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TRAVEL LITERATURE AS SOURCE MATERIAL FOR THE
HISTORY OF UPPER CANADA
1791-1840

By JAMES J. TALMAN

The term travel literature for the purposes of this paper has been taken to include all classes of this and kindred literature, the general requirement being that the writer should have spent but a short time in the country. This standard, however, cannot be applied too rigidly as there are many accounts, written by persons who became domiciled in the country, which are too valuable to be overlooked. Although the majority of the accounts are by travellers, perhaps the name contemporary descriptive sketches might more adequately describe the subject.

Travellers' accounts and kindred literature have taken an important place as source material for history, as has been shown by some recent treatments.¹ Little, however, has been done with this type of material in studies of Canadian history. This is especially true of the early history of Ontario. It is hard to credit, but it is nevertheless a fact, that by 1820 Canada was the Mecca of many tourists. Many guide-books were published in the United States, which suggested Canada in their itineraries. The tours were generally designated "Northern" if Canada was included. Between 1825 and 1834 there were at least six different publications which have been noted. Some of these reached four or five editions.² The practice of writing these books and suggesting tours was so general, that as early as 1819 the editor of *Niles' Weekly Register* felt that he should also publish his suggestions, and outlined a route including Canada.³ The usual custom for persons visiting this country was to travel from New York up the Hudson to Albany, then by stage, or after the Erie Canal was completed, by boat, to Buffalo and Niagara Falls. A stage took the travellers from the Falls to Queenston or Lewiston and a steamer was taken at either of these places for Kingston. Usually a stop was made at York [Toronto] for a few hours. The travellers usually went from Kingston to Montreal by stage and returned to New York or England after visiting Quebec.⁴

The guides published for the use of travellers contain little material of value for historical study, except the descriptions of routes, hotels, and

¹ e.g. Allan Nevins, *American social history, as recorded by British travellers*. New York 1923.
Joseph Paul Ryan, *Travel literature as source material for American Catholic History*, in the *Illinois Catholic Historical Review*, January 1928, p. 179.

² *The fashionable tour, in 1825; an excursion to the Springs, Niagara, Quebec and Boston, Saratoga Springs* 1825. This reached four editions at least.

The modern traveller. A popular description, geographical, historical and topographical, of the various countries of the globe, 1829.

The North American tourist. New York 1839.

A northern tour, being a guide to Saratoga, Lake George, Niagara, Canada, Boston, etc., etc., through the states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, etc. Philadelphia, 1825.

The Northern traveller and northern tour; with the routes to the Springs, Niagara and Quebec, and the coal mines of Pennsylvania; also a tour of New England. New York, 1825. Fifth edition New York 1834.

The Tourist, or pocket manual for travellers on the Hudson River, the western canal and stage road to Niagara Falls, down Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence to Montreal and Quebec. New York 1834.

³ *Niles' Weekly Register*, supplement to vol xvi, 1819. The tour suggested by the Register was taken from Poulson's *American Daily Advertiser*.

⁴ Andrew Picken, *The Canadas*. London 1832, p. 225.

historical incidents connected with the sights which would be seen by the tourists. In the northern tours the battles of the War of 1812 were dear to the heart of the descriptive writer. However, if these accounts do not contain valuable material, their very existence and number show that there were many persons continually travelling through the country. In 1837, Mrs. Jameson stated that she had been told that during the previous summer one hundred and fifty travellers and visitors sat down to dinner almost daily at one of the two Niagara hotels; although in 1837 the trade declined, owing to the commercial embarrassments in the United States.⁵

With such a large number of people going through the country, it is not surprising that the years between 1791 and 1840 should have been very rich in travellers' accounts, especially as visitors were not diffident about setting down their impressions in print. American tourists were not as prone to do this as the British travellers, who often included a description of Upper Canada along with their accounts of the United States. John Macaulay, a member of the legislative council and later Receiver General of Upper Canada, wrote to his mother in 1837, "We have had a great Oxford professor of chemistry here lately—Dr. Danberry,"; and added as though it was a common practice, "he will doubtless write a book about Canada."⁶ There seems to be no record of his having done so. The numbers that were published, however, show that Macaulay was justified in his presumption.

