

Grace Tomkinson

MY TWO WORLDS

"Now when I was your age" has always been a popular theme-song with parents. According to my father, the children of his day were little Spartans, thriving hardily on the plainest fare, which was just a little above the traditional "bread and point" of the impoverished early settlers (interpreted as "a slice of bread and point your knife at the butter"). They expected no luxuries, little playtime, and certainly no pocket money. They cheerfully did endless chores and trudged through snowdrifts up to their necks to sit on hard benches under stern schoolmasters.

My brother and I were not easily impressed. We lived in the farmhouse where our father was born, travelled the same road to the one-roomed country schoolhouse with a roaring box stove in the centre and the identical homemade benches, and were aware of no great hardship. We particularly enjoyed ploughing through the snowdrifts. Nothing he recalled seemed strange to us except the singing-school. That weekly institution, highly regarded (even by my father, who was tone-deaf) had regrettably died out. We could only imagine the bare walls of our school-room echoing with "do-re-mi-fahs" and possibly "Lardy Dah" or "Cousin Jedediah." Our singing instruction had to come from joining our neighbours on Sunday evenings in the old Moody and Sankey hymns with my mother at the piano (another archaic social custom).

However forbidding a picture he drew, none of our father's early experiences, or even his father's, could make our eyes widen as my grandchildren's do at my tall tales of growing up on a New Brunswick farm around the turn of the century. They feel as close to the first Elizabethans as to that benighted era which had no radios or television, no light switches, no aircraft or automobiles, and very few telephones. Trying to convey it to them makes me feel slightly Neanderthal. It is no news that while life has changed phenomenally everywhere in the past fifty years, not very many (except the Wandering Jew) have had the privilege my contemporaries and I have had of living in two completely different worlds, or leaping from the almost mediaeval to the interplanetary age.

Tradition and the wilderness both die hard in the Maritime Provinces. In my childhood they were always close, breathing over our shoulders.

We lived in a kind of timeless state in which the folkways of our forefathers had been preserved intact along with many of their treasured possessions: grandfather clocks, great iron kettles (invaluable for scalding pigs at butchering time), bellows, spinning-wheels, candle snuffers, warming-pans, and wooden cradles. Few of them had been retired from active service, and not wholly for sentimental reasons. Inborn thriftiness had something to do with it. Perhaps there had been too many frugal Scots among us and too little hard cash. Today few of us find it easy to throw anything, however useless, away.

Even the nature of places changed little, which was not surprising when one remembers that there was little moving about and that three generations of a family might live and die in the same house. Each community remained curiously stamped with the characteristics of its first settlers. Our father could tell us the exact type of people still to be found in any of the communities in our end of the county: shiftless and ignorant or hard-working and law-abiding; Irish-Catholics, Methodists, godless, or strait-laced Presbyterians who sang only the Psalms and started them with a tuning-fork.

While we clung to the old ways, there was an uneasy feeling as we grew older that we might be behind the times. Young people who had managed to get as far as Boston came home with patronizing airs, boasting of the opportunities there and (what made every girl especially envious) flaunting stylish clothes. If we ventured to complain of the disadvantages of living in such a backwater, our parents reminded us that two very noble careers were open to young women in our Provinces, teaching and nursing. Both, unfortunately, required a certain outlay of that rare commodity, money. The only other possible vocation was matrimony.

It took me some years to discover that our handicaps might become assets. I have been given more credit than I deserve for my research in writing of the early days. It was largely a matter of memory. It meant considerable checking and re-checking in various libraries and Provincial Archives, but no detail of my ancestors' daily life was entirely strange to me, even as far back as pre-Loyalist days. It was easy for me to picture how the Nobles and Lumleys lived, in my novel *Welcome Wilderness*. The indestructible old houses were still there. The big fireplaces had been bricked in behind modern wood-burning ranges with fancy names like "Home Comfort," but they could be plainly seen. We used the actual furniture they had prized: dropleaf tables, highboys, four-posters, brass candle-sticks, and copper lustre and gold-sprigged china.

