

NOVA SCOTIA JOURNALISM IN THE EIGHTIES

A. J. CROCKETT.

*Nothing to make a song about, but Kings,
Helmets, and Swords, and half forgotten things.*

(YEATS)

DURING the past summer there came into my hands a bound volume of *The Plain Dealer*, an almost forgotten paper, at one time published in New Glasgow by W. D. Stewart, the veteran journalist who still wields the pen in his native town. It was the first volume of a paper which had a brief existence for a period beginning May 12, 1880, running for about one year till it fell a victim to the heat of an election campaign then being waged in the county. John McDougald was the Conservative candidate for the federal House, and he had the powerful aid of Sir Charles Tupper. Appeals were made and pressure of various kinds was brought to bear upon the publisher of a paper which persisted in seeing good in both sides, and in fearlessly expressing its real opinions. *The Plain Dealer* held out for a while, but finally succumbed, and one morning appeared without its old time motto, "Hew to the line, let the chips fall where they will." It came out strongly in favour of the Conservative candidate and helped to win a Conservative victory; but from the standpoint of sound journalism, and even the interest of the publisher, it made a fatal mistake. The paper lost more than it gained, and —worse still— its prestige was gone. It gained some party subscribers; but lacking the vital principle of independence and its accompanying virility, it lost most of its substantial and intelligent readers. It gradually withered and died. The details of the story of its demise are rather pathetically told by the publisher in a letter which he sent to its old rival, *The Eastern Chronicle*, and which appeared in the columns of that paper in the year 1884. This letter someone has most considerately and appropriately cut out, and had it pasted securely on the inside of the cover at the end of the volume which lies before me.

The palmy days of *The Plain Dealer* were therefore covered by the issues in my volume. It gives a wonderfully accurate cross section of the life and interests of a generation which has now practically gone. Of those who contributed articles, occupied

official positions in the community, or advertised in the pages of the paper, but very few remain. As for the rest—"All, all, are sleeping on the hill."

For many years this volume has lain in a country farmyard barn, neglected, unnoticed, and unappreciated. One possessor had considered that it was of value only as a scrap book, in which he could paste the clippings which interested him in his weekly reading. What interminable pages of these clippings there were, three and four layers deep! They covered the reading matter of the decade ending in 1890, and in its way a very interesting study. Here is a sort of palimpsest—the original work being covered by later additions. I find myself wondering about this man who was so careful not to destroy his periodical reading, and even took such pains to preserve it. It was all good reading, and to him no doubt this was a labour of love. There are clippings from *The Presbyterian Witness*, *The Golden Rule*, (the organ of the Christian Endeavour), *The Union Signal* (the organ of the W. T. U.), *The Voice* (which proclaimed the sentiments of the Prohibition party in the United States), *Sabbath Reading* and *The Presbyterian*. The owner of the volume also got *The Christian at Work*, which was more than many of his brethren did. I find pages from *Harper's*, *The Century*, *The Youth's Companion*, and many other well known journals. There are apparently endless sermons by T. L. Cuyler, Beecher, Parkhurst, Talmage, Spurgeon, W. M. Taylor, and others. Prayer Meeting topics, Sunday School topics, advice to young men, poetry, and jokes are all here together in one glorious medley. There are very full reports of the death and funeral of Philips Brooks and of H. W. Beecher, with the tributes paid to Brooks, Beecher and others. There are also full reports of conventions at Northfield, Christian Endeavour Conventions, W. T. U. work, etc. John B. Gough was then at the height of his power and left his mark on his day and generation; part of that impress is here in this book. If one had the time and inclination, one could see deeply into the mind of the man who thus read and clipped and saved. Only this need be said here. He was a good man, of the highest ideals, one who loved his fellow men and especially those of his native land and county.

Interesting as this is, I must leave reverie alone and address myself to the task before me. When the clippings and the pages of the religious and moral journals are cleared away, there lies before me the embodiment of the aims and aspirations of another man who reveals himself in his journal, as high and as honourable a man in his way as the other. He would not have got credit for this in the preceding century. One of his contemporaries in de-

scribing the life of Dr. Dodd, the Macaroni parson who was convicted and hanged for forgery about 1777, said that at one time in his varied career "he descended so low as to become the editor of a newspaper." To-day it is different. We live in a newspaper age, when those who publish and edit newspapers control the thoughts and desires of millions; they make war and peace; they raise and overthrow governments, and decide the destinies of the nations. Their newspapers are their mouthpiece, the means by which they reveal and express themselves.

