

THE FIRST CANADIAN BORN NOVELIST

By LILIAN M. BECKWITH MAXWELL

THOUGH the library of the University of New Brunswick, through the beneficence of Lord Beaverbrook its Chancellor, has been made the repository of Lord Bennett's papers and of papers of Lloyd George, it is not widely known that within a few weeks another literary treasure which has been deemed "priceless" has been obtained by the Library of the University of New Brunswick. This book is of the first edition of the first novel to be written by a native Canadian and published in Canada, and to Frederictonians there is a personal appeal the author having been born in Fredericton. Up to the time the University obtained this book it was thought that there were only two copies extant, one being in the Library of Congress and the other in the Toronto Public Library. This work of fiction was written by Julia Catherine Beckwith later Hart.

The title page of the book reads,

"St. Ursula's Convent or the Nun of Canada, containing scenes from real life,

The Moral world
Which though to us it seems perplex'd, moves on
In higher order, fitted and impell'd
By wisdom's finest hand, and issuing
In universal good.

Thomson

In Two Volumes

Vol 1

Kingston, Upper Canada

Printed by Hugh C. Thompson
1824"

On the fly leaf is printed,

"To the Right Honorable

The Countess of Dalhousie

These volumes are inscribed with Profound Respect by Her Ladyship's Most Humble Servant

The Author"

This novel is contained in two small volumes within gray card-board covers about four inches by six in size. The book is a "thriller", sensational, full of intrigue, shipwrecks, children exchanged but restored in later life, highway men, counts and marquises, nuns and convents, husbands and lovers believed lost but found alive in the closing pages of the book—such a book as a seventeen year old girl would write, though, according

to "St. Ursula's Convent or the Nun of Canada", it was a time "Genteel in its elegance and refinement".

Much of the material for the book was found in the happenings experienced by Julia's family and relatives. She was born from the union of a Methodist New Englander and a Catholic French woman. Her father Nehemiah Beckwith was a son of a Samuel Beckwith who with his brother John, their families and their father Captain Samuel Beckwith, sea captain, migrated in 1760 from Connecticut to take up former Acadian lands in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia.

During the American Revolution Nehemiah, aged twenty-four, finding the attacks of the American privateers upon the coasts of Nova Scotia paralyzing to trade, in 1780 moved, along with others, to the River St. John where he secured from the Government a grant of land in the Parish of Maugerville and there took up farming and ship building, the family business. Here he built and launched the "Lord Sheffield" a vessel which was the first to make regular runs from Fredericton to the mouth of the St. John. The "Lord Sheffield" was put to good use by the thousands of Loyalists who came up the St. John in 1783 and 1784. Among them was General Benedict Arnold who came to Fredericton to be near his wife's Loyalist relatives and to look for new opportunities. At this time trade with the West Indies offered lucrative return and General Arnold, having looked upon the "Lord Sheffield" proposed to Beckwith that they together enter upon this larger trading project, Beckwith to put into the proposed partnership the "Lord Sheffield". In 1786 General Arnold bought a house at the lower end of the present Waterloo Row in Fredericton, and at the upper end of the Row, facing the river, the partners built their ware-house. (Later this ware-house was changed into the present dwelling house, but a Frederictonian has a picture of it as a ware-house showing double doors on the second floor.) At the same time Arnold had a house in St. John City and built a trading post on Campobello Island in Passamaquoddy Bay. The site of the latter building, fifty yards or so from the summer home of the late President Roosevelt, is still shown. Trading posts on the islands of Passamaquoddy Bay were an essential factor in the West Indian trade.

As a rule Nehemiah himself took command of the ship on the out bound run, but in the latter part of 1788 Arnold proposed that he take the ship on the outside trip. That was the last Nehemiah Beckwith saw of the "Lord Sheffield". For a

time it seemed that Nehemiah was ruined. Then he began to trade in lumber and cattle and must have prospered because in 1790 he was married in Government House to Julie le Brun de Duplessis who had come to Fredericton as a governess to the children of the Governor, Lt. Colonel Thomas Carleton. Nehemiah now built a house in Fredericton on the south side of King Street on land granted to him by the City Trustees. It was the third lot east of Regent street. The house had a little garden with a picket fence in front. Here Julia Catherine Beckwith their first child and the future authoress was born in 1796.

Julie, Julia's mother, was a first cousin of Abbe Ferland the early historian, (whose portrait hangs in the Chateau Ramsay Museum, Montreal), and it is from Abbe Ferland's personal correspondence retained in the Archbishop's Palace in Quebec that descendants have gathered information pertaining to the le Brun de Duplessis family.

According to L'Abbe Jean Baptiste Ferland, Jean Baptiste Le Brun de Duplessis, Julie's father, a native of Picardy and of the Regiment of Bearn, came out with Montcalm in 1755 and under the French regime was *écervien d'artillerie* (probably paymaster in the commissariat office), attached to His Most Christian Majesty's troops in Canada, but having actively opposed the passage of the Quebec Act, he found it difficult for a time to practise his profession of a lawyer or Notary Public. In her novel his grand-daughter Julia wrote of the hero that "by a Letter de Cachet he was banished to Canada where his genteel department procured his appointment of a Notary Public." In 1761 Jean Baptiste le Brun married Marie Catherine Methot of Three Rivers and henceforth Three Rivers and Montreal became his places of residence. From this union at least seven daughters, three of whom seem to have married into the Beckwith family of Cornwallis, N. S., and one son were born. The son Francois, who left no descendants, took to the sea and a letter from him, among Abbe Ferland's correspondence, wrote of him leaving Halifax for Quebec in the ship "La Diligence" of which he had command, and another letter from Francois alluded to his much talked of shipwreck on Anticosti Island. Julia had four shipwrecks in her novel.

