

THE AUTHOR OF "THE MAPLE LEAF"

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FOLLOWING our return from the Old Country, after an extended holiday (1936-37), we were describing to a friend in the Province of Quebec our visit to the birth-place of Alexander Muir of *The Maple Leaf*. Some time later, our friend mailed us a clipping entitled "Out of the Ordinary." This short sketch went on to say: "Many people of the present generation would perhaps be "put to it," as the saying goes, to name at once the composer of Canada's National Anthem, tell where he was born, and how *The Maple Leaf* was composed. A recent discovery of a son of the poet, said to have been living in poverty in Toronto, near the Memorial Park, made in honour of the memory of Alexander Muir, may awake an interest in the famous poet-composer of a nation's song."

We cannot remember when first we became interested in the story of the author of the song; but the writer of "Out of the Ordinary" goes on to say: "Scottish people should not forget Muir. He was a Scotchman by birth, born in Lesmahagow, Lanarkshire, he was taken to Canada as a baby when his father, a schoolmaster, emigrated with his family."

We agree with the columnist that many Canadians of the present generation would be "put to it" to name at once the composer of *The Maple Leaf*. But one Scotsman, at least, may be permitted to pay tribute to the memory of another Scot who put a national song on the lips and in the hearts of millions of Canadians for all time.

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The circumstances of the poet's birth are these: John Muir, father of the poet, was born at Crawford-john and moved to Skellyhill, Waterside on the Logan Water in the same parish. John Muir was a schoolmaster, a typical dominie of his generation; and his salary was thirty shillings per month, approximately seven dollars and fifty cents in Canadian money, and the small cottage he occupied was probably rent free. He met and fell in love with a Mrs. MacDiarmid, a widow with some means (probably small means) then living on the neighbouring estate of Stockbridge in the parish of Lesmahagow, Lanarkshire, Scotland. They were married in 1829, and Alexander, the poet, was born the following year.

In 1833, John Muir took his little family to Canada, and settled in a township near Toronto. He is said to have lived in a log cabin in those early days. The subject of our sketch would then be three years old. John Muir, the father, taught at different schools in the vicinity of Toronto, and died in 1865.

Alexander Muir followed in the footsteps of his father, the career of teaching. He graduated B.A. from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, in 1859, and two years later took charge of a school in Scarborough township. He remained there a few years, and then became headmaster of a school near Toronto. He was principal of Gladstone-Avenue school from 1888 until his death in 1906.

It is said that in early life Alexander Muir shewed himself to be a "lad o' pairts;" and it is related that when Dr. Norman MacLeod was on a visit to Canada, he said to the young poet, whom he met: "Ye'll be weel kent afore ye' dee"; but is Alexander Muir as "weel kent" as his memory deserves?

The Maple Leaf was written in 1867, and a thousand copies of the song were printed. It is said the author received a profit of only four dollars, though the song caught the public imagination and thousands of copies were printed. Muir may have believed that the true secret of happiness lay in limiting the aspirations; we do not know, but he is said to have declared he was only to happy to have pleased the people, and²that this was of more value to him than money."

Some Reminiscences of a Friend:

Lieut.-Col. A. E. Belcher, who was the first Mayor of Southampton, Ontario, in the year 1904, who knew Alexander Muir several years before he wrote *The Maple Leaf*, says:

"Muir then lived in the east part of Toronto, and in those days the remuneration of a school teacher was very small. Almost immediately opposite Muir's small house was what was then called Leslie's Gardens, where they raised fruit and trees for sale; it was quite a park with trees as well.

"We young men coming from outside places boarded at three or four dollars per week, at the then farmers' taverns, situated in the vicinity of the market square. Instead of going to church on Sunday, we would take a nice long walk down to the gardens, which were like the countryside. Our friend Alexander Muir lived in a small house opposite the gate into the gardens. At times he asked me into the house, and we enjoyed a chat, so I had the good fortune of knowing Alexander Muir in other days.