With these thoughts we turn again to our paper, *The Plain Dealer*, and ask what kind of a paper it was and wherein it differed from a similar journal of our day. W. T. Stead, who had an unerring journalistic instinct, used to have a character sketch as a regular feature in his monthly *Review of Reviews*. In each issue a sketch was given of some man who in some way had become prominent during the month. Stead said that he tried to present these men to his readers "as they appeared to themselves at their best, and not as they appeared to their enemies at their worst." Following this principle, we turn to see what this paper thought of itself and what it aimed to do. One is struck not only by its high aims, but also by its attitude towards literature—books and reading. The prospectus is printed in many issues, and says "a judicious examination into the literature of the country will be attended to, in the selection of such articles as tend to raise the standard of purity among the people of our country, while all low, scurrilous, and impure literature will receive our emphatic condemnation." Again, the paper professes "to be a welcome visitor to the home fireside, its columns being kept scrupulously free from every form of demoralizing matter." "It caters for profit to no low and vicious taste, its message being to elevate and not to degrade its readers, and to this end the best efforts of its management will continue to be directed." In pursuance of these laudable aims it states that every issue "will contain an interesting tale, poetry, sketches, choice selections, receipts for the household, an agricultural department, scientific information, and correspondence on live and important subjects."

But a journal gives expression to its principles and ideals officially in its editorial column. There it tells its readers what it stands for, what it thinks on the questions of the day, and what questions it thinks really important. A survey of the editorial column of our journal should give us results.

We find, as we should naturally expect, editorials on such subjects as "Roads," "The Plough," "Our Soil," "Trade," and "Robert

Burns." These subjects, like the poor, are always with us. Then we find a subject like "The Exodus", which we hope will not always be a living subject; we hoped it would be dead and forgotten long ere this. Some of us thought it *was* dead, but like Banquo's ghost it appears at our banquet and will not down. We are still aware of its disquieting presence. Then the "C. P. R.",—what paper did not deal with this subject? We find that those visionaries who expected to change the climate of the provinces by closing the Straits of Belle Isle were alive in that day, and that their scheme was thought worthy of an editorial reference. The perennial Irish question received its share of notice, as it always will. One finds little difficulty in subscribing to the opinion of Giraldus Cambrensis, who said that the Irish question would be finally settled a little before the day of judgment. All these subjects may be described as hardy perennials.

There are other subjects which throw more light on the thinking of the day. There was, for instance, that very thorny and vexing question of "College Grants" and "College Federation." It was a living question in those days, for then the college grants ceased. It was then that the University of Halifax came into existence and began its brief career. The sentiments expressed sound a great deal like the propaganda of the past year or so, but time has shown that some of the fears were groundless and some of the hopes well founded.

In general, it may be said that the number of editorials on the various aspects of education is quite noticeable—if not remarkable. Some of the subjects are "Education," "Our School House," "Our Educational System," "Thomas McCulloch," "The Presbyterian College, Halifax," "Pictou Academy." No argument is needed to prove that education was one of the subjects in which the people of the county took the deepest interest, and it is plain to be seen that this interest is reflected in the editorial columns of the journal which lies open before me. The education in which men then believed was education allied to religion—religion treated in a broad way and with a lofty tone. We find therefore the editor expressing himself on such subjects as "The Presbyterian College, Halifax," "The New Hebrides," "The Relation of Presbyterianism in Pictou County to the Churches in Scotland."

The editorial mind was not always soaring in this lofty empyrean. Some of the most interesting editorials are those on local subjects such as "The Pictou County Cattle Disease," "Retrospect of 107 years ago," and the burning subject of the "Pictou County Atlas"—a work which is appreciated much more in these

days than in the early eighties. The atlas was printed in 1879, and at the time our journal flourished the courts of the county were busy with the subject. The editor expressed the views of the paper in two articles "Lawyers, Magistrates, and that sort of thing," and "The Judiciary and the Pictou County Atlas."

