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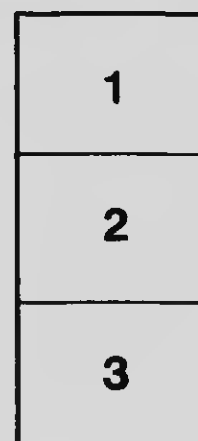
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# UPPER CANADA IN EARLY TIMES

A REVIEW

BY WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL

JOHN HOWISON, a surgeon in the East India Company's service, spent some two years and a half in Upper Canada in the second decade of the nineteenth century, and he has left us a most entertainingly written account of his impressions of the country and its people. He brought down on himself by his book\* the wrath of Robert Gourlsy the "Banished Briton," who admitting that "we see a book very well written, very readable as a romance"—still considers it "the tale of a sentimental weak man. . . worse than trifling—scandalous;" and his account of the people of Niagara District "is indiscreet, is ungenerous, is ungrateful."

Landing in Quebec after a seven weeks' passage across the Atlantic in company with a large number of British emigrants, mostly from Scotland, and all bound for Upper Canada, he was pleased with the appearance of Quebec as a commercial city, as well as amused by the manner in which the officiousness of the French-Canadian porters was damped by the watchfulness and suspicion of the Highlanders.

Taking a steamboat to Montreal, he found there the "lightness of the streets, the neatness of the buildings, the hospitality and polished manners of the people and the air of enterprise and activity that is everywhere exhibited in it . . . truly attrac-

tive"; and they "appear to particular advantage when contrasted with the dullness, gloom and dirtiness of Quebec." Even "individuals of the lower classes . . . carry with them an appearance of vigour, contentment and gayety very different from the comfortless and desponding looks that characterise the manufacturing population of the large towns of Britain." Which, *en passant*, sounds very modern.

He drove in "an amusing ride which lasted more than an hour" from Montreal to Lachine; then, next morning, provided with another *calash* and driver, continued his journey west; he stopped for breakfast at St. Anne's, where he first had the opportunity of observing the manners of an American inn-keeper. "Gentlemen of this description," he later found in Upper Canada. They, "in their anxiety to display a noble spirit of independence, sometimes forgot those courtesies that are paid to travellers by publicans in all civilised countries; but the moment one shows his readiness to be on an equality with them, they become tolerably polite." So the St. Anne's boniface seated at his door poising his chair on its hind legs and swinging backwards and forwards, paid no attention to the traveller as he alighted, or walked into the house or even when he desired him to get breakfast ready, but when he said, "Will you

\*Sketches of Upper Canada, Domestic, Local and Characteristic. By John Howison, Esq., Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, High Street. 1821.

have the goodness to order breakfast for me if convenient?" the tavern-keeper replied "Immediately, Squire," and rose and showed him to a room where an excellent breakfast was at once set before him.

We are not told the terms or the tone in which Dr. Howison's "desire" for breakfast was first expressed, but we may imagine. The traveller apparently finds it impossible to understand how innkeepers can consider themselves on a par with other people—and he afterwards speaks of an incident related to him by a gentleman in Upper Canada concerning a major in the American invading force of 1813 taken prisoner by the Canadians, who stated to one of them that "he hoped to be treated with respect for he kept one of the largest taverns in Connecticut—Howison added that this showed that the American Government granted commissions to many whose "rank in life did not entitle them to such a distinction."

Dr. Howison wholly disapproved of "those absurd notions of independence and equality which are so deeply engrafted in the mind" of those whom he calls peasantry, and regrets that such notions are acquired by emigrants in a very short time. At Kingston, he accosted two Scotsmen whom he had seen in Montreal less than a fortnight previously; and "instead of pulling off their hats as they had invariably done before on similar occasions, they merely nodded to me with easy familiarity," He adds: "I addressed them by their Christian names." Precisely why a Scotch bricklayer should raise his hat to Dr. Howison rather than the Doctor to the Scotsman we have no information.

After being ferried over the Ottawa River at St. Anne's, he went westward in the *calash*, passing through the settlement of Glengarry, and after "the polished and interesting peasantry of Lower Canada," he finds the inhabitants of Glengarry "blunt and

uncultivated," displaying "no inclination to improve their mode of life, being dirty, ignorant and obstinate. The surface of the soil was excellent, "to the depth of several inches it is composed almost entirely of decayed vegetable matter . . . too rich for the common purposes of agriculture . . . cropped twenty-one years in succession without receiving any manure whatever." *O, si sic semper!*

The following appears in the first edition; but good taste or good sense caused it to disappear in subsequent editions.

