

DAGUERREOTYPISTS AND PORTRAIT TAKERS IN SAINT JOHN*

By J. RUSSELL HARPER

THESE is an irresistible fascination in the portrait whereby we are enabled to see ourselves as others see us. It has flattered the ego and tickled the fancy all through the ages, but the Nineteenth Century saw the emergence of picture-making devices which made possible a thousand portraits where only one small painted miniature had previously existed. The story of how this came about in one Canadian province is undoubtedly typical of what happened in others. The following describes the changes which occurred during three short decades in New Brunswick.

J. H. Gillespie, profile miniature painter of London, Edinburgh and Liverpool arrived in Saint John from Halifax on May 29th, 1830. He says that he had painted "upwards of 1400 likenesses" of Haligonians during the previous year. These amounted to but a fraction of the thirty thousand satisfactory portraits which he had taken over a period of twenty years with his "very curious and elegant apparatus." The sitter was detained by ten minutes, and the artist "generally succeeded in producing a strong resemblance." These quick pencil sketches cost a mere twenty-five cents, but for two dollars likenesses could be had in which the features and drapery were painted. Gillespie's apparatus was set up in a painting room rented from Mr. Magee at his Germain Street house opposite Trinity Church. Undoubtedly a camera lucida was used, for in Halifax this artist described it as consisting of "several mechanical and optical instruments." The camera lucida was not a camera as presently conceived at all, but a mechanical apparatus in which a prism was suspended at eye level, and by looking into it the artist saw the sitter's head as if projected on the drawing sheet; he was thus able to trace the profile accurately and quickly.

Picturemaking devices such as those used by Gillespie and which were comparatively common throughout the Maritime Provinces during the 1830s, are of double interest. They heralded one of man's answers to a demand for more and better likenesses to be used in presentation lockets or to hang on the walls where they served as an ever present reminder of loved ones, living and dead. They almost rang the death knell of that race

*The material used in this article has been principally extracted from the newspaper files in the Archives, New Brunswick Museum. Much of the material relating to Rulofson has been gleaned from a manuscript biography prepared by R. B. Haas, University of California, and which will shortly appear in print.

of miniature artists who draw free hand and painted pretty little portraits on ivory, cardboard or parchment and to many portrait painters who worked on a larger scale. During their day some of the miniaturists and portrait painters had been residents of the towns and cities in which they worked. Financial difficulties into which they were forced by this new competition is apparent when the schemes of various artists for money-making are examined. Thomas H. Wentworth of Saint John, who had also had some income by selling prints of local fire pictures which he painted, found during the years following 1840 that he had to retail cooking stoves to supplement his meagre earnings. As will be seen, he adopted another expedient later. B. J. Tibbetts, portrait painter, turned to the installation of steamboat engines, and Joseph Toler took over art classes in the Mechanics Institute. Many other portraitists were travelling artisans who remained in provincial centres for but a few weeks, painting the leading citizens and their ladies, or the sons and daughters who were "courting". J. W. Swift of New York set up a studio for a very short time and Albert G. Hoit of Boston was high regarded during a brief visit in 1839. His American reputation was so great that even President Harrison sat to him the next year. While in the "Loyalist City", Mr. Hoit painted the rector of Trinity because of the high and beloved esteem with which he was regarded by his parishioners. A number of citizens took up a subscription to reimburse the artist for the costly frame which was put on before presentation to the reverend gentleman. The local people said it was not fitting that a stranger should bear the whole cost. By 1850, what the camera lucida had started, the daguerreotypist had finished, and visits of these miniature and other artists seemed to have ceased completely.

The camera lucida did not have a protracted triumph in Saint John. It was outclassed rapidly by the picture making process invented by that ingenious Frenchman, M. Daguerre who in 1839 perfected a unique method whereby an image could be fixed on a mercury coated metal plate by light reflection. The camera had been borne. Resultant pictures he named in honour of himself "daguerreotypes." This, the first practical photography, made a tremendous sensation when publicly demonstrated late that year in Paris. New York, Philadelphia and Boston amateurs were enthusiastically experimenting with picture taking a few months later. Daguerreotypes are said to have been first taken in Canada at Quebec City during the following October. Technical improvements such as the introduc-

tion of lenses that would pass more light and the increased light sensitivity of the coated plates made the device commercially useful. Two more years and daguerreotype studios in metropolitan centres were fairly common and being well patronized.

