

CONTENTS – Folder 38:

CUS417/38.1 (Record# 839) – CUS417/38.19 (Record# 857)

The Romance of Pioneer Life in Ontario

"Events in History are the Products of Causes, None of Which Will Be Exactly Repeated"

By E. M. GUNDY



WHEN, in the seventies, John Richard Green wrote a history of the English people, he formed a tradition which has done much to make history the human study which we know to-day. The world was weary of finding its history divided into the reigns of kings till the advent of a new king became more to be noted than the invention of a steam engine and the course of history seemed to hang in the balance on the death-bed of a regent. But true history cannot permit such arbitrary divisions. Kings and their pageants may rise and fall, York and Lancaster strive for sway or a Henry VIII make foreign policy the handmaiden of matrimonial intrigues, while the history of the English nation is being created in the manor and fief, in the cabin of the ship and in the poor workshop of the Lancaster weaver. Mr. G. N. Trevelyan has risen at a later time to cry against the Seeley tradition that a study of history will enable us to solve the problems of empire. Events in history are the products of causes and tendencies, none of which will be exactly repeated.

The future of Canada as a nation does not depend on the depth of our historical insight. But the individual looking back along the twisted road of the past is enabled more fully to appreciate his own position in the world to-day. He will see how the toll of years has brought our country to its present position and he may thus be induced to take his life as a citizen less lightly. Of such value, apart from the interest always inherent in a stirring tale, will be the study of pioneer life in Ontario. Canada's governors have sailed here, bided their time and sailed away. The path of our progress has been, perhaps, more amenable to their fashioning than has that of England in the hands of her sovereigns, but while Dorchester took his frigid way through our council chambers, while Durham was working on the pages of his report, the settler in his clearing, striving through fatigue and hardship to make his fields a

his sons, was making Canada. Without him Confederation would have been impossible and the Dominion Government would not now find itself in a position to petition at the Court of St. James for a recognition of our political autonomy.

An interval of no great length separates the complex life of the present time in Ontario from the simple organization to be found at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But the contrast is remarkable. Those will find the transition of thought to be easier who have travelled in recent years in the upper valley of the Peace River. Our frontiers have been forced westward and northward thus far. In the region of the Peace the Government still grants the settler his hundred and sixty acres. As yet great stretches of unbroken forest remain in that region, crossed infrequently by rough trails, filled with stumps, such as was Yonge Street before Simcoe's time. Log huts or Indian wigwams are the only shelters and the population is so sparse that one may travel a hundred miles between the high palisades which form the banks of the Peace without seeing a trace of man. It is into an atmosphere such as this that he must be carried who wishes to enter in spirit into the early days of Ontario.

FOR THOUSANDS of years, while in the East great nations were being born and reborn, the wilderness in America slept. The native Indian, blending into his environment like the deer which he hunted, seemed part of its sleepy existence. When, in 1495, the Cabots sailed into the mouth of the St. Lawrence, a new era began. But for three hundred years even after the Cross was raised at Hochelaga, the Great Lakes territory, except, perhaps, for the passing of an occasional coureur, continued to vegetate in its monotony. In 1615 Father Le Caron and Champlain made their journey by canoe and portage to the Trent Valley and, following its course down to the inlet, which posterity has named the Bay of

Quinte, looked first on the waters of the great inland sea.

In the era of French occupation few settlements were to be found in Ontario. Frontenac gave his name to a trading post on the present site at Kingston. De La Salle was granted land by the Bay of Quinte. Fort Rouillé became a halting place in the swamps near Toronto Bay, whence, for a long two hundreds miles to Detroit, few Europeans were to be found. Detroit then spread over both banks of the river and gradually became the centre of a fair community of French whose descendants still cultivate tobacco near the outskirts of the border cities. These posts were used by the French mainly to tap the fur of the West. Permanent settlers were few and French influence in Ontario remained for the most part transient.

Ontario owes the first serious attempt at settlement to those who remained true to George III and a decadent parliament, at a time when the majority in the colonies found the combination to be insupportable. The first large body of Loyalists arrived in 1780. At Cataraqui, in that year, on the site of old Fort Frontenac, there were British barracks. Fort Niagara stood on the east bank of the Niagara River. Above, Fort Erie maintained a dreary existence and Detroit still remained in the hands of the British. A few gardens around these posts, the only cultivated land in the country, supplied vegetables to the mess. The Loyalist settlements at Niagara preceded by a few years those along the northeastern shore. In 1780 Governor Haldimand gave instructions to Lieut.-Col. Butler, of the Rangers, to distribute at Niagara land and supplies to the refugees already there. The same summer breaking and clearing began and by the end of 1783 an official report shows that forty-six families had settled in the vicinity in "forty-four houses and twenty barns." When Governor Simcoe came to make Newark his capital a fair colony was in existence.