Speaking of Glengarry (or Glengary), as the author always spells it, he says:

"This account filled me with high expectations, and the more so, as I had been told that the upper part of the settlement was in a state of rapid advancement. I, therefore, hoped to see my countrymen elevated in their characters and improved in their manners, by the influence of independence, and stopped at a private house, which my driver had recommended as being much superior to the tavern. Here I found a large family devouring pork and cions, and a room containing as much dirt as it could conveniently hold. I had scarcely passed the threshold, when I was importuned by signs to take my seat on the head of a cask and helped abundantly to the family fare. Resistance was vain, as none of the party seemed to understand a word of English, and I suppose my unwillingness to join in the repast was attributed to *false modesty*.

"The evening being far advanced, I was obliged to resolve upon remaining with them all night. After listening for a couple of hours to Gaelic, I followed the landlord to my bedroom; but the moment he opened the door, a cloud of mosquitoes and other insects settled upon the candle and extinguished it. He made signs that I should remain a few moments in the dark; but I followed him down-

stairs and firmly declined paying another visit to the apartment intended for me, as it seemed to be already occupied."

The other changes in the several editions—there are three editions that I know of—are merely verbal.

After leaving the Glengarry settlement, he travelled upwards of sixty miles—"half cultivated fields, log houses and extensive forest all along composed the monotonous scene . . . destitute of variety and interest . . . a dull and unvaried prospect." He reached "two small villages . . . within twelve miles of each other called Prescott and Brockville" [sic]. Prescott with twenty or thirty houses and a new fort occupied by a few soldiers.

He discharged his carriage at "Brockville" and secured a passage to Kingston on a *bateau* [sic]. Five *bateaux* went together, a brigade, each boat with five rowers and a man with a paddle to steer—the noise of the oars startled the deer "browsing along the banks"—the water exquisitely pure and transparent but producing in gentlemen from Upper Canada nausea, pain in the stomach, etc., i.e. on the way down before they became accustomed to it. Indians were met, "their heads adorned with steel crescents and waving feathers, the rest of their dress consisting of the skins of wild beasts and long scarlet cloaks covered with ornaments."

Reaching Kingston, a fine town of 5,000 inhabitants, he found a good hotel—more fortunate in that than most of us. Then he took passage for York on the steamboat *Frontenac* and soon felt himself impelled to "invoke a thousand blessings on the inventor and improvers of the steamboat for the delightful mode of conveyance" furnished mankind. The *Frontenac* was the largest steamboat in Canada—her deck 171 feet long and thirty-two broad—her tonnage 740 tons, and her draught when loaded up, eight feet. "Two paddle-wheels, each about forty feet in cir-

cumference, impel her through the water," and she sailed "when the wind was favourable nine knots an hour with ease." A fine boat, indeed.

York was reached, a town of 3,000 inhabitants whose trade was trifling—he remained there for an hour or two and re-embarked for Niagara, thirty-six miles distant, reaching this village at 10 p.m. The village, with a population of 700 or 800, was "neat, gay and picturesque, and was crowned by a small fort [Fort George] at a little distance, the ramparts of which were crowded with soldiers"; "a detachment of military was always stationed at Niagara."

In the vicinity, "the soil and climate . . . seem to be admirably adapted for the production and growth of fruits . . . the orchards may almost be said to grow wild. They raise wheat, Indian corn and potatoes enough," but the visitor saw everything in a state of primitive rudeness and barbarism."

After paying a high tribute to the Canadian Militia, of whom he says "the bravery of the Canadian militia which was brilliantly conspicuous on many occasions, has neither been sufficiently known, nor duly appreciated, on the other side of the Atlantic," he goes on: "In Upper Canada a man is thought dishonest only when his knavery carries him beyond the bounds prescribed by the law."

"Between Queenston and the head of Lake Ontario, the farms are in a high state of cultivation and their possessors are comparatively wealthy . . . Many of them possess thirty or forty head of cattle . . . They are still the same untutored incorrigible beings that they probably were when, the ruffian remnant of a disbanded regiment or the outlawed refuse of some European nation, they sought refuge in the wilds of Upper Canada, aware that they would neither find means of subsistence nor be countenanced in any civilized country. Their original depravity has been confirmed and increased by

the circumstances in which they are now placed. The excessive obstinacy of these people forms one greater barrier to their improvement; but a greater still is created by their absurd and boundless vanity"; "they can, within certain limits, be as bold, unconstrained and obtrusive as they please in their behaviour towards their superiors, for they neither look to them for subsistence nor for anything else.

