

# A COKE'S TOUR TO HALIFAX

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IN 1832, E. T. Coke, Lieutenant of the 45th Regiment, spent "ten very agreeable days" at Halifax, and shortly afterwards wrote an interesting account of his sojourn in the Nova Scotia capital. He thus joined the long line of literary men who have taken Halifax for their subject. In its two hundred years of continuous settlement Halifax has been "much exposed" to such men, but the line began long before that. There are accounts of the voyage of Gomez along its littoral in 1524, as well as of Champlain's visit in 1607, and that of Gargas in 1687-88. Since 1749 the line has of course included Alline, Akins and Eaton, and Burke and Dickens and Kipling, and many others. Nevertheless, Coke's description of his trip to Halifax in 1832 is of value because of its first-hand information about communications and agriculture in the province, as well as for its revealing glimpses of life in and about the provincial capital.

His visit renewed an old link with Halifax, for he was an officer in the 45th regiment, which had earlier seen service at Louisburg, Beauséjour and Halifax. From 1745 to 1749 it had been at Louisburg, where it had been known as the 56th or "Warburton's Regiment," until its name was changed after the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, in 1748. A year after its change of name, it was removed from Louisburg to Halifax, where it afforded additional protection to the new settlement. Six years later, at least part of it was with Monckton at the capture of Beauséjour; and in 1758 it was commanded by Brigadier-General Charles Lawrence at the last siege of Louisburg. It remained in America until 1765. Subsequently it saw service in the Peninsular War; and between 1819 and 1832 it added to its laurels in Ceylon and Burma and India.

Coke crossed the Atlantic with the specific purpose of informing himself more fully respecting the United States and the British North American provinces. Before reaching Nova Scotia he visited the principal Atlantic cities in the United States, and travelled through Upper and Lower Canada and New Brunswick. He was obviously a man who had read widely, who possessed acute powers of observation and who could use both pen and pencil for his writing was illustrated by sketches that he had made. One of these was "Halifax from the Road above Bedford Basin."

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His narrative gives us a view of interprovincial communications as well as of intraprovincial travel. He approached Nova Scotia from New Brunswick, leaving St. John by steamer at seven o'clock on Monday morning, September 24, "with the sea as smooth as a lake, but the vessel rolling heavily . . ." Five hours later they entered Digby Gut, and early in the afternoon reached Annapolis Royal. This steamer was the *Henrietta*, which plied three times a week from St. John to Digby and Annapolis. In the preceding November she had replaced the *St. John*, a schooner-rigged steamboat, which had begun a regular service across the Bay of Fundy about four years before that.

From Annapolis to Halifax Coke travelled by stage-coach. This was less than four-and-a-half years after the Western Stage Coach Company had commenced operations on this route. Coke made the journey in stages, spending a night at Kentville and changing coaches at Windsor. "On the morning of the 25th September (he stated) we left Annapolis, pursuing our journey to Bridgetown, fourteen of fifteen miles distant, where we crossed to the right bank of the river and followed its course over a poor and exceedingly light soil . . ." "The day was stormy, with heavy rains, and the coach only a second-hand American one, with 'Western Mail, New York, and Hoboken' upon the doors; neither was it water-proof, the canvass curtains hanging down in long shreds, and flapping to and fro with the wind. The horses too were poor specimens of the Nova Scotian steeds, three out of the four being lame; the coachman however was perhaps one shade more professional in his appearance than those in the States. I attempted to kill time by reading Bulwer's Eugene Aram, but was incessantly interrupted, when devouring one of the most interesting chapters, by a prosing little woman eighty years of age, with snow-white hair, rosy cheeks, bright black eyes, and a set of teeth which would not have disgraced a Brahmin. She was the picture of good health, but most unfortunately my neighbour, and apparently took a great fancy to me, as the full benefit of her colloquial powers was bestowed upon me in some such interesting conversation as 'Aye, these barrens are very dreary, but you will soon come to the settlement:—now there's a pretty intervale—this is poor territory.' " These were some of the joys of travel before the Dominion Atlantic Railway to Annapolis was opened in 1869.

Near the village of Aylesford, Coke and his fellow-travellers passed in sight of Clermont, "the pretty country residence of

the Bishop of Nova Scotia." A few miles farther on they entered the Cariboo Swamps.