HOWEVER, not till the Loyalists in the southern colonies saw the last hope destroyed of regaining their position, did a large influx begin. The most characteristic feature of the Loyalists of the St. Lawrence region is the predominance of the military. This was noted by Anne Powell, who in a journey through the Loyalist settlements in 1789 passed "from colonel to captain, from captain to major." The Bay of Quinte district was reconnoitred by Captain Sherwood, of the King's Loyal Americans. A few Loyalists, among whom were the parties of Colonel Van Alstine and Colonel Michael Grass, chose to sail directly from New York. The majority, the Royal Greens, Jessup's Corps, Major Rogers' Corps and many families of non-combatants came by the Hudson River route to Oswego. In all possible cases the settlers were assigned land in the townships which had already been surveyed and numbered. The most important work of clearing was first attempted. Government supplies of flour, axes, and saws were distributed sparsely to those who were unable to bring supplies. When the grain began to sprout between the stumps and the first frosts appeared, rude huts and huge fireplaces were built. The harvest was successful and the first winter passed without too much hardship. But for many years letters tell of privations. Many of the soldiers had had no previous experience in farming, but adversity and the advice of friendly Indians strengthened them to work. Cooking under difficulties, trapping, curing and sewing deer skin, sugar-making and simple medical treatments were soon learned and the news of each successful experiment passed quickly from settlement to settlement. The "Hungry Year" of 1788, drove many to starvation, but as the years wore on many rude comforts began to appear.

The details which have come down to us of the life of those first settlers are meagre. Little writing was done, but a few books of travel, De Rochefoucauld in 1794, Howison, after the turn of the century, and that charming narrative of Anne Powell, give us pictures of early life. A few old books, such as Playter's, "History of Early Methodism," and Caniff's, "Early Settlement of Upper Canada," reconstruct the period from the stories of pioneers who lived into the time in which the books were written. The Public Archives of Ontario and Colonel Frazer's, "History of Ontario," are mines too little explored,

but rich in material for the patient reader in search of the romance of the early settlements. In nearly all families who trace their history to those times can be found letters, now much faded, utensils made by the settlers, and old books which they read. In a suggestive essay Miss Nina Yeomans mentions as a valuable source the old family Bibles, between the leaves of which may be found occasional clippings and notes and where are recorded the births and deaths and the names of the children in the large families of those years.

THE LIVES of the Loyalists were simple and usually moral. The new settlers were intensely devoted by nature to Great Britain and the passion was stimulated by the suffering which they had endured. They were always hospitable. Many times in their lives they had been dependent on the care of others and now, in their own homes, they welcomed every stranger "right gladly." Every house had its large Dutch fireplace on which huge logs burned continually. By its light, in the autumn and winter, the household work was done. The wife busied herself in carding wool and in making the homespun linen, the daughters mended and the farmer engaged in fashioning axe-handles or in repairing boots or harness. But when visitors arrived work was put aside and the hostess would bring forth the best that the house could provide. A breakfast described by Howison sounds Bradwardian in its variety: "green tea, fried pork, honeycomb and salted salmon, pound cake and pickled cucumbers, stewed chicken and apple tart, ginger-bread and sourkroust. Dinner was but a repetition and supper *da capo*." The lean years of the eighties seemed to intensify the value which might be set on plenty.

After supper, the elders of the company would make a circle around the fire, the old soldier Loyalists to tell again of the narrow escapes of battle days, the women to cheer their neighbors for the homeward journey with tales of goblins and ghosts. Dancing and mimic plays, husking bees and paring bees were the recreations of the younger people. Almost every neighborhood had its fiddler. Late hours were frequent and our grandmothers who object to the not unreasonably late hours of modern society should be reminded of the frequent occasions when the need of the rising sun to light the return to home was made the pretext for dancing the small hours away.

MARRIAGES were usually made the occasions of much hilarity. For months, in most cases, friends and neighbors had helped to clear new ground and partially to erect on a back hundred acres, a fresh log house. Courting or "sparking" was usually left to Sunday, the only day when for a length of time the young people could remain from the fields. On the day of the wedding the community would assemble uninvited and the ceremony was capped with a dance. If an itinerant preacher were in the neighborhood all would be well, but this was not always the case and many acts of Simcoe's Parliament were devoted to legalizing past irregularities. The clergymen of the Church of England and the magistrates were at first the only persons who might perform the ceremony. Near Galt, Squire Ellis and Squire Murray did a thriving trade. Money was scarce in all parts of the country and ministers and even doctors were often paid in kind. The Rev. Dr. Boomer, who ministered in Dumfries Township, records that on one occasion "after performing the marriage ceremony, was surprised when the bridegroom stepped briskly to one side and whispered in my ear that as they had no money he would, on the morrow, send me the marriage fee in sausages."