I knew how Relief Lumley salted fish, made butter on her up-and-down churn, or mixed lye and grease to produce her own soap. I had watched my father blow up a pig's bladder (by inserting a goose-quill) as Jasper did, to provide a container for the year's supply of lard; or cure and hang choice cuts of beef to give us that delicacy, dried beef. I had seen buckwheat threshed on the barnfloor with a homemade flail and winnowed in a stiff breeze. I had helped thread the tin candle-moulds (another heirloom) with wicking and pour in the hot tallow to harden into satiny white candles. I knew too well the constant battle with our implacable enemy, winter: the seaweed banking laid about the house in the fall to keep out frost; the thawing of frozen pumps and shovelling of mountains of snow.

We were carried even farther back into the past by living in a mixed community. If we English were unprogressive, our Acadian neighbours still lived under the feudal system. They cherished the speech and folkways brought from France with Frontenac and Champlain, and they handed down the songs from the ancient Miracle plays and others long forgotten elsewhere. New Brunswick was never a melting-pot for the two races. Each clung stubbornly to its own language and traditions and, above all, its own religion. But after living together fairly amicably for a century and a half, there was bound to be some overlapping of customs, with their origins forgotten. A New Brunswicker feels surprisingly at home in Normandy today.

Perhaps the French were not the first to give newly-married couples a hilarious serenade from the groom's friends, accompanied by the noise of tin pans, cowbells, horns, shot-guns and every other available noisemaker; but they contributed the common name, *charivari* or, Anglicized, "shivaree." The outdoor dance-stage erected in our part of the Province on festive occasions may still be seen at Norman village *fêtes*. The Surettes' wool-washing, which I described in *Her Own People*, was another ancient European custom adopted by the English when soft water was scarce. All of us slept on feather beds over straw ticks, with wooden slats (never springs) beneath, though some old spool beds still had supports of criss-crossed rope. After the ticks were taken out at spring-cleaning time to be re-filled, the straw rustled pleasantly and fragrantly under the sleeper.

Attending school with French children and visiting their bare little houses added variety to our narrow routine of living and made us familiar with theirs. That was all in fascinating contrast to ours: the sand-scrubbed floors, the homemade furniture and religious pictures, the incredibly wrinkled and brown *grand-mères* tirelessly running their spinning-wheels

or weaving what we called "French linen" (from their own flax) and grey homespun cloth (from their own sheep's backs) to provide clothing for the family, especially the men and boys.

We were never as gay at our tasks as our Acadian neighbours, who made a game of everything. They were always having frolics or celebrations of some sort, with lively music from mouth-organs, fiddles, or jew's harps, and square-dancing in the tiny rooms. There was less dancing and fiddling among the English, but there was still a good deal of laughter. Each season brought some excitement, even the winter, when we were at the mercy of the weather. We had candy pulls and pie socials when the roads were not impassable, and skating on the pond around a crackling bonfire when the ice happened to be clear of snow. All ages turned out then, some with antiquated skates made by a local blacksmith, with steel blades turned up in front and set in wooden foot-pieces held on by straps. We smiled at them, but they appeared to give the wearer no more trouble than our modern steel Acme's, which clamped on to our boots and were forever coming off.

In summer we had picnics, swimming in the Strait, and excursions with other families to the blueberry barrens or the burnt-over common land where wild strawberries and raspberries grew in amazing profusion. We were cautioned to keep an eye out for bears, though we never encountered any except the moth-eaten cinnamon one which came ambling through the country once a year, led by a swarthy keeper with a pirate's moustache and a red kerchief about his neck. That was an event in itself. The pair always arrived at the school yard at recess time. We children kept well back with nervous but rapturous squeals while the bear stood on his hind legs and danced for us in heavy lunges and steps, keeping his head turned away as if he felt embarrassed at playing a part so beneath him. After one of the boys was perhaps bold enough to accept a ride on his back and a few pennies were collected, the animal padded patiently off on all fours. We watched regretfully till he was only a slow-moving brown spot on the dusty road.

Another school highlight was the annual Examination Day, when the trustees were expected to ask a few perfunctory questions to satisfy themselves that the teacher had done a good job. The little ones spoke pieces and the big Fifth Reader girls stood up and proclaimed dramatically: "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight" or "The Lips That Touch Liquor Shall Never Touch Mine." (The big boys were missing, being needed on the farm at Examination time). Fall brought the excitement of the Exhibition where, if our prayers for fine weather were answered, we might

compare our neighbours' fat cattle with our own, stare at their mammoth pumpkins, and wonder why their speckled rooster got First Prize and ours did not.

