

# THE BACKWOODS OF AMERICA

ELIZABETH MACDONALD FOSTER\*

TWO youths stood at a Glasgow pier watching a receding barque dip behind the baths of the western stars. Retracing their homeward steps Hugh exclaimed half angrily, "Why did she do it?"

"Do what?" said Frank, the elder brother.

"Leave a happy family for an unknown future in the backwoods of America."

"You forget," said Frank, "that in her husband and her baby Elsie, Janet carries her home with her; whatever she touches she will beautify and exalt, as well in the backwoods of America as in the city of Glasgow."

After weeks of discomfort almost unheeded because of conflicting emotions of farewell and adventure, they arrived at the port of Pictou—the port from which two years earlier the Royal William had steamed out, bound for the old land.

The objective of the young couple was Upper Canada, but while their barque was in port, a probable two days, they decided to visit some fellow countrymen at Albion Mines, a few miles up the East River. Engaging a small craft to New Glasgow, the head of navigation, they walked the remaining two miles. (Here rich seams of coal were discovered in 1798 and from that time this district has proved to be one of the most productive coal fields in the Empire.)

Cheered by a warm welcome and the short visit with their friends, Sandy and Janet returned to Pictou to find that their boat had put to sea. Great was their disappointment; happily however their "boxes" were left on shore. They returned to Albion Mines where Sandy found ample scope for his skilled masonry. The winter passed not unpleasantly and by spring friends had prevailed on them to remain in Nova Scotia.

Besides being a masterbuilder, Sandy had a great ambition to become a "landlord," he accordingly bought a block of timber some miles farther up the river. The only oasis in the woodland was a lake, a real treasure for its unlimited supply of pure water and abundance of choice fish. In addition it contained medicinal leeches, which people came long distances to procure; as these were the days of "blood letting."

On this new domain which cost £100, Sandy erected a log house containing "but and ben". Care was taken to pro-

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vide a china closet and linen press for Janet's store of old world treasures. A clothes press was also added for her pretty gowns, while Sandy's silk socks and brocaded waistcoat remained in the "boxes" with other finery, including a dozen hand-made linen shirts, Janet's marriage gift to the groom.

To this home in the forest Sandy brought his wife and child. It was a house by the side of the road, for the "king's highway" passed nearby, but that highway was then chiefly a bridle path. None of their few neighbours lived within sight, but the young couple had health and each other. When Sandy was asked to take a building contract on far away Prince Edward Island Janet's heart quailed, but she made no sign. She would not hinder her "man". A strong neighbor girl was secured to do chores and afford company when wild animals howled in the night.

An occasional neighbor called. Janet served tea from her dainty china, and with the tea a scone. Returning the calls she was served tea from a bowl, and a slice of cold mashed potato took the place of bread; it was sincere but meagre hospitality. As the years passed, the china, the silk shawls and the gowns were frequently borrowed for marriage feasts; while the fine linen did duty for "winding sheets."

Living beside the road and the lake was not an unmixed blessing; travellers, overtaken by darkness, often came to the door begging shelter, fearing the howl of the wolf, the call of the silly loon and the ominous hoot of the solitary owl. None was refused. True hospitality was granted alike to the fugitive from justice and the church dignitary. One day a handsome young man alighted from his horse, approached the entrance, lifted his hat and enquired the way to the Upper Settlement. He later became principal of the Presbyterian College in Halifax.

The Micmacs gradually followed the white settlers from the shore farther up the rivers. They came and departed as silently as the Arabs, making dwellings and finding food on arrival. One morning Janet awoke to find that she had new neighbors. In later years these neighbors were considered a wood menace because they slashed the young saplings regardless of value, but at this time wood was over abundant. Ash, oak, maple were fashioned into numerous household necessities. Indian women were skilled in basketry, leather embroideries and moccasin making. These dark skinned, silent people loved nature, and were friends with the animals, birds and plants. Nature re-



warded them with food, clothing and shelter. Their only utensils from the outside world were a pot, a knife and a needle.

Indian women liked to visit the white lady, admire her "household goods," and watch her dress the baby; they were much interested in the baby's lace caps of darned net. They were not beggars, their larder was full, but they did enjoy an occasional gift of beads, needles or yarn, which they used in their decorative work.

Before many moons little Sandy arrived to play with Elsie, later more playmates were added and it became necessary to purchase a "fly" to convey the family to the distant kirk. The vehicle assuredly belied its name; however it bumped merrily over the rutty roads, and young bodies were unmindful of discomfort. Church services were an event in those days, and the Evangel had no uncertain sound.