So much for the direct expression of its mind and character. But what about the real paper—the body of reading matter which gave it its life and interest? The last pages were given up to agriculture, and the whole of the first page to miscellaneous matter for the family circle,—poetry, the story, the sketch, and the scientific information and choice selections which were promised in the prospectus. The inside pages contained the editorials, the general news, county news, and articles on the events of the day. There were exceptionally full reports of the proceedings of the Town Council, the Municipal Council, the meetings of the Presbytery, the Synod and General Assembly, and Temperance meetings. The outstanding events of the year appear to be "The laying of the corner stone of Pictou Academy," "The Launch of the Sulitelma," and the greatest of Pictou calamities, "The Foord Pit Disaster." The accounts of this great disaster are very full, and all the details are given of the inquest and enquiry. Curling flourished in those days, for this was the year of the famous visit of the Bluenose Curling Club to Ottawa and Montreal, and the space given to this event will indicate to the present-day reader the interest it excited. Articles also appeared on such subjects "Pictou County Coal Mines," "The Engine Sampson," and "The Industries of New Glasgow." There are further references to "The Amateur Press," which was a feature of New Glasgow life of the time. The youth of that age found an outlet for part of their superabundant energies in publishing small amateur periodicals of various sizes, and appearing like Elbert Hubbard's *Philistine* once every little while. Perhaps the overworked term "semi-occasionally" would suit for most of them. I have made some effort to obtain copies of these youthful amateur incursions into the field of journalism, but without success.

But the real paper may be seen not so much in the contributions made to its reading matter by its editor and reporters, as in the contributions made by its readers and correspondents. "Our Montreal Letter" was a regular feature. Mr. Dan McDermid of the Vendome Hotel, who wielded a facile and humorous pen, describes in a series of letters his trip and experiences in Newfoundland, and in another series "A Holiday in Cape Breton."

A very interesting and valuable contribution is made, I presume

by the editor, who writes a series of biographical sketches under the general title of "Howe's Contemporaries." Eight prominent Nova Scotians of the days of Joseph Howe are sketched. The names are R. B. Uniacke, Lawrence O'Connor Doyle, Herbert Huntington, Hon. J. W. Johnston, George R. Young, Hugh Bell, Alexander Stewart, and Edward M. Dodd. There also appears a series of articles on "Distinguished Pictonians", by the Rev. Dr. George Patterson. This series is evidently incomplete, as the writer deals only with Rev. John Stewart, Rev. Thomas McCulloch, Dr. John McLean, and G. M. Dawson. This series inspired the Rev. J. P. McPhie, of Sunny Brae, to write of the East River and to praise its famous men. This in turn brought out correspondents from East River St. Mary's, Barney's River, and other places with lists of distinguished sons; but while there was a small flood of correspondence, none of them could begin to compete with Mr. McPhie's country.

This brings me now to the subject of the country correspondent, or the country paper as a vehicle for expressing the mind of its constituency. George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, in speaking of the influence of his sect, said somewhere that "every Quaker shook the country for ten miles around him." *The Plain Dealer* reached and received a response from a wide extent of country extending from Pugwash on the one hand to Hopewell, Sunny Brae, East River St. Mary's, Antigonish, and Guysborough, with an occasional letter from other outlying places as far away as Windsor. These correspondents did not content themselves with sending short and colourless "items," "notes," "jottings," or "personals", such as we find in our dailies and weeklies to-day. They were *correspondents* and wrote *letters* to the journals dealing with the incidents that occurred in a very vigorous and human style. On the other hand, they were more reserved than the age which preceded them. They did not in their exuberance express themselves in what they thought was poetry, as did an older correspondent, a fragment of whose contribution is here presented:

In Plainfield there was a great spree:
The host and his guest failed to agree.
Amid great noise and uproar
One was shown to the door,
Such a shindy you never did see.

This apparently was a product of the ballad age which has now practically disappeared, and the research worker—like Prof. Roy McKenzie—has the greatest difficulty in obtaining accurate in-

formation about the numerous ballads which were sung with such gusto by our not remote ancestors.