It was no pretentious County Fair energetically organized by strangers, but an informal neighbourly gathering, an annual reunion of widely scattered old friends and an opportunity for the young to make new ones. It was not an unadulterated joy for the men and boys who had to be up before daylight to drive their reluctant livestock some ten miles into town and trudge wearily home behind them at night. But the crisp October air was charged with excitement from the moment the gates were opened, mounting gradually till time for the afternoon horse-racing. The women might be more interested in exchanging family gossip and admiring each other's entries—tempting loaves of bread, frosted cakes, golden butter, gleaming jellies; knitted afghans and bedspreads, embroidered towels and centrepieces, patchwork quilts and elaborate hooked mats, among them some examples of native good taste and real creative talent. The women also had to snatch time while in town to visit the dry-goods store and the millinery shop. If they had to leave the latter (when times were poor) without a new fall hat, they had, at least, ideas for re-trimming old ones.

Soon after that the long winter closed in. When nothing else happened the weather could furnish thrilling drama. With no forecasts except what might be learned from studying the almanac, scanning the skies, or observing the dog or cat eating grass, we were continually being taken unaware by equinoctial gales, high tides which crept alarmingly up over the marshes and threatened our pasture land, or blizzards. Each year brought its quota of those, when we could barely struggle home from school through the smothering, blinding snow which might keep us marooned for days. As soon as the sky cleared there was the excitement of seeing the men in the district turn out to "break" the roads.

We watched eagerly till they came in sight, the only sign of life in a silent, frozen world—acres of undulating blue-white snow, dazzling in the sunlight, with white caps on fence-posts, white thatches on the well-house, the barn, and other outbuildings, and white puffs on the dusky branches of the spruces and fir trees. We listened for the muted ring of shovels and the reassuring sound of human voices, while the powdery snow was flung up in glittering clouds. Then we joyously hailed the first pung to venture through, with runners squeaking on the frosty road and the shrill, delicious music of bells.

The French, living closer to the shore and making their living mainly from the sea, were more dependent on the elements than we. They ran constant risk of having their small boats overturned in sudden squalls or crushed in the drift ice coming down from the North in the spring. But both races had always had their melodramatic escapes and, occasionally, tragedies. Men lost their way in the woods, were mistaken in the hunting season for moose or deer, were pinned under falling trees while logging or were trapped in the middle of the harbour when they rashly attempted to cross as the treacherous spring ice was about to break up.

No one had to tell my generation how precariously the earlier ones had lived or how philosophically they settled down to occupy themselves in long winter evenings, shelling quantities of beans which had been picked and dried, mending harnesses, carding and spinning wool, holding skeins of yarn to be wound into balls, and eternally knitting to keep a family in mittens and stockings. We had seen most of it done. I had taken a hand at hooking on my mother's mats and had watched her draw her own designs on burlap bags and color her rags, as her mother and grandmother had done, with onion skins, copperas, or hemlock bark. It was only for a special effort that she might buy a gaily stamped canvas and store dyes. When the mat came out of the frames and was suitably admired (after weeks of tedious labor), a quilt went in. My quilting, like my hooking, was never up to standard, but I learned to appreciate patient craftsmanship and the traditional patterns with the beautiful names—"Log Cabin," "Wedding Ring," "Double Irish Chain."

What I enjoyed more in those evenings was listening to stories of the early days or various versions of the old songs like "Barbara Allen" and the "Come-all-ye's." There had been no mysterious crimes in our neighbourhood to inspire local ballads, not even the usual haunted house where a pedlar had been murdered. But stirring tales of our north-east coast had been handed down—of children stolen by Indians, of the great Miramichi fire, of burning phantom ships periodically sailing up and down, or of the Saxby gale, which came closer home and was within my father's memory.