As the family increased in numbers and years new problems arose. Not only food and clothing but "schooling" had to be considered. There was never scarcity of food, thanks to the fish and fowl of the lake and the game of the forest which were supplemented by vegetables and coarse grains. Gristmills were to be found on many of the neighboring streams. Beside the mill was the blacksmith shop where the horse could be shod, and neighbors could hold open forum on church and state politics while waiting for the grist. The maples supplied abundance of sugar and syrup, and if there was a shortage of black tea there were always herbs. The tinder box took the place of the match safe, and should it fail one could go to a neighbor for a pot of hot coals.

As for clothing, it was chiefly supplied by the industrious sheep that nibbled a living among the stumps. Shearing was an annual frolic; neighbor lads and lasses gathered to cut the fleeces, which were then washed at the lake kitchen—consisting chiefly of a huge black pot. Into tubs of warm water containing soft homemade soap the fleeces were placed; the young people "kilted their skirts," and to the tune of their own laughter danced on wool. At length the snowy fleeces decked the hillside where they were dried. Carding, spinning, and weaving followed. Skilled craftsmen were available for all these duties; they went from farm to farm, remaining days or weeks as necessity demanded. The fine yarns were used for dresses for the girls and shirts for the boys—the coarser for blankets, suits and rugs. Flax was also grown, cut, scutched, spun and woven, and used in making personal, table, and bed

linens; the coarser grades made bed ticking, bed spreads and grain bags. "Linen" was linen in pioneer days.

In this busy and happy life the family grew up. Sandy usually spent the winters at home, and in the evenings his merry old-land songs added to the cheer of the blazing back log. Janet sat beside him knitting with a book at her elbow, the smaller children in bed, the others "doing their sums" by the light of the tallow candle.

Before the age of Free Schools a large family was a luxury, fees being paid per capita. The country schools were built of logs, and furnished with backless benches, with a table and three legged stool for the master. In winter a red hot stove in the middle of the room was surrounded by the smaller children warming their toes and their slates and scorching their garments. The dominee was usually a "man o'pairs" preparing for either Oxford or Edinburgh—and he knew his Classics. He boarded around the homes, and his presence was almost as highly revered as that of the clergyman. These were days of hardship but great opportunity for teacher and preacher—their wisdom was undisputed.

Religion and politics were taken seriously, in one locality there were two near-by day schools of differing Presbyterian polity. None but a Scottish ecclesiastic could define the difference; but any clash of opinion, whatever the cause, called forth from the other school the malediction "You're an Antiburger", or "You're a Kirkman." School feeling ran equally high during a political election, despite the fact that the children were entirely innocent of the cause. On these occasions the damning appellations were, "You're a Tory" or "You're a Grit." They even walked on opposite sides of the road and refused to swap gum. Youthful fervor, however, soon cooled; but with their elders the cleavages were more rigid.

Before the adoption of Penny Postage mail was a luxury. On one occasion during Sandy's absence, Janet refused a large packet of manuscript because the cost was exorbitant, and her shekels insufficient. In later years this was deeply regretted as the packet was supposed to contain information about the estate of a wealthy brother, a colonel in India. Unsuccessful efforts were made to retrieve the loss, but nothing resulted save castles in the air.

Although comparatively poor, the early settlers of Pictou County had an ambition to give at least one member of the family higher education. To facilitate this ambition Pictou



Academy was founded in 1816, and despite many difficulties, it grew in size and influence, drawing pupils not only from its own neighborhood but from other parts of the province and even from Bermuda and the West Indies.

The boom period was from '80 to '90 when generous bursaries were given by a former student, George Munro, New York publisher. A writer says, "Pictou is noted for coal and clergymen; in less than one hundred years she has given 300 clergymen, 200 physicians, 8 college presidents, 2 governors, 2 premiers, numerous judges and other sons of distinction."

In a Scottish home like that of Sandy and Janet, this ambition to send one or more of the family to college was not lacking, the Church and Medicine having the preference. This was duly effected, and in after years when grandchildren scrambled over the idle loom and played with the now silent spinning-wheels, they would cautiously peer into the dark closet, where in Harvard days Uncle Squair kept the skeleton. Descending to the living room they peeped into the china closet, next into the now almost empty wardrobe where grandmother's gowns once hung. Little remained except band-boxes containing old silk hats and outmoded bonnets.

Today remnants of Janet's "treasures" are found in various homes from Atlantic to Pacific all across the "Backwoods of America;" and her samplers are the prized possessions of great-granddaughters.

Erstwhile, Sandy and Janet, having served their generation by the will of God, have fallen on sleep.

Our sires—brave hearts that crossed the estranging seas,  
And broke the hush of the primeval wood,  
Who lit their candles in the solitude,  
And met the saffron morn upon their knees.