Kingsford, in his small bibliography of Ontario, published in 1892, lists many works, which he describes as being published "outside the territory of Canada."⁷ This list contains ninety-one titles that may be considered as coming in the class of literature under discussion. In addition to these there are at least thirty other accounts which Kingsford did not have. A few of these such as Goldie's diary and Langton's letters have been published since Kingsford wrote his book, but the majority were published soon after they were written, and should have been included by him. Thus it can be seen there is a large collection of accounts, numbering not less than one hundred and twenty, available for students of the period between 1791 and 1840 in Upper Canada. Only about fifteen of these accounts were published between 1791 and 1815, which leaves the large number of over one hundred accounts descriptive of the period between the end of the War of 1812 and the Union of Upper and Lower Canada. During this twenty-five years there was no particular period which was more productive than any other, and each year saw approximately the same number of accounts published.

The majority of writers were British. The accounts of La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, Ogden, and Bernhard are the outstanding ones written by non-British travellers. La Rochefoucault's is one of the best accounts of Upper Canada written by a traveller of any nationality and no accounts prior to 1825 are to be compared with it. Ogden was a citizen of the United States. Bernhard was a German duke. He spent very few days in Upper Canada and confined his remarks to descriptions of steam boats and the inns at Brockville, where he preferred to spend the night on board because the two taverns were so full of people and had such a dirty appearance.⁸

⁵ Anna Jameson, *Winter studies and summer rambles in Canada*. New York 1839, vol i, p. 270.

⁶ Archives of Ontario. *Macaulay papers*, Case iv, package M5, no. 00717.

⁷ William Kingsford, *The Early Bibliography of the Province of Ontario*. Toronto 1892, p. 42.

⁸ Bernhard, *Travels through North America, during the years 1825 and 1826*. Philadelphia 1828, vol. i, p. 83.

The British travellers were of all classes and often gave their occupations after their names to indicate their special qualifications as writers. Both Stuart and Howison stated that they were "of the honourable East India's Company's service," though the value, in a literary way, of such a connection is not clear. The legal profession was represented by Fergusson, Vigne and Wells. Fergusson settled in Upper Canada after he had made two journeys to the country. Adam Fergusson, who later took the name Blair and was identified with Confederation, was his son. Fidler, Bell and Carruthers were clergymen. Fidler was an Anglican and spent a few years as missionary at Thornhill, on Yonge street. Bell was the Presbyterian clergyman who went to Perth in 1817 when the settlers there petitioned the British government for a minister. Blane contented himself by publishing an account of his travels as being "by an English gentleman." Bouchette was a surveyor and MacTaggart a civil engineer employed in the construction of the Rideau canal. Basil Hall was a naval officer and George Head, Coke and Francis Hall were military men. Rolph, Dunlop, and Pryor were physicians. Dr. Thomas Rolph was a medical man in Ancaster and is not to be confused with Dr. John Rolph of St. Thomas, who was connected with the rebellion of 1837. Dunlop was warden for the Canada Company, and his small anonymous work "by a backwoodsman" was very popular when it was published. Fothergill, Talbot and Mackenzie edited newspapers at various times in Upper Canada. Talbot had an interesting career and was the editor of London's first newspaper, the *Sun*.⁹ Farmers and settlers made up the largest group of writers on Upper Canada and contributed many valuable accounts. Pickering, Need, Mrs. Traill, Langton, Shirreff and others who wrote anonymously were of this category. Pickering spent a few years in the Talbot settlement as supervisor for Colonel Talbot and his account is authoritative. Need's diary and Langton's letters should be read together as both settled near Peterboro in the early thirties. The editor of the Langton letters has pointed out parallel incidents in the two accounts and has shown some discrepancies between them, when both describe the same incident but give different dates.

No two writers spent the same length of time in Upper Canada. There are the accounts of hurried travellers who spent only a few days in the country. These saw little except the roads, steam boats and inns, but seldom failed to include Upper Canada in the title of their works. William Dalton, for example, who travelled through the United States and "part of Upper Canada," crossed the Niagara river at Fort Erie and went down the Canadian side to Queenston, from where he went to Lewiston. Abdy, on the other hand, devoted twenty-six pages of his three volumes to Upper Canada and did not record it in his title. This, however, was an exceptional case. Some writers spent much time in Upper Canada and others settled in the country before they wrote their accounts. As a general rule these works are of greater value than those of transients. In many cases the title of the work is some indication of the length of time spent in the country.

The so-called emigrant's guides or handbooks are different from the above accounts but no hard and fast distinction can be made. The accounts of most travellers were often written with an eye to the "failing farmers or webless weavers"¹⁰ who might be contemplating emigration. The

⁹ See Fred Landon, *Some early newspapers and newspapermen of London*. Transactions of the London and Middlesex Historical Society, 1927.

