

"Romance of Old Fort Howe" The Story of William Cobbett

Interesting Paper by Rev. H. A. Cody Read at the Fort Howe Celebration Under the Auspices of the Women's Canadian Club.

The following interesting paper on the "Romance of Old Fort Howe" by Rev. H. A. Cody was one of the most enjoyable features of the Fort Howe night, under the auspices of the Women's Canadian Club in the York Theatre last evening:

A ROMANCE OF OLD FORT HOWE

By H. A. Cody. It is interesting to note that many famous cities of the world have important hills near or surrounding them. Athens has her Hill of Mars, Rome her Seven Hills, and Jerusalem her Mount of Olives. On this side of the water the same is true, Montreal has her Mount Royal, and Quebec her Citadel.

St. John, too, has her hill, rising sentimentally and rugged above the City of the Loyalists. It is the glory of war; not to bold robbers, who sought its sides as a place of refuge; and not to any castle with frowning walls, does Fort Howe command recognition. Its history is a simple record of peace in keeping with that of the city nestling at its base.

Fort Howe claims special consideration today, not by reason of the treaty of peace which was here ratified with the Indians, or that it was garrisoned by a considerable number of soldiers; but because of its association with one of the most remarkable men England ever produced: William Cobbett was a young man when he came to St. John in 1785. Too long would it take to tell the details of his early life, so only a few of the salient incidents are mentioned here. He was a self-made man, of humble peasant origin. He was self-educated, too, and his struggles to obtain knowledge were not to his great will power. He learned Grammar, so he tells us, when he was a private soldier, receiving only a shilling a day. The edge of his berth or the top of the guard-bed was the seat upon which he studied; his knapsack was his bookcase, while a bit of board lying on his lap was his writing table. He had no money to purchase candles or oil, so in winter he had to use the light from the fire, and only when his turn came at that. To buy a pen, or a set of papers, he was forced to go without a portion of his food though in a state of starvation. He had to read and write amidst the noise of whistling, singing, whistling, and bawling of at least half a dozen of the most thoughtless of men. "Think not lightly," he wrote "of the farthing, it will give you now and then for ink, pen or paper. That farthing, alas! was a great sum to me." Once he had saved a half-penny for the purchase of a book, he hid it in the morning. This money he lost, and so badly did he feel that he buried his head under a pile of sheet and rug, and cried like a child. What a lesson is this to the youth of our city who have every opportunity for study, and yet so often they make little use of it.

In 1785, Cobbett joined his regiment, the 54th, in Halifax, N. S. His description of the men is not to be flattered. "Everything I saw," he wrote, "was new: bugs, rooks, and stumps; thousands of Captains and Colonels without a sword, and a great number of Squires without shoes or stockings. "Within a few weeks his Regiment was ordered to St. John, and very different was the impression which New Brunswick made upon Cobbett's mind. He was in his happiest mood when writing about the rivers, creeks, waterfalls, trees, and everything of the kind. "If Nature in her very best humor," he said, "had made a spot for the express purpose of captivating me, she could not have exceeded the efforts which she had here made."

Two outstanding incidents connect Cobbett's name with the history of Fort Howe. The first is that of his romance which led to his marriage in four years. There was stationed here a Sergeant of the Artillery, Reid by name, who had a beautiful daughter at this time thirteen years of age. Cobbett saw her for the first time one evening in a centinel's house. He fell in love at first sight. This favorable impression was increased three days later, when walking one cold morning at daybreak by the river, he caught her out on a snow bank scrubbing out a washing tub. "That's the girl for me," he said to his two companions when out of her hearing. "I have never seen a more beautiful girl in my life."

