

OHSP XVII

21

# The Mosquito in Upper Canada

BY

THE HONOURABLE WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL,  
LL.D., F.R.S.C., ETC.



Reprinted from Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records, Vol. XVII.

## THE MOSQUITO IN UPPER CANADA.

BY THE HONOURABLE WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL, LL.D., F.R.S.C., ETC.

The Insect has been called the "Outlaw of Creation;" and some have not hesitated to say that the great fight ahead of man is with the Insect, and that if he does not conquer the Insect, it will conquer him and civilization together.

Whatever truth there may be in these somewhat alarming statements, there can be no doubt of the tremendous amount of misery and mischief done by some kinds of insects. And the mosquito is not the least noxious. Her activities are almost as varied as the methods of spelling her name; Murray gives twenty-six spellings and the mosquito has at least a score of ways of being a nuisance.

All writers on early Upper Canada agree in their account of the extraordinary number of mosquitoes in that new land;—apparently the Arctic regions in the summer are the only places which could be cited as a rival in that respect. Dr. Howison who spent a few years in this Province in the second decade of the last century tells of visiting the Gaelic settlement in Glengarry, and says that on going up to his bedroom at that place the moment the door was opened a cloud of mosquitoes and other insects settled on the candle and extinguished it. While such an occurrence must have been unusual, every one who lived even half a century ago in rural Ontario must have seen swarms not much if at all less thick. The "rain barrel" without which the farm mistress could not do her washing was placed at every corner of the house and almost invariably was full of "wigglers" or baby mosquitoes, larvae. Offensive as the mosquito was and is, her music annoying, her bite irritating and poisonous to man and beast, until recently she was not blamed for more. And yet it is quite certain that what we now call malaria is due to the mosquito. In olden Upper Canada, fever and ague, ("fevernager" was the common pronunciation,) remittent fever or "fever of the country," was an almost intolerable curse. The cause was generally considered to be the bad air of swamps or low lying undrained lands, and if one here and there suggested the mosquito as the real offender he had no hearers. It was not until the closing years of the 19th century that it was scientifically established that the real cause is a very minute parasite in the blood and introduced by the Anopheles mosquito—that kind of mosquito which stands on a window pane with the proboscis and body in a straight line at an angle and not parallel with the surface, and "the female of the species is more deadly than the male."

The Anopheles has been busy in this Province ever since it was a province and it would be impossible to set out all her deeds. We shall speak of only two or three.

After the foolish and fratricidal war of 1812 had been waged for two years and a half, the contending parties agreed to quit as they began. By

the Treaty of Ghent they also agreed to refer to two Commissioners, one appointed by each party, the determination of the middle line of the international waters which was the boundary agreed upon in the Treaty of 1783 (which acknowledged the independence of the United States.)

General Peter Buel Porter, who had served with some credit in the War of 1812 and who was to be Secretary of War in Adams' Cabinet, was selected as the American Commissioner, and John Ogilvy of Montreal, the British Commissioner. Their duties led these men into the St. Clair Flats where the deadly Anopheles swarmed. Porter survived the attack, but Ogilvy, bitten by the insects, was stricken with fever and died at Amherstburg, September 28, 1819, the doctors all attributing the fatal infection to the miasmatic air of the lowlands.

A little before the St. Clair mosquitoes plied their deadly beaks on John Ogilvy, their sisters were busy with equally nefarious if not equally fatal work at the other end of the peninsula.

In June, 1817, there entered the Province of Upper Canada a Scotsman over whose head forty winters had passed and who was to become almost by chance one of the most noted men in our whole Provincial history. Robert Gourlay—he later adopted his mother's maiden name "Fleming" as a middle name—was born in Fifeshire of a moderately wealthy family; he devoted himself to farming but quarrelled with almost everyone but his devoted wife and children. Well educated, a man of good principles, honest, generous, ever mindful of the poor, he had peculiarities which were sometimes not far removed from insanity; he seems always to have been anxious to put some one in the wrong, not for any advantage to himself but for chastisement of the wrongdoer; he quarrelled on trivial pretexts with his neighbour the Earl of Kellie, his landlord the Duke of Somerset and several of his friends. At length he made up his mind to come to Upper Canada where he had land. He did not intend to remain more than six months, but purposed to return to his farm in Wiltshire. But *l'homme propose*; he visited his wife's kinsman, Thomas Clark, at Queenston in July 1817 and there he was laid up for two months with a fever caused by the stinging of mosquitoes. This misfortune entirely ended his plan of a speedy return to England.