My mother made desperate attempts to keep up with current styles through "fashion-books" from the States and Eaton's catalogue, but I was quite familiar with previous modes. The dolmans, basques, and bustles of the eighties were still worn by elderly ladies—and why not, if they were not worn out? Dignified grandmothers came to us for tea, carrying wicker cap-boxes. When they had removed their outdoor bonnets, tied primly with ribbons under their chins, they took out dainty caps to cover their

thinning hair. Almost every one, in her youth, had worn some sort of cap: a night-cap, a morning or evening cap, christening caps for babies. A lady's dress cap was an elaborate creation of lace and ribbons. "Second-best" caps were plainer, of black or white net.

The dress of a still earlier period I knew even better. Among the treasures in our attic were copies of old magazines such as *The Floral Wreath*, *The Floral Album*, *Godey's Lady's Book*. The latter, I regret to say, I was allowed to cut up for paper dolls when other sources failed. I was not very enthusiastic about doll ladies mincing along in hoop skirts, and I was embarrassed for the little girls showing their frilled pantalettes, but the pictures were better than nothing. They carried me back into their world, and I learned more than the prevailing fashions. I discovered, among other things, how a lady might profitably fill in her leisure time. Beside the latest knitting, tatting, and crochet patterns, I found directions for bead and bugle work, hair work (admittedly difficult for amateurs), and crewel and shell work. One art described in detail by *Godey's* was the making of attractive artificial flowers from wood shavings. That appealed to me since the raw materials needed (wood shavings and dye) were more likely to be at hand than the beads and bugles, satins and velvets, required by others, but I never got very far with it.

Our house held numerous proofs that our early Victorian relatives had time to kill. We had handsomely beaded and fringed watch-pockets, pin-cushions, hair-receivers, tea-cosies, and match-holders; and one ingenious, much-admired ornament called a jumble-jar, made by covering an old bean-crock with putty, imbedding in it any small object at hand, and covering the whole with gilt paint.

It seems extraordinary in this day of violent changes that houses, anywhere, could have remained so much as they were a century before; but it would have been considered recklessly extravagant to buy new furnishings while the old remained usable. It would also have been difficult, since chairs and tables could not be obtained by trading butter, eggs, or wool. People had to be satisfied with their old pieces, made with pride to endure and infinitely superior to the store furniture available. The problem of floor coverings could be solved by hooked or braided mats. If a parlour must have a carpet, that was also homemade. Ours had been woven in a colorful pattern of broad stripes by my Nova Scotia grandmother, from wool she had grown, spun, and dyed. When it was demoted to the sitting-room and replaced by an ugly mail-order one, our parlour was never the same.

I was apologetic about our parlour at any time. Some of our neighbours had elegant ones like the Snowballs in *Her Own People*, crammed with slippery horsehair furniture and draped with heavy lace curtains, lambrequins, and antimacassars. The walls were hidden under formidable enlarged family portraits, pictures of the Royal Family at various stages, and fascinating Currier and Ives prints such as "The Drunkard's Progress." They had organs, mantelpieces, and whatnots loaded with bric-a-brac and souvenirs from foreign ports. We had had no sea-faring ancestor to collect Oriental gimcracks, and our parents had managed to beat off the glib assaults of itinerant portrait salesmen. We had only my mother's piano, which lent the room some distinction, a cherished Franklin stove, dreary steel engravings, and our inherited furniture, which included a bookcase. That held old editions of the classics, with, characteristically, more poetry than prose. (Poets were generally appreciated in the early Maritime Provinces, and verse-writing was a popular pastime). There were religious books for Sunday reading (one of my grandfathers had been a minister), and the big family Bible had its own table. A small volume in ancient calf, particularly recommended to me, was that melancholy tale of youthful piety, *The Dairyman's Daughter*. A sort of classic in its day, it may have helped form the character of previous generations but it only left me with the conviction that the good die young.

When it came to describing pioneer remedies, I was completely at home. A great-aunt, whose forebears had landed with the Yorkshire emigrants and who still retained traces of their accent, was known as a great "herb-woman." Long after she was gone, her family had implicit faith in her unpalatable concoctions. Each year we gathered the ingredients for them: bayberry bark, tansy, wormwood, peppermint, and gold-thread (for sore mouth). We were dosed all winter with scalding ginger tea, red-pepper tea, infusions of senna or sorrel leaves, and tamarind water. Goose grease and turpentine took care of a cough that did not demand a mustard plaster. May snow was good for "sore eyes". Flax-seed had many uses. Sulphur and molasses was the universal spring tonic. Assafoetida was the evil-smelling panacea for everything and, since people were more given to fainting then, the camphor bottle was always at hand.

