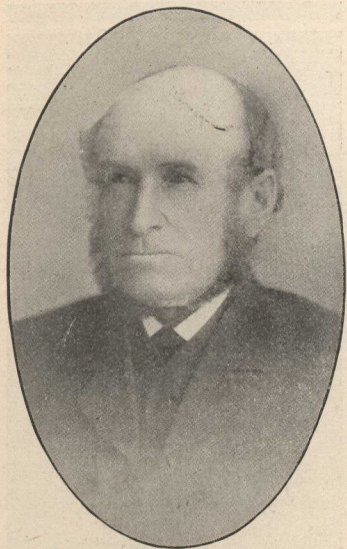


THE LAST OF THE LA GUAYRIANS

By C. C. JAMES



Mr. David Stirton.
1816-1908—The Last.

THE Canada Company had been formed to take over and settle a large area of land in Upper Canada. John Galt, the novelist, had been sent out to act as superintendent. One of his first acts was to lay out a town which has grown into the substantial city of Guelph. He wrote home to a friend an account of the inauguration of this work, dating his letter from Guelph, 2nd of June, 1827. By accident this letter some time later

came under the eye of the editor of *Fraser's Magazine*, and was printed in the issue of November 30th, 1830. As an introduction to this article we reproduce a portion of the letter as follows:

"The site chosen was on 'a nameless stream's untrodden banks,' about eighteen miles in the forest from Galt—a great future city founded by a friend of mine, with a handsome bridge over the Grand River, and of which I had never heard until it had a post office. Early on the morning of St. George's Day I proceeded on foot towards the spot, having sent forward a band of woodmen with axes on their shoulders to prepare a shanty for the night—a shed made of boughs and bark, with a great fire at the door. I was accompanied by my friend Dunlop, a large, fat, facetious fellow, of infinite jest and eccentricity, but he forgot his compass, and we lost our way in the forest. After 'wandering up and down' like babes in the woods, without even a blackberry to console us—the rain raining in jubilee—we came to the hut of a Dutch settler, in which no English was to be obtained. However, after much jabber, loud speaking, and looking at one another with mouth, eyes and nostrils, in addition to ears, Mynheer gave tongue that he could speak French, which he did, no doubt, perfectly; as, in telling us that he had cleared a farm in the States which he had exchanged for his present habitation, he expressively said, '*Je swape.*' We hired him for our guide.

"It was almost sunset when we arrived at our rendezvous; my companion, being wet to the skin, unclothed and dressed himself in two blankets, one in the Celtic and the other in the Roman fashion—the kilt and the toga; the latter was fastened on the breast with a spar of timber that might have served for the mainmast to 'some great admiral.' I 'kept my state' (as Macbeth says of his wife at the banquet) of dripping drapery. We then, with surveyors and woodmen (Yankice, choppers) proceeded to a superb maple tree, and I had the honour and glory of laying the axe to the root thereof, and soon it fell 'beneath our sturdy strokes' with the noise of an avalanche. It was the genius of the forest unfurling his wings and departing forever. Being the King's name-day, I called the town Guelph—the smaller fry of office having monopolised every other I could think of; and my friend drawing a bottle of whiskey from his bosom, we drank prosperity to the unbuilt metropolis of the new world."

Accompanying the letter there appeared a sketch of the town showing a clearing, a bridge across the Speed, the stump of the maple tree neatly fenced in, the Priory facing the river, the market building, the school, and a number of houses. For a time, the Priory was Mr. Galt's residence. Later it was used for offices and for the temporary accommodation of new arrivals. Visitors to the Royal City will have noticed the picturesque log station of the C.P.R.—it is the Priory site preserved and welcoming as of old the newcomers to the city of John Galt.

Mr. Galt in his autobiography tells us

that soon after the beginning of the town he found it expedient to make his headquarters at some more convenient point and so he took up his residence at a house on Burlington Bay, thus locating midway between York and Guelph. He says: "I had not been long settled in this domicile, when one Sunday morning a deputation came to me, from a body, I think, in all, of fifty-seven emigrants, who had come from New York, where they had been landed from La Guayra, South America. . . . I considered that as the Company had work it would be doing service to Government to employ these people, accordingly directed them to proceed to Mr. Prior at Guelph, till I had time to consider their case."

