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**A Contemporary Account of the Navy
Island Episode, 1837**

by

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A Contemporary Account of the Navy Island Episode, 1837

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

(Read May Meeting, 1919)

The following account of the destruction of the "Caroline," etc., was written by George Coventry at the time, in order to be sent to England, where his people resided. It is dated at Chippewa, Upper Canada, 1838, and is in the form of a letter to his sister in England.

George Coventry, whom, when I was a boy, I knew in Cobourg, was born at Copenhagen Fields House at Wandsworth Common in the house "at the corner near the city road" and "within the sound of Bow Bell." His father was a ward of Baron Dimsdale of Thetford, and was placed by his guardian with Jones, Havard & Jones, merchants, in London. His mother was Elizabeth Thornborrow, from Lupton Hall, Westmorland, who was visiting at Sir Joshua Reynolds', when she was won by Coventry. Coventry, Senior, was afterwards a member of the firm of Jayson & Coventry, and seems to have been a man of literary tastes and considerable ability. The son was born on 28th July, 1793. He had the misfortune to lose his mother who died of cancer when Coventry was three years old. The lad was then placed in a Ladies' School, at Peckham, Surrey, kept by Mrs. Freith and her three daughters, one of whom, the elder Coventry afterwards married.

George Coventry was then sent to a Boys' Boarding School at Hitchin, Hertfordshire, kept by Mr. Blaxland, where he stayed for about three years. On the death of Mr. Blaxland, his undermaster, Mr. Payne, started a school near Epping Forest, which young Coventry attended until his fourteenth year when he was sent to Dover where he completed his education. He afterwards engaged as an employee in his father's firm, and in that capacity travelled over the greater part of Great Britain. He also visited France, where he thinks he saw at Fontainebleau some flowers, the offspring of certain plants which he had seen leaving Dover, a present from the Queen of England to the Empress Josephine. He came to Canada in the fourth decade of the 19th century, was an eye-witness of some of the occurrences of the Rebellion of 1837, and returned to England in 1838. Returning to this Province he lived for a time in St. Catharines; afterwards he was in Cobourg, then in Picton as editor of a paper there, then he returned to Cobourg and made that his home for the remainder of his life. He died at Toronto, February 11, 1870, and is buried in the St. James Cemetery at Cobourg.

He left at his death a considerable mass of manuscripts, one being "The Concise History of the Late Rebellion in Upper Canada" from which the accompanying is taken. The greater part of this history, which runs to about 20,000 words, is familiar ground; it does not differ from the current accounts of the rebellion and no small part of it is invective against Mackenzie and his followers. I have therefore not thought it worth while to copy all of it.

Coventry also left a considerable mass of poetry, more or less good; amongst the manuscripts is one seemingly based on Chaucer, which purports to be a poetical account of a fishing and hunting party at Rice Lake—it brings in a great many persons who were well known in Cobourg, Port Hope and the township of Hamilton, and each one of these is made to tell a story. At the present day, the stories are rather vapid and of little interest to anyone except those who were acquainted with the persons to whom they are attributed—I knew most of them by sight and all by name.

He also left a manuscript, "Reminiscences," which contains an account of his life up to the end of the second decade of the last century. He gives an interesting story of John Wesley, which I attach to this paper, and he also has the following:

"I was at Vauxhall the night that George IV died. Everyone was in full black dress, which gave the Gardens a most remarkable appearance. Such a sight will never be seen again, for they are now abolished."

Coventry was employed by the Government of Canada to collect material for the history of Canada, and it was through his efforts that the "Simcoe Papers" were obtained.

According to my recollection, Coventry was a man of fine presence and dignified bearing, and with the courtesy of an English gentleman. I have no reason whatever to suppose that he has misrepresented anything, although his account of the destruction of the "Caroline" does not agree in all respects with that given by Dent and others, nor with that given by an officer "G. T. D." (the late George Taylor Denison, Sr.) in the *Canadian Monthly* for April, 1873, Vol. 3, p. 289.

ANECDOTE OF JOHN WESLEY

"In after years my father often narrated events that happened at that period; not the least remarkable was the following:

"There was another quiet house not far distant from Wandsworth Common at which the celebrated John Wesley visited, and my father being a neighbour was sent for when John arrived on his visit,

which was pretty frequent. The little coterie assembled was more like a quiet Methodist meeting than a feast, there being some 20 or 30 generally present. Among these seekers of truth was an old man who knew the Bible by heart. His name was Samuel Best, who went under the cognomen of 'Poor Help,' as an innocent-minded man. The tea and evening passed pleasantly enough, all edified with Mr. Wesley's account of his voyage across the Atlantic. When the hour of ten announced the time of his departure, he being an early man and an early riser, his coat was brought and as was his custom he went round the room and shook hands with all present. On accosting 'Poor Help,' he remarked: 'Why Samuel, thee have been unusually silent this evening. I have not heard thee speak a word. There must be something remarkable on thy mind.' To which Sam replied: 'Yes, John, there is, and I cannot refrain from telling thee what it is, "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live."' My father said the affair was taken in good part; but whether it operated on a mind at all times inclined to be superstitious, it is a singular fact that Wesley died in less than a fortnight, March, 1791. At this period my father was a bachelor, not being then of age.

"When I paid a visit to England in 1838 to see my father for the last time, I was one morning strolling around the Bricklayers' Arms, Kent Road, waiting for the Brighton stage, when I was arrested by a railing around an old church yard, and on peeping through, the first tombstone that caught my eye was the following!

'Here lies
Samuel Best,
Commonly called
Poor Help.
Aged 93.

"This was the identical man who gave John Wesley his warning to prepare for death. There are many remarkable circumstances connected with Sam Best which can be found in the magazines of the day; but Southey, in his life of Wesley, has not mentioned this, and perhaps never heard of it, although perfectly true.