"On being elected the first Mayor of Southampton in the year 1904, I wrote asking him if he would come up later in the summer and deliver a sort of patriotic or inaugural address, which he kindly consented to do. I entertained him during his stay. I had prepared a speakers' platform in our town park, and at its entrance I had at least 200 school children, each with a small flag, and a large one to lead, to escort him; he was tender-hearted, and I noticed he was quite affected.

"Of course there were very many citizens present. After he had finished I took him to my home and, of course, I had a very profitable time. Among other things I asked him how he came to write *The Maple Leaf*."

"He stated that one day in Leslie's Gardens he was passing along a path when a maple leaf fell upon his coat sleeve. They have little sprigs on them, and it stuck fast—he brushed it off. On looking down it was there still; and he gave it another brush, and it came off. He went home and related to his wife how the leaf had stuck to his coat, and said: 'I think I will write about the Maple Leaf.'

"The day was lovely and bright; it was in the autumn when the maple leaf was beautiful in color. After writing the poem, he read it to his wife, who said: 'Why not put it to music, so that they can sing it?'

"He went to Nordheimer's music store, but he could not find any that would suit—so he sat down and composed the tune to suit the words. It was sung, and he found it quite popular; and from that time it found favour.

"When Alexander Muir died, I had become quite attached to him and came to his funeral. Sitting on the bench with Judge Coatsworth, we heard that there was need of funds, and His Honour gave quite liberally, and I added a little, after which the Orange Brotherhood subscribed a sum for the erection of a tombstone which bore a portrait medallion of Muir, the work of A. J. Clark, Sculptor."

"I was at the unveiling, which was conducted by Lieutenant-colonel, later Judge T. H. Scott of Leeds."

That is the story of one who knew the poet.

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Muir, who was loved by all who knew him, seems to have travelled the hard road of life; he knew its lights and its shadows, mostly shadows perhaps, as temporal success is measured; poetry and music were to him pleasure and refreshment and solace. His poetry revealed his temperament, sincerity, fidelity

to inspiration—it is that which gives poetry its spell, which makes it incommunicable by itself, but inspiration must be there. It is by subtle things that the sincerity of poetry is known. Muir was by no means a Robbie Burns, and would probably have been the first to disclaim merits beyond that of a humble versifier, but he composed a few simple verses, lines that at once stirred the imagination and made Canada articulate, so to speak, in a song of unity. It was indeed an exquisite stroke of the imagination that brought forth *The Maple Leaf*. Here he struck a patriotic keynote and the sentiment rang true:—

Here may it wave our boast our pride,
And join'd in love together,
The Thistle, Shamrock, Rose entwine
The Maple Leaf forever.

Although Muir recounts the incident that inspired him to write *The Maple Leaf*, he could not have been unconscious of the political events of the day, and it must be recalled that the same year the song was composed, 1867, the *British North America Act* was passed by the Imperial Parliament, of which Sir John A. MacDonald—that grand old Loyalist—was the ruling genius and spokesman in Canada. The years of struggle, leading up to the union of Canada, undoubtedly stimulated Muir's patriotism and influenced the theme of his song.

There are indeed moments in the life of a man that bring forth sensations, emotions, flashes of illumination that seem to project the mind forward and send the herald thought into the wilderness, as it were on one of the great adventures. Such came to Alexander Muir.

He was not mean, selfish, weighing all things by money, as he himself declared when he made the sum of four dollars by the publication of his song. His life seems to have been tempered by simplicity and honesty; and speaking sincerely, he tells his wife of something that moved him. In the silence of his heart there was the feeling of patriotism, the desire, the ever burning desire for liberty; so his principles rang out in song, and he exhaled his very soul in immortal verse, and laid it at the feet of his beloved Canada.

If it is essential to the full growth of the love of country that we should have our early imaginative delights associated with our native soil, Alexander Muir had the same love for his adopted land. His was the nature that would revel in the

sunrise of the eastern sky; the riot of opal and orange and rose and gold; the beauty of a butterfly's wing—as he gloried in the rich colouring of the maple leaf that settled on his coat-sleeve, and brought forth the song we love so well.

Visit to Muir's Birthplace.