The new process of portrait taking was introduced to Saint John in May, 1842, by Clephen J. Clow who five years previously had done portraiture in Halifax, possibly with a camera lucida. His Saint John studio was in the Commercial Hotel where the light was sufficient to allow picture taking from ten to three o'clock each day. Evidently he was a miniature painter who, like others, quickly foresaw that old methods would soon be obsolete and consequently adopted the new and still very novel daguerreotype process. He offered, in his announcements, to take likenesses which would "give the exact resemblance and most accurate delineation of the features, and are equal if not superior to the finest engravings." Several specimens of the "novel and highly interesting art" were available for inspection by those who had not seen any before. He supplied pictures in neat morocco cases for five dollars. On the other hand, Clow was still prepared to paint miniatures on ivory for more conservative tastes at prices ranging from five to twenty dollars. He stayed a part of the summer and then moved on to other centres.

The local artist, Thomas H. Wentworth, also realized that a revolution was taking place in portraiture. He went to the States where he learned daguerreotype taking from Messrs. Hodkinson and Butters and on his return to Saint John turned his studio over James G. Melick's Watch Shop into a daguerreotype gallery. This was opened in September following Clow's departure. Here he photographed the local people for three and a half years at four dollars per picture, and here, as with Clow, he offered to do portraits in colour, india ink and pencil. There is no indication that he ever used a camera lucida.

Daguerreotype taking was overwhelmingly in tune with the spirit and life of early Victorian Saint John. This was the age of mechanization in the colonies. The steam boat was replacing the sailing ship, steam saw mills were being introduced, and talk was in the air of railways. The Mechanics Institute was one major factor in fostering the spirit of mechanical progress locally. It undertook the task of educating the artisan so that he would be ready to step into prospective openings for foremen mechanics. Such hordes crowded into the institute's halls to hear lectures on magnetism, galvanism, physics, electricity, light and the properties of gases that the directors were obliged

to take over Hopley's Theatre at the Golden Ball Corner to accommodate the eager young men. Advertisements of the day proclaimed that knowledge was the power which would raise the individual above his fellow men and everyone seemed ready to delve not only into the practical but also the fundamental principles of scientific learning. The lecturers, teachers and leaders in the movement were impressively broad in their spirit and outlook. These progressive men read, talked and thought widely and deeply, applying their knowledge to perfect inventions embracing everything from perpetual motion machines to improved steam engines. One of these intellectually brilliant lecturers was the impractical and usually poverty-stricken Robert Foulis.

Foulis's background comprised all of the elements that would seem desirable in the training of a pioneer daguerreotype artist. He had been born in Glasgow in 1796 where he had had to abandon the study of medicine through ill health. He was, however, a brilliant science student and is said to have been a classmate and friend of the great Faraday, but came to America and took up portrait painting in Halifax. Three years later (1822) he arrived in Saint John where he devoted himself to studying civil engineering and chemical and electrical experimentation. Eventually this genius who, like Watt, had always been fascinated by steam, invented the world's first steam fog horn in 1854-9. He opened a School of Arts in Giannini's Dancing Academy in 1839 where his lectures in chemistry, so he declared, were "intended to excite a laudable curiosity for further research"; he also taught painting and mechanical drawing. Sometimes Foulis lectured at the Mechanics Institute, two discourses delivered in March, 1844, were on "Chemistry as applied to the Arts." One of these certainly dealt with his early experiments in photo-engraving, and the other was probably on daguerreotypes. He had little time during the following year for picture taking since he was engrossed in schemes to promote provincial steam saw mills on a principle developed by himself. Any anticipated financial gain failed to materialize, and the man was once more in his perennial impecunious circumstances.