"My father still continued to visit at this conference where he formed an intimacy with Sam Best, who gave him several texts of scripture applicable to his future movements in life. Strange to say he would never show them to any one, but he told me in after years that every one came true. He had great faith in Best's discrimination of character and looked upon him as a prophet.

"The King went one day in disguise with Lord Sandwich and two or three other eminent men. Best looked hard at the monarch, whom

he had never seen, and told him to write down in his Tablet, Proverbs, Chap. 25, verse 5. After a little conversation the party retired. On reaching Saint James, the King turned to his Bible and read aloud to his courtiers, 'Take away the wicked from before the King and his throne shall be established in righteousness.' Sandwich was very angry with old Best, as well he might; but the King ever after was a friend to him and said he should never want, which was verified."

So far I have copied accurately the manuscript of Mr. Coventry. There is, however, a good deal about Mr. Best which he does not seem to have known. The D. N. B. gives us most of the following:

This pretended prophet, Samuel Best, was born in 1738, and before he was 50 years of age he had become an inmate of the Work House at Shore Ditch. His life before that time is rather obscure. By some he is said to have been a Spitalfields weaver and by others a servant in different establishments in the city of London. Before he was 50 years of age he disowned his children, he discarded his original name and took that of "Poor-help" (not Poor Help as Coventry thinks), describing as he thought his special mission.

He was a visionary and enthusiast, not wholly unlike his contemporary, the celebrated Richard Brothers who came from Newfoundland. He probably was a little touched with insanity and probably believed in his own prophetic and supernatural powers. He was in the habit of receiving his visitors, we are told, in a room adorned with fantastic emblems and devices; he would inspect the palms of their hands and from them give an outline of their past lives. He would also furnish guidance for the future in phrases of scripture, just as he did with Coventry's father; he also believed, or at least claimed, that by licking the hands of his patients he could determine the disease with which they were afflicted.

After acquiring considerable notoriety he removed to a house in the Kingsland Road and was consulted by many of the upper classes whom he also visited at their own homes. He professed to eat no food but bread and cheese and to drink only gin tinctured with rhubarb. He spent his nights, as he claimed, in communion with the celestial powers. For the last 30 years of his life he was convinced that he was to be the leader of the children of Israel to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. In that regard he imitated Richard Brothers, who about the same time, that is, the latter part of the 18th Century, gave himself out as a descendant of David, declaring that he was to be revealed as Prince of the Hebrews and Ruler of the World.

Brothers was more fortunate in some respects than Best in that he convinced many educated Englishmen, members of Parliament

amongst them, of the verity of his claims, while Best never had any great following. Best, however, had the security of mediocrity, for he ended his life in peace and without prosecution, dying in 1825, while poor Brothers was first charged with treasonable practice and confined as a criminal lunatic, and was subsequently removed to a private asylum.

We have at the present day some instances of the same kind of prophet. Joseph Smith was a strong example, and since his time we have had the Holy Rollers, the Holy Ghost and Company, and like bodies of visionary enthusiasts.

Some of them are still with us.

COVENTRY'S ACCOUNT.

Grand Island belongs to our Neighbours, therefore to secure themselves from Molestation, they [that is Mackenzie's Forces] agreed to make the Conquest of Navy Island belonging to the British Government, and inhabited only by one old Woman and her daughter, whom they sent over to Grand Island in snug quarters there at a Log Hut within sight of their previous location.

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That no opposition should be made to their landing, they kept the place of their destination a profound secret, and marched through a Wild forest for four or five Miles, frequented by Nothing whatever but Deer and Wild Cats.—It so happened however, that early intelligence reached us, and had it been acted upon promptly, the whole trouble, confusion, expence and Inconvenience, might have been Easily avoided. It was early in the Morning of the 11th of December, I was at Captain Ussher's, when a respectable farmer called to give his deposition relative to their Movements. He stated he wished to do so from a fear that his Cattle and property would be plundered by these Brigands on their March. He owned a large farm on Grand Island as well as 300 acres of Land in Upper Canada—and therefore claimed our protection, by dispersing the pirates as quickly as possible. He happened to be at Tonawonta at the very time when they embarked—suspecting their place of destination, which on Enquiry was Confirmed, he hastened thro the Island to the shore—took his Canoe—came over and gave us the Information. This was the first Intelligence that reached us—we took down his deposition in writing—witnessed it, and after breakfast, Captain Ussher mounted one of his Horses and rode off to the Commanding Officer¹ then at Fort Erie to give him Intelligence.—It was considered an event so highly improbable, that

no further notice was taken of it, further than passing the Communication on to another quarter; we were displeased, being firmly convinced that the farmer's testimony was implicitly to be relied on, but having No authority to act, nothing could be done, altho' Mr. Ussher volunteered for one to go over and keep guard—there were also numbers in readiness to join him.—The remainder of the day, we kept a sharp look out, allowing no Boats to pass without permission of a Magistrate, yet notwithstanding our vigilance some spies had been Known to Cross, higher up the River.—One of these, however, Corroborated the farmer's Testimony by mentioning the Circumstance at a small Tavern about $\frac{1}{2}$ Mile distant, where I called every hour to ascertain if there were any suspicious Characters.—At four o'clock in the Morning, we went down to Chippewa and stated this fact also—but the Colonel was as little inclined to belief as the other; he promised however that a conference should be held in the Course of the day—which was accordingly done, but the golden opportunity was lost, by reason of the Time that elapsed in passing, repassing and conferring together. A handful of Men at that Crisis would have prevented the direful disasters that afterwards occurred. I wished for the spirit of Lord Peterborough's Movements, at that Juncture to act promptly, in order to prevent the annoyance which must inevitably arise from those Marauders taking quiet possession of an Island, from which, if they intrenched themselves well, they could with difficulty be removed.—The Militia are all very well as Secondaries, but from the Circumstance of being so little engaged in Warlike operations, they make but poor primaries in a case of Emergency of this kind.—This does not arise from any defect in personal Courage, because the late Events have proved this fact to the Contrary. It arises from a want of organised plans and extension of service, to teach them the importance of every position and advantage to be taken of the Movements of an Enemy, which can only be acquired by tact and Experience.

