day with affection and, sometimes, with something approaching reverence. No readers subsequently used in the provincial schools, according to many of those whose standards of taste were influenced by the series under discussion, have approached them in general excellence.

The prefaces of these readers state that their aim was "to interest young people (so) as to induce them to read, not as task-work merely, but for the pleasure of the thing". These readers, they said, "avoid as much as possible that dull solidity which so much tends to make school hours a weariness to the young".

To those familiar with more modern literature texts, this fine old series exhibits certain interesting peculiarities. One of these is the proportion of selections of an *improving* nature. Out of a total of seventy-six selections in one book, twenty-six carry definite injunctions concerning moral conduct or advice on the pursuit of success in life, while in a number of others the moral is more or less concealed. The pupils learned that "lazy boys grow up to be lazy men", that boasters are not to be trusted, that meddling is "an ugly trick" and one likely to result in pain and grief for the meddler, that honesty is the best policy, that greed exchanges the substance for the shadow, that "As long as we keep the place which God has given us, we are happy", and many other precepts of the type to be found in *The Ant and the Cricket*, *The Fox and the Stork*, and similar tales and fables. This same insistence on literature, not as literature, but as a medium for the inculcation of moral standards, as a means rather than an end, is noticeable in the other books of the series as well, though possibly not to the same degree.

Another striking feature of the series is the proportion of selections dealing with death and the grave. Wolfe's famous *Burial of Sir John Moore* occurs twice in the series. The pupils read about dogs at their master's grave, about a Russian exile's daughter who secured, by great exertions, a remission of her father's sentence, but who was found shortly afterwards "with her hands clasped, gently sleeping her last long sleep". Other selections deal with children who are blown up (*Casabianca*), carried off and killed by eagles, drowned in shipwrecks, or who die apparently from sheer gentility, like the heroine of Tennyson's *May Queen*. This preoccupation with death ranges from the sublimely dignified to the mawkishly sentimental. Mr. E. F. Benson and Mr. Esme Wingfield-Stratford, in their studies of the Victorian Age, have described for us the mid-Victorian fashion of cultivating sentimentality. At the time this series of readers was in use in Nova Scotia, the cult of the tearful had waned in England, but some of the finest efforts of its devotees remained enshrined in these school literature texts. One need only mention *The Old Arm Chair*, and a poetic effusion inspired by the American Civil War entitled *Somebody's Darling*. Another poetic selection, *The Face Against the Pane*, also of American origin, described a shipwreck and the recovery of the bodies of the drowned, and still another approaches even nearer the bounds of morbidity by telling, in verse, how a young lady playfully hid herself in a chest, forgetful of its spring lock, and how, half a century later, the chest burst open upon being moved, and her skeleton rolled out, to the astonishment and moral elevation of the frivolous beholders. The group of tear-compelling literary specimens included *The Loss of the "Royal George"* and *The Wreck of the "Hesperus"*; and it only remains to add that when choosing an example of the work of Charles Dickens for inclusion in the readers, the editors hit upon *The Death of Little Paul* as the most suitable selection available.

Possibly English literature has been greatly enriched since these readers were made, by the work of men who are both naturalists and talented writers. However that may be, the contrast is most marked between a present-day set of children's texts in reading and appreciation and the sets used by their fathers and grandfathers. The selections in the readers of 1887-97 that dealt with natural phenomena dealt with them mostly as they occurred in lands and climates other than our own. There are descriptions of the ostrich, the sky-lark, the bird of paradise and the tailor-bird, of the chamois and the bison, of tropical forests and the arctic feeding-grounds of reindeer. There is even a description

of a rorqual; but the emphasis is rather upon the method of hunting it than upon its life and habits. One book contains four tales about elephants, dealing mostly with their capture and with their feats of strength and memory. Of natural history lore likely to be checked by the personal observation of the pupils there is very little.

As the high school standard is approached, the character of the books is altered. This change is not only in the inclusion of more difficult passages, but in the nature of the content as well. The final book of the series, prescribed for the first year of high school, leans heavily upon military history, the literature inspired by military glory and prose accounts of travel. About one quarter of the book is devoted to war. It begins with an account (author's name not given) of Elliot's defence of Gibraltar. This is followed by Napier's description of the Battle of Corunna and Wolfe's *Burial of Sir John Moore*. Turning the pages, one finds Southey's account of Trafalgar and Nelson's death, Motley's story of the siege of Leyden, and Headley's stories of the burning of Moscow and of the relief of Lucknow. There is a selection describing the siege of Jerusalem by Titus, and another describing the light cavalry charge at Balaclava.

Many of the poetical selections are of a corresponding type. Campbell's *Ye Mariners of England*, Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, the famous *Speech of Henry V Before Harfleur* are all to be found there, as well as lesser known poems such as Croly's *The Retreat of the French Army from Moscow* and Parmelee's *Claribel*. Balancing this kind of material somewhat, one of the rhetorical sections of the book contains John Bright's famous pacifist oration, *What is War?* It strikes a lonely, but curiously modern, note.