He had sent out printed enquiries to various parts of the Province; and had received certain answers as to the state of the various townships.

Gourlay remaining in the country published an Address to the Resident Land Owners of the Province, advising the drawing up of a full statistical account of the Province and for that purpose the holding of meetings throughout the country to draw up answers to questions which he framed. The last of these attracted most attention: "What in your opinion retards the improvement of your Township in particular or the Province in general and what would most contribute to the same?"

Gourlay most emphatically states—and apparently with perfect truth—that he did not intend Parliamentary Reform and that he had no political object in view; he published the address in the official organ of the Government, the Upper Canada Gazette, after having consulted the Administrator, the Chief Justice and many of the leading personages of the little capital. Only one Councillor saw anything wrong in the Address; the Reverend Dr. Strachan as soon as he saw it in print, considered it of an inflammatory and dangerous nature. Gourlay was annoyed and angry. He took no pains to be conciliatory but rather the reverse, he wrote articles in the Press which aggravated his

supposed offence and confirmed Dr. Strachan's bad opinion of him. The view spread amongst the official classes, and it was spread by them that Gourlay was seditious and desirous of overturning the existing order of government and society; he was even charged with being pro-American, an imputation at that time quite as serious as that of being a pro-German at the present.

There is no reasonable doubt that both Gourlay and Strachan were perfectly honest; both desired the best advantage of the Province; both were Scots, both "dour," both fixed in their views—what one's enemies call stubborn, one's friends, firm—both intolerant of opposition and both of perfect courage of conviction. The contest for awhile lay between these two implacable countrymen, the divine suspecting the farmer, the farmer despising the divine.

But Gourlay could only talk and write; Strachan could act. In a short time the Province was stampeded, the Legislature forbade certain meetings which had been projected to carry out Gourlay's scheme, and the patriotic and philanthropic Gourlay was branded all over the Province as a traitorous self seeking intruder.

Prosecuted for seditious libel at Brockville and at Kingston, he was twice acquitted but there was a weapon in the existing law more effective than the law against libel.

In 1804 owing to the large number of disaffected Irish who were entering the Province, a Bill which had been at first intended as a protection against Americans hostile to our monarchical system was enlarged in its passage through the Legislature to cover the case of British subjects as well. As finally agreed to, it authorized certain officials, Judges, Executive and Legislative Councillors and others—to cause the arrest of anyone who was not an inhabitant of the Province for six months or who had not taken the oath of allegiance, and if not satisfied with his words or conduct to order him to leave the Province—if he did not leave the Province within the time given he could be tried for so doing and if found guilty he could be again ordered to leave the Province. If he disobeyed he was liable to the death penalty "without benefit of clergy."

This Statute had seldom been appealed to but it was in full force when the enemies of Gourlay failed in their prosecutions of him for seditious libel. Two magistrates of Niagara had him arrested; he was ordered to depart from the Province; he refused and was cast into the Niagara Jail to await his trial at the Assizes. In the Fall of 1819 he was tried and convicted; ordered to leave the Province, he passed through the State of New York and the Province of Lower Canada for the Old Land.

There oscillating between England and Scotland he remained for nearly fourteen years, three of them in prison because he refused to give bail when required; he horse-whipped Henry (afterwards Lord) Brougham in the Lobby of the House of Commons because (as he claimed) Brougham had neglected a Petition which Gourlay wished presented to the House of Commons; he worked on the road as a pauper; he showered petitions on the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the King; he drew up plans for the improvement of Edinburgh, for the settlement of New York State, and had the luxury of law suits both in the English and the Scottish Courts—and at length in 1833 he returned to this continent. He refused William Lyon Mackenzie's advances but ultimately returned to Upper Canada in 1838. From that time

on, the "Banished Briton," as he called himself, kept pestering the Provincial Parliament with petitions about his wrongs and demanding an admission that he had been wrongly banished. At length he was given a small pension which he refused and a pardon which he protested against; he lived in Upper Canada, the United States and Scotland until 1863 when he died in Edinburgh.

Gourlay is one of the most striking figures in our whole history: he just failed of being a great and a useful man; his prosecution which, while within the law, was really persecution, had some influence in uniting the forces opposed to "Family Compact" rule, although he himself always despised Responsible Government.

If the mosquitoes had let him alone, he would doubtless have returned to his English farm and quarrels with his landlord and his neighbours, and the world would have never heard of the Banished Briton and Neptunian.