I nevertheless agree with my friend, that common foresight and prudence, should have induced the Colonel of the District, in the absence of any Regulars, to send over a guard to the Island, knowing, as he must have done, that Mackenzie was in Buffalo, inflaming the Minds of the People to revolt against us.

From ocular demonstration, it was proved, on the following day,² that our Information was Correct, for we could plainly see the pirates, walking around the Island, and preparing their fortifications.—All Night long, the axe was heard, felling Trees for breast work, and the Constructions of Shantys, as temporary huts to shelter them from the

Cold, until they could convey lumber over for building, which was soon effected, necessity being with them the rallying point to raise quarters as speedily as possible, not only for themselves, but from the Anticipated Kentucky boys, we could see them cutting down and carrying away fern and brushwood for Beds to repose on: they kept up large fires, most of them being apparently accustomed to Night Campaigning in the open air.

Dreary as our Midnight patrolling was before the arrival of the *General* and his advanced Guard, you may readily suppose, we were no better off after the arrival of our piratical Neighbours whose plans we were totally ignorant of: they might come over in Boats, burn the Houses and pillage the Country, then return with the greatest alacrity without being Caught, for we had as I before stated, no other Guard along the frontier. Fortunately, however, they were too closely engaged in their Military Tactics and Shanty building to trouble us, although the circumstance of their being armed and not knowing precisely their Numbers, was a source of great alarm all around the Country.—

The very possession of our Soil, small as the Island is, aroused the Indignation of the Loyalists, and prompted them to greater exertion than they had hitherto manifested. The News, which had gone forward to Toronto as doubtful, was no sooner confirmed than Volunteers marched from all quarters, and dispatches forwarded to the Lower Province, to recall all the regulars they could spare. Order being partially restored in that quarter, since the destruction of Saint Charles and the flight of the prominent leaders, the Troops promptly obeyed the call and prepared for departure.

In Common Seasons, their transportation by Water would have been Impracticable, such an Occurrence being rarely remembered of Steam Boats plying towards the End of December. This Season however, as if aided by a superintending power in favour of our cause, was mild, enabling the Boats to run without interruption from the Ice. Detachments of the 24th and 32nd regiments quickly arrived at Toronto, from whence they rapidly pushed on, without the harass and fatigue of travelling by Land.—Whilst these brave fellows were on their route, Volunteers from various districts had arrived from as far North as Port Hope, Cobourg, Prescott and other Settlements along the Lake Shore.—Colonel MacNabb³ also had returned from the West and pushed on with 300 Men, joined by Captain Kerr and his 200 Indians, who had painted their faces Red, a custom among them on warlike Expeditions.—We were not a little pleased at their arrival, having some chance of being relieved on our Midnight Guard.

The quiet Village of Chippewa suddenly assumed quite an animated appearance from the Influx of so many strangers. So rapid had been the Movements of the Troops that in a very short time upwards of 4000 had arrived to our protection.—Bands of Music—Bugles—Marching—Countermarching—drilling—firing—Cannon exercising—the bustle and stir of the Commissariat department—waggon loads of Bread—Beef, pork & potatoes moving along the road from the surrounding farms—presented a spectacle quite Novel to me, who for the first time was located in the very heart of the Contending parties—Private Houses were all turned into Barracks and the Methodist Chapel into a Hospital—our worthy Clergyman turned the sword of the Spirit into an Instrument of war, nothing in fine being thought of but preparations for defence in the Event of an Invasion—This all-engrossing Topic superceded every other consideration.

I should tell you, that in conformity with the Colonel's assurance, preparations were made for going over to the Island to make remonstrance against American Citizens taking possession of our Territory.⁴ Accordingly, some of the Magistrates, accompanied by Volunteer rowers, proceeded on their way thither. This was an ill-judged Experiment,⁵ as they must have been aware that the Brigands were too numerous and too well armed to allow them to land, although it was their policy to have done so, which would have secured the party prisoners, and secured the Boats.—Willing, however, to shew us that they, in reality had commenced their fortifications, and possessed Cannon;—so soon as the Boat neered the Northern Extremity of the Island, they opened their Battery and fired a Six pounder upon the adventurers. This was too warm a reception, so they deemed it most prudent to return, which they quickly did, without accomplishing the End in view. Two or three more shots were fired, but without effect, their artillerymen not being in sufficient practise to level a good aim, or make that allowance in the art of Gunnery with a Moving object, so as to do any injury.

So incredulous were the authorities in power, as to their numerical force, considering that merely a few lawless fellows had gone there on a freak, that they determined on another Experiment, which took place shortly after, and would doubtless have succeeded had they manned a sufficient Number of Boats. Unluckily however, as I hinted at the outset, we had no Boats of any consequence, but they were very quickly supplied from Queenston and Elsewhere. The Sleighing being good, a grand Movement took place, and it was really curious to see the rapid arrival of so many Boats. In a few days,

near 100 were collected together. I saw one Immense Boat that would hold 50 men, drawn all the way from Hamilton, a distance of 44 miles, by 36 oxen,—a sight, I shall in all probability, never witness again. Schooners also were ordered from the shores of Lake Erie, and every other kind of craft that the Country possessed.—The two first Boats were soon brought into service, without waiting for a general attack, which, at one time, was determined on. These were manned by a reconnoitering party,⁶ consisting of Intrepid young fellows, who had freely volunteered their services. The current being strong, they were towed up the river a little beyond Mr. Ussher's.—The party, consisting of Six in one boat, and Eight in the other, proceeded towards the Island, intending to row down the stream between Navy and Grand Islands. The object in view, was to ascertain what force was stationed at the back part, where the old lady's cottage stood, then taken possession of by VanRanselaer and Mackenzie, with their aid de Camps.