"It is indeed lamentable to think that most of the improved part of this beautiful and magnificent Province has fallen into such 'hangmen's hands.'"

Some of these Canadians must have failed to raise their hats to the Doctor. That he was one of "their superiors" goes without saying.

We have no hint throughout the volume of the writer's profession, but Gourlay perhaps gives the key to this unfavourable view of the character of the Canadians. In his General Introduction, Gourlay tells us that Dr. Howison, assuming the name of "The Traveller," was "advertising for employment . . . as a practitioner of physic" and assisted Gourlay for a time "in rousing . . . attention to the iniquities of the government and the pollutions of Little York . . ."; but he seems to have been unsuccessful and ultimately deserted the cause "keeping up a silly correspondence with the Major . . . now made Sheriff of Niagara District . . ." Gourlay contends that "the great mass of them [i.e., the Canadians spoken of by Howison] are well meaning, honest, sober and industrious men," and "some of those who set themselves up for the respectables—the gentlemen of the country were, in fact, the most ignorant, mean, disgusting and infamous char-

acters that ever came under my observation."

Whether the failure to obtain a medical practice was the cause or not\*—and Dr. Howison never was qualified to practice in Upper Canada—"the Traveller" does not spare the character of Canadians.

Some of the information he gives is not without interest—Ancaster, at which we know the Courts of Assize were then held, is described as a village of a few dozen straggling houses and between 200 and 300 inhabitants, near which was a church, one of the two within fifty miles—the nearest to the west being more than 200 miles away. "Thus in the space of nearly 300 miles, there are no more than four villages at which public worship is conducted regularly throughout the year."

A good description is made of the manufacture of maple sugar. "The Indians sometimes refine the sugar so highly that it acquires a sparkling grain and beautiful whiteness, this they put into small birch-bark boxes called *mohawks* and sell to the white people."

Dr. Howison travelled to the Grand River and gives a description of the Mohawk Indians, their religion, virtues and vices. He rode to Long Point where he saw a frog fascinated by a black snake, saw "partridges spring from every copse and deer often bound across the path, and tells of the passenger or wild pigeon, now, alas a thing of the past—the last I ever saw, I shot in 1871). "Myriads of them are killed by firearms or caught in nets by the inhabitants; for they fly so close and in such numbers that twenty or thirty may sometimes be brought down at a single shot." (The best I ever did was six.) Wilson, the ornithologist

\*In the biography of the Honourable W. H. Merritt, M.P., by J. P. Merritt, St. Catharines, 1875, p. 45:

"A Dr. Howison spent the winter of 1819-20 here (i.e., 'The Twelve,' now St. Catharines) and kept his office at Paul Shipman's Hotel. He appeared to have been a man of means and practised but little at his profession, spending most of his time in visiting around the neighbourhood, where his society was much appreciated."



saw a flock in Ohio more than a mile in breadth and at least two hundred and forty miles in length which he calculated to contain 2,230,272,000 pigeons—And now in 1913, it is not known that a single bird of the species survives!

Coltman's Tavern comes in for commendation. There Howison got delightful venison which had been kept for three or four weeks and "was in such a fine state that it almost fell into powder under the knife."

The Talbot Settlement was visited where "the excellence of the soil, the condensed population and the superiority of climate all combine to render it more agreeable and better suited to the lower orders of Europeans than any other part of the Province." But while "the first view . . . excites pleasing emotions . . . on deliberate inspection will destroy all these Arcadian ideas and agreeable impressions. He who examines . . . in detail will find most of its inhabitants sunk low in degradation, ignorance and profligacy, and altogether insensible to the advantages which distinguish their condition. A lawless and unprincipled rabble consisting of the refuse of mankind, recently emancipated from the subordination that exists in an advanced state of society and all equal in point of right and possession, compose, of course, a democracy of the most revolting kind . . . But then "the farmers of the Niagara District, many of whom have been thirty or forty years in the country . . . are in no respect superior to the inhabitants of the Talbot Settlement: they are equally ignorant, equally unpolished . . ." Some of these Talbot settlers must have shown that they considered themselves equal to a new-come-out Englishman!

And their habits did not commend themselves to the stranger—"Many of the settlers . . . follow the habits and customs of the peasantry of the United States and of Scotland,

and consequently are offensively dirty, gross and indolent in all their domestic arrangements." They must apparently have lived up to the old Scottish proverb "The clartier, the cosier."