While in Scotland in 1937, we had planned to visit the birthplace of the author of *The Maple Leaf*. We knew it was at Skellyhill (which is really an estate or large farm), at Waterfoot as it is sometimes called, on the Logan Water, in the south west district of the Parish of Lesmahagow in Lanarkshire, Scotland. We had no car, and how to get there was the rub. No one we had met seemed to know exactly where Skellyhill was located, or why the Alexander Muir we spoke of was different from any other person of the same name. Many had heard about the sugar maple of Canada, and even received pressed maple leaves and packets of maple sugar from their friends on this side of the water; but they knew as little about the Scot who composed *The Maple Leaf* as the average Canadian who sings this stirring anthem on almost every public occasion over the length and breadth of Canada. At last we applied to our friend, Frank Bell, Post Office Inspector, Glasgow, to find out how we could reach Skellyhill on the Logan Water. Following some enquiries by Mr. Bell, our instructions were: "Take the bus from Glasgow to Uddingston, change to the country bus that passes through Lesmahagow and Achloch, get off the bus two and a half miles beyond the latter place, take the road to the right, walk a mile to the Cumberhead Cross Roads, from the Cross Roads to Skellyhill is three miles, then ask a policeman." Mr. Bell's charming daughter, Annie, now volunteered to accompany us in the search, for which we were grateful.

It was a season when the days had grown longer and the air warmer, and the June nights are brief in Scotland.

We made plans for our journey, and on the appointed day had early lunch. The weather was none too encouraging, the sky was overcast with little specks of blue peeping through the slatey-grey ceiling; one of those days when one is hopeful that Old Sol will eventually burn his way through the darkened sky by noon. It looked a toss-up, but we took the chance.

The writer took the bus from George's Square, Glasgow, for Uddingston; we pass through the Gallowgate, where Dr. Samuel Johnson and his friend Boswell slept at the Saracen Head Inn, on their way from the Hebrides. This hostelry was advertised

in the *Glasgow Courant* of 1755 "a convenient and handsome new Inn, where the beds are all very good, clean and free of bugs." Bugs are less fashionable today. We pass the old cattle market and on to Camlachie, no longer "a wee country village." Camlachie has other memories in the Walkinshaw Mansion, and Camlachie House built in 1720, where General Wolfe lodged when a subaltern serving in Glasgow before he earned fame and death on the Plains of Abraham, Quebec. Next we reach Parkhead and Tollcross, occupied a century ago by hand-loom weavers of advanced political opinions; past the glades and through the suburbs of Mount Vernon, formerly known as "Old Windyedges," on account of its exposure. We reach Uddingston, pick up Annie Bell at the model suburb of Sandy Hills, and join the country bus that takes us through Bothwell, across the famous Bothwell Brig, where the Government troops and Covenanters fought the bloody battle on Sunday morning, June 22nd, 1679.

Leaving Bothwell behind, we have the Lowther Hills on our left, and the village of Leadhills, being the highest inhabited place in Britain. Passing through Lesmahagow and the small hamlet of Auchlochan, we get off the bus some two and a half miles beyond the latter place, and take the road to the right, which is slightly on the upgrade. This was evidently a new road cut through an estate, wide, unpaved, and girt on each side with beautiful oak, elm and the noble Scotch fir. It was raining before we reached Auchlochan, but we were equipped for rain, and the out-spreading branches of the trees provided considerable shelter; indeed it was like passing through some lordly demesne rather than a public road. We arrived at the Cumberland Cross Roads, a mile from where we left the bus but we were in a quandary as to which way to turn, to right or left. All this way we had not come across a human habitation; we had not passed a vehicle of any description, and had not met "the policeman" or a living soul on the road. We decided to continue following the high ground for a short distance, and at last spied two or three one-storey cottages of the "but and ben" type. Simultaneously with our arrival at the cottages, to enquire the way, a motor van drew up, a travelling store on wheels. We enquired of the owner and driver, Mr. Gilbert of Lesmahagow, the way to Skellyhill on the Logan Water, where Alexander Muir was born. He was the first person we had met who knew anything about Muir and his father the Skellyhill dominie. We were now under a pelting rain, and Mr. Gilbert generously offered to give us a "lift" as far as he was

going on the way to the Logan Water, but in view of the down-pour and the distance of three miles to reach our objective, he, Mr. Gilbert, later decided to take us all the way. He said that Mr. Donald Fraser, the present schoolmaster of Skellyhill, had an automobile and would be sure to drive us back as far as Hamilton and the bus line. This was something of a relief, and we "squeezed" ourselves into the cab of the truck beside the driver. The cab of the mobile store was plentifully lined with pots, pans, children's toys, etc. Mr. Gilbert did not carry everything "from a needle to an anchor," but inside, outside, on top and in the cab, he must have had everything *but* the anchor.