The country correspondents who lived in the eighties expressed themselves quite as vigorously, but in a different way. Let me take, for example, the incident of the minister of a village church receiving a call from another congregation. I extract the following from the correspondence from the village of H—:

It is said that the Rev. A. McQ. of this place has received a "call" from P—which it is feared he will accept. If a man by holding out a bait to my dog entices him from his home and master, I would have that man arrested. If a child is persuaded to leave his home, the abductor has to suffer for his crime. But another congregation may induce your pastor to leave you, and it is a call from the Head of the Church.

It is not to be supposed that the P— correspondent would let a thing like this go by the board. Shortly afterwards we find in the correspondence from that village the following:

I cannot see the analogy between stealing a dog and giving a minister a call from another congregation. Let your H— correspondent give his man more salary or a free house to live in, and he will stay with him.

Then, to complete the story, we turn to the account of the proceedings of Pictou Presbytery which dealt with this subject. We are told "The call was placed in his hands, and his decision in regard to it was asked. Mr. McQ. stated that he could not at present see the path of duty so clearly as he would like, to enable him to give an answer, and asked that he be allowed three weeks to further consider the matter." Later, on turning again to the H— correspondence, one finds the following embedded in the letter from this place:

Your P—correspondent does not see the analogy *et cetera*. He is a little late and rather injudicious in giving his advice. We will give our man a free house. We pay him quite as much as P—can, and when we call a man from another congregation we will not ask any other congregation to help us pay his salary.

This thrust was apparently of the nature of a stab under the fifth rib. At any rate the P— correspondent received his quietus, and we hear no more of him. The minister decides to remain in his own congregation. He has a new manse, and no doubt an addition to his salary.

If we accept the principle laid down by the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," that in every individual there are three persons or personalities—the man as he appears to himself, as he appears to his fellowmen, and the real man, known only to God—and if we apply this to the life of a paper we would then, I think, be justified in saying that we should find the journal's opinion of itself expressed in the editorials: the real paper, we should find in the reading matter provided; while the advertisements would perhaps indicate, to a considerable extent at least, how others regarded it. There are certain appeals made to the reading constituency of the paper to become interested in certain things and to possess them. An examination of the advertising columns would indicate what things its readers were interested in, and in what way the appeal was made to them. The newspaper reader of to-day is evidently interested in bargain sales engineered by Semitic merchants. Tobacco, cigarettes, movies, and motor cars appeal to him to an extraordinary extent. There was nothing of this in the eighties; and while much might be said on advertising in this decade, I wish to speak only of two things.

I find in the first place a considerable amount of space devoted to patent medicines. There is, however, time to give this subject only a passing glance. I give it, not because this covers a larger space in the advertising columns than the same subject does to-day, but because one advertisement has attracted my wayward fancy and clamoured for special attention. What is one to make of an "ad" which appeared for several issues under the heading *Prof. Grant's Liniment?* There are five excellent testimonials, all bearing witness to the virtues of the aforesaid remedy, and the instant relief it gave to such varied complaints as toothache, sore legs, neuralgia, and certain complaints which called for the services of a horse doctor. It was good for man and beast. But the reading of the last testimonial gives us pause. It deserves to be quoted in full:

Prof. Geo. Grant

Dear Sir:

A few days ago I had a very severe attack of toothache in four of my teeth at once; and your liniment cured me completely.

Sir Francis Smith

Knight of the Tonsors.

The guileless professor follows these convincing recommendations with the following:

OFFER

To anyone leaving Pictou county for California, or some far away part, and intending to stay there, I offer to sell a receipt for making my liniment by which a great fortune could be realized in populous parts of the world. It is a most effectual medicine.

George Grant.

So far as I have been able to discover, no one took advantage of this exceptional offer, with its lure of great wealth.

