

A PICTONIAN LOOKS AT HIS ATTIC

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*A poor life this if, full of care,
There is no time to stand and stare.*—(Davis).

I KNOW an attic. It is not one of those attics in which a boy finds so much to occupy him on a rainy day—an attic in which to prowl and turn over innumerable things in search for old letters and stamps, or perhaps to read surreptitiously those stirring stories banned by the Puritan atmosphere of the rooms down stairs—to read on and on while the rain patters upon the roof and beats upon the window panes. Nor is it one of those attics where the gray-haired mother goes on a quiet afternoon when she is all alone to look again lovingly at the little boots and tiny clothes of those who once filled her home with glee. It is not one of those *old* attics, where the treasures and trinkets of generations long since dead and gone are gathered and preserved or simply pushed out of sight. This house has hardly reached the age of sixty years; its builder and occupant has been dead, lo, these many years. Even at the best, in its brief span of existence it could not accumulate many treasures.

Again, it has not such an attic as one sometimes dreams of, and by a perverse fate so narrowly misses. Only a few months ago a coming auction sale gave rise to the inference that in that house there was an attic filled with spoils of the days of old. Upon enquiry I found the conjecture right. The careful housewife had cherished every paper, pamphlet and periodical that had gone into that house for over fifty years. None had been destroyed. They were all there in the attic. But unfortunately the younger generation, smitten with the house-cleaning bug, in their contest with dirt, and in something of the spirit of Scipio, had carried the war into the attic with fatal results. Days were occupied in carrying out these unique and irreplaceable papers and burning them, until the last leaf was gone and the attic clean. When this news reached me I sat down, like Ezra, "astonied."

But let me return to our own attic. It was not a place where old books accumulated. Few attics in the country contain these, especially the old pioneer books, for the simple reason that they

never had them in large numbers. Very few books were possessed by the early settlers. This is one of the conditions noted by the missionary preacher, Dr. James McGregor. "It was no little discouragement to me," he says, "that I scarcely saw any books among the people. Some of those who spoke English had indeed brought some with them, but scarcely one of them had added anything to his stock since." That pioneer world furnished a poor soil for the arts. The early pioneers of Pictou had too much to contend with to devote much, if any, time to books and reading. Even as late as 1827, *The Colonial Patriot* of Pictou says, "Books are extremely scarce."

Furthermore, the love of literature was not fostered and stimulated in the very first period by schools. In the early pioneer days there were none. Dr. McGregor remarks that he "did not see a situation where a school could be maintained for a year, so thin and scattered are the population." He follows this by a remark which I am cautious and discreet enough to give in his own words. "Besides," he says, "so many of the Highlanders were perfectly indifferent about education, for neither they themselves nor any of their ancestors had ever tasted its pleasure or its profit." But he further adds, "I found it easier than I had thought to rouse the Highlanders to attend to the education of their children." The result is seen in the subsequent interest in education, and the intellectual eminence attained by the succeeding generations. All of which goes to show how there is something in the saying of Dr. Johnson that much might be made of a Scotsman if he were caught young.

This changed educational outlook, the work of Dr. McGregor and Dr. Thomas McCulloch, showed itself in several ways. The energies of Dr. McCulloch were directed to the founding of a school or college, and Pictou Academy arose as an institution in 1816. This Academy in turn, as Haliburton remarks, "was producing what Nova Scotia sorely needs, a race of capable schoolmasters." They in turn would create that intellectual atmosphere which would develop a taste for reading, and this would satisfy itself in the purchase of books. It is interesting to follow the advertisements in the journals of the day, and to note the enlarging range of books offered to meet this increasing demand. In the first issues of *The Colonial Patriot* in the year 1827, the books offered to the public and mentioned by name were Watt's Hymns, Bibles, and school books. Turning to *The Bee* which began its career in 1835, we find that in the first issues Dawson of Pictou published a three-inch advertisement headed "Books and Stationery," in which

he mentions particularly that he has two copies of Cowper's poems, six copies of Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, dictionaries, and various textbooks. In addition to this there is advertised *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, *Chambers's Information for the People*, and a full series of publications of this famous Edinburgh house. This was excellent reading. The appetite, as it grew, developed an increasing desire to preserve the story of the early history of the settlement. In the very first issue of *The Colonial Patriot* there is a letter from a correspondent who urges "the collection and preservation of all those facts and circumstances relative to the original settlement and subsequent growth of the town and district." We see, as a result of this interest, a number of books written on Dr. James McGregor, *The History of Pictou County*, *The Life of John Geddie*, *Last Martyrs of Erromanga*, and others. Such books as these were at one time cherished, but are now found in attics.