No sooner however, had they reached the line opposite the extremity of the Island, than a brisk Cannonading, with 6 pounders, opened upon them. It was an interesting and Novel sight, tho' an alarming one, lest our brave Countrymen should be swamped by a Cannon Ball. At the first fire, we distinctly saw where the ball struck the water, well directed as to the line, but too much elevated, so that the Ball passed over their heads, and struck some distance off.—The second shot was better directed and fell very near the bow of the Boat.—Finding it would be impracticable to get round, they rowed back and returned to Chippewa, about Midway in the Current on this side, but sufficiently near to the Island for any experienced Rifleman to have done great execution. By this time, a vast number had assembled with their rifles, who kept up one incessant firing, but all to no effect. I should think at the least, there were 200 balls fired, still no harm done, which satisfied us there was less to fear from the Brigands than had, by many, been anticipated, although it had been given out that their aim was as unerring as the Indians.—Whilst the Boats kept gliding along, our fine fellows only laughed at them, twirling, at the same time, a Hat at the End of a boarding Sword, with which they were all well armed, as well as pistols. Before they cleared the Island, another Cannonading commenced, with similar ill-success. The ruffians discharged 7 Six pounders, but none near Enough to either Boat even to splash them. One Ball, I noticed, dropped in the water, midway between the 2 Boats. This was the second best shot that was made.—On reaching Chippewa, they gave 3 cheers, and landed amid the applause of the bystanders.

After Mr. Ussher had played "God Save the Queen" on his Bugle, we walked down to see the results. I examined the Boats carefully, but no symptoms of a single bullet mark, out of the 200 fired on the Occasion, convincing us, that the recruits must be better practised in the art of Gunnery, before they attempted to cross over and pay us a visit.

These reconnoitering parties ceased soon afterwards, and a Council of War was held as to the best course to pursue to dislodge the Marauders. It was desirable, if possible, to spare the effusion of human blood, and on this account, it was considered advisable to act on the defensive, particularly as our reinforcements were numerous, and detachments arriving daily from distant districts. The Jewish Monarch declared formerly, that in the multitude of Councillors there is safety:—Unfortunately however from there being too many, the Country was harassed much longer with apprehensions of alarm than was consistent with the general character of the British Nation. This Indecision was afterwards a source of reproach by the American Authorities, who considered that it was our duty to remove a lawless band, who had taken possession of our soil, contrary to the existing Treaty between the two Countries.—Colonel McNabb was of opinion that the first shedding of blood by forcibly removing them, would weigh but trifling in the scale of Contention and prevent numbers afterwards falling a Sacrifice by the Sword, an Idea which was looked upon by the most Intelligent Men as a moral Certainty: indeed it was on the Eve of being accomplished, but afterwards Countermanded.—A plan of the Island was drawn by my friend Captain Ussher and Myself, where every spit was marked, so intimately acquainted were we with its location, from having gone over so frequently on shooting expeditions. This was forwarded to the Governor, preparatory to his taking a circuit along the frontier.—

Whilst the subject of attack was under Consideration, various Magistrates assembled at Fort Erie in Council, who drew up a remonstrance, signed by Mr. Merritt, chairman, requesting the Mayor and Authorities at Buffalo to inform them whether the aggression complained of were noticed by them, or in any way sanctioned, or whether in reality, any preparations were making for hostilities—an Event wherein there appeared some probability, from the circumstance of Drummers parading the streets of Buffalo on recruiting Service.—

Dr. Trowbridge, the Mayor, an Intelligent and highly reputable Man, finding the enthusiasm of the people had gone beyond the power of the Law to restrain their proceedings, resigned his situation in

favour of Mr. Barker:—previous to this, however, he wrote a reply to the Magistrates assembled at Fort Erie assuring them that every thing practicable would be done to restore order, and that, so far from the Government wishing to sanction the proceeding of the Rabble, every precaution would be taken to allay the excitement.

“Had these resolutions been promptly followed up by the Marshall and others in Authority, quiet would soon have been restored, and the rebellious faction disbanded—but a strong party of speculators arose in their favour and winked at their proceedings, allowing Boats to convey arms, Ammunitions and provisions to them, which might easily have been prevented. Certain Authorities even saw Cannon with the United States mark upon them, and yet took no measures to secure them or to detain the parties who were known to be the pilferers.—

A steam Boat⁷ was also hired for the conveyance of recruits, arms, Ammunition, etc., to the Island, which had arrived from Rochester and other districts on Sleighs, where the Jurisdiction of the Marshall extended.—A guard also, in time of peace, being allowed to watch the Boat at Night, without any warning that it was an infringement of Neutrality was truly unaccountable.—Strange as this conduct may appear to you, I have it from the best information—gentlemen who were over there when the Marshall conversed with Van Ransellaer and who saw a Cannon in his Boat belonging to the American Government.

