

A VICTIM OF SCOTTISH CANADIANS

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IN treading the bypaths of Canadian history you may come upon a neglected pamphlet or a quaint old book. As you read, new light shines on a dark place. From a colourless episode suddenly emerges real romance. A drab controversy about trade or politics is transformed into a human story, dramatic in its way, either a tragedy or a comedy as you care to view it, and with elements of both. In an old collection the present writer lately found a little volume. It seemed to be a series of essays, or papers, bound together and of small pamphlet size. The book was unattractive in appearance. The printing was stodgy and uninviting to the eye. It dealt with the affairs of Canada about the year 1822. This is a period in our annals which the historian usually passes over as tame and commonplace, hurrying on to the outbreak of the rebellion in 1837 with brief and breathless allusions to Robert Gourley, the Family Compact, and the doings of that turbulent person whom Sir George Cartier once shocked his hearers by scornfully describing as "Old Mr. Papineau." But in 1822 the curtain had not risen on the liveliest proceedings of these vociferous and at times violent gentlemen. On examination, the pages of the little book were found to teem with vehement criticism; a range of invective adequate to any situation unfolded itself, and there was an imposing and copious selection from the Latin authors. The satire partook of Juvenal and the style of Junius. Who could this brilliant writer be, and what was it all about? There was a slight hint of the mysterious, so fascinating to those who pursue with eagerness the materials for history, and who exult in the belief (usually unfounded) that they have come upon something new.

Placed under the microscopic test of the investigator, the book yielded up part of its secrets. It was, in truth, a tiny periodical, issued weekly, with a Montreal date-line beginning in October, 1822, and finally expiring in June, 1824. The name borne on each title-page was *The Free Press*, and the author, (for nearly all the articles were evidently by one person) issued also a weekly called *The Scribbler*, copies of which—there is reason to believe—are still

extant. The chief purpose of *The Free Press* was to denounce the attempt made in 1822 to unite the provinces of Upper Canada and Lower Canada, and to hold up to scorn and obloquy the "Scotch faction" in Montreal whose nefarious deeds were declared to be destroying the country. Dr. Johnson's witticisms at the expense of the Scots were mild compared with the denunciations of Mr. Samuel Hull Wilcocke, who was the editor and author of the stormy little publication now under review. He must not, of course, be confounded with Wilcocks, a Member of the Upper Canada Legislature, who went over to the enemy in the war of 1812, and gave up his life for the cause he had espoused.

To appreciate the indignation of Mr. Wilcocke, one must picture to one's self the Montreal of a century ago. It was a handsome little city of perhaps 25,000 people. Travellers, both British and American, have written in enthusiastic terms of its fine situation and solid stone houses. "I shall always feel a pleasure in recollecting the time I spent in Montreal," says John Howison in 1821:—"The lightness of the streets, the neatness of the buildings, the hospitality and polished manners of the people, and the air of enterprise and activity that is everywhere exhibited in it are attractive." Equally impressed was John M. Duncan:—"From the opposite bank the town has a showy appearance, and in summer the circumjacent scenery is exceedingly beautiful." It was even then a famous seaport. Ships came from British and West Indian ports and from the Mediterranean. Steam navigation had begun, thanks to the enterprise of John Molson. Three steamers plied between Quebec and Montreal, and—marvellous to relate!—you could make the journey in seventeen hours. The river trade was a flourishing one. Great rafts of timber were floated down the rapids from the Upper St. Lawrence. The Bank of Montreal had just been founded. There were several newspapers.

"The inhabitants are extremely kind to strangers, and many of them entertain in a princely style," says James Strachan of Aberdeen, a canny Scots observer. And this brings us to the point around which the story revolves. The commerce of Montreal was dominated by members of the Scottish race. The fur trade reigned supreme. The headquarters of the North-West Company, and its minor rivals, were there. Not all the outstanding members of this band of adventurous traders and explorers were Scots, for John Gregory was an Englishman, while Pond and Pangman were Americans. But when the names of McTavish, MacKenzie, McLeod, McKay, MacGillivray, MacDonald, Cameron, McGillis, Fraser, Grant, Campbell, and Ogilvie are set down, you seem to hear the

roll-call of the Highland clans. They were all prominent in the fur trade, and most of them figured with intrepid courage in one of the most romantic passages in the history of British North America. The lavish hospitality of the Beaver Club has been handed down in many a tale of the festivities of the fur trade worthies. "The appointments of their club-house," writes Dr. Bryce, "were notable. On their tables silver and glassware, of a kind unknown elsewhere in Canada, shone with resplendent light at their feasts." Among the guests, we may be sure, John Barleycorn filled an honoured place. The songs, the dances, and the performance of what was called the *grand voyage*, when the givers of the feast sat down on the carpet and with improvised paddles imitated the voyages made by canoes in the far western rivers and lakes (singing lustily all the while), betokened jolly dispositions and love of good company. But the fur traders were also business men,—shrewd, enterprising, and jealous of their interests. Rival concerns quarrelled and afterwards made it up. In the distant west the clashes between the officials of competing companies led to bloodshed and violence. Lord Selkirk's career and the collision between the Nor'Westers and the Hudson's Bay Company are chronicled in many brilliant books.