The Scotch perhaps were the worst for they "do not fail to acquire some of those ideas and principles which are indigenous to this side of the Atlantic. They . . . become independent, which in North America means to sit at meals with one's hat on, never to submit to be treated as an inferior, and to use the same kind of manners towards all men." I must admit that having seen many who have been brought up in a Scotch immigrant home, it did indeed seem as though some of them had been taught all these except "to sit at meals with one's hat on," which I never saw or elsewhere heard of—I shudder to think what would happen if they tried that. Notwithstanding all their faults, "the utmost harmony prevails in the colony and the intercourse of the people is characterised by politeness, respect and even ceremony." And "any poor starving peasant who comes into the settlement will meet with nearly the same respect as the wealthiest person in it, captains of militia excepted." Unfortunately being thus treated, the newcomer "generally becomes most obtrusive and assuming in the end: and it is a remarkable circumstance that in Upper Canada the *ne plus ultra* of vanity, impudence and rascality, is thought to be comprised under the epithet *Scotch Yankey*." I have been calling the Doctor an Englishman—I withdraw the name—no one but a Scot could give that touch.

There can be no possible doubt about Howison's politics, either—he says "the lower classes are never either virtuous, happy or respectable unless they live in a state of subordination and depend in some degree upon their superiors for occupation and subsistence." There was noth-

ing unduly democratic about the Doctor—and he was one of “their superiors” even if the “peasantry” did not lift their caps to him.

Nevertheless “the time I lived in the Talbot Settlement comprehended some of the happiest days” he ever passed in the course of his life—he read Plutarch’s Lives, which he borrowed from a farmer, and one number of Blackwood.

Then he went from the Talbot Road to the head of Lake Erie, and on his route found Scotch, New Englanders and Indians. “The Scotch peasants had been degraded by a life of poverty, servitude and ignorance. . .”

“The New Englanders unaccustomed to subordination stood much higher in their own estimation . . . but they were destitute of any sort of principle either moral or religious”; “The Indians were not in a state of debasement and they seemed more entitled to respect than either the Scots or Americans.” Poor Canada!

He was ferried over the Thames on a raft and got into the Long Woods, nearly lost his horse and at length reached Ward’s Tavern, came again to the Thames and a populous settlement but was grieved for there too “the Canadians in addition to their indolence, ignorance and want of ambition are very bad farmers.” He found some mineral oil which was used as a medicine—“it very much resembles petroleum, being of thick consistency and black colour and having a strong penetrating odour.”

Then he came to “a spot called the town of Chatham. It contains only one house and a sort of church, but a portion of the land there has been surveyed into building lots and these being offered for sale, have given the place a claim to the appellation of a town. There are many towns like Chatham in Upper Canada and almost all of them have originated from the speculations of scheming individuals. When a man wishes to dispose of a piece of land or to render one

part of his property valuable by bringing settlers upon the other, he surveys a few acres into building lots. These he advertises for sale at a high price, and people immediately feel anxious to purchase them, conceiving that their situation must be very eligible indeed, otherwise they would not have been selected for the site of a town.” No, this is not written of “towns” in Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1912, but of “towns” in Upper Canada a hundred years ago. There is nothing new under the sun.

Reaching the Detroit River, the doctor was charmed with the “amenity of manners which distinguishes them from the peasantry of most countries:” and “this quality appears to particular advantage when contrasted with the rudeness and barbarism of the *boers* who people the other parts of the Province.” The French-Canadians must have doffed their caps to the visitor.

He visited Sandwich “which contains thirty or forty houses and a neat church,” also Amherstburg which had a population of over 1,000, “many of them persons of wealth and respectability, and the circle which they collectively compose is a more refined and agreeable one than is to be met with in any other village in the Province.”

He remained at Amherstburg and Sandwich ten days and left for the Talbot Settlement again: arriving at Arnold’s Mills, he was deserted by his companions and left to make his way alone. He got to the Talbot Settlement and at length to Niagara—in June, 1820, he was conveyed across the Niagara to Lewiston on his way homeward.

Dr. Howison is typical of a certain class of visitor—he comes to Canada firmly convinced that he knows it all, that his way is the only way and that all who differ from him are fools or worse. The courtesy of the French-Canadian he accepts as homage paid to a superior person and

thinks that he is entitled to homage from English-speaking Canadians. Their independence he resents as insolence and he is wholly unable to understand that they do not look upon him as a superior. He cannot see that the free yeomanry are not a peasantry, but that they consider themselves—and rightly so—the equal of

any man on earth. They hold up their heads, and do not consider it a sign of condescension for which to be grateful to be addressed by their Christian names. And with all their manifold failings in the eye of the stranger, he is, as we have seen, bound to admit their prosperity and their happiness.

*Reprinted from The Canadian Magazine  
May, 1913*