Foulis at this point turned to daguerreotypes as a possible way to earn a few dollars. He took as partner James G. Melick, the watchmaker. Melick probably owned the Prince William Street premises above his own shop which Thomas H. Wentworth had recently vacated. Melick had undoubtedly often seen Wentworth at work and probably learned the process from him;

at any rate, watchmaking experience would be very useful in constructing and repairing the cameras. Wentworth's rooms were re-opened under Foulis and Melick management in March, 1846, with charges of three dollars for each picture with a case and "no charge unless a satisfactory likeness is produced." They moved to No. 2 Dock Street in November, and then at the year's end terminated their partnership. This was "in consequence of finding that their rights as freemen of this City might be invaded with impunity." Actually Foulis, who didn't stay at any one thing for very long, was probably tired of a picture taker's restricted routine and wanted to return to his beloved and wildly erratic inventions. He retired from daguerreotype work completely while his partner, Melick, carried on alone for at least another five years being in 1851 adjudged a leading provincial daguerreotypist. Melick later moved to Hampton where he lived to a ripe old age.

The Vining and Reed gallery opened a few months after that of Foulis and Melick over Lockhart's hat shop at the corner of Prince William and Market Square. It was called the "St. John Daguerrian and New Brunswick Photographic Gallery." This was the first local use of the term "photograph". It had been coined by Sir John Herschel in 1839 and is usually associated with the early English experiments where positive photographic prints were made almost from the very first from negatives. The great attraction of Vining and Reed pictures were their supposed resistance to the "action of air, moisture and light for centuries, without the possibility of being faded or damaged." The restoration of faded daguerreotypes had reached large proportions by the 1850s. This firm gave instructions in picture taking and sold photographic supplies, indicating the beginnings of local amateur photography. Ever anxious to make a little extra money, Vining and Reed advertised that "Persons wishing likenesses of sick and deceased persons, can be waited upon at their residences."

John Nelson's name first appears in Saint John late in 1847. His "Miniature Likenesses" set in "Splendid Locketts" were very appropriate for Christmas gifts and "as perfect as can be produced in New York." His small pictures in plain cases cost \$1, in silk velvet cases 6/3, and in enamelled cases 7/6. Large "Plate" daguerreotype likenesses suitable for drawing room walls he sold at from 15/- to 25/-; others sold this size for as much as 40/-. Nelson was an ambitious man and a bit of an adventurer—the California gold fever had struck Saint John and dreaming of the proverbial pot of gold at the rainbow's end,

John Nelson went with others to seek his fortune in the west. Also, like at least one other Saint John man, James Quinton, he realized that more California gold could be collected by other methods when panning at the workings. He took over partial operation of a store. His partner, writing in January of 1850, described Nelson as "a real Blue Nose and a shrewd money-making man", estimating that he would net more than \$2,000 profit on the year's operations. Evidently Nelson felt that he had made his pile already for he was back in Saint John before June 6th when he announced that

"he has returned from California, and is prepared to take Daguerreotype likeness, at his old place in King St. executed in a style superceded by none. He begs to say that he has obtained all the latest improvements in the Art."

Nelson's specialty was children's portraiture, taken "almost instantaneously" by a new process. (Ten years before, exposures exceeding five minutes and taken in the full blazing sun were often necessary.) Improvements in photography had already eliminated long exposures which ruined the clarity of many earlier efforts. Even yet old men shaking with palsy could not be photographed under any circumstances, and few children could be kept still for long enough.

Prior to his California trip, John Nelson had been in Fredericton briefly, and at the same time a most interesting man, William Henry Rulofson, who had probably spent his boyhood in Saint John, was taking daguerreotypes in that centre. Rulofson had been there in business on a previous occasion and returned in March, 1848, but we don't know if he or A. G. Kimball and G. H. Brown who were in Fredericton in 1846, were the first photographers there. If Rulofson was first, he must have been indeed a very young man, for he had been born in King's County in 1826 making him only 22 in 1848. Already he had travelled through Europe and the Eastern United States learning the fine points of photography, but had seemingly avoided Saint John where his brother had spent some time in the county gaol for stealing funds from his dry goods store employer. It was a real family disgrace, for the grandfather had been an officer in a Loyalist Regiment and a leading citizen on the Hammond River. Young William Henry Rulofson returned from England to Saint John just for long enough to marry before moving on to Fredericton where his first son was born. It is easy to visualize him and Nelson discussing the prospects of Cali-

fornia for they both set out shortly after. Rulofson on the long voyage around the Horn photographed "everything of interest from a Patagonian savage to a Brazilian emperor."