¹⁰ Adam Fergusson, *Practical notes made during a tour in Canada*. Edinburgh 1834, p. vii.

numbers of accounts published in Scotland and Ireland, from where there was much emigration in those days, show where the readers were. Furthermore, many emigrant's guides were based on travellers' accounts. The value of these guides to the modern reader depends upon the acknowledgment of sources used by the writer. Occasionally long extracts of valuable and uncommon accounts may be encountered. For example, Inches, who probably was never in Canada, attacked the accounts of Pickering, Ferguson, Dunlop, and Hickey, and gave long quotations from each. In contrast with this, Mudie wrote one of the best and most popular emigrant's guides of his period but to-day it is scarcely of any value to the student of history. There is no way of knowing how valuable one of these guides will be until it is read, but it is a safe assumption that a book claiming to be only a handbook for the use of emigrants will not contain as much valuable material as the description of a tour or sojourn in the country.

The literary form of the descriptions varied with the writers. Mrs. Jameson undoubtedly heads the list as a stylist, with her German quotations and irrelevant literary interpolations; but the accounts of Howison, Talbot and Mrs. Traill were not much inferior and remain close to the subject. Niagara Falls provided many writers with an outlet for their literary talents, and practically all attempted to describe them, although all admitted that the description had been written better before.

The form of the narratives followed all plans. Most writers based their accounts on their diaries and some, such as Need, published their diaries in their original form. Others roughly followed their diaries but added facts they had collected and conclusions they had formed, which were suggested by the incident at hand. Pickering followed the latter plan and at the same time put together what was probably the most badly written account of all, with the exception perhaps of Fowler's. A common conceit was to call the chapters letters. In some cases the accounts were really a series of letters and even were edited by a person other than the writer, as in the case of Magrath. The numerous other occasions, however, on which this was done seems to imply an effort to impart an air of authenticity to narratives which otherwise might be doubted.

The value to the student of the class of literature under discussion lies in the fact that it throws light on social and, to a lesser degree, economic conditions. Most writers were content, like Mrs. Jameson, to abstain "from politics and personalities."¹¹ Even William Lyon Mackenzie's volume is almost entirely free from any political discussion. Practically the only exceptions to this are Gourlay's *Statistical account*, Sir Francis Bond Head's *Narrative*, which is primarily of a political nature, and Preston's *Three years* which is obviously an account written in a fit of pique because he was not taken up by the family compact group in Toronto. Even the social problems that were closely allied with the political situation, such as crown and clergy reserves, received scanty reference.

The value of travellers' accounts and kindred literature in the study of social conditions is lessened by the indifferent observation and the preconceptions of the writers. David Wilkie, a Scotch traveller who went through Upper Canada in 1834, had a great deal to say about the method of writing accounts. All travellers, he stated, had preconceptions and

¹¹ Jameson, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. vii.

when their observations agreed with their preconceptions the point was settled satisfactorily. When the facts disagreed the writers either gave up the point, followed their own opinions, or made a compromise between the two.¹² Furthermore, most travellers noticed the same things. It was natural that practically all writers should describe the inns at which they stayed and the system of performing labour by "bees," which was a phenomenon peculiar to America. Methods of clearing land, building fences, advice regarding crops, details of construction for log houses, were all published, because they were certain to interest prospective emigrants. The prevailing drunkenness, the "republican notions," and democratic ideas of equality, which made it possible for all classes to sit at the same table, were noted. But the more occasional phases of life, such as the weddings and the funerals, were not very often described.