Sometimes there was a war of pamphlets, when the man with the pen was as necessary as the man with the paddle. If kind and generous, the fur trade magnates were also imperious and—it may be—tyrannical. Their rivalries often ended in bitter controversy. They rushed into print with the ardour that characterized all their proceedings. If someone with more literary skill than themselves happened to be available, he was employed to carry on the fray, and this—we may safely infer—accounts for Samuel Hull Wilcocke's troubled career in Montreal and his subsequent plan, unique in several respects, for wreaking vengeance upon his *quondam* friends.

Wilcocke was an Englishman of parts and scholarship. He was born at Reigate. Before coming to Canada he had produced several books, including a Dutch-English dictionary, a history of Buenos Ayres, and a tract on the Treaty of Ghent. At first he wrote extensively for the pamphlets of the North-West Company, and was a sturdy partizan of thier interests. But for some reason he quarrelled with the powerful heads of the Company. In 1821 he was in bitter opposition to them, complaining that he had been insufficiently paid for his services. They retaliated by charging him with forgery, but, he relates, "I was acquitted by the verdict of a jury from the false and fabricated charge of forgery supported by the wilful perjury of five of the partners of the North-West Company (all of them Scotchmen) and a host of their creatures and dependents." Wil-

cocke, then or shortly after, retreated to a safe haven in the United States, from which he must have poured out broadsides at his enemies. But the arm of the Montreal interests was longer than he thought. A "party of marauders from Canada" took him in the dead of night from his refuge in the United States, and he was securely lodged once more in "that living grave, the Montreal gaol," to face another trial. During his residence in the "grave" he wrote a pamphlet on the Banking Institutions of Canada, and if a copy survives it is sure to be found written in trenchant style with no mercy to individuals, because, like Mrs. Malaprop, he favoured a nice derangement of epitaphs.

Wilcocke now appealed to the United States Government for release, on the ground that he had been forcibly removed from territory under their control, and at the instance of the Washington authorities he was set at liberty. Feeling secure against another kidnapping, he settled down in Burlington, Vermont, close to the Canadian border, and began his campaign to "get even." From that place he issued *The Scribbler* and *The Free Press*. It must not be supposed that these publications were vehicles for abuse only. By some means he kept in close touch with public affairs in Upper and Lower Canada, and his comments are intelligent and interesting. Learned constitutional disquisitions on the proposed Union Bill of 1822 appeared from his pen. He was a skilful controversialist. He opposed the measure as an attack on the French Canadians, conceived by the "Scotch faction" whose desire was to rule the whole country from Montreal. This is his side of the story. He regarded them as "a transient, migratory flock of birds of prey," and as "worthy of the barren highlands whence they sprung." All his troubles are due to "that crouching and reptile race, the vagrant Scotch adventurers." He had, he assures us, the highest respect for the Scottish nation (at home), but when they went abroad, especially to Montreal, the resources of the language became inadequate to describe them. His inflammatory epithets, when printed, were carefully posted each week at Burlington by the editor himself, and arrived every Friday morning in Montreal. They must have provided the commercial metropolis with many a pleasant week-end.

What eventually became of Wilcocke the documents available to the present chronicler do not show. The last we hear of him is an announcement that he had made arrangements to move from Burlington to Rouse's Point on Lake Champlain and publish a daily newspaper. This betokens a love of perilous enterprise, because while a man may, if he wishes, lead a stirring life in weekly journal-

ism, he leaves peace behind when he determines to ride the whirlwind and direct the storm every lawful day. There is a touch of the pathetic in the career of this exiled Englishman forced to take refuge in a foreign country, because he felt he had been "villainously oppressed" under the British flag. His condemnations of the Union Bill of 1822, introduced into the British Parliament and then withdrawn, are of historical value. The measure was one of the moves to anglicise the French, culminating finally in Lord Durham's Report, that well-written but overrated document which has helped to render the explanation of our constitutional development more difficult. Wilcocke vanished, and his unheeded warnings show that he foresaw the issue of events more clearly than his contemporaries. No historian of note, English or French, mentions him. His name is found in but one of the books which are usually accessible in a Canadian library—Masson's *Les Bourgeois du Nord-Ouest*. As for the Union Bill, so pregnant a proof of race conflict, with twenty-five troublous years of agitation to follow, the histories dismiss it briefly. What a brilliant chapter Macaulay would have made of it!