The California career of this early New Brunswick photographer was quite astonishing. From his travelling studio on wheels in which he visited the diggings to exchange photographs "for the folks back home" for gold dust or nuggets, he moved into a permanent San Francisco gallery. This grew under his initiative to be one of the great photographic salons of the old west, and indeed when he died in 1878 from an accidental fall while inspecting a new sky light, it was said to be the only photographic establishment in the world with an elevator. At that time he employed 34 hands including six Chinese, "faithful, industrious and expert, valuable aids in the mounting and finishing department." He had a file of 2581 glass negatives of people of note including the Earl of Dufferin, Don Pedro, Emperor of Brazil, Generals Grant and Sherman, P. T. Barnum, and Edwin Booth. These were sold after his death to a poet who scraped and then used them to build a hothouse in the Oakland Hills. Rulofson in 1873 had the distinction of receiving the gold medal in Vienna for the world's best photograph and was at one time president of the American Photographic Society.

And what of Rulofson's brother, Edward? He went to the United States as well where first his wife and child mysteriously disappeared. There was a suspicion of foul play. Then he became alternately a Professor of Philology and a leader of a trio of criminals in New York who were responsible for many crimes of violence. When years later he was finally convicted, he railed loudly against his two brothers on the eve of his hanging, claiming that they had left him to his fate. Actually one or both of them had paid for his defense. Edward's chief claim to fame was that he was the subject of an American News Company thriller entitled "The Man of Two Lives."

Two opposition galleries were set up shortly after Nelson returned to Saint John. William Pender, who had visited the principal daguerreotype galleries of the United States, and Eastern and Western Canada, took rooms in the Market Building off Germain Street where for as little as five shillings he could "secure the shadow ere the substance fadeth." With the latest German instrument, either a Voigtlander lense or a French imitation, sold widely as "German", he noted that his portraits were

"warranted to possess perfect resemblances to the original and to have the natural colour of any shade

required from the dark hue of the Ethiopian to that of the fair daughter of New Brunswick."

Pender's stay in Saint John was short. The next year, 1852, Thomas H. Ellison set up a permanent gallery. Ellison almost immediately afterwards received a prize for the best daguerreotype taken in New Brunswick at the annual Provincial Exhibition for the Encouragement of Agriculture, Home Manufacture and Commerce, held at Fredericton; Nelson had been co-winner with Melick the previous year. Ellison regarded daguerreotyping as a skilled craft or trade. He had already travelled around New Brunswick for several years having been in Fredericton as early as the 1848 Christmas season. He noted when opening his new Saint John Gallery that he had "served a regular Apprenticeship at the Profession (not having abandoned a former business as some who are now practicing the art have done)". This slighting reference may have been directed towards Nelson. Three years later he was so certain of his proficiency that he offered to wager \$100 or \$250 against any man in Saint John or any other city in America who could produce a picture equal in tone, clarity, finish and appearance to that taken in his establishment. The challenge was "to be decided by two of the most experienced Daguerreotype Artists in the United States." There is no record of any acceptance. Ellison made some additional money by taking daguerreotypes for use in making engraving for the London Illustrated News and other papers, but an 1858 notice appeared in the local paper naming Thomas H. as an insolvent debtor.

Travelling daguerreotypists were operating in New Brunswick at the same time who replaced the roving miniature painters. One of these was A. K. Coffin who had his "Coffin's Travelling Daguerrian Saloon" at Fredericton for a few months during 1851. The colourful name conjures up an image of a wagon similar to a gypsy's caravan; whether this is a correct interpretation is conjectural.