It was not long ago that I found in a farmhouse attic, in a box of old religious books, school books, dictionaries and books of that sort, a volume giving an outside view of the county. This was entitled *A History of the Mission of the Secession Church to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island*. It contained the Scottish view of the sending of missionaries to such destitute and benighted places as the counties of Pictou and Colchester in Nova Scotia. The material was apparently gathered from the Memoir of Dr. McGregor, his letters, the minutes of the Presbyteries in Nova Scotia, and also out of personal letters from the ministers in Nova Scotia to their friends in Scotland. In addition to this volume I found in the same attic a book published in Geelong, Australia, and entitled *A Year in the New Hebrides*. This title, however, covered only a portion of the contents of the book. It contained an account of the "Early History of the New Hebrides Mission", and twenty-five pages were occupied in telling the story of the "Voyages of *The Dayspring*"—a story which every Pictonian knows, although he is perhaps not so familiar with the subsequent history of the famous missionary vessel. Here the whole story is given, from the building of the ship in New Glasgow till the final disaster on the island of Aneityum. The record is embellished by nine lithographs and nine woodcuts. Such are the books which should be cherished and preserved, but are relegated to attics.

My attic, however, contained no such treasures. Strangers had lived in the house, and everything of value had long since been taken away. There remained only a small, scattered pile of dusty and mouse-eaten papers, tossed aside in neglect and contempt.

Dust and cobwebs were in the unfurnished place under the roof, with enough light to show the bare joists and rafters and rough boards of the house. There was nothing there but these old papers. We are frequently reminded that "there is nothing so dead as an old newspaper." On the other hand, we are told that "newspapers are history in the making," that they are "human nature's most faithful mirror," one authority going so far as to say that "the great newspapers of England are exceptionally good history books." As far as our rural communities are concerned, the local paper is practically the only historical record that we have. If any public or semi-public records exist in these small places, they are badly kept and badly preserved. It is in the country newspaper, poor and mean as it is, that the life of the country is portrayed as nowhere else. Where else will you find so faithful and intimate a story as that which appears in one of these journals? Where else will the historians of the future obtain the means of knowing what the great mass of our people were doing and thinking during any great event such as the World War? They may not find an elaborate description of the great battles, or the strategy of the great generals, or the policies of the great statesmen, or the gossip about the great personages; but they will find a great deal about the ordinary people of the country. Here they will see proudly chronicled, not the mere names, but particulars concerning those who went to the front and those who gave their lives for the cause. Here also they will have related the activities of those at home, what socks were knit, what boxes were sent, what bonds were subscribed for, and all that makes the life and thought of a community. If the estimate is correct that the average country newspaper in the course of a year prints 10,000 names, then it touches more people than is realized, and reveals more to the discerning reader than any other medium. We might say that the life of our rural communities is mirrored in these country journals, as the life of Camelot was mirrored and woven into the magic web of the Lady of Shallott.

When a Pictonian first looked at

These papers in the attic dim,
A pile of papers 'twas to him
And it was nothing more.

But after all, there are possibilities in these old and dusty papers to him who can read their story. I turn again and look at them with something of the spirit of the poet who looked at the flower in the crannied wall. The message of the dusty papers is not so deep and comprehensive a message as that which the flower

could tell the poet; but if I cannot know from them what God and man is, I shall at least be able to know something of this former attic owner, his interests, his tastes, his politics, his religion, and perhaps something of his ideals and aspirations. And I shall know in addition something of the life of the county and province in which he lived. This knowledge would be necessarily limited to the period covered, the years 1880 to 1890, and also limited by the number of papers preserved.