Conduct so reprehensible, could not escape the Censure of our Authorities, who, finding that so much listlessness and apathy prevailed, considered it high time to look out for themselves, having previously ascertained that the American Militia refused to act.—

All these circumstances being taken into consideration, a Council of War, which was held at Chippewa, determined upon some vigorous measures to prevent further aggressions upon our Territory, and to open the eyes of the deluded Buffalonians, as to the impolitic course they were pursuing.—They would have rejoiced had the Authorities on the other side done their Duty, by putting a stop to Innovations so hourly Notorious. After allowing the American authorities a fortnight, and finding all their remonstrances unavailing, they determined to act decisively and to perform that Service which it was the bounden duty of the American Government to have done themselves. No alternative remaining, six⁸ Boats were manned, under the Command of an intrepid officer, Captain Drew, with instructions from Colonel McNabb to proceed at Night and take possession of the piratical

Steam Boat, the "Caroline," which was known to be illegally conveying Cannon, Arms, Ammunitions, recruits and provisions over to the Marauders and rebels on Navy Island.—She was seen plying on the afternoon of the 28th⁹ and not returning, was supposed she would moor there for the Night.—In whichever case, however, they were to take possession of her at all hazards.—Accordingly about 10 o'clock at Night, the preparations were completed and the Boats manned and well-armed for the Expedition—a more hardy, or intrepid set of fellows could no where be found, all in good spirits, and ready to achieve any event however hazardous.—On nearing the Island, they found that the said Steamer had left in the Evening for Schlosser on the American shore thinking to be protected and beyond our Control, but the result proved the Contrary. The first two Boats Kept ahead of the rest, having more experienced rowers and on arriving alongside, were hailed by the Sentry for the Countersign.—No satisfactory answer being given, the party on guard fired, but without effect; the Boat was soon boarded and taken possession of, but not without the loss of several lives in the Confusion that ensued.—This is a brief outline of the proceeding, columns of which have been written on the subject containing more untruths than I need trouble you with.—As the Current was too strong towards the rapids and falls, to tow her over, which was the original intention, she was set fire to, in three or four different places—unmoored and allowed to drift her course over the falls, a species of Navigation that was certain to consign her to oblivion for Ever. The Night was very dark, consequently, as you may suppose, it was a very grand sight, to see her gliding with the Current towards the whirlpool of her destination, whither she in due time approached and no vestige of her remains ever seen afterwards.¹⁰

The Boats quietly rowed back into the Chippewa, having two prisoners¹¹ and three of the party wounded¹², one of whom, Mr. McCormack, suffered severely, and afterwards received a Pension for his bravery—the other two soon recovered.—After eliciting all the Information they could obtain from the Prisoners, they were allowed to return home the following day, it appearing that they were strangers, who had taken shelter there for the Night, the small Tavern at Schlosser being quite full.—Many others being similarly situated took to their heels as fast as they could on escaping from the Vessel. The American papers as you may suppose published the most exaggerated statements, alleging that 40 or 50 individuals were on board when the Steamer was unmoored, who had no time to escape; but this, from the Nature of things was totally impracticable, as some time elapsed in setting fire to the Vessel; she was also moored so tight with

a chain that the party had considerable difficulty in unloosing her—during these preparations therefore, ample time was afforded for any one to escape.—I saw several of the Gents who went on the expedition, the following Morning, but in the Confusion that ensued and the darkness of the Night, it was difficult to elicit the loss of the Enemy.—Mr. Chandler thought only one¹³ and three or four wounded.—Lieut. Elmsley told me he believed five or six, which I believe to be the sum total of their loss.—One only, was actually found who had acted in the capacity of Sentry—he was interred in Buffalo amidst a large Concourse of sympathizing spectators—but however many might deplore his fate, others considered he had voluntarily placed himself in danger, when ought to have been Industriouslly employed elsewhere.

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The rebels on the Island were also very Indignant at losing so great an augmentation to their resources; they vented their spleen by opening a brisk Cannonading the following Morning on our houses opposite, as well as the Military Waggons and passengers who were passing and repassing along the frontier.—This they had occasionally done for a week, without doing much damage. I am sorry however to inform you that three Lives¹⁴ were unhappily lost—one Individual who had taken shelter in Mr. Ussher's barn was so seriously wounded in the abdomen, that he died soon afterwards; another had his legs shot off; the third on undergoing amputation sunk with exhaustion.

The houses which contained Companys of Guards were battered severely; a ball went through the upper part of a room where 20 or 30 Men were stationed.—In the adjoining house, a Tavern, two Balls went through which induced the parties to decamp. A red hot ball fell near Captain Ussher which was afterwards preserved. In the house beyond, where I had been located for a Month—a ball entered the front door through the parlour and just took the corner of the Dining Table, forming a line on the surface as if ruled—went through Mrs. Ussher's bedroom and did considerable Damage.—Six others passed the House in different places, which ultimately rendered it untenable.—It was high time therefore to shift apartments below stairs into a Kitchen which was built behind an Embankment; here we were safe, but it was beyond a Joke the whizzing of the Balls, which at times came very near us.—You would have imagined that the people were here disciples of Charles the 12th of Sweden, had you seen the number of people congregated on the frontier, not only in waggons looking over to the Island, but on foot.—They were even imprudent Enough to stand in groups as a Mark for the rebels to fire at. I was one Morning walking with Mr. Meredith and Doctor

Hamilton in front of Mr. Ussher's house, when a warm firing Commenced—a ball passed behind us within 60 yards and tore up the ground; the whizzing Noise induced us to put our hands to our ears and I for one involuntarily lowered my head, upon which Dr. Hamilton coolly replied, it was better to walk on quietly upright; he however was used to such Matters in the last war.—Strange as it may appear, I believe now that it is possible even to be fond of the excitement, for Mr. Merritt's son who was up there one day, went away quite disappointed that he could not see them fire, and on those days when the Cannonading did take place, I have heard the bystanders exclaim "Go it ye Devils and take better aim."—There were many hair-breadth escapes and considering the immense number of times they fired, it is extraordinary so few fell a sacrifice.—A short time before the breaking out of the affray, we had built a foot bridge across the Creek at the back of Mr. Ussher's house. Captain Adams told me he was marching his Men across when a Ball struck in the Bank close beside them. I also saw one strike the water under the Bank when three officers were passing on Horseback.

Doubtless you will ask where the Balls were procured in so short a time for the use of the Ruffians, for I can call them No better.—Some they stole from the Arsenals, but the greater part were cast at a foundry in Buffalo.