The next victim of the Anopheles—which word, by the way, means in Attic Greek, worthless or injurious—to be mentioned is a dignified Judge of His Majesty's Court of King's Bench for the Province of Upper Canada—the Honourable Levis Peters Sherwood, the son of a Loyalist father who in 1784 came to Upper Canada with his family and slaves, locating about two miles below Prescott in the Township of Augusta. Levis Peters, the second son, joined the Law Society of Upper Canada in 1801, being the second Student at Law on its Rolls; he was called in 1803, and soon attained eminence at the Bar. He was a Member of the Legislative Assembly for Leeds in the Sixth and Eighth Parliaments and Speaker in the latter; he was a consistent and active supporter of the Government and after being Judge of a District Court, he became a Justice of the Court of King's Bench in 1825. His health even at that time was undermined and he was liable to give way under any undue strain.

It became the duty of Mr. Justice Sherwood to preside at York in 1828 at some of those semi-political trials which convulsed the Province and its little capital, and which were symptomatic of a deep-seated and far-reaching discontent with the Government and its officials, the best known exponent of this discontent being William Lyon Mackenzie. In 1826 some young men of the official class showed their resentment against Mackenzie by raiding his printing office and throwing his type into the Bay: he sued for the trespass and was given damages many times greater than his real loss; then Mackenzie began making personal attacks on Sheriff Jarvis, calling him a murderer—basing the charge upon his having killed young Ridout in a duel some years before. Jarvis published statements of those present to show that the duel had been perfectly fair on his part: then Francis Collins an enthusiastic Radical Irishman, who claimed descent from the old Irish Kings, began making similar attacks in his newspaper the *Canadian Freeman* on Henry John Boulton, the Solicitor General, who had been Jarvis' second in the duel: the Solicitor General called upon the Attorney General, John Beverley Robinson, to prefer a Bill for Criminal Libel against Collins which he did; the Grand Jury found a True Bill whereupon Collins attacked them also: they found a True Bill for that libel also: Collins was to be arraigned on the two Bills but he asked an enlargement which Mr. Justice Sherwood granted; afterwards there was apparently a misunderstanding—Robinson not acceding to Collins' request for an adjournment of his trial, Collins was convicted; he then published an article reflecting on Robinson's "native malignancy" and was again indicted for Criminal Libel. This trial also was before Mr. Justice

Sherwood; his health always poor was at the time very bad; the mosquitoes had tortured him and he was suffering from indisposition and great debility occasioned by a severe attack of the "fever of the country." After having charged the jury he became so ill that he was obliged to retire from the Bench; before doing so he stated to Collins and his counsel that Mr. Justice Hagerman would receive the verdict if they assented; this they did and Mr. Justice Hagerman took his place. The Jury brought in a verdict of "Guilty of a libel on the Attorney General"—the clerk entered a verdict of "Guilty" on the Indictment, but Dr. Rolph, Counsel for Collins, objected and Mr. Justice Hagerman then told the Jury that if they found the defendant guilty of any part of the Indictment, they should return a general verdict of "Guilty"—which they did.

It is probable that the more experienced Sherwood would have acted differently and in such a way as not to be open to objection. Much complaint was made against Hagerman's direction and more against Sherwood's very heavy sentence of a fine of £50, imprisonment for one year and to find sureties for good behaviour for three years.

The sentence was approved by Sir Peregrine Maitland and his Executive Council; but the House of Assembly took a different view. Collins was sent to jail where he complained of the Sheriff, Mr. Jarvis, not supplying him with bread, the Sheriff contending that this was an indulgence extended to indigent persons only and not a legal right; as a matter of fact, Collins had given his allowance of bread to the wife of an absconded jailer who had to support herself and her nine children. Collins did succeed in forcing the Sheriff to supply him with wood but there is no record of success in his claim for free bread.

The citizens of York and others petitioned for his release, but unsuccessfully; at length, the Lieutenant Governor asked for instructions from the Home Authorities, the Law Officers decided that the trial had been conducted in accordance with law but thought the sentence too severe, recommending its reduction by one half, and after ten months imprisonment the editor was released without bail.

The examples given may perhaps suffice to indicate the evil effect of the mosquito in this Province in early days—but who can estimate the toll of misery, disease and death taken by the tiny pest? The use of quinine has much mitigated the trouble for many years, but it is by no means got rid of. In the country to-day we see the fretful babe, with its swollen face writhing in torture from the irritation of the poisonous bites, the hard-working mother deprived of needed rest and sleep, the toiler of the field affecting to despise but in reality dreading the plague which saps his strength and dissipates his energy—the list is unending. In simple self-defence "the mosquito must go."