"After leaving the swamp we entered dense forests of pine unvaried by a solitary habitation for many miles, and the few small clearings were plentifully covered with Nova Scotian sheep, *alias* large black stones; but at Kentville, where we passed the night, the country assumed a more fertile appearance, and our road continued within sight of the large prairie and rich dikes of Cornwallis and Horton . . ." "The view of Cape Blomidon, or Blow-me-down (as it is now significantly called, from the heavy gusts of wind which prevail off its bluff point), with the Basin of Minas and the opposite shore, is a fine and extensive one when taken from the high part of the Horton Mountains over which the road passes. For the first time in America, I saw a drag-chain used in their descent, but the road was excellent; and though closely packed with eight people inside, and only two seats, we travelled the ten miles in an hour and ten minutes."

Then making a circuitous route of six miles in twenty, they crossed the Avon, and arrived at Windsor to "breakfast." Windsor, like every Nova Scotia town Coke visited, impressed him favourably. "The streets are clean, and the houses have a respectable and pleasing appearance, superior to the Canadian villages."

Near Windsor, he saw King's College. "A long wooden pile of buildings, with a flat roof, occupies an eminence one mile from the town, with twenty-five windows in each story, which, consequently, might be reasonably supposed to be a cotton mill; but, not being in the vicinity of any water, I came to the conclusion that it was a barrack: my loquacious neighbour however set me to rights by informing me that it was the college. It certainly exhibits a strange architectural taste, though quite a modern building, the institution having been founded only thirty year's." (It was founded in 1789). In 1832 (Coke stated) "there were twenty-one students, who are eligible at the early age of fourteen, on account of young men entering upon business so early in life. They are required to wear the cap and gown, but little attention appears to be paid in this respect to the rules of the college. I saw some very un-academically dressed young men in green shooting jackets, standing at the hotel door, smoking cigars and surveying each passenger as he stepped out of the coach. The only mark of scholastic garb they wore was the square cap and tassel; and one of them crossed the street with his gown

folded up and carried under one arm and a large stick under the other . . ."

His trip across the peninsula gave Coke an opportunity of seeing something of the agriculture of the Province. "The crops throughout our journey appeared in a most deplorable state; in many parts they were yet green, though it was now the 26th of September, and some were entirely destroyed by the frost, which had been capricious in the extreme: one field was probably quite destroyed, and the farmer at work cutting it for winter fodder, while the next was yet in a flourishing state. Owing to the lateness of the spring, and the early September frosts, it seemed probable that the farmer's yearly labours would receive but a poor return."

This was about twenty-five years before the Halifax Windsor Railway was opened, and so Coke continued his journey from Windsor by stage-coach. "We changed our coach at Windsor (he added) for one of larger dimensions, and, the Halifax races commencing the following day, we had an addition to our party of half a dozen lawyers and attorneys returning from the circuit to enjoy the gaiety of the capital. My prosing old trollop contrived to place herself beside me again, and after congratulating me upon the vicinity we had preserved, she transferred her little grand-daughter from the centre seat, where her bonnet was crushed into every possible shape but the one the maker designed, to a place upon my knee. What with the child, the old dame's garrulity, and fifteen inside passengers upon a hot day, I was almost worked into a fever, and was therefore happy to escape when we stopped to change horses, and walk up the Ardoise Mountain . . ."

Soon he caught sight of two large estates, the country seat of T. N. Jeffery at Lakelands, and Mount Uniacke, which had been the property of Richard John Uniacke, Sr. "The Road continues over high ground, after gaining the summit" of Ardoise hill, "passing between many lagoons varying in size from 20 to 40 acres, which afford excellent trout fishing, and have some good land near them. One farm especially, the property of Mr. Jeffries. (Hon. T. N. Jeffery), Collector of Customs at Halifax was quite a treat to a traveller who had been so long accustomed to see nothing but a most slovenly system of agriculture. It displayed much better management than that of his near neighbour, Mr. Uniacke, the late Attorney General, whose farm and house were erected upon such a barren spot, and so much money had been expended upon the estate, that, to use a fellow-pa-

senger's expression, 'for every stone he had picked up he had laid down a dollar.' Each house is prettily situated near a small lake, with undulating and well-cleared grounds, laid out in gardens and with quickset hedges; they had also planted several hundreds of English oaks in the hedge-rows, which appeared to be thriving tolerably."