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The Insurrection being quelled at Toronto and in the West, the Governor crossed the Lake to take a survey of the frontier. Landing at Niagara, he proceeded to Queenston and from thence to Chippewa, along the shore to Fort Erie, opposite Buffalo, the termination at that time of the guarded Coasts.—On his return, he was accompanied by Mr. Merritt and two other Gentlemen, who pointed out, as they rode along, every thing worthy of Notice on our own frontier, as well as the opposite shore and the Island where the rebels were encamped.—I was standing opposite Mr. Ussher's unconscious of their approach, when the Governor politely withdrew from his Company—shook hands and expressed his satisfaction at finding all along the line so vigilant and at their posts. I asked him when the Marauders would be dislodged, as they were a source of great annoyance to us by their frequent firing;—he replied that in a few days, on the arrival of the artillery, then on its way— it would be effected.—At this Intelligence from the fountain head, we were satisfied.—I have no doubt at the Time, this was fully contemplated, but on a Council of War being held, it was considered advisable if possible to spare the effusion of

human blood. On leaving Chippewa, however, he left orders with the Colonels in command to use their own discretion.

The Artillery at length arrived and a Number of Men were despatched up the river to raise embankments and breast work, preparatory to a general Bombardment. This was done at Night, the first set of Men being obliged to retire from their work in consequence of Cannon having fired to dislodge them, which was soon effected. None of the workmen received any Injury, but the works having first commenced in front of my friend's House, sad dilapidation ensued: the front wall fell in soon afterwards, which rendered the building quite unsafe and uninhabitable. At length the works were completed and our Mortars and Cannon being in readiness, a regular attack was contemplated, but so many schemes and plans were devised, that Nothing effectual took place after all. Three Schooners were manned and stationed up the river under the Command of Captain Graham, Lieutenant Drew and Lieutenant Elmsley—three Gentlemen of confirmed bravery—they were to cut off all Communication by water with Buffalo; then there were near 100 Boats of various sizes in readiness which, when manned, were to effect a landing at one End of the Island, whilst the Artillery were playing upon the Centre and Northern End; these however were quiescent, to try the effect first of all, of the Bombardment; when this commenced, the Bravados were alarmed not a little. The 24 pounders and Mortars raked the Trees and the Shanties—tore up the ground and Killed some of the Rebels: but main body still clung to the Island. Had the Boats been ready Manned, a landing might with ease have been effected during their panic: this scheme was however overruled—so much for a multiplicity of Councillors, in which we are told safety Consists. The prolongation of storming the Island had a bad effect, inasmuch as the alarm was unabated; it also drove many peaceable families from their homes and domestic firesides at an inclement Season of the year. I never could comprehend the policy of their operations, further than what I stated before—the desire to prevent the dreadful Massacre that must have ensued for very few I apprehend would have escaped, so Indignant were the people on this memorable occasion.

That you may judge the situation of the contending parties, I hand you a small Map of our positions, sufficient to guide your Ideas to the spot, remarkable in history. There lay entrenched a handful of desperate fellows who Kept a whole Country in agitation for upwards of a Month, and we residing within Cannon shot, liable at a Moment's impulse to have a ball sent through the House or perhaps a leg shot off whilst perambulating the Banks of the River.

* * * * *

From the time of their arrival there on the 13 December to the period of their Evacuation on the 15 January, you may be sure such restless adventurers were not idle in concocting mischief—fortunately however thro' the fickleness of their plans and their constant differences and quarrels, no measures were effected for our annoyance further than what I mentioned relative to their occasional Cannon Exercise and rifle shooting:—It was imagined however, that one Night, they were ripe for some expedition, and in order to give signals and divert us from their Movements—they lighted up a Machine which was moved to and fro on the Island.—From it issued a most dazzling and brilliant light, which could be seen for many miles around. It was supposed to consist of Tar Barrels and other Inflammable Materials, which burnt for several hours.—No movement however took place.—They had schemes to divert our attention in various ways, which were afterwards acknowledged.

* * * * *

. Their general Correspondence, which was freely carried on by Spies, notwithstanding our vigilance. They knew all our movements, although we could gather nothing of their's from their peculiar locality on an Island.

Nearly a day elapsed before we knew of their departure and great conjecture arose as to their point of destination. In the course of the day one solitary Individual was seen waving a flag but this was looked upon with suspicion—In the afternoon authentic Intelligence arrived of the Event, yet, very many even then were incredulous, altho from the circumstance of seeing none on guard as usual it was apparent some Movement had taken place.—To settle the question, a party volunteered to go over; it was considered a hazardous undertaking, more especially as many surmised that they had excavated subterraneous caverns to Enter, and knowing the schemes they planned to deceive us it was no wonder a source of anxiety to learn the result. At the time, the Information of very few could be relied on, as so many strange rumours were afloat and so many spies over here awaiting our Movements and spreading reports to mislead us.—A great number assembled on the shore as you may imagine to know the result, and many anxious hearts were relieved when a general huzza proclaimed that the Island was once more in our possession and the British flag flying.

Their movements had been so rapid to clear out, as they termed it, that one poor wretch was left behind,¹⁵ who was glad enough to hail his rescuers, from the thralldom he had so long entrammelled in—

he stated that he was asleep, and knew nothing of their movements; on his examination but little could be elicited from him, further, than that he had been a hewer of wood and drawer of water and was heartily glad that the expedition was abandoned—he was soon released from Captivity, having been taught a lesson for his folly that he will not easily forget.

Had it been Brobdignag Island, greater Curiosity could not have been evinced to see it:—An old Shoe or a slip of Cloth were as great curiosities as some of the relics they shew you in France: grape Shot—pieces of punched Iron from Steam Boilers, furnished from Black rock foundry were as precious as current Coin; and as to Pikes, they were trophies of too intrinsic value to fall to the lot of many; they decorated Halls and curious Cupboards, whilst half a Bombshell or a Cannon Ball embellished a lady's work Table.—The few of the rebels who wore shirts carried them away, filthy as they were on their backs as scarce a vestige of linen was found with the exception of part of the tail of a shirt that had bound up a wounded Leg. Nothing can exceed the Miserable Condition of a Buccaneer's Life, far worse than that of savages, for they know no better.