The similarity of accounts was partly caused by the habit, common to writers, of reading previous accounts. They all did it. Talbot read Stuart's guide, which he very aptly described as the "Pilgrim's guide to the celestial regions."¹³ Talbot had also read Duncan's and Fothergill's accounts. Shireff read Fergusson's narrative and Wilkie in turn read Shirreff's. Mrs. Traill who was usually original had read Dunlop's work, and other examples could be multiplied indefinitely. The great differences between accounts, therefore, arose from the personalities and aims of the writers. Fergusson and Dunlop were interested in developing the country because of their connection with the Canada Company. Shirreff had a brother in the American West and saw little good in Canada. W. G. Mack, who wrote in the interest of the British American Land Company, described Upper Canada as a fever ridden locality, in an effort to attract settlers to the Eastern townships. Mrs. Jameson, accustomed to an educated and cultured society in Europe, naturally saw little that pleased her in Canada. Howison was ill during the greater part of his travels and his writing was influenced by the moroseness which resulted. Talbot seems to have had no reason for his very unflattering and occasionally unfair opinion of the people of Upper Canada. The writer who called himself an "ex-settler"¹⁴ had failed to make a success of his venture in the "bush" and his narrative is correspondingly biased. Optimistic accounts were, as it has been said, often engendered by a desire to encourage emigration and develop the country. Others were the result of patriotism that endeavoured to exalt Upper Canada at the expense of the United States. The feelings of patriotism that made Abdy feel that he was "breathing the pure air of liberty after having so long inhaled the foetid atmosphere of mock equality,"¹⁵ when he crossed the Niagara river into Canada, must have made him see things in Upper Canada with a less critical eye than in the United States. Fidler's observations and Strachan's account suffered from the same influence. The attitude of the writer is generally obvious, however, and this can be taken into account when reading these works.

Some of the limitations of these accounts have been noticed. Fortunately, however, the same limitations are not found in all accounts.

¹² David Wilkie, *Sketches of a summer trip to New York and the Canadas*. Edinburgh, 1837, pp. 165, 188.

¹³ Edward Allen Talbot, *Five years residence in the Canadas*. London 1824, vol. i, p. vi.

¹⁴ *Canada in the years 1832, 1833 and 1834*. . . by an ex-settler. Dublin 1835.

¹⁵ Edward Strutt Abdy, *Journal of a residence and tour in the United States of North America*. London, 1835, vol. i, p. 300.

If, therefore, a sufficient number is read, and there certainly are many accounts available, it is not a difficult matter to discover the true state of affairs in Upper Canada. Wilkie's conclusion that emigrants could "pore over volume after volume on this interesting subject, and be little wiser at the end concerning the principal points of their enquiry,"¹⁶ is therefore altogether too sweeping and the opposite of the truth.

¹⁶ Wilkie, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

LIST OF WORKS TO WHICH REFERENCE HAS BEEN MADE IN
THE FOREGOING ACCOUNT

Abdy, Edward Strutt

Journal of a residence and tour in the United States of North America, from April 1833 to October, 1834.
London, 1835.

Bell, Rev. William

Hints to emigrants, in a series of letters from Upper Canada.
Edinburgh, 1824.

Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach

Travels through North America, during the years 1825 and 1826.
Philadelphia, 1828.

[Blane, William Newnham]

An excursion through the United States and Canada during the years 1822-1823.
By an English gentleman.
London, 1824.

Bouchette, Joseph

The British dominions in North America.
London, 1832.

Canada in the years 1832, 1833 and 1834, containing important information and instruction to persons intending to emigrate thither in 1835.

By an ex-settler, who resided chiefly "in the bush" for the last two years.
Dublin, 1835.

Carruthers, J.

Retrospect of thirty-six years' residence in Canada West, being a Christian journal and narrative.
Hamilton, 1861.

Coke, E. T.

A subaltern's furlough, descriptive of scenes in various parts of the United States, Upper and Lower Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, during the summer and autumn of 1832.
New York, 1833.

Counsel for emigrants and interesting information from numerous sources with original letters from Canada and the United States. Ed. John Mathison. Second edition.
Aberdeen, 1835.

Dalton, William

Travels in the United States of America and part of Upper Canada.
Appleby, 1821.

Duncan, John Morison

Travels through part of the United States and Canada in 1818 and 1819.
Glasgow, 1823.

[Dunlop, Dr. William]

Statistical sketches of Upper Canada, for the use of emigrants. By a Backwoodsman.
London, 1832.

Fergusson, Adam

Practical notes made during a tour in Canada, and a portion of the United States in 1831. Second edition to which was added a description of a trip in 1833.
Edinburgh, 1834.

A few plain directions for the persons intending to proceed as settlers in His Majesty's province of Upper Canada in North America. By an English farmer settled in Upper Canada.
London, 1820.

Fidler, Rev. Isaac

Observations on professions, literature, manners and emigration in the United States and Canada, made during a residence there in 1832.
London, 1833.

Fothergill, Charles

A sketch of the present state of Canada, drawn up especially for this work.
York [U.C.], 1822.

Fowler, Thomas

The journal of a tour through British North America to the falls of Niagara, etc.
Aberdeen, 1832.