After passing Ardoise hill, the travellers encountered a twenty-mile stretch of bad roads and desolate country. "A new line of road had been laid out some two or three years previously, and, nothing being expended upon the repairs of the old one, we had to jolt about unmercifully over huge rocks and deep water-courses. It was well, indeed, that we were packed so close, and had not much space for pitching to and fro." Here the road lay through the leafless forest, which had been consumed by a fire in 1825. "Nothing can exceed the desolate appearance of the country over which it swept; the trees either yet remain, hardened by the fire, in their natural position, and casting a wintry gloom over the few green shrubs which are creeping up again at intervals beneath them, or have been consumed by internal fire, leaving only a mere shell or skeleton."

"Night had set in by the time we had arrived within ten miles of Halifax, and I, allowing my head to sink down upon my breast, breathed hard, and affected sleep, for the purpose of avoiding the old lady who was by far a greater plague to me than the old man of the sea was to Sinbad the sailor. But all this *ruse de guerre* was of no avail: 'I am sure you will never wish to travel with such an old woman again,' said she; 'most sincerely I shall pray for it,' groaned I; and my evil genius persevered in describing the Bedford Basin upon whose margin we were now travelling, and related 'how the French admiral and fleet scuttled themselves and went down with colours flying in the presence of the English sooner than surrender,' and how the mast of the admiral's ship was yet visible above low water on a calm day. I was mute, but ever and anon peered out, and squinted through one eye to the right and left, in hopes of seeing the long-wished-for city; but there was only the white light water of the basin below, or the dark outline of houses at intervals on the right, with the roaring stream of the Sackville, as it descended over its rocky bed from the chain of lakes we had passed during the day. I almost shouted with joy when the exclamation of 'there is the city-dell' (citadel) broke from her, and we entered the streets just as the vivid flash of the heavy gun from the ram-

parts, and the numerous bugles and drums of the garrison, nounced that it was eight o'clock.

This is a part of Coke's description of the town of Halifax. "The peninsula rises rather abruptly from the water, the streets being laid out parallel with the harbour from north to south; but they are much confined by the citadel on the summit of the hill and the crown reserves around it. The city is consequently much compressed in width, and occupies only a narrow strip of land, being about two miles and a half in length by a quarter of a mile in width, and all the cross streets are inconveniently steep, but the corporation were as actively as at St. John's in levelling and making them more commodious." (But Halifax was not incorporated until 1841). Five years earlier the population of the peninsula of Halifax was 14,439. At the time of Coke's visit it was still largely a wooden city, "there not being more than 100 stone houses out of 1600 . . ." "The citadel, which is raised upon an old fort of smaller dimensions, will not be completed in some years; the work is carried on chiefly by the soldiers of the garrison, who receive 9d. per diem extra while employed during the summer months . . ." (The fourth and present citadel was constructed between 1828 and 1856, and rearmed in 1867). "The barracks at present occupied by the troops are of wood, with very little to recommend them, except some fine mess-rooms and a library instituted by Lord Dalhousie, when Governor of the province. A fire would prove of infinite service towards beautifying the city, by destroying them and a great proportion of the private dwelling-houses. Those even which are built of substantial materials are principally of the shaley ironstone rock of which the peninsula is formed, and which contains such a quantity of the ore that it oozes out in long streaks down the walls, and gives them a most lugubrious and prison-like appearance. Some of the public edifices are of a handsome freestone and the Province Building, as it is called, situated in an open square, surrounded by an iron railing, and the interior prettily planted with locust-trees, would not disgrace the capital of Great Britain . . .; but the colonists do not appear to feel much pride about the grandeur of it, and their approbation of it is smothered in complaints of the extravagance of the cost. They have another source of lamentation in Dalhousie College, which occupies one end of the parade, where the guards mount daily and which was commenced in 1820, but not completed for want of the necessary funds. It is, also, a handsome freestone building, but unoccupied. Part of it, from humane motives, has

been fitted up by the Governor as a cholera hospital, as well as the levee room at Government House; but fortunately neither of them was required. The latter is situated near the lower extremity of the town, but rather too near a burial ground. There are only two churches of the Protestant episcopal religion, St. Paul's and St. George's, the latter a plain circular wooden edifice, bearing a close resemblance to the Coliseum: besides these, the Catholics and dissenting sects have six chapels . . ."