The travel selections are mostly bald accounts of journeys from place to place, and are intended, as a headnote points out, "to be read before a map". One of them begins as follows:

Embarking at Southampton in one of the splendid steamers of the Peninsular and Oriental Company, we soon pass the Isle of Wight, and make for the open sea. The second day brings us in contact with the rough waters of the Bay of Biscay. The Spanish coast is probably sighted off Cape Finisterre; and here the Englishman begins to recall with patriotic pride the many triumphs achieved by his countrymen on the Peninsula and in the surrounding waters.

In short, these selections are geographical and historical rather than literary, and the geography and history they teach is of the old "cap-and-islands" and "dates-and-battles" style.

As one of its more solid virtues, the book contains Shakespeare's *King John* and Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, both abridged, but at sufficient length to give the pupil a more than nodding acquaintance with both play and poem. Byron's panegyric on Greece, a portion of Longfellow's *Evangeline*, one or two examples of Macaulay's work, and short passages from the speeches of Burke, Brougham, D'Arcy McGee, Gladstone and Sydney Smith are also included in the book. Social questions are represented by Hood's *Song of the Shirt*, and humour is illustrated, rather indelicately, by a poem about a gentleman who, "taking a dose, has thrown up three black crows!"

In spite of their obvious limitations and deficiencies, this series of readers was considered very good indeed, both by the educationists who prescribed them and by the men whose early education was built around them. They had many merits. Glancing down the pages containing their tables of contents, one sees many of the great names of English literature. They attempted to teach courage, loyalty, honesty and diligence, and, while they may have only partly succeeded, they inspired an affection so lasting that it is necessary only to mention them in the presence of one "brought up on them" to bring a sparkle to his eye and a quotation to his lips.

Since the readers formed the backbone of the school course, the other subjects need not detain us long. The mathematics books were solid works, sometimes by men distinguished in that field. Those in science (the high school course included physical geography, astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology and physiology) were more often of the so-called *primer* type, though written by such men as Geikie, Lockyer and Balfour Stewart. The educational authorities evidently felt that not only should texts remain almost permanently in use, once they were chosen, but, also, that "a big book is a big nuisance". The result was that these primers found favour with them, and the pupils had access only to the barest essentials of a given subject. It is possible to read one of these science primers from cover to cover in a couple of hours, so that while the pupils were able to glean some slight knowledge of each subject, their grasp of it was slight.

The best source of information concerning the way in which the various high school subjects were taught forty or fifty years ago is in the old examination papers set by the provincial educational authorities. These examinations were originally intended to set up standards of attainment for those entering the teaching profession; but, as time went on, their use was extended. Colleges

accepted them for purposes of matriculation. A certificate of marks made in them was proof that the possessor had attained to such and such a grade of the high school, and was demanded by merchants and others when engaging young employees. Many years ago it became the rule rather than the exception for a boy or girl attending a Nova Scotian high school to write these "provincial examinations", and they were used as grading examinations to determine promotion from one standard of high school education to the next.

From these examinations, therefore, as well as from official sources such as *The Journal of Education* and the textbooks used, it is possible to form a fair idea of the education received in certain subjects. The first two grades of the high school studied British and Canadian history. Requirements for examination at the conclusion of the first grade of high school were laid down by the Department of Education as follows:

1. The leading events of British History from the Norman Conquest as contained in the prescribed *Outline of British History*: The knowledge expected will include (i) The Sovereign, his descent and personal character: (ii) The *chief* events of each reign such as wars, battles, treaties, etc. (iii) The character and achievements of *very famous* individuals. 2. The leading events of Nova Scotian history...

Pupils were thus pretty well restricted to royal genealogical data and military history as far as Great Britain was concerned; for it can be assumed with a fair degree of justice, probably, that the "*very famous*" individuals of the examination requirement would be found mostly among the generals who led British armies. As for the Nova Scotian history, a very large proportion of it, as given in the prescribed text, was also of the military variety. Since the early history of Nova Scotia was closely linked with that of New England, the pupils were given some knowledge of American affairs, particularly of the period ending with the American Revolution. The following typical question appeared on an examination paper in 1890: "How did the war of the American Revolution affect Nova Scotia both during its progress and by its results?" This question, possibly because it was badly answered by candidates on the first occasion, was repeated in 1892.

At the matriculation standard, the examination candidates were required to pass in "universal history" as contained in Swinton's *Outlines of the World's History*. The examination papers provide evidence that United States history as set forth in this book was taught in considerable detail. Questions taken from

examination papers of the time will serve as an illustration: "Explain the following terms in United States history: Missouri Compromise; Monroe Doctrine; Free Soilers; Compromise Bill; Fifteenth Amendment;" and "Trace the events leading to the breaking out of the Great American Civil War".

The high school provided also a course in English literature, building on the foundation provided by the readers discussed above. This course demanded a critical study of one or more standard works of English literature, and the more rapid reading of several others. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*, Scott's *Ivanhoe* and *Lady of the Lake*, and Macaulay's *Essay on Warren Hastings* were used for this purpose at one time or another during the period. The provincial examination for one year indicates that candidates writing the equivalent of a modern matriculation examination were expected to have a good critical knowledge of *Paradise Lost*, *Evangeline*, *Hiawatha*, *Locksley Hall*, *Marmion* and Gray's *Elegy*. This was in addition to a number of prose works, and whatever knowledge of the history of English literature they could obtain from Stopford Brooke's *Primer of English Literature*.