What these foot-prints on the dust of the attic reveal about the man who once was there, I do not wish to discuss. Why should I use him to point my moral or adorn my tale? I merely suggest to my readers that certain conclusions may be deduced from certain facts. I find, for instance, a number of copies of the *Halifax Morning Herald*, while diligent search failed to reveal a single copy of the rival journal, *The Morning Chronicle*. Naturally all the local Pictou County papers are represented; but *The Colonial Standard*, the organ of the Conservative party in the county, surpasses all the rest in numbers. It came to him as a subscriber, and no doubt expressed his sentiments. And as "Tory" and "Kirkman" were synonymous terms in those days, he was of necessity a subscriber to another Pictou County periodical,—*The Monthly Record of the Church of Scotland in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island*. If this paper was not received as the oracle of God, it was at least the voice of the Church, speaking with a Scottish accent and at times with a controversial tone. The subscriber had, however, other interests. Three Masonic papers, two Canadian and one American, were discovered,—*The Masonic News*, *The Freemason*, and *The Masonic Chronicle*—which would no doubt indicate his attachment to this ancient and honourable order. His business interests are shown by his subscription to *The Farmer's Advocate* of London, Ont., and to *The Canadian Lumberman* which was then the only paper published in Canada devoted to the lumber and timber industries. The home and domestic interests are represented by *The Ladies' Journal*, *The Ladies' Newspaper*, *Truth* published in Toronto, and *The Home Fascinator* of Montreal—all Canadian home papers.

As for the times in which he lived, something may be gathered from a group of Nova Scotia weekly periodicals, all of which have passed out of existence. I notice *The Critic*, a 16-page weekly published in Halifax by C. F. Fraser and bearing the motto "The Welfare of the people is the highest Law." There is only a single issue to judge from, but it is evident that it found a place for certain regular features,—a summing up of the weekly news under the headings of Scientific Gleanings, Religious News, Mining, etc.

As for special articles which would indicate the thoughts of the journal on the questions of the day, I find an article on "King's College and Federation," and a letter from a correspondent who deploras the desecration of the Sabbath in the degenerate days of 1885.

Another paper is *The Semaphore*, a 16-page journal published in Yarmouth. It was issued quarterly, at an annual subscription of 12 cents. As the particular mission of this journal was to advocate the assessment plan of life insurance, the price mentioned was evidently all it was worth. I am next attracted by *The Rural Home*, a 16-page journal published in Kentville. This was the initial issue of this periodical, being Vol. 1, No. 1. It was a strictly agricultural paper; in return for fifty cents it would be sent to the subscriber for a year, and supply "agricultural literature which would benefit old and young." The information is given, perhaps unnecessarily, that the object of the publisher was not to make money, but to advance the interests of the farmers by increasing the productiveness of the soil and the prosperity of the country. The kind of advice offered would probably not appeal to the agricultural authorities of to-day, but one specimen may be given, although it may not be fair to judge the whole tone of the paper from a single extract. It says: "The exceedingly low price of potatoes will prove a blessing in disguise if it reduces the acreage of the crop." Emphasis is laid on the exhausting effect of this crop on the soil, and the labour and expense of battling with the potato bug which apparently had just made its appearance. These considerations, the editor thought, would cause many to look around for another crop; but he failed to indicate or suggest what this new crop should be. Another paper, entitled *The Maritime*, calls for attention because it is timely and up-to-date. It is a weekly review of 16 pages devoted to the interests of the Maritime Provinces or "Maritime Rights," giving special attention to trades, manufacturing, mining, finance and insurance. In this issue, that of February, 1879, the principal interest centres in the Tariff. It was inevitable that it should, for it followed the triumph of Sir John A. Macdonald and his party in 1878, and it was in the very early days of the "N. P.," the familiar name given to the National Policy of protection. It was inevitable, too, that it would reflect the natural tendency to prophesy, characteristic of the day and the spirit of the age. Here, for instance, at the end of an article on "Iron and Londonderry", is something of the spirit of our fathers who voted accordingly, which is in striking contrast to the Maritime spirit of to-day so unduly depressed. The writer of the article says:

Londonderry will yet be a great hive of industry. The busy little town of 500 workmen will attain the proportions of a Wolverhampton, or a Barrow-in-Furness; the Basin of Minas will float the hulls of ships carrying its productions to all parts, all the gigantic masses of iron that modern civilization is proud to show as proof of her grasp and strength; here instead of to England or the States will be sent the plans of a naval architect like Scott Russell, or a great engineer like Stephenson or a great builder like Brassy, and one of the boasts of Nova Scotia will not be, as now, the wealth of economic minerals *beneath* the earth's surface, but the ranks of stalwart workmen whom she can show as proof of her power in manhood and population, and all of them finding work at home.