Meanwhile John Nelson began to feel the effect of the rival businesses. He considered that the best way to meet opposition was combining expansion with subtle flattery so in June, 1853, he moved his cameras to larger quarters in Benjamin Smith's new building on Germain adjoining Trinity Church. Here he said that he could take as good daguerreotypes as the art was capable of producing but

"as the public are the best judges, he wishes them to judge for themselves, and believes that our New

Brunswick people are possessed of as much artistic taste as any in the world."

He remained there for only a month and a half before going to rooms near the Customs House where his price was also cut as an attraction to business. He tells of elaborate facilities at the new stand:

"The operating room is constructed upon the latest and most improved principle, with sky lights so arranged as to throw the rays at an angle of forty-five degrees, thus giving the true angle of light and shade, and without which it is impossible to produce a durable or perfect likeness."

Henry Chubb, Saint John's veteran newspaper editor and a former mayor, added further details of this modern photographic salon. He wrote that

"We have lately been struck with some beautifully executed likenesses exhibited at the door of Mr. John Nelson, Daguerreotype Artist, adjoining the Custom House. We have stopped, paused, admired and ultimately ventured upstairs, and cannot but do ourselves the pleasure in justice to Mr. Nelson, that we have never seen more *Lifelike Appearances*. He also has the ability of throwing into his pictures that depth of light and shade the likenesses to do all but speak. We strongly advise our friends when they come to this city, to go to his studio and obtain for their friends, what after death, is to their survivors the most precious relic that can be obtained. Mr. Nelson has a large collection of beautiful articles belonging to his profession, and a fine-toned Piano Forte to amuse his friends, whilst their relatives are waiting to obtain from him that exact likeness which none but a master in his art, like himself, can produce. We heartily wish this gentleman that success which his talents entitle him to."

Mr. Chubb might have added that he had his own picture taken on this occasion. It still survives looking out from its highly silvered metallic background; the portrait fully lives up to all the praise bestowed on the taker for life likeness of the picture, since the minute and delicately etched face is well modelled and a work of real artistic quality.

Unfortunately many a success story has an unsuccessful ending. A notice signed by irate creditors was posted on December 10th, 1853 denouncing John Nelson as an absconding

debtor. The shrewd Blue-Nose was not shrewd enough to realize the dangers of overexpansion and only survived for four months in his new and elegant quarters.

The experimental and pioneer phase of picture taking lasted for only ten years in Saint John and then the numbers of photographers increased rapidly. In 1857 there were five and by 1862 seven as well as a store selling nothing but photographic supplies. This can not be attributed merely to technical advances which made picture taking both easier and cheaper. It was also due to a real fondness among the public generally for the truthful or "speaking" likenesses with every wrinkle and undulation of the skin faithfully reproduced. The Victorian loved the candid unconventional poses which formed such a marked contrast to the stiff painted miniatures. A doggerel poem graphically sums up this basic fondness for the daguerreotype portrait. It was composed in Saint John during 1852 by a young man who mailed it to his mother along with a new picture in which, seated with his hat on, he gazes out over the top of a half opened magazine. He wrote these "Lines to Accompany a Daguerreotype:"

Dear Mother o'mine, I send you this case,
 Containing my features, my figure and face,
 So carefully limned by the art of Daguerre,
 That I smiled when I saw it produced as 'tis there.
 'Tis odd, I admit, and you will not see why
 I should all the rules of decorum defy,
 As I sit for my portrait, and let that old hat
 Have a place in the picture—but you'll overlook that,
 When I tell you that I've an affection for those
 Indispensable articles called by us clothes.
 So if my best coat was brought into view,
 Why should not my hat be immortalized too?
 'Twill not please you, I know, that I should have
 thought fit

In the careless posture before you to sit:
 But if your anger will vanish, and smiles will replace
 The frown that now darkens your time-honoured face,
 For you that cannot resist it—I know that you'll feel
 Contagious merriment over you steal;
 And while you reproach me, with face still demure,
 Relentingly say, "But 'tis like him, be sure!"
 There's the old smile of boyhood—the eye that once
 turned

With affection to thee, whence the lessons I learned
 Of patient endurance, of virtue and truth,
 That have been my protection in manhood and youth.

