

HALIFAX HARVEST

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THE essay has now no bannered following, as in the palmy days of Addison, Steele, and the inimitable Goldsmith. It flourishes in an atmosphere of reason, and the present is, in various ways, an age of unreason. Yes, unreason. Consider the facts. Half a century ago, the surrealists tossed aside the idea of submission to logic and in the intervening years, their strange doctrines have seeped across the world. Later the cry was raised, even in the realm of literature, "Leave it all to the Proletariat!" and "Leave it all to the Unconscious!"—neither a call to intellectual achievement. Surrealists, communists, and psychoanalysts are still vocal, but at present another voice is loud. It is that of the existentialist, proclaiming the philosophy "that man be free only through full consciousness of his illogical position in a meaningless universe." His illogical position in a meaningless universe? A dismal belief, surely, and not common sensible.

While the logical eighteenth century was still a dominant influence in literature, Thomas Chandler Haliburton made his academic studies at King's College and began to play a part on the stage of public affairs. As he looked with keen eyes on the scene about him, he saw much that cried out for correction; and he realized his own power. He also would write a commentary on life; would show society of the time its form and feature in a fashion more sharply corrective than were the suave strictures of Addison. So he wrote the Clockmaker series that lighted the pages of *The Nova Scotian* from 1835 to 1836, and has scintillated ever since. These essays were immediately copied in American newspapers and widely published in book form. Fame had come to Halifax.

Between 1835 and 1849, Haliburton wrote three series of *Sam Slick the Clockmaker* essays, two of *Sam Slick the Attache*, and one of *The Old Judge*. The last, written when he was Judge of the Supreme Court after serving as Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas, is the most urbanely thoughtful, if not the most pungent, of these books. Like the others, it is a description and commentary written out of his own experience. Haliburton does more than express an opinion, he offers subtle constructive criticism. Fortunately, he has set forth in so many words his magnanimous ideal as writer: "To portray character, to give practical lessons in morals or politics, to expose

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hypocrisy . . . to develop the resources of the Province to foster and excite a love of our own form of government a preference for it over all others." Of the various benefits derived from his works, he values most highly, he says, the knowledge that "they have done good."

No other has painted so true a picture of the austerity beauty of Canadian winter as Haliburton, or written anyt so vivid as this Halifax vignette: "The wind, which had blowing steadily, but very moderately, from the northwest several days, gradually diminished until it ceased altogether. A few long-drawn sighs and audible breathings indicated waking up and subsequent approach of a southerly gale. Meanwhile, the soft and balmy air and the delicious weather generally intervenes between the departure and arrival of two contending winds, had tempted the whole population of the city to be abroad. The Tandem Club and the four-in-hand the garrison were out; and the double and single sleighs of the townsmen enveloped, as well as their inmates, with furs, horses decorated with bells fancifully arranged and many coloured rosettes, enlivened the streets; while gaily dressed people on foot and many equestrians added to the animated scene which they themselves had come to admire."

Like many another loving citizen, Haliburton gloried in the view from Citadel Hill, and hoped for a time when Halifax would welcome visitors from Europe and "form one of the mini of the great American tour." He was a clear-sighted patriot, with a soul sensitive to the *lacrimae rerum*. A visit to Prince's Lodge one day as he followed the Windsor road to Bedford Basin filled his mind with thoughtful sadness; he saw the abandoned mansion falling to ruin, the beautiful promenade running wild, and he pondered the transience of human greatness. Incidentally, this essay has preserved Prince's I for posterity.

Then again, Haliburton observed men and manners with a most discerning eye. His essays on social life in the province and its capital are keen and kindly, yet caustic. Unlike the novelist who observes to narrate, the essayist observes to find food for thought. For instance, the commanding rub-a-dub of the Government House party on the door of a Halifax mercantile inspired this miniature essay, perfect in one paragraph.

In those days the magnetic telegraph of the doorbell had been introduced into the country, and it is a subject of great interest to all reflecting minds that it has been imported. It is a

those refinements that have debilitated the tone of our nerves and, by depriving them of exercise, rendered them so delicate that they are excited and shocked by the least noise. Nor is the language it speaks by any means so intelligible as that which is uttered by that polished, deep-toned, ornamental appendage of the hall door, the good old brass knocker. At the same time that intelligent watchman gave notice of an application for admission, it designated the quality and sometimes the errand of the visitor . . .

And so on for a long nineteenth century paragraph. Certainly, the jangle of the doorbell has not much character; but what could so genial an observer not have written on the electric bell, the buzzer, and the gong?