One might linger longer over these Maritime voices, but echoes of a wider field resound in this little garret. There are not only county and provincial papers, but there are a number of distinctively Canadian papers which took a national outlook and dealt with the larger issues of the country. I find several copies of *The Canadian Gazette*, of London, which speaks in a somewhat official tone, but each has a fairly attractive table of contents. Glancing at one of them, I find an article entitled, "Recent Canadian Literature." It is news to learn that the reading public of that day were interested in such a subject, and it certainly is of interest to know what they thought about it. This was the issue of November, 1886, a date when most of our present literary critics were still in their intellectual swaddling clothes, their youthful minds untroubled by the problems of Canadianism in literature, and perhaps innocent of any literature except "Old Cap Collier." So I thought, as I turned with immense satisfaction to this article. The first book mentioned was Morgan's *Dominion Annual Register for 1885*; but I passed hopefully on to the next, *Reminiscences of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition*. The reviewer was careful to state that this book was in no way intended to take the place of the official catalogue of the Exhibition, which was enough to indicate the general nature of the contents of the volume. The remainder of the article was spent on such literary works as *The Annual Report of the Ontario Bureau of Industries*, *A Statistical Abstract and Record of the Dominion*, published by the department of Agriculture, and five other volumes of the same general tenor. So this is Canadian literature in the eighties!

In the same issue of this journal there may be found an interesting Report of the Governor and Company of the Island of Anticosti. Nearly two pages are taken up with description of the advantages of this wonderful and romantic island, and much information is given which cannot be found in our geographies, especially of the

immense value of its fisheries, timber, wild fruits and minerals. It is particularly mentioned that samples of vegetables grown there will bear favourable comparison with the most highly cultivated districts in England; in fact, "anything you can grow in Canada or England you can grow there." One learns also that the island is suited to the breeding and rearing of stock, both horses and cattle; while as for seals, "the whole North Shore is simply covered with seal," and it is added that the way they are killed is to reach the rocks in their vicinity by boat, "whistle to them and shoot them by the hundred as they come up." As if this were not enough to lure the sportsman, it adds that there are salmon rivers on the island, and the eels are so thick that the water is black with them. The only drawback mentioned is the inconvenience caused by flies and mosquitos; and the answer to this is that, in this respect, there is no comparison between Anticosti and Australia. One man reports that the climate when he was there averaged about 90 degrees in the daytime, and adds that he "conversed with many of the inhabitants of the island who seemed to love their island so much that nothing would induce them to leave it." His conclusion was that there was room there for thousands of people, and he would rather give up his Ontario land than his Anticosti land. In short, the very island for a new Swiss Family Robinson! It must have been reports like these that lured our forefathers from their home in the old land to tempt their fortunes in the wilderness of Nova Scotia.

Time and space will not permit me to speak of other papers—*The Montreal Witness*, *The Colonist* of St. John's, Nfld., *The Telegraph* of St. John, N. B., *The Charlottetown Examiner*, *The Toronto Weekly Mail*, *The Toronto Weekly News* (E. E. Shephard's paper) and *The Presbyterian Review*. I merely mention this flotsam and jetsam of a household reading. I pause, though, for a time over *The Family Herald and Weekly Star*, which in those days—and for many days after—found an entrance into nearly every house in the country, and I would expect to find some copies in this attic. The noticeable feature about the copies found here is that they are consecutive numbers, with no doubt a reason for it. It is not the full accounts of the battles of Fish Creek and Batoche, and the tale of the stirring events of the North-West Rebellion, for these are found only in a portion of the papers. Can it be that there was a special interest in the serial story running in the paper? It was *The Living Link*, by James DeMille. Few copies are missing, so that the story is almost complete. I know that the literary critic of the present day speaks contemptuously of some of De-

Mille's works, and singles out *The Living Link* as being unworthy of the man who wrote *Helena's Household* and *The Strange Manuscript*. While not attempting to controvert this, I merely remark that the readers and critics of the seventies and eighties did not think so. They would naturally compare DeMille to Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade and Jules Verne, who were the popular writers of their day. He took his place with these popular writers, and his books with the best sellers of that day. *The Living Link* was published in *Harper's*, a magazine of the highest standing, and a reviewer has this to say of the book:

The novel in structure and method reminds us of Wilkie Collins, and it is not inferior to some of his, though not equal to his best. We are inclined to rank *The Living Link* as the best of DeMille's books, and one of the best of its class. The plot is ingeniously conceived, the situations are certainly possible, and their improbability no more impairs their interest than did the improbability of the 1001 tales with which the Princess Schederezale kept alive the curiosity of her cruel master.