There's the old easy manner, from which you forebode
My pathway in life a profitless road.
Your forebodings came true—but I'll never let care
Change the careless expression the picture doth wear.
Then open with kindness the satin-lined look
And let no severity dwell on your look,
If you say the expression you cannot endure,
Just add as you close it, 'It's like him, be sure.' "

The technique and materials of picture taking changed rapidly. A phase was begun in 1856 when three galleries advertised ambro-types as well as the more common daguerreotypes. These were Joseph Durland, James Heath, and Flood's Gallery (patronized by His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor). Each had display stands between the sidewalks and curb that were considered by many people a public nuisance as an obstruction to pedestrians. Ambrotypes were a curious offshoot of experimental work in which the collodion emulsion on a glass plate when developed had the properties of transparent darks and opaque whites. This glass plate was then mounted in front of a black background giving the effect of a positive. They were produced for only a few years. Many were tinted, just as daguerreotypes often had daubs of red applied to cheeks to add a realistic touch; the sedate Saint John ladies would have scorned the use of paint in the flesh.

Every daguerreotype and ambrotype picture was still unique for negatives from which any number of positives could be made were apparently not yet in use in Saint John. The English had been using transparent paper negatives from the first but the idea had not "caught on" in France or America. They were introduced at about the same time as ambrotypes in the form known as "Cartes de visite". These were being sold by all of the local photographers by 1863. People flocked to the galleries for these little positive prints that were the rage in France, England and the United States. They had been first designed in 1858 as a sort of calling card for Parisians and were produced cheaply by cameras with moveable lenses that could take eight poses on a single plate. These were cut into separate pictures. Their use was sufficiently widespread and common to warrant the shop next to Flood's Gallery selling "ne plus ultra Portimies" or "Photographic purses" in 1862. These special pocket books were fitted with a folding case to hold six "Cartes de visite" photographs in addition to the regular coin and bill compartments, and were no more bulky than the normal purses. "Cartes de visite" spelled photography for the masses. They were cheap, could be turned out quickly, and were made by the

thousand. So within twenty years from Clow's first daguerreotypes, all of the essential processes of modern photography had been introduced, even to the exploitation of picture taking as a mass commercial proposition.

Our Victorian ancestors demanded that their rooms should be embellished with cord hangings, their chairs with tassels and antamacassars, and their parlors with stuffed birds. They demanded also that their "Cartes de visite" and tin-types should be dressed up; the simple unadorned head was not nearly enough. Accordingly Mr. Durland, who had taken a partner, installed in 1862 a new gadget in his photographic gallery. It was, a visitor remarked:

"a splendid rural sketch which they use as a background in taking likenesses. It is so arranged as to produce with almost marvellous exactness, a beautiful outdoor scene. The Likenesses taken with this background, many of which we have seen, impress the beholder with the idea that the artist has been testing his skill in any other place than within the four walls of a room. The painter, by a very ingenious contrivance, has succeeded in arranging the background so as to represent the person before the Camera as if standing on a neatly flagged walk. This is an effect which we have not hitherto seen produced, and it seems to harmonize exactly with the rest of the sketch. Messrs. Durland and Sanders have now on hand some admirable specimens of "Cartes de visites" taken with this new representation, and they are well worthy of a minute examination."

Such was the introduction of portrait-taking by mechanical means in Saint John. It was a flourishing business in the 1860s with James R. Woodburn photographing the Honourable S. L. Tilley and his friends and sparing "no efforts to satisfy fully all who favour him with their patronage." Flood's Photographic and Ambrotype Gallery also executed Sphero-types, Cartes de Visite, and cabinet photographs "in the very best manner and on the most reasonable terms" but like cautious business men who do not "trust all of their eggs in one basket", this latter establishment, as did the firm of Bowron and Cox, also sold "new and second hand pianos."