Just below the summit of Fort Howe, and near Sergeant Reid's house was a clear spring of water, bubbling out from beneath a large limestone rock. At this place water was obtained for the surrounding houses and without any doubt it was here that the young lovers often met. This spring is sometimes called "Cobbett's Well," but it is generally known as "Jennie's Well." It is commonly supposed that this spring was named after Sergeant Reid's daughter, and it may come as a surprise to many to learn that her name was Ann, and not Jennie. To account for this tradition has been a pure surmise to me. One suggestion made by the president of the Women's Canadian Club is that perhaps her name was Jennie Ann. There is another I consider more feasible. Jennie, or Jincy, may have been the nickname given by the soldiers to the Sergeant's daughter. Be that as it may, the spring will be called "Jennie's Well, and not "Ann's." It sounds better, and so we shall leave it at that. It would be a graceful act on the part of the Women's Canadian Club to redeem this neglected spring, and erect a fountain or some other suitable monument to the memory of this beautiful young maiden who came so often to it for water, and stopped to talk with her and her lover. There is a strong temptation to give the imagination free scope and weave around this spring the spell of romance. Some day, perhaps, the future poets and novelists of St. John may find in the incidents surrounding Jennie's Well inspiration and material for poetry and prose, who captivated him at once. It was a stern test of devotion to Jennie, who had since

gone to England with her father. This new maiden, according to Cobbett's own words, was dressed in "a neat and simple fashion. She had long light brown hair twisted nicely up, and fastened on the top of her head in which head were a pair of lively blue eyes associated with features of which softness and sweetness, so characteristic of American girls, were the predominant expressions, the whole being set off by a complexion indicative of glowing health, and forming, figure, movements, and all taken together, an assemblage of beauties far surpassing any that I had ever seen but once in my life. That was, too, two years ago; and in such a case and at such an age, two years, two whole years is a long while. Here was the present bride absent; here was the power of the eyes against that of memory; here were all the senses up in arms to subdue the influence of thoughts; here was vanity, here was passion, here was the spot of all spots in the world, and here also was the life, and the manners, and the habits, and the pursuits that I delighted in; here was everything that imagination can conceive united in conspiracy against the poor little brunette in England."

But notwithstanding all of these influences, Cobbett was loyal to the "little brunette in England." He joined her several years later, and they were married. There is an incident which shows us what a sterling woman Jennie was. When she left for England Cobbett had given her one hundred and fifty guineas, which he had saved, that she might not have to work so hard. When he reached England he found his little girl a servant of all work at the house of a Captain Brisac; and without hardly saying a word she put into his hands the whole of the one hundred and fifty guineas unbroken.

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While stationed at Fort Howe, Cobbett was made Corporal, and became clerk to his Regiment. About this time the new Discipline, the "Dundas System," as it was called, was sent out from England. It gave instructions as to the mode of handling the musket, marching, etc., and was to be studied by the officers, and put into immediate practice. "Though," as Cobbett said, "an old woman might have written the book," it had to be complied with before the next annual Review. The officers neglected the study until a short time before the Review was to take place, and Cobbett was the only one who could give the instructions. In the "Life and Letters of William Cobbett," by Lewis Melville, recently published in two volumes, there is a humorous caricature by Gilray of a scene on Fort Howe on this occasion. Cobbett is standing in the midst of excited officers, one he has just thrashed and sent away rubbing the affected parts; another is receding in punishment, while others are standing near with terror depicted upon their faces, trying to study the Manual. Then when the Review did take place, Cobbett is standing in the midst of the officers, who are all looking at him with admiration. He had to stand upon the flank of the Grenadier Company, with his worsted

shoulder-knot, and his high, coarse, hairy cap, confounded in the ranks among other men, while those who were commencing him to move his hands and feet thus or thus, were in fact uttering words which he had taught them. Cobbett got more than his share of the punishment, and he found that they were committing flagrant breaches of trust that affected the public peace. As a clerk he had access to the books, and he made voluminous extracts he exposed the culprits upon his return to England. But the full account of this would take too long to relate, so it must be read elsewhere.

Cobbett's fame spread throughout the province. He had to visit people in all parts of the province, and he had to attend to the affairs of the whole Regiment, his accounts, his partner his guards, and everything that he found time to study English and French. He built a barracks for four

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