DeMille wrote hurriedly, wrote for a public that eagerly and impatiently awaited the publication of his stories. They loved and admired the author who revealed his genial soul and boyish heart in such books as *The Dodge Club*, *The American Baron*, *A Castle in Spain*, and above all in the B. O. W. C. series. Some of them reveal the joyous and impetuous youth who had travelled in the storied and romantic land of Italy, a country which left a vivid and lasting impression upon him; and as Mr. Dick in the story of David Copperfield could not help but speak of the head of King Charles I., so it seemed impossible for DeMille to write without speaking of Italy. But it must also be remembered that his own country meant more to him than any other, even Italy. He writes with loving touch of his native city St. John, and such events in the history of his own province as the Great Fire of Miramichi or the Acadian exiles on the shores of Bay Chaleur, and tells again their tragic story. Most of all he loved Wolfville and Grand Pré and the Basin of Minas. His teachers and the friends and companions of his college days are to be found in these books, and but slightly disguised. Again and again, and in fitting language, he describes the scenery and the glorious prospect of "that landscape which for soft and quiet loveliness may be equalled by few and surpassed by none of those which in other climes have been celebrated by the poet and the artist." How often he turns aside to describe "Blomidon black, frowning, sombre, as though this were the very centre from which emanated

all the shadows of the night!" Nowhere, he thinks, can be seen such sunrises and sunsets as those of Grand Pré:

And you may see all that can be presented by even Italy in every part of its varied outline—on the plain, on the mountain top, and by the seaside. You may traverse the Appenines, or wander by the Mediterranean shore, or look over the waste Campagna, and yet never find anything that can surpass those atmospheric effects which may be witnessed along the shores that surround the Basin of Minas. Here may be found that which would fill the soul of the poet or artist—the dreamy haze, the soft and voluptuous calm, the glory of the sunlit sky, the terror of the storm, the majesty of giant cloud masses piled up confusedly, the rainbow tints cast by the rising or setting sun over innumerable clouds.

These books are filled with the spirit of our own land; they re-tell its history; they have caught its romance and its traditions, and enshrined them in language that youth will always read. They are still eagerly read by the boys of to-day who have access to them, and they create the same desire for school and college that *Tom Brown's Schooldays* has done for many a youth. But it is characteristic of us as a people that they are not appreciated as they should be, and that they are not as they should be in every Public and School Library in the three provinces.

But I have wandered far afield from my attic, and I have not finished my task. There are yet many things to give rise to thoughts, even if I am not entirely in harmony with the poet to whom the meanest flower that blew gave rise to "thoughts too deep for tears." But there is now little left except a few odds and ends—some California papers, old reports of various kinds, a *Belcher's Almanac*, a stray copy of the Seaside Library, and a couple of reports of the British American Book and Tract Society. Had we time, one could learn of the spirit of the colporteur who said what our booksellers of to-day cannot say, that "the books that I sell invariably have a good effect on the buyers." We could learn that in 1883 he sold \$1197.81 worth of books in Pictou and Antigonish counties; that the books most in demand in Pictou County were Spurgeon's and Talmage's sermons, Bunyan, Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, Havergal's *Royal Invitation*, Newman Hall, Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, McCheyne's *Memoirs and sermons*, Hodge's *Way of Life*, Cuyler's *Pointed Papers* and Newton's *Wonders*. That there was a real demand for such books is evidenced by the fact that one Pictonian declared he would give his last fifty cents to procure a copy of Talmage's sermons. And then we have the Cape Bretoner who said he had

plenty of books. He had the Bible and four other books—Baxter, Boston, Guthrie and Doddridge. He said he had read all these, and that was enough.

But I am now reminded of one of the tales in the *Arabian Nights*, where the poor fisherman listened to the importunate *genie* imprisoned in a bottle and set him at liberty. The *genie* grew so big, so fierce, so frightful and threatening, that the fisherman was fain to put him back once more into his narrow prison, and succeeded by guile in doing so. I have only ventured to take a peep at the *genie* of the attic, and he has already grown so big and threatening that I fear I shall be enslaved by him and be compelled to write on and on. By this abrupt end you will know that I have at last contrived to lure him back to his attic and have closed the door on him.