This is just a gem by the wayside that caught my eye and aroused my special interest. But the really important and remarkable feature of these columns is the unusual amount of space devoted to literature, books, and reading. In one issue about one quarter of the space was taken up in this way. I doubt if anything like it can be duplicated in our country to-day—if in any country. I am not referring to the booksellers of the county and their advertisements, which are general and not specific. There were a number of them—real booksellers, who had in stock, as one of them states, “books in every department of literature.” But publishers of the best books and periodicals considered *The Plain Dealer* a good advertising medium. George Munro, the New York publisher, used a three-inch space to advertise his cheap edition of standard works. He appeared to think the readers of this paper would be interested in buying such books as Farrar’s *Life of St. Paul*, and makes special mention of the following as among the late issues of his famous “Seaside Library”:—Geikie, *Life and Words of Christ*, two parts; Farrar, *Life of Christ*; Thomas Hughes, *The Manliness of Christ*; Spurgeon, *John Ploughman’s Talks*. He does not mention a single novel or work of fiction! If he were the only publisher advertising, it might well be said that Munro, being born in Pictou, advertised in the papers of his native county from a patriotic motive and not as a business enterprise. But he is only one of many. The Leonard Scott Publishing Company use a six-inch space to set forth the advantage of subscribing to such publications as *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Westminster Review*, *The British Quarterly Review*, and of course *Blackwood’s*. We find too that generous space is devoted to advertising *The Nineteenth Century*, *The Fortnightly*, *The Contemporary*; among American periodicals *The Independent*, *The Youth’s Companion*, and *The Scientific American* are conspicuous; but we have also Frank Leslie’s publications, *The Band of Hope*, and a quota of Canadian papers.

This can mean only that the people of this county were reading, and reading the best, especially in periodical literature. The re-

views of books in the paper are not frequent or extended. That could not be expected. We find, however, that reference is frequently made to the contents of the English Reviews, and once in a while a book like Principal J. C. Shairp's on "Culture and Religion" gets due notice. I find also among the news items a reference to the fact that "Everybody is now reading *Endymion*, by Benjamin Disraeli," and in connection with this there is printed a key to the different characters in the book. The thing is done with such an air—as much as to say that everybody will be pleased to read so convenient and timely a bit of information! Undoubtedly this paper had a constituency of real readers.

We have heard a good deal during the past summer about the "Primacy of Pictou People," which is more than a mere apt alliterative allusion. Beyond all question, Pictou did accomplish something more than the ordinary, into the details of which I do not need to enter at this late date. I am concerned with a question far more important. How did they do it? It will not be admitted for a moment by the other counties of the province that Pictou people were a bit better than anybody else. They were not supermen. They had no innate genius. They had no exceptional opportunities. It is said, however, that Pictou became predominant intellectually because of the Academy—that there was in the county an institution of learning—a nursery of intellectual men. No doubt this had its share, but there were other factors. No one thing can account for it. I am, however, firmly convinced that one of the influences which made Pictou great was the great fact that there was in this county a reading public. We had booksellers in the towns and people who knew, bought, and read the best books. In other words, there was in the homes of the people an intellectual life which stimulated the minds of the growing generation. And this is something that we are in grave danger of forgetting. During the past two or three years we in this community were reminded more than once by distinguished visitors that we are living on our past. One well-known literary man, in addressing an audience here, commented on the fact that we are not now a reading people; and he drew the conclusion that, whatever we had done in the past, we were not now producing great men and would not produce them under the present conditions. This statement may be challenged, but the speaker based his conclusions on the fact that we had no book stores and no libraries. He acknowledged that there was a small library in the town of New Glasgow, numbering a few thousand volumes, and housed in a small room twelve feet square. He contrasted us with similar communities in the middle or Eastern

States, that have libraries of 100,000 volumes. This is what he considered necessary if we are to do the work required of us. Unfortunately there is not a library of this size in Nova Scotia, or even the Maritime Provinces. But this is another subject, and would lead me too far afield. I am dealing with only a phase of journalism—a Pictou county paper of the early eighties. However, I have now little to add, except to quote the words of Professor Dunn:

There is no worthier pledge of the intelligence and purity of any community than their general purchase of books; nor is there anyone who does more to further the attainment and possession of these qualities than a good *bookseller*.

This is quite true, and worthy of a good deal of emphasis, especially if we include the reading of the best periodicals. Something might also be said of the far reaching influence of the country paper, and the powerful impress a good editor may leave in the county which his paper reaches. Whether we are doing all that might be done, I leave to others to say. I hear it said, however, that one thing Nova Scotians much need to-day is a different mentality—a deep and abiding faith in their own country, and in the virtues of the people who inhabit it. But this again is another story.

I have spent a pleasant hour or so browsing in the pages of the volume of this almost forgotten paper which has brought back the past so vividly to me. The foregoing is my tribute to a journal which does not deserve the fate of oblivion.