To settle in life so many daughters must have been a problem for pere and mere le Brun in an age when marriage was the only future open to women. In Julia's book the heroine replied to two offers of marriage by saying, "I am entirely at my fath-

er's disposal". However Julia's mother Julie seems to have found opportunities for her sisters to meet the men of her husband's family.

Julie, wife of Nehemiah Beckwith, attended the Methodist Church, in Fredericton, because, she is reported by descendants to have said, it was least like the Catholic Church, and she told, according to the Beckwith family, that she had turned from the Catholic Church on account of the fate of a favorite aunt. This aunt, so the story ran, had been the fiancée of an officer in the French army, and the officer having been reported killed in battle the aunt entered a convent. Eventually the officer turned up, went to the convent, and his lady love, though she had taken the veil, stole from the convent to bid him farewell, and was never seen again by her family. This convent was among those torn down later following the French Revolution, at which time the skeleton of a young woman was found bricked into a wall. This tale, attributed to Julie, sounds more like Julia but does not conform to the kindly feeling towards convent and nuns portrayed in "St. Ursula's Convent". Nor did the Methodist religion alter French Julie. Called before the elders of the church for the sin of vanity she explained that she wore a bow in her bonnet because the ribbon band had been too long and she did not want to commit the sin of wastefulness!

Julia helped with the settlement in life of her sisters. In April of 1798 Francois le Brun wrote a letter to his sister Marie-Anne wife of Colonel Beckwith "somewhere in New Brunswick". (In 1794 Colonel Beckwith was A.A.G. to English troops in Canada.) In 1798 Samuel Beckwith of Cornwallis, N. S., nephew of Nehemiah, married in Fredericton Adelaide le Brun. Visits were made too to Cornwallis. In 1813 when Julia was seventeen years old she paid a visit to the home of her Uncle Asa in Cornwallis, and while there began to write her novel "St. Ursula's Convent". Two years later, in 1815, tragedy struck the home on King street. Nehemiah went to St. John City on banking business, there being no bank in Fredericton in the early days. He did not return and later his body was found in the river with pockets rifled. He had fallen among some of Julia's highwaymen. After Nehemiah's death both Beckwith and le Brun families helped Julie and her six children of whom Charles the youngest was ten and Julia the eldest nineteen years old at the time of their father's death. "Sister Beckwith" of the Hotel Dieu, Montreal, a daughter of Marie-Anne, Mrs. (Colonel) Beckwith, and Julie's sister Lucile who was Mrs.

John Charles and lived near Montreal, (the first John Charles in America founded Charlestown, Boston), attempted to have the children received into the Catholic Church. Julie's eldest son, Marvin, named for Nehemiah's mother Miriam Marvin, was re-christened in Montreal "Francis" probably after his uncle Francois le Brun, and ever afterwards though he was called Marvin, signed himself "Francis E. Beckwith". Francis E. Beckwith became sheriff of Victoria County, N. B. The son John Adolphus was sent by his aunts to Laval University and later in political life—he became a member of the New Brunswick cabinet—his fluency in the French language served him well. The girl Sophia eventually married a Mr. John Marsh, became the mother of a police magistrate of Fredericton and the grandmother of a lieut. governor of New Brunswick. The son Charles, named probably for his uncle by marriage, was killed by lightning at the age of twenty-four, and Amelia, who never married but cared for her mother, wrote at the time of Charles' death to her cousin Abbe Ferland of her mother Julie's grief.

In 1805 Elizabeth le Brun de Duplessis, one of Julie's younger sisters, had married Antoine Ferland of Isle d'Orleans and settled in Montreal. In the close of the same year her son Jean Baptist the future historian, was born. When Madame Ferland lost her husband in 1813 she moved to Kingston where her son entered Nicolet College under the provision of Mgr. J. G. Plessis, Bishop of Quebec. In the natural course of events of this family, which seemed to think nothing of travelling through the wilderness, Julia Catherine Beckwith arrived in Kingston in 1820 to visit her aunt Madame Ferland. In Kingston Julia found a publisher for the book which she had started years before in Cornwallis and "St. Ursula's Convent or the Nun of Canada" must have received some acclaim because a copy of it was placed in the foundation stone of the then, 1824, new Kingston gaol. In the same year of 1824, Julia, who had reached the age of twenty-eight, married George Henry Hart, an Englishman and a printer. From Kingston the Harts went to the States, perhaps to New York State where Samuel Beckwith and Adelaide had settled near Rochester, N. Y.

The widow Beckwith continued to live in her home on King street where she had good neighbors. Amelia wrote to her cousin Abbe Ferland of the kindness of Dr. Allan a retired army surgeon who lived with his two sons in the house just above, and the late Mrs. L. W. Bailey of the University, whose father Joseph Marshall Baron d'Avray had been the Principal of the first

Provincial Normal School which stood just above the Allans, told of running in to see "old Mrs. Beckwith, a little French woman".

While in the States Julia Catherine Beckwith Hart published her second novel, "Tonnewonto or the Adopted Son of America", and in the same year, 1831, returned to Fredericton where her husband had secured a position in the New Brunswick Crown Land Office. The manuscript for a third book, "Edith" was written but never published, though for a number of years Mrs. Hart wrote for a newspaper, the "Fredericton Reporter". In 1867 Julia C. Beckwith Hart died in her home on the corner of Brunswick and Westmorland streets, Fredericton, leaving several children of whom Marvin was the eldest, and the next year her mother, Julie le Brun de Duplessis Beckwith passed away at the age of ninety. In the old central graveyard in Fredericton, next to George street, the third lot from the upper corner is surrounded by an ornate iron fence. The grave-stones in the lot are gone but the iron gate in the fence has "Hart" as part of the iron-work. Here was laid to rest Canada's first native novelist.
