

SATURDAY NIGHT IN MILTON

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IT is Saturday night in Milton. That may mean bath night, movie night, bridge club night in some places; but, in Milton, Saturday night has another significance. It is *Library* night, and has been for a little matter of 110 years. A group of people are gathering in a low, red, gabled building on Main Street. They seat themselves in rows before a desk, a table spread with magazines, and a large chart ornamented with mysterious blue and red disks, while they wait patiently for the calling of certain numbers.

The historic sites of our country are being gradually tracked down and marked. The Maritime Provinces are besprinkled with tablets telling the younger generation and insatiable tourists: "Here, at such a time, history was made!" But some places which played an important part in our romantic past are still in danger of being forgotten. One of these is an upstairs room in a two-storey frame house in the part of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, once called Milton. A small bookshelf in that room in the James Starr home held the entire stock of books which made up the first Public Library in the Maritime Provinces, and, if the records in the Bureau of Statistics are correct, it was the third in the Dominion.

Niagara-on-the-lake gets the distinction of having the oldest Canadian Library, dating from 1800. St. Charles, Quebec, had one in 1802. Formal organization of the Yarmouth Book Society, with twenty-one members, took place on January First, 1882.

The ragged fishing village, strung along the shore, which was to grow with breath-taking rapidity into a busy port, was divided then—it is still, for the older generation—into two distinct sections, the Town and the Mills. The latter, clustering around the grist, saw, and carding mills, became Milltown, and then Milton.

At the time when these twenty men and one plucky woman felt the need of reading matter, the educational advantages of the province were meagre. Homes were still mostly log cabins, farming implements were primitive, and homely, blue-dyed Jersey cloth was the material commonly used for clothing the family. There were no roads worth mentioning, few schools, and money was a scarce commodity. The country had been going through a period of depression, and the year which saw the beginning of this pioneer Library was a time of business paralysis. According to Murdock's

History, no new building of any kind went up in Halifax during that year, no repairs or improvements. "Hardly a clapboard or a shingle was put on."

Halifax was a gay English garrison town, with a reputation for lavish entertaining and pretty women. Dalhousie College and King's were very young, very small schools. In Pictou the impoverished Highlanders had founded their famous Academy, but the student body, at that time, amounted to only twenty pupils. Shelburne's hope of being the great metropolis of the continent had petered sadly out, and it was already settling down to be a graveyard of dead dreams. The Loyalists who had remained in the country were widely scattered and in no position, most of them, to maintain the fine tradition of culture they had brought with them.

Yarmouth had been settled by fishermen from Cape Cod and Marblehead, descendants of the Pilgrims. They had looked askance at the doings of the worldly "newcomers" in Shelburne. Tory Halifax, according to their light, was going straight to the dogs. Military officers, soaked in port and claret, dominated society. There was not even a proper Sabbath Day, with everyone turning out to see the troops reviewed in the afternoon, and a band concert in place of divine service in the evening.

But whatever the rest of the country might do, a few people could improve their minds and save their souls. Yarmouth could muster only eighty dwellings at that time. Nineteen were at the mills, and in one of these a pioneer educational institution found a home. The Book Society began life with a rigid constitution, modelled after that of a Book Club which John Brown had belonged to in old Glasgow. The members were considered shareholders in the joint stock of books. Beside the regular officers, a Keeper was appointed to take charge of the volumes in Depot, and four Inspectors, who carefully examined each volume as they were returned at the meetings. Books, then, were dearly prized and tenderly handled. The following table of fines was imposed without mercy on heedless subscribers:

- Folding down a leaf or "dog's ear"—2d.
- Tearing a leaf—3d per inch.
- Grease, ink or oil spots—2d.
- Distinct thumb spot—2d.
- A break in the binding—3d.
- Breaking a leaf out of the binding—3d.
- Misfolding a map—4d.

If a book chanced to be lost, the borrower paid for it, and in the case of a set, for the whole set. All this in a day when twopence

was twopence. No wonder many of the first books are still intact, on the shelves!