On the day after his arrival, Coke attended the horse-races of Halifax. Horse-racing was popular at this time, and the Turf Club had been active since 1825. Many years before the organization of this Club, however, Richard Bulkeley had done something to improve the breed, by importing three horses from Ireland for stock-raising, and horse-racing had its beginning at Halifax in 1768, when one of Bulkeley's horses won the mile-and-a-half event. For the next few years regular spring and autumn meetings were held, and horses were imported from New York and Baltimore. But in 1771 the Governor prohibited horse-racing at Halifax, because it tended to idleness, drinking, gambling and immorality. Now, in 1832, the races attracted large crowds. "I have seldom witnessed a livelier scene" (Coke wrote) "than the Halifax race-course presented on the 27th of September. The day was remarkably favourable; not even a passing cloud appeared to plead an excuse for not forming part of the show. By mid-day the city had poured forth all its inhabitants, both horse and foot, who were either grouped upon the ramparts or brow of the citadel hill, or listening to the military bands who played between the heats on the plain below. The scene was rendered more enlivening by the numerous gay uniforms of the rifle brigade, 8th and 96th regiments, which, with detachments of artillery and engineers, composed the garrison. The races had been set on foot by the officers of the army and navy upon the station, many of whom carried off the palm of victory in competition with professional jockeys. They were more suitably equipped too for running a race, according to an Englishman's notions of dress, than the provincialists, who cut rather an *outré* appearance riding in their shoes and loose trowsers. Many of the races were well contested, and the sports were kept up with great spirit for three days. A captain and subaltern became *field officers* on the course, owing to the treachery of the ground which gave way under the horses when they were making nearly their last spring to gain the winning-post. A midshipman merited by his perseverance what he could not gain by the fleetness

of his steed, as he ran for almost every stake, from the cup down to the saddle and bridle. The grand stand consisted of a few pine boards loosely tacked together, and was altogether a most frail and tottering erection, and prior to trusting one's life in it it would have been a matter of prudence to have insured it. We had one or two false alarms of 'coming down', from the boys scrambling upon the roof, or gentlemen of heavy weight venturing upon the floor; but, the generality of the ladies preferring to witness the races from their own carriages, the show upon the stand was limited to about a dozen or eighteen people. All booths for the sale of spirituous liquors were prohibited near the course but the law was evaded by the proprietors of contiguous fields letting them for the erection of tents, which proved of some service in attracting all those who had an inclination to be disorderly away from the peaceable portion of the assemblage.

The old Masonic Hall, whose cornerstone had been laid by the Duke of Kent on June 8, 1800, was then an important community centre. "In many a stormy time," as reported in the *Citizen* in 1875, it was to be the cradle of liberty. Within its walls soon after 1832 railways, and responsible government and party quarrels were discussed and practically settled by the citizens, not as Masons but as citizens. There Johnston and Howland and Young displayed their talents, and helped to make the Masonic Hall "the focus of intellectual and political life." In September 1832 Coke was one of many who dined "at the public ordinary the same afternoon" as the horse-race, "held in the Mason's Hall, a room of noble dimensions, but rendered gloomy by the ceiling being painted in most deplorable taste of a deep black colour, varied here and there with a streak of white, a compass, a rule, an eye, and other strange devices of the craft. I could compare the general effect only to that of a storm about to burst over the heads of the company, and it certainly much marred the beauty of the ladies who attended the ball in the same room the following evening. The cup, which had been made at New York, was produced after the cloth was removed for presentation to the winner, a citizen, (Emerson), and I believe the only one who entered a horse for the races."

In the autumn of 1832 the theatre at Halifax enjoyed a revival in popularity. The performances, in the words of the *Nova Scotian*, continued to be various and respectable, the players nightly suffusing "light, life, and good humour, over the little community." The plays included *Isabella* or *The Fatal Marriage*, *The Weathercock*, *Othello*, *The Rendezvous*, *The Soldier*



*Daughter*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. In the advertisement for the presentation of *A Cure for the Heart Ache* and *Raising the Wind*, on November 2nd, it was announced that the "House is made comfortable by stoves." In that month, moreover, the musical concerts of Messrs. Herrman & Co., a group of visiting Germans, gave the theatre some competition. During his stay in Halifax, Coke went to see *Simpson and Co.* and the *Poor Soldier* "but almost took alarm at the box-office, which was in a damp corner on the ground floor behind a green curtain, where we received some dirty play bills, not broader than the riband of a lady's bonnet. The interior of the house well corresponded with it. We managed to obtain seats in the front box, from which an active man might have almost leaped over the people's heads in the pit on to the stage. Altogether it was much like performing in a sentry-box: we were so close to the performers, that a darkened eye-brow or rouged cheek could be easily detected, and the prompter's voice was heard in every sentence; yet, in spite of these objections, the good citizens were flattering themselves that Fanny Kemble would extend her engagements from the States to the capital of Nova Scotia. The house was very thinly attended, but the heat was so oppressive that in half an hour we were glad to beat a retreat to our quarters, where I was again, for the second time during my travels, confined to my bed by indisposition for two days, but was happily surrounded by military friends, who soon set me on horseback again. I gave the band-box of a theatre the full credit of inducing if not producing my indisposition."