It has been more difficult to obtain information concerning the private reading habits of the boys of the time. The province had no public library system, even though some of the larger and more progressive towns established and maintained creditable public libraries. Sunday-schools usually had libraries for young borrowers, however, and some homes, principally those of professional men or of the well-to-do, were well equipped with books.

The idea that juvenile literature should be of an improving nature still dominated the minds of many publishers, themselves brought up on books like *Eric, or Little by Little* and *The Fairchild Family*. Enquiries have revealed that memories of youthful reading include a whole genus of these books, summed up in the description as books "about little boys lost in London". The heroes of these books belonged generally to what used to be called The Lower Classes. They were bootblacks, chimney-sweeps, crossing-sweepers or the followers of similar menial and precarious occupations. Dogged by misfortune and adversity as persistent and inevitable as Fate in a Greek tragedy, they exhibited an optimistic courage and a tendency to indulge in religious clichés that stamped them, in the minds of those they sought to improve and, almost as an afterthought, to entertain, as horrible and disappointing little prigs. The titles of a few of these highly edifying tones are still recalled. They include the famous *Eric, or Little*

by *Little*; *Onward, or The Story of the Brown Boy*; *Boys on the Battlefield* (London slums), and other kindred tales.

As an antidote to this pabulum provided by the Sunday School libraries and by doting relatives, boys of the eighties and nineties read, usually surreptitiously, quantities of paper-covered novelettes. There is still a certain amount of smacking of lips among men of that generation over reminiscences of breath-taking incidents when Indians or bandits swooped down on stage-coaches, or when the great detective brought his prey to bay in some spot of nightmarish unpleasantness. Nick Carter, Old Cap Collier, Deadwood Dick and the James Boys thus became the improbable companions of Eric and the "little boys lost in London" in forming the character of Nova Scotian youth forty years ago.

These two classes of juvenile literature do not, however, complete the entire range. Rather, they form two opposite extremes, and between them lies a whole field of literature sampled by various individuals according to taste and opportunity. This field contains many recognized classics which, if we may judge from publishers' lists and the contents of local bookstores, are still popular with boys. There are some exceptions, of course; and it is doubtful if Fenimore Cooper, who appears to have been universally read and liked in the Jubilee era, is now considered anything but a tedious bore by the present generation of young readers. Scott, too, was held in high esteem, though there is no unanimous choice of a favourite novel by him. One gentleman gives his coming upon *Ivanhoe* as the outstanding literary experience of his youth. Another reports similarly of *Old Mortality*, and still holds Cuddy Headrigg to be one of the greatest characters in fiction. *The Boys' Own Paper*, or as it is probably better known, *The B. O. P.*, generally bound in the form of an annual, a heavy volume containing serials, short stories, and articles on hobbies, sports and other subjects interesting to boys, was then widely read in Nova Scotia, and is probably only slightly less popular to-day. Some of Jules Verne's books ran in this excellent magazine as serials, as did those of a number of other well-known writers of books for boys. Captain Marryat, W. H. G. Kingston, Charles Lever, and R. M. Ballantyne each had a following, and certain books of fiction for boys written by Professor DeMille of Dalhousie University had some success. This list does not, of course, exhaust the catalogue of books popular with boys of the era, but it will serve as an indication of the sort of thing read.

Certain omissions will immediately be noticed among the names mentioned above. There is, of course, a danger in basing

generalizations on insufficient data; but such evidence as has been adduced would appear to indicate that neither the early stories of Rider Haggard nor the incomparable *Tom Brown's Schooldays* had any vogue among Nova Scotian boys of the time. On being questioned, some gentlemen stated that they had either never read *Tom Brown*, or had read it as adults when their own sons were enjoying it. Even G. A. Henty's popularity did not come in Nova Scotia until a later date.

This, then, was the intellectual baggage with which boys were equipped in Nova Scotia in the Jubilee Decade. At the foundation there was a carefully taught literature with a strong moral, or edifying bias, an insistence on the imminence of death and the glory to be found on the battlefield. This supported a superstructure of military and political history that found little room for the discussion of social questions, and a factual type of geography, ("Name all the counties of Ontario touching on Lake Huron", *Examination paper of the period*). The whole edifice was crowned solidly with mathematics and ornamented with a smattering of science. (It may be significant, at this point, to mention that one gentleman says, "We were taught navigation without a ship, astronomy without a star and geology without a rock".

There is nothing remarkable about the reading habits of boys of the time. On the whole, the reading matter was probably neither better nor worse than that of the present. Many of the books presented a false interpretation of life; but that need occasion no wonder, and it is quite certain that among all the dross there was occasionally a nugget to be found. The same thing may be said about the literature of any period; and, since the bases of criticism change with the passage of time, it is difficult, if not impossible, for one reared in a different atmosphere to pass judgment with any pretence to finality.