The sponsors of the Society had no notion of encouraging light reading. Their first books included Russell's *Europe*, Goldsmith's *Animated Nature*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Bunyan's *Holy War* and similar works. By March there were thirty-five volumes in circulation. The fees required were ten shillings entrance money, with a quarterly payment of two shillings and sixpence. The Keeper was on duty every Saturday evening between six and seven. A member who was more than an hour late was fined threepence for the first offence and ninepence for the second, in the case of the same book.

In July of that year Mr. Stayley Brown set out on a voyage to Great Britain. The Society gave him all their funds, and a list of approved books to be bought. They particularly specified a good, modern Geography. This, we assume, is the leather-bound volume of 1264 finely printed pages, in the Library to-day. It had a most formidable title: "A New System of Geography and Universal History of the Known World Comprehending, a Copious and Accurate Description of . . . Europe, Asia, Africa and America, etc., etc." by James Ferguson, Esq., F.R.S." We are not told what the Society thought of their purchase, but they must have been astonished at some of the information concerning their own part of the Known World. Nova Scotia is described as "wrapped in the gloom of a fog for the greater part of the year." Its soil is "thin and barren", its grass "intermixed with a cold, spongy moss" except in the case of Cape Breton where the soil is nothing but moss "unfit for agriculture". Upper and Lower Canada are credited with birds, beast and fish which, if they ever existed there, have been long extinct. The fish include such curious specimens as sea-wolves, sea-cows, the lencornet, the goberque and the achigau. The maps contain unfamiliar names, partly because of phonetic spelling. The regions between settled strips and unexplored country are filled in with the names of Indian tribes, the Blackfoot, the Assinipoels, the Dog-ribbed nation, the Hare Nation and others.

In 1823 the Book Committee became so frivolous as to put in a book of poetry—Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, but it was wedged in among heavy tomes on travel, history, astronomy and sacred biography (an item which seems to have been dropped from publishers' lists). The Edinburgh Quarterly Review was given a cautious trial, along with the London Quarterly Review, to see which would be more beneficial. By 1827 they had ventured on their first fiction—*Arabian Nights*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Miss Edgeworth's *Popular Tales* and Scott's novels.

After seven years the Library outgrew its quarters and was housed at various stages in other dwellings, in a warehouse, an office, a store, and finally in a small building bought for it in 1866. Yarmouth had grown into a prosperous shipping centre. The descendants of the founders of the Milton Library, as it had come to be called, trod the decks of some of the finest clipper ships on the Seven Seas, vessels that were in many cases built and owned in Yarmouth. They explored ice-bound fiords and tropic lagoons, and brought their women-folk rare treasures from far-away ports— heavy silks and Paisley shawls, carved ivory and sandalwood, coral and jade. But the Library seems to have jogged along in the same old way, with no startling increase in membership. The strict regulations regarding the admission of new shareholders must have been partly to blame. A candidate for the honour of belonging to the Library had to be properly recommended and have his name posted for at least a month. When the vote as to his eligibility was taken, three black balls could bar him out as unqualified to appreciate the privileges of good reading. The old idea of education as a luxury, not for the masses, died hard in Nova Scotia.

By 1866 the membership had dwindled so alarmingly that a notice appeared in the newspapers stating that the Milton Library "containing one thousand volumes of valuable standard works, with several thousand unbound volumes of the leading Reviews, Magazines, etc." would throw open its membership to all, on payment of two dollars a year, the shareholders having abandoned all proprietary rights in the books. But the new policy does not appear to have improved the situation much. The town had grown in another direction. The minutes continue to record a falling off in members. But in 1889 the Library took on a new lease of life when the present building, the gift of two loyal members, was opened.

As the original office-bearers died off, the next generation and the next had taken their places. Then, somehow, the vacancies were left unfilled. The highly venerated institution that had served the community so long found itself in the strange situation of having only one trustee, Mrs. Robert Caie, one of the donors of the new building. She accepted the responsibility, and with her husband's help kept the place in repair and lighted and heated for the Saturday evening meetings. When her parents were gone, their daughter took over the burden.