During his short stay Coke saw much of Halifax and its environs. "We enjoyed," he wrote, "many pleasant rides towards Point Pleasant, and the pretty private residences near the city, and passed an entire day in visiting Rockingham, where Prince's Lodge, formerly the Duke of Kent's country seat, is mouldering into dust, and in making the circuit of Bedford Basin. The road winds prettily along the margin of the water through a thick grove of birch and forest trees, crossing innumerable rivulets which pour their tributary streams into the basin from the rocky but thinly inhabited country with which it is surrounded. The lodge is a large wooden building six miles from the city, without any claims to architectural beauty, and, from its numerous large sash windows, may be likened to a conservatory or a lantern, there certainly being a greater proportion of glass than timber in the front. The grounds have been laid out tastefully, and the situation is exceedingly beautiful, overlooking the

broad expanse of the basin, from the edge of which it is about 300 yards. After the Duke's departure from the province, the property came into the possession of Sir John Wentworth, the Lieutenant-Governor, who allowed it to fall into its present ruinous and forlorn state. Not a vestige of the double tier of verandah remains; the balcony and parapet railing are hanging in the most doubtful *suspense*; and, when we expressed a wish to see the interior, the old soldier in charge said that he would not insure us against either vanishing through one of the floors or being buried under the falling roof. The old guardhouse has been converted into the stables of a comfortable inn, the scene of many garrison pic-nics and citizens' Sunday parties." Coke also rode to the village of Sackville, at the head of the basin, where there was a small military post for the apprehension of deserters. From there he continued by a bridle path to Dartmouth, on the opposite side of the harbour.

Coke also saw something of the provincial militia. They were, he stated, well equipped in every respect, and seemed to take some pride in making a soldier-like appearance. Just a week before his arrival, the Halifax Militia had engaged in a sham fight in the valley between the Basin and the head of the North West Arm. On that occasion the invading army consisted of the Rifle Brigade, the 96th Regiment, and several of the volunteer companies of militia. The defending force was made up of the 8th Regiment and the bulk of the militia regiments. The results of such exercises were apparent to the military visitor. The militia, he wrote, "had lately been engaged in several sham fights with the garrison, and the skirmishing over several miles of rough ground had instilled such a martial spirit into them, that they were parading voluntarily to perfect themselves in military exercise. The province can muster 22,000 infantry, but no cavalry . . ."

Very soon came the time for Coke's departure. "After spending ten very agreeable days, we left Halifax", he stated, "with regret the society and manners of the inhabitants are so thoroughly English, from the rapid succession of new comers and the gaiety attendant upon a place possessing so large a garrison that a temporary abode there for seven or eight years might be comparatively desirable." This was about the end of the first week of October, and the forests were ablaze with the magic tints of autumn.

On his way back to Annapolis, where he was to embark in the *Henrietta* for St. John, Coke visited Sherbrooke Falls "upon

the pleasing little stream which runs through Kentville," the settlement of Cornwallis and Wellington Dyke. At "Acacia Grove," the lovely home of Mr. Charles R. Prescott, which had been built near Cornwallis about twenty years earlier, Coke requested permission "to walk through his gardens. He (Prescott) very kindly accompanied us, pointing out the various exotics he had introduced into the province, and which were in a most thriving state. Apricots, grapes, and peaches, were ripening in the open air, and had a most delicious flavour, probably heightened by their being the first we had tasted since leaving England. The privet and quickset hedges, with some acacias, as well as various European trees, were flourishing as if they were indigenous to the soil, and scarcely any of his numerous experiments in gardening had failed." Then, after viewing Wellington Dyke, Coke returned to Kentville. From there he went by coach to Annapolis, "with a learned coachman, who favoured us with a dissertation on the pronunciation of French in general, and the derivation of many of the Nova Scotian names of places from that language. Such as that Cape Blow-me-down was corrupted from Blo-mong-dong, which he gratuitously taught me to pronounce with the true nasal twang, and instilled into me that "Have-a-chance River," which flows into the basin near the above cape, and "Knock-me-down Street" in Halifax, were only vulgar denominations for what originally bore more dignified titles." Thus the Lieutenant of the 45th Regiment bade farewell to Nova Scotia, after his pleasant stay of ten days at Halifax.