The number who were killed or wounded, by our bombardment was never ascertained,¹⁶ as their burying place was on Grand Island, where they occupied a Log-hut as Hospital—one newly made grave was found, which on digging the Earth away, was found to contain the body of a poor wretch who was supposed to have been shot by their own party, as he was lying with his arms pinioned; who this Individual has never been ascertained.¹⁷

The miserable state of existence they must have endured, baffles all description. It is almost impossible to convey to you the disgusting scene which was exhibited. The Shanties wherein the Miserable wretches bivouacked were scarce fit receptacles for pigs, being strewed with beans, peas, pork rhine, vermin and dirt. Their beds were composed of brushwood, and nothing to shelter them from the Inclemency of the Weather but pine branches. Here they congregated at night, eating, drinking, smoking, swearing and sleeping. For an occasional bivouac on a deer hunting expedition, such a logement would pass Current but for fifty or sixty human beings to assemble nightly for one Month together, betokens a race of desperados worse than Savages.

Mrs. Mackenzie was over there part of the Time¹⁸ living in a dirty house at the back of the Island which I before described to you. The only accommodation for her at Night was on a shelf covered with straw.

NOTES

In the following notes, contractions will be employed as follows:

"Dent." The story of the Upper Canadian Rebellion by John Charles Dent, Toronto, 1885. This work is more than usually accurate in the account of the "Caroline" episode. I have not referred to "The Cutting out of the 'Caroline' and other Reminiscences of 1837-38" by Robert Stuart Woods, Q.C., (afterwards Judge Woods), Chatham, Ont., 1885—everything of value in that work has been utilized by Dent.

"Head." A Narrative by Sir Francis B. Head, Bart. 2nd Edn., London, 1839. I have not quoted Head's "Emigrant"—it does not afford any useful material.

"Leg. Ass." Journal of the House of Assembly, Upper Canada, Session 1837-8, Toronto, 1838 (Official).

"G. T. D." The Burning of the "Caroline," by G. T. D. (George Taylor Denison, Sr., father of the Police Magistrate of Toronto, of the same name). The Canadian Monthly and National Review, Vol. 3, 289 (April 1873). The head note reads "The following narrative is by a Canadian officer who served against the rebels and their American sympathisers." It does not appear that Denison took part in the cutting out.

"Trial." Gould's Stenographic Reporter, Vol. II, Washington, D.C., 1841. This contains a full stenographic account of the trial at Utica, N.Y., October, 1841, of Alexander McLeod, charged with the murder of Amos Durfee at Schlosser, at the cutting out of the "Caroline." It was satisfactorily proved that McLeod was not in the expedition at all, although both he and his friends had claimed that he was.

"Kingsford." The History of Canada, by William Kingsford, LL.D., F.R.S. Can., Toronto, and London, 1898, Vol. X.

"Lindsey." The Life and Times of Wm. Lyon Mackenzie, by Charles Lindsey, two volumes, Toronto, 1862.

¹ Probably Col. Kenneth Cameron, formerly of the 79th Highlanders and at that time Assistant Adjutant General.

² Possession was taken by the "Patriots" of Navy Island, December 13th, 1837.

³ Colonel (afterwards Sir) Allan Napier MacNab arrived at Chippewa, December 20th. His name is found spelled in many ways: McNab, McNabb, M'Nab, M'Nabb, Macnab, Macnabb. He was placed in command on this frontier and was afterwards knighted for his services.

⁴ Lieutenant Governor Francis Bond Head as early as December 13th, 1837, had sent a remonstrance to Governor Marcy, of the State of New York, concerning the agitation at Buffalo to procure countenance and support for the disaffected in Upper Canada. Head, 332; Leg. Ass., 97—the Governor, December 19, issued a Proclamation against attempts to set on foot military expeditions or enterprises in violation of the laws of the land, and the relations of amity between the United States and the United Kingdom, Leg. Ass., 98—this was almost a dead letter and practically nothing was done for weeks to check the movement. On Navy Island being occupied, Head, December 23, sent Archibald McLean, Speaker of the House, to Washington with a full account for the British Ambassador, Henry S. Fox. Head, 335; Leg. Ass., 98.

⁵ I have not seen this "experiment" of the Magistrates noted by any other writer.

⁶ Richard Arnold's account is as follows (Dent, Vol. 2, p. 215):

"The next day (*i.e.* December 26, 1837) I and several other volunteers accompanied Captain Drew on a reconnoitering expedition. We set out from Chippewa Creek in a small boat and proceeded to circumnavigate Navy Island, where we

could see the rebels in full force. As we approached the island they fired round after round at us, and the bullets whistled thick and fast over our heads. Our position was one of extreme peril. 'What a fool I am,' exclaimed Captain Drew, 'to be here without a pick-up boat. Should we be disabled we shall find ourselves in a tight place.' One of the rowers in our boat was completely overcome by fear, and funked. 'I can't help it boys,' said he—and threw himself at full length along the bottom of the boat. We made the trip, however, without any accident. The next day we made another expedition in a large twelve-oared gig, with a picked crew, chiefly composed of lake sailors. Again the shots whistled over our heads, and struck the water on both sides of us, but in the course of a few hours we found ourselves back again in Chippewa Creek without having sustained any injury. We had by this time become used to being under fire, and didn't seem to mind the sound of the whistling bullets."

⁷ This was the "Caroline," a steamboat about 75 feet long and of 46 tons burthen, the property of William Wells of Buffalo, which was cut out of her berth in the ice at Buffalo and brought down to Schlosser, December 28th, plying across to Navy Island.