No new books had been purchased for some time. A new Library had been opened in the Centretown, as it was called, and the circulation in Milton was confined to an assortment of the best magazines. The income derived from a legacy left by Mrs. Caie

and the annual membership fees was barely enough to pay for subscriptions, and the upkeep of the Library had increased somewhat since the days when Mr. Starr was allowed two and six a quarter for his south chamber. But the building was never closed, and for years no one seems to have asked many questions about it. It was not till the Library had reached the ripe age of a hundred years that the Milton Horticultural and Improvement Society took the charge off Miss Caie's shoulders.

Those Saturday evenings in the early days must have been formidable gatherings. They were altogether masculine affairs except for that remarkable charter member, Mary Fletcher, who took an active part in the life of the community in a day when women needed courage to raise their voices outside their homes, and who even found time to write poetry. The method of giving out books was by lot, a suggestion of John Brown's which may have come from Glasgow. It added greatly to the excitement of the occasion, we are told in the records, and has been followed through all the years.

An innovation introduced in 1889 to make the drawing of lots easier was a large cardboard chart, called a Magazine Indicator, with the names of the available periodicals on it and disks to mark them off when chosen, red for a current issue, blue for a back number. Pegs containing the number of each member were drawn by the Keeper or Librarian. The first called took his choice. The disks were placed, and another number drawn. This is the procedure followed to-day.

The books, so highly prized, are still on the shelves, gathering dust and time-stains which would distress those grim Inspectors of long ago. No one would think of selling them, no matter what they might bring, or even consider having them moved to any other place. The very regulations made to guard them, and ensure their usefulness to the proper parties, have put them at last where they are used by nobody. And since they are in a country where tradition is very precious, there is every possibility that they will be there, just as they are, for another hundred years.

They would scarcely tempt many readers to-day. The print is fine, and the older ones had few illustrations. There are complete bound files of the best old magazines, English and American. There are early editions of Thoreau, Emerson, Ik Marvel, Meredith, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and their contemporaries. There are quaint textbooks. One, *Lessons in Reading and Speaking*, was, according to the flyleaf, used by a schoolgirl, Catherine Harron, of Halifax in 1808. Poor Catherine! It is to be hoped that she

was a studious child, for the selections include: "Demofthenes to the Roman Confuls," "Henry IV's Foliloquy on Fleep," "Califthenes' Reproof of Cleon's Flattery to Alexander", and whole pages of morals and maxims such as: "We ought to diftruft our paffions even they appear the moft reafonable" and "The firft and moft important female quality is fweetnefs of temper".

The grammar in the back of the book would caufe hilarity in fchools to-day. "An adnoun or adjective," we learn, "is a word added to a noun to denote fome quality, property or circumftance of it, as 'a *wife* man, 'a *round* table!" Very few books in the collection feem to have been bought for younger readers. One, from the "Boys' and Girls' Library of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge" has the cheery title: "Lives of the Apostles and Early Martyrs, Designed for Sunday Reading".

As the years went on, the men dropped gradually out of the Saturday night gatherings, and their wives or children took their places. Some of the early formality, bred of the tremendous respect our fathers had for the printed word, departed. Now the women waiting whisper of local happenings. The boys and girls turn the pages of the ancient, illustrated weeklies. But, for me, the shades of their great grandfathers are always there, sternly guarding the musty, sombre volumes, putting on their spectacles to examine sternly each page for spots or thumb prints. I fee ladies in coal-scuttle bonnets tripping past outside, and gentlemen in stovepipe hats and knee-breeches. I look down on the blue water of the harbour, and fancy I hear the ringing of hammers and screeching of faws in the deserted fhipyards on the fhire. And I feel stirring in me something of the awe of thefe sturdy pioneers hungering for knowledge, something of their intense gratitude for the privilege of opening a good book.