This event in the early settlement of Upper Canada is recalled by the death of Mr. David Stirton of Guelph, who passed away recently in his ninety-third year. Mr. David Stirton was born in Scotland in 1816; came to Upper Canada in 1827; from 1858 to 1874, represented the county of Wellington in the Parliament of Canada; for nearly thirty years, from 1876 to 1904, held the position of postmaster at Guelph; and now, after being a lone survivor of the early pioneers, he has passed away at a fine old age. It is not of his interesting parliamentary career that we propose to write, but we remember that he was "the last of the La Guayrians," and in these days of revived immigration and of pioneering "made easy," it may be of interest to recall the story of the little band of Scottish settlers of which he was the last survivor.

Turn to the map of Venezuela in South America. You will find the city of Caracas in the north, lying a few miles inland from the coast. Its seaport is La Guayra. In 1825 the country, then known as Colombia, was in a state of unrest. The sovereignty of Spain had been thrown off by Bolivar. The old plantation proprietors were uneasy; they were anxious to dispose of their estates. Coffee was the chief crop grown for exportation, the work being done by slaves. These estates were advertised in Europe as most attractive properties, and the suggestion was sent abroad that here was the place for the industrious Scottish emigrant. Scotland was uneasy at the time. Her people were streaming out of the western ports across the Atlantic to the United States and Canada. There was, however, but little shipping from the eastern ports for America. This presented a new field for the promoter. A company was organised, a plantation purchased in Colombia and advertisements of most attractive nature scattered up and down the eastern shires of Scotland.

A London sailing vessel of 600 tons called *The Planet* was chartered to take out the settlers. The boat left the Thames with a few English emigrants and then picked up the rest of her passengers, 250 in all, in the Bay of Cromarty. This was in 1825. They sailed for La Guayra, calling at Madeira on the way to take on a cargo of wine. Twelve weeks out from Cromarty Bay, the party were landed at La Guayra. Disappointment met them from the first. The country was in disorder, life and property were insecure, the climate was unsuited to the Scotsman of the north, the estate that had been purchased by the company was composed partly of

barren mountains and partly of valleys that required irrigation. Transportation had been provided and land allotted by the company to the settlers who were bound by written contract to locate upon the land and to repay their debt in ten years. The poor, deluded people were thus left in a most pitiable condition. After vain efforts to make a living and to reconcile themselves to their inhospitable surroundings, they were gradually forced to abandon their lots and soon found themselves gathered together in temporary quarters at Caracas.

Here at least they had some chance of defending themselves against bandits and outlaws. They laid their case before the British consul, and with the help of Mr. Lancaster, the Quaker educationist, who happened to be there at the time, they sent home an appeal for help. This did not fail. A British frigate was despatched to their assistance. The captain in charge was a brother of Sir Peregrine Maitland, then Governor of Upper Canada. After consultation, they decided to accept the offer of transportation to Canada. They were taken north and landed at New York, where they were met by Mr. Buchanan, the British consul, who also acted as agent of the Canada Company. It should be noted here that Mr. Stirton's father reached New York by an earlier boat, as he had saved enough of his money to pay for passage for his family. Twenty-two families in all were sent forward from New York consigned to the care of Mr. John Galt who was building up the settlement in the County of Wellington. Mr. Stirton some years ago told the story of his journey. His father and family sailed up the Hudson to Albany, thence by canal boats to Rochester and by schooner to the head of the lake. Half a dozen houses stood on the present site of Hamilton; Dundas was somewhat larger; but Ancaster ("the pretty, breezy town of Ancaster on the hill," Galt called it) was the most promising town of the district. Over the primitive roads they made their way, reaching Guelph on September 8th, 1827, less than five months after the time of the cutting of the first tree. The Stirton family slept on the first night in the loft of the Priory.

Another chapter now opened in the history of the La Guayrians. Mr. Galt gave them welcome and made out a plan for forming with them a model settlement which was to extend four miles in length along the Elora Road. Their locations were laid

out on paper, irrespective of the configuration of the country. The Company undertook to assist in the building of the houses. Winter came on before they were ready and the poor immigrants, dependent solely upon the assistance of the Company and unacquainted with Canadian pioneer life in the bush, suffered to the limit the hardships of backwoods life. For a year or more they worked along increasing their clearings and improving their houses, but still dependent upon the Company. A change then suddenly took place. Mr. Galt and the officials at home had a misunderstanding, the result of which was that he resigned and returned home and his place was taken by another. The work provided by the Company upon which they depended for a living was stopped, supplies were shut off, and in a short time the La Guayrians were scattered over adjoining townships and they had to begin once again the battle of life in the deeper recesses of the King's bush.

May the Twentieth Century bring as good citizens as the La Guayrians!



Mr. John Galt.
Author and Pioneer.



Guelph—From a Sketch made in 1828. One of the Towns Founded by Mr. Galt for the Canada Company.