What our diet lacked in variety was partly supplemented by those disagreeable medicines. We appreciated what we had enormously, and there were some delicacies a gourmet might envy: fresh clams and quahaugs whenever we wanted them enough to walk through our woods pasture to the shore and dig them; a barrel of fat Shemogue oysters in the cellar every fall and smelts caught almost in the dooryard. Spring brought

fresh herring, speckled trout, lobsters, and shad, as well as maple syrup for pancakes made from our own buckwheat. We thrived on dark bread (from our wheat ground at the nearest grist mill) covered with butter we had helped to churn or molasses brought in great puncheons by ship from the West Indies and retailed at the store at the "corner" in gallon jugs. One traditional Christmas dish of the pioneers my father always prepared. He saved some of his choicest wheat grains at threshing-time for fumerty, boiling it all day on the kitchen stove with sugar and spices and frequent stirring and sampling.

Large cellars were needed for storage, keeping our winter vegetables from frost (if we were lucky) and milk cool in summer. They held crocks and jars filled with preserves—black currant, wild strawberry, raspberry, rhubarb, plum, crab-apple, gooseberry, and cherry, along with jelly and chow-chow. Eggs packed in coarse salt stayed fresh, as did cranberries in water. When we lifted the inside trap door to go down to the fearsome, dark cavern (armed with a tallow candle), we were assaulted by an unforgettable aroma compounded of potatoes, turnips, carrots, parsnips, cabbages, beets, apples, and salt or smoked fish. We had no ice-boxes, not even the antiquated kind with a drip-pan beneath. We had ice-houses. When the lake ice was considered sufficiently thick, farmers began cutting out great blocks of it and hauling them home on sleds. Buried deep in sawdust in an ice-house, they would keep milk sweet in warm weather and cold enough to raise cream. They might even provide an occasional treat of ice-cream.

Beside inheriting the material comforts of the eighteenth century, we clung to many of its ideas and turns of speech. We could not boast of the rich variety of obsolete words and colorful expressions still current in Newfoundland, but we had a few. The verb "to frig" (to fuss or bustle about) is undoubtedly Shakespeare's "to firk," with pronunciation and meaning very slightly altered. "Prog" (food) goes back at least to Swift. "Starrigan," a dead tree root (unknown to Webster), had become more of an epithet. It was no compliment to call a woman an old "starrigan" or a man a "feckless gomeril." We had metaphors suited to people of the farms and the sea (the fog might be "anchored outside all day"), and similes—"as pretty as a nest of eggs," "chasing like a shot cat," to fit "like a duck's foot in the mud," "puny as the last run of shad." The Loyalists had bequeathed us "as lazy as a Hessian soldier."

Our father lived by the almanac or several of them (put out by patent medicine firms), and not altogether for weather forecasts. It was interesting to look ahead and see when the next thaw or blizzard would occur

even though the guesses were frequently wrong. What were more important were the signs of the zodiac and the moon's phases. These had to be constantly studied to know when to put in the crops (though, in our short growing season, the ground being free from frost was the first consideration). Root vegetables did better when planted in the old of the moon, but above-ground seed which went in then was likely to rot. Sheep must be sheared when the moon was on the wane to ensure a good thick fleece, but pork butchered then would shrink in cooking.

Not all the superstitions we had inherited were taken very seriously, but it did no harm to keep them in mind, and some of our French neighbours' as well. Cutting a baby's nails boded him no good, but when he had an attack of hiccoughs he was thriving. If our mother happened to bake a loaf of bread with a hollow in it big enough to hold her hand, it cast a slight gloom over us, foretelling a death in the family circle. So did a dog howling or a death-watch beetle ticking inside the wall. Our old house was inhabited by so many death-watches that, had they had authentic information, our whole clan would soon have been extinct. We were never allowed to rock an empty chair, raise an umbrella indoors, or seat thirteen at table, and I am still not quite comfortable at meeting a funeral, even in crowded city traffic. Had any female, old or young, presented herself at our door early New Year's morning, it would not have been opened. But no one we knew would make such a mistake. Unless a male visitor arrived first to "let the New Year in," our luck for the year would have been ruined—but not one with a fair complexion. A few dark-haired men in the community thoughtfully made a round of morning calls to forestall such a calamity.