⁸ Captain Drew, R.N., who was in command of the expedition, in his report, December 30th, says: "I directed five boats to be armed and manned with forty-five volunteers." Leg. Ass., 90. G. T. D. says: "Five boats were prepared, well manned, well armed and with muffled oars." Can. Monthly, Vol. 3, 290. Richard Arnold says: "The expedition consisted as far as I can remember of seven boats, each containing seven men, *i.e.* four rowers and three sitters." Dent, Vol. 2, 216. The number of boats is given as seven by most authors and is probably correct. Sir Allan MacNab, under oath in the McLeod trial, says: "they were seven in number . . . seven or eight men in each boat . . . about forty persons." Trial, 124. "The boats did not all return at the same time. Five arrived at about the same time, two at a different time." Trial, 125. John Harris gave the same evidence. Trial, 129. "Seven boats left Chippewa, five only reached the Caroline, five returned in company." With this Edward Zealand agrees word for word, Trial, 135. Robert Armour says: "Seven started, five crossed the river," Trial, 147; so do Christopher Bier, Trial 157, 159, Hamilton Robert O'Reilly, Trial, 162, 165, Sheppard McCormick Trial, 169, Frederick Claverly, Trial, 170, 175, and several others. The fact seems to be that seven boats started but two lost the way and did not cross the river.

⁹ This should be "29th."

¹⁰ It seems quite certain that the "Caroline" did not go over the Canadian Falls, nor as a whole (at least) over the Falls at all. Her engines seem to have sunk and portions of her charred wood work went down the river and over the Falls on the American side.

¹¹ Both British subjects—one was Sylvanus Fearn's Wrigley, of the Township of Dumfries, who had enlisted with Dr. Duncombe; after Duncombe's men were dispersed, he crossed the Niagara River to join the "Patriots." He was on his way to Navy Island where he was captured. He was detained in gaol for three months and then discharged on giving bail for good behaviour. The other was Alfred Luce, a native of Lower Canada, who had also joined Dr. Duncombe; he shared in Wrigley's adventures until his capture. He was released the following day and sent across the ferry to the United States, as there seemed to be doubt whether he was not a citizen of that country. Dent, Vol. 2, 213; Leg. Ass., 91.

¹² Lieutenant Shepherd McCormack (so named by Drew in his official report, December 30, 1837, Leg. Ass., 90—but both his names are spelt in different ways, *e.g.* the pensioning Statute, 1838, I Vic. c. 46, calls him Sheppard McCormick)

was shot in several parts of his body and also received two cuts from a cutlass. He was permanently injured; he received a pension from Upper Canada of £100 (\$400) per annum, counting from December 29, 1837. The Preamble of the Act is worth copying:

"Whereas Sheppard McCormick, Esquire, a retired Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, received several severe wounds in action at the capture and destruction of the piratical steamer 'Caroline,' in an attempt to invade this Province by a lawless banditti, by which he is disabled and it is just and right that he should receive a Pension during such period as he may be so disabled by said wounds."

He received the pension until his death when it was continued to his widow.

It was the conventional thing for all loyal Canadians from the Lieutenant Governor down to call the Canadian Rebels and their American "Sympathisers," "Pirates"—they were "Pirates" to precisely the same extent and in the same way as William of Orange and his English and Dutch followers—"Pirates," however, offset "Patriots" with "apt alteration's artful aid." "Banditti" ("we call them plain thieves in England") is another term of opprobrium equally well deserved: "a Banditti" is not quite without precedent in our literature—but then I recall a student of mine, *Consule Planco*, speaking of the distance between "one foci of an ellipse and the other." And Parliament is like Rex, *super grammaticam*.

The second reported wounded was Captain John Warren, formerly an officer in the 60th Regiment—his wounds were trifling and he resumed duty the following day, Dent, Vol. 2, 212; Leg. Ass., 89, 90. The third was Richard Arnold (wrongly called John Arnold in the official report, Leg. Ass., 90). His story is given in Dent, Vol. 2, 214—he was "struck by a cutlass on the arm and got a pretty deep gash just above the elbow;" he was "invalided and sent home to Toronto in a sleigh next day;" "there his wound healed rapidly, leaving him none the worse." He died in Toronto, June 18, 1884. He always was properly proud of being the last man to leave the "Caroline."

¹³ Captain Drew in his official report said, "I regret to add that five or six of the enemy were killed," Leg. Ass., 90; but it is reasonably certain that there was only one killed—this was Amos Durfee of Buffalo, for the murder of whom Alexander McLeod was tried at Utica, N.Y., in 1841. There were several wounded, more or less severely.

¹⁴ MacNab, writing to Lt.-Col. Strachan, from Chippewa, January 19, 1838, says, "Three of our brave and loyal Militia have unfortunately lost their lives in the service of their country against the Rebels and their piratical allies upon Navy Island. They were all killed by gunshot wounds." Leg. Ass., 264.

¹⁵ He was arrested as a spy but released.

¹⁶ The existing accounts mention that the casualties on the Island were one killed by a round shot, and one slightly wounded by a splinter. Dent, Vol. 2, 224, note.

¹⁷ I have not seen any reference to this circumstance in any of the other accounts.

¹⁸ Mrs. Mackenzie, née Isabel Baxter, a native of Dundee, was married to William Lyon Mackenzie at Montreal, 1822, when Mackenzie was living in Dundas. She was a woman of sterling character, a devoted wife and mother. She was the only woman who spent any time on Navy Island. "She arrived there only a few hours before the destruction of the 'Caroline,' and remained nearly a fortnight with her husband, making flannel cartridge bags and inspiring with courage by her entire freedom from fear, all with whom she conversed. At the end of about a fortnight, illhealth obliged her to leave." Lindsey, Vol. 1., 38, Vol. 2., 163.

Navy Island was abandoned by the "Patriots," January 14th, 1838, Dent, Vol. 2, 223.