It was a winding road we followed with much zigzagging and wheezing under full power till we roached Skellyhill, to find that Mr. Fraser has gone to Hamilton for the day. This was indeed bad news, in view of the drenching rain. Mr. Gilbert, however, procured the key of the schoolhouse "window," from the caretaker, unlocked the window where the phone was kept, called up several garages in Hamilton, and at last got in touch with the schoolmaster, and asked him to come out to Skellyhill right away, for a gentleman from Canada wanted to see him. This curt but friendly command rather checked our breath, but we thought of the pouring rain and the four miles back to where we left the bus, should Mr. Fraser fail us. Mr. Fraser, however, was good enough to say he would come out right away. Meanwhile we took shelter in the caretaker's cottage, said goodby and thanks to our good friend, and waited Mr. Fraser's arrival.

Skellyhill is but a short distance above the waterfoot on the Logan Water, and rests on the brow of a gently sloping hill, the banks spangled with the daisy and dandelion and buttercups, looking rather droopy under the pouring rain; and the surroundings seemed plentifully dotted with trees. There are not more than half a dozen labourers' cottages, pleasing though humble, and these are clustered within a few yards of the present schoolhouse. There are other homes in the vicinity, no doubt, but owing to the weather it was impossible to make a survey, much as we should have liked to meander further afield; nevertheless, we carried away the impression of a fertile district of the country.

Mr. Fraser arrived in due course and took us to see the ruins of the old Skellyhill school, where John Muir had the delightful task of teaching the young idea how to shoot, for the

princely salary of thirty shillings per month.

The old schoolhouse is slightly in the rear of the present small but neat stone structure, with date of its erection, 1878, inscribed on the front of the building; and to the left, but a wee bit further back, we found the ruins of the cottage where Alexander Muir was born, and where, at one time, wreaths of blue smoke curled above the humble "but and ben" now a heap of rubble; and thus we view the alembic of change. Looking up-hill, from the school yard, one can see a monument erected in the last century to commemorate David Steele's martyrdom in covenanting times, a man whose descendants still live in the district. During the passions of the religious struggle people stopped at nothing.

Mr. Fraser, the schoolmaster, told us that Dr. Gordon (Ralph Connor) had visited Skellyhill in 1934, and viewed the ruins of Muir's birthplace and that of the old schoolhouse. Dr. Gordon suggested that some kind of a monument or a replica of the Muir cottage could be erected from the stones of the buildings that are there, lying above the foundations; that when he returned to Canada, he would do something about the matter. Mr. Fraser evidently gave the suggestion some publicity for he informed the writer that he thought he could raise a hundred pounds, contributed by the "gentry" of the district.

We expressed hearty sympathy with a movement of this nature, and told Mr. Fraser that if he mailed the writer snapshots of the ruins and of the small but substantial schoolhouse, we would gladly aid in the publicity of any movement suggested by Dr. Gordon. Unfortunately, however, Dr. Gordon passed away previous to or soon after our return to Canada. We heard nothing from Mr. Fraser; and so the matter rests.

Mr. Fraser was good enough to drive us back to Hamilton by another route. We had barely started on our way when the rain ceased and a blink of sunshine broke through the sky, and before we had gone many miles, the landscape was bathed in mellow radiance, casting a glory about the hills and soft wooded valleys and the quiet country roads.

We bade goodby to Mr. Fraser at Hamilton, had a late tea in town, and boarded a bus. By the time we reached Sandyhill, the evening with its coolness and its shadows had now come.

That which had been a dream had now come true. We had visited the birthplace of Alexander Muir, author of *The Maple Leaf*.