We were not inclined to look back nostalgically on any period as the good old days. We were still living in those days, though we had, admittedly, made some progress. We had elegant hanging-lamps with stained glass shades (as well as plainer ones), and we used candles only to save kerosene. We cooked on stoves with ovens, not in iron pots hung on cranes. We kept milk in tall tin "creamers" instead of in big pans from which the cream had to be carefully skimmed. Farmers owned at least one horse and rarely used oxen. We rode in modern top-buggies, though there were some who refused to give up their old buckboards and canopy-topped surreys.

We were still too close to the past to have any perspective. If our elders had occasion to complain of hard times, it was never suggested that their forebears might have chosen to settle in a more fortunate spot than an isolated corner of the world that was almost an island, or that the

Maritimes might have more to offer in the way of climate, soil, or opportunities. Possibly the Dominion Government had not done all it promised at Confederation time, but we were where Fate (or Providence) had placed us and we could thank our lucky stars that it was by the salt water, not in one of the inland settlements which we regarded as the backwoods hinterland.

While being "stuck fast in yesterday", like Walter de la Mare's Jim Jay, had its drawbacks, we did have something intangible that my grandchildren will have missed. We had a strong feeling of continuity, a warm relationship with our forefathers that enriched our own lives. They were always reassuringly near, reminding us that they had been, literally, over the road we were following. There was a satisfaction and a sense of security, even to a child, in travelling fields his great-grandfather had cleared or standing in the meeting-house he had built and singing the old hymns he had learned under John Wesley in England. It was moving to wander about the old churchyard, parting the wild rose bushes and reading the fading inscriptions on the family headstones. The joys of preparing for the Christmas feast were enhanced by knowing that the ritual of chopping mincemeat or suet and raisins for the plum pudding was exactly as our great-grandmother had done it and perhaps in the identical wooden chopping-bowl.

It would be unthinkable, even in troubled times like ours, to wish the clock put back, and of my two worlds I prefer the challenges and hazards of the present one. But while the earlier one leaned too much on tradition, this one is getting alarmingly far from it. The increasing number of babies born would have a far better prospect of growing up than we had, had they not been plunged into one of the most perilous periods of history. They will be forced to make their way through a strange, new civilization without inheriting adequate equipment, materially or mentally, to cope with it. They may become too absorbed in learning to solve the immediate problems concerned with survival to have time to be indoctrinated with the wisdom of their fathers.

It was wisdom, and we never needed it more than now. The previous generations lived with primitive artifacts, but their minds soared above them. They succeeded in reaching, through centuries of experimenting, a gradually higher state of culture and a code of principles we cannot afford to ignore. There are, fortunately, some indications today (in spite of the current emphasis on scientific achievement) of an awakening on this continent to the fact that no civilization can advance, or even go on existing, without an awareness of history. More and more books are appearing

(and at least one magazine) devoted entirely to re-creating the American past.

It was not our past, though many Canadians have ancestors who shared and contributed significantly to the American heritage. We have an historical culture entirely our own, but unless we keep reminding ourselves that we, too, had giants in the earth, we may lose sight of them. Those of us whose roots go deep in the old Provinces by the sea have never felt the need of apologizing for our pioneers, but our hands today might be strengthened by a re-appraisal of our beginnings. Our forefathers never had to live with guided missiles, but they wrestled with the almost insoluble problems of blazing their own trails through a hostile wilderness and establishing a government. They lived sparsely by our standards, and few acquired great wealth; but they fostered and tended a native culture which permeated the whole country, and they left us an enviable legacy of brains and character.

The *Dalhousie Review* records with deep regret the death on May 22, 1968, of Major J. W. Logan, formerly lecturer in Classics at Dalhousie University and for many years a valued member of the Editorial Advisory Board of Directors of the *Review*.