Goldie, John

Diary of a journey through Upper Canada and some of the New England States, 1819.
Toronto, 1897.

Gourlay, Robert

Statistical account of Upper Canada, compiled with a view to a grand system of emigration, in connection with a reform of the poor laws.
London, 1822.

Hall, Captain Basil

Travels in North America, in the years 1827 and 1828.
Edinburgh, 1829.

Hall, Lieut. Francis

Travels in Canada and the United States in 1816, 1817.
London, 1818.

Head, Sir Francis Bond

A Narrative of the Canadian rebellion of 1837.
Toronto, 1839.

Head, Sir George

Forest scenes and incidents in the wilds of North America, being a diary of a Winter's route from Halifax to the Canadas, etc. Second edition.
London, 1838.

[Hickey, William]

Hints on emigration to Upper Canada, especially addressed to the middle and lower classes in Great Britain and Ireland. By Martin Doyle [pseud.] Third edition.
Dublin, 1834.

Howison, John

Sketches of Upper Canada, domestic, local and characteristic; to which are added, practical details for the information of emigrants of every class. Third edition.
Edinburgh, 1825.

Inches, James

Letters on emigration to Canada, addressed to the Very Reverend Principal Baird. Second edition.
Perth, 1836.

Jameson, Mrs. Anna

Winter studies and summer rambles in Canada.
New York, 1839.

Langton, John

Early days in Upper Canada, letters of John Langton, from the backwoods of Upper Canada and the audit office of the province of Canada.
Toronto, 1926.

Mack, W. G.

A letter from the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada, containing hints to intending emigrants as to the choice of situation, etc.
Glasgow, 1837.

Mackenzie, William Lyon

Sketches of Canada and the United States.
London, 1833.

Mactaggart, John

Three years in Canada. An account of the actual state of the country in 1826, 1827 and 1828.
London, 1829.

Magrath, T. W.

Authentic letters from Upper Canada, with an account of Canadian field sports.
Dublin, 1833.

Mudie, Robert

The emigrant's pocket companion; containing, what emigration is, who shall be emigrants, where emigrants shall go, a description of British North America, especially the Canadas, and full instructions to intending emigrants. First edition.
London, 1832.

[Need, Thomas]

Six years' residence in the bush, or extracts from the journal of a settler in Upper Canada, 1832-1838.
London, 1838.

Ogden, John C.

A tour through Upper and Lower Canada: by a citizen of the United States.
Litchfield, 1799.

A synopsis of this account is published in the Ontario Historical Society, Papers and Records, vol. xxi, p. 210.

Picken, Andrew

The Canadas, as they at present commend themselves to the enterprise of emigrants, colonists and capitalists.
London, 1832.

Pickering, Joseph

Inquiries of an emigrant, being the narrative of an English farmer from the year 1824 to 1830. A new edition.
London, 1831.

Preston, T. R.

Three years' residence in Canada, 1837-1839.
London, 1840.

Pryor, Abraham

An interesting description of British America from personal knowledge and observation, containing many and various communications not before made public. Second edition.
Providence, 1819.

La Rochefoucault-Liancourt

Travels in Canada, 1795.

The thirteenth report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario, 1916.
Toronto, 1917.

Rolph, Dr. Thomas

A brief account together with observations made during a visit in the West Indies and a tour through the United States of America in parts of the years 1832-3, together with a statistical account of Upper Canada.
Dundas, U.C., 1836.

Shirreff, Patrick

A tour through North America, together with a comprehensive view of the Canadas and United States as adapted for agricultural emigration.
Edinburgh, 1835.

Strachan, James

A visit to the province of Upper Canada in 1819.
Aberdeen, 1820.

Stuart, C.

The emigrant's guide to Upper Canada, or sketches of the present state of the province collected from a residence there during the years 1817, 1818 and 1819.
London, 1820.

Talbot, Edward Allen

Five years' residence in the Canadas, including a trip through part of the United States of America, in the year 1823.
London, 1824.

[Traill, Catherine Parr]

The backwoods of Canada, being letters from the wife of an emigrant officer, illustrative of the domestic economy of British America.
London, 1836.

Vigne, Godfrey T.

Six months in America.
London, 1832.

Wells, W. B.

Canadiana. Containing sketches of Upper Canada and the crisis in its affairs.
London, 1837.

Wilkie, David

Sketches of a summer trip to New York and the Canadas.
Edinburgh, 1837.