The most literary essays that have come out of Halifax are probably those of Archibald MacMechan, "Archie" to the Dalhousians of several decades. *The Porter of Bagdad*, his first book, is delicately imaginative and slightly autobiographic. His next, *The Life of a Little College*, won a real distinction: it was published by the very discriminating firm of Houghton Mifflin. In it, the man of letters speaks of Tennyson's artistry, of Browning's women, of Virgil's golden style; the professor tells of his beloved college and its way of life; and the literary historian has a prolonged word to say on the critical history of *Evangeline*.

Professor MacMechan's third collection is *The Book of Ultima Thule*. Ultima Thule (the farthest Thule), his pet name for Nova Scotia, is poetic and evocative, though not at all so clearly defined as Land's End. That the author's attitude of mind has become more strongly historic, the following titles show: "*Storied Halifax*", "*Ab Urbe Condita*," "*The Memorial Tower*," "*Old St. Paul's*", "*The Province House*." These essays touch the city with a wand of light that makes the past glow in living colors. "*Ab Urbe Condita*" justifies its tribute to Lord Cornwallis for his "energy, uprightness, and public spirit" which made Halifax a success from the beginning. Such writing kindle a spirit of patriotism, give depth to knowledge and perspective to vision of the future.

The critic among Halifax essayists is John Daniel Logan. Though he wrote much elsewhere, the city can fairly claim him; here he found his greatest happiness, here lived the friends of his soul, here came his dearest inspiration. He is most widely known as author of *The High Ways of Canadian Literature*, and certain chapters of the book best illustrate his quality. They are, actually, critical essays on Haliburton, Roberts, Carman,

D. C. Scott, Lampman, Wilfred Campbell, Drummond and Pauline Johnson. His books of verse—and there are number—usually begin and end with an essay. As critic Doctor Logan can be generous in praise, bitter in blame. He original, inventive, enthusiastic; an encourager of talent; writer who made many friends and a few good enemies.

Halifax has the distinction of being very much a university town. The University of King's College traces its history to 1789. In 1821 the Earl of Dalhousie established what is now the university bearing his name. The University of Saint Mary's College began its life in 1840. Mount Saint Vincent College, a comparative newcomer in the field, welcomed its charter from the Province of Nova Scotia in 1925.

The most university-minded among Halifaxian essayists is, doubtless, Professor H. L. Stewart, founder and for twenty-five years editor of *The Dalhousie Review*. His many contributions to the quarterly were essays in substance if not always in form. His recent article in *Culture*, entitled "University Life in Canada" offers this cardinal comment:

It was no mere accident that the beginnings of the University were religious, nor is it merely coincidental that the influences now lowering its intellectual life are of the sort we call in other references *secularist*. The passage of centuries has wrought many change in that blend of 'piety and good learning' for which, the ritual of an Oxford College, 'our founders' are still remembered with thanksgiving. But despite every transformation of ceremony and articles, every reinterpreting of statutes and adjustment of ancient routine, it is the same spiritual elevation over sordid and selfish fleeting interests that has always marked genuine University life.

Readers interested in such philosophical subjects as the Concept of Beauty, the Frontiers of Psychology and the Philosophy of Religion, the Sanctification of the Intellect, psychology and Ethics, will rejoice in Gerald B. Phelan's essays. I believe Phelan has the gift of clarifying the obscure and irradiating the clear. He can, for instance, reveal analogy, that familiar figure of speech akin to simile and metaphor, to be 'at the very heart of Thomistic philosophy, since being belongs intrinsically to that is and to each and every thing analogically, that is, in proportion to its nature.'

E. W. Nichols wrote the personal essay with a light hand and a humorous glance. "On Lying Awake", which appeared originally in *The Dalhousie Review*, Norris Hodgins includes

his own collection of Canadian essays. The historical essay is well represented by the work of Daniel Cobb Harvey, both in magazine article and pamphlet.

One special form of essay has had a distinguished roll call in Halifax from the time of Joseph Howe to the present: it is the editorial. This daily essay, complete in a few paragraphs, interprets events of the hour, shapes public opinion, and helps to decide the destiny of nations. The editor is a nameless leader of men. The city has also a creditable showing in another special field, the review, written or spoken, which sets forth critical opinions of books and plays.

So Haliburton's successors have bravely carried through the years the torch he kindled. They have been consistently, though perhaps unconsciously, loyal to a tradition. History, Fiction, Poetry, Drama may grace the hill-set city by the sea like Muses on Parnassus; but Essay wears the brightest crown.