Religion among the early settlers, especially in the more outlying districts was left to the head of each family. The visits of the itinerant preacher were intermittent and the open republicanism of many of these men placed a serious handicap on their work. More frequently, of a Sunday evening, the large Bible would be taken from the shelf and the family, in the light of the fire, would sing the well known hymns. As the communities increased in size rude churches were built. There was little harshness about the religion of the Loyalists. The amusements of the young, the dances, the kissing plays, boxing and "sparking" were usually innocent and helped to a large degree to save the settlements from

*We publish the above article with special pleasure for two reasons. In the first place it is a most interesting one and will be read by every one with genuine pleasure and appreciation. In the second place the article is really an essay which merited and received the Lincoln G. Hutton Scholarship in connection with the recent year's work in the university, and in open competition with all the students of his college won the above-named scholarship for his essay on "The Romance of Pioneer Life in Ontario." It will serve as an illustration of the excellent work that is being done by our colleges and their students.—THE EDITORS.

July 8, 1925

THE NEW OUTLOOK

Page 11

and children." Mrs. Jameson later made an intrepid journey through most of the western country and has much to say in praise of Canadian life as she saw it. But her first winter spent in our destestably muddy capital was a severe trial of her spirit.

While York was thus expanding as the social and governmental centre the rural districts were undergoing a metamorphosis. From 1824 the Canada Company had assisted settlers and the work of John Galt and his associates was being rewarded in the foundation of Guelph, Galt and Goderich. The years from 1829 to 1831, when one hundred and sixty thousand settlers took up land, have been called the "years of great migration." Although Mrs. Moodie found life on the frontier near Peterborough to be very trying to one of her education and susceptibilities, most of the farmers in the districts already settled were leading a hearty and prosperous existence. The neat farms of the Quakers, interspersed with an occasional meeting-house, were spreading along Yonge Street. The older settlements around Niagara and the Bay of Quinte appeared well-ordered and populous. The MacNabb clan had begun to build the village of Bytown and after 1832 the Rideau Canal took their produce to the lake. The waterways being the chief highway, the harbors were made busy with freight. Political life was so stirring and open that the Family Compact was already under fire and '37 was looming.

One record of personal experience calls up vividly those quickening times. Robina and Kathleen

Lizars in their book, "The Humours of '37," tell a quaint story of the Rebellion days. Nathaniel Pearson, a Quaker, a refined and intelligent farmer, lived in the Aurora district. Some of his Quaker principles were sacrificed to reform and he rode off to join the insurgents on their way south. During his absence his wife found it necessary to go on an errand to Aurora. When Mrs. Pearson arrived she was suspected of carrying messages to the rebels and was marched off to the guard-house between two Loyalist soldiers. She appealed to the guard, who was a neighbor, a poor man to whom she had often given help; but he refused to listen, even when Mrs. Pearson pleaded for her young baby at home. A gentleman of Orillia named King found her in the guard-house and was immediately interested. "Do you tell me you have a young baby at home needing you? Gad! if they had taken my wife that way they wouldn't know the devil had ever been born before." Through the help of Mr. King Mrs. Pearson was released. On reaching home she found that Quaker principles had once more been forfeited. The Loyalists were about, searching for food and arms and the trusty Dutch maid, Betty, was determined that they should not have either. She had hidden the only gun in the woodshed. As the men entered and were on their way to the cellar Betty foreswore her sect by declaring that the cellar was empty. The men, who never doubted the word of a Quaker, turned back and the provisions were saved.

The story was strikingly confirmed for me as I

talked with a lady, now nearly ninety years of age, who told the story in nearly the same words as it appears in the *Chronicle* of the Lizars. She was the little baby who, by being in the Quaker house had secured the release of her mother, Mrs. Pearson. Mr. Pearson survived "Montgomery's Tavern" and returned home to the farm. To the guard who had refused aid Mrs. Pearson was unable to speak during the remainder of a long life.

IT IS interesting to feel that even in these days we may find means other than by the written word to unlock the past and enter into the spirit of those early days of pioneer life. We may lose ourselves for an hour in the prints of the John Ross Robertson collection. We may stand by the Falls of Niagara and, shutting out as well as possible the modern sights and sounds about us, endeavor to picture the scene as Mrs. Jameson found it. Or we may make a pilgrimage to the old Quaker Cemetery near Aurora, where lie so many among our forefathers who were true and noble. The simple gravestones typify the purity and sincerity of their lives. But they themselves are, for the most part, forgotten. Some by means of old letters, some by a story buried in a book now unread, some merely by the name chiselled on the stone, enter our small world of history. But as we travel back in imagination to the days in which they lived, to the toil from dark to dark, to the hours of labor seen even now in the long snake fence, or to a quiet evening of theirs, we, of a later time may find the romance of the early settlements.

falling into degradation and intemperance. But the itinerants found even these outlets for young spirits to be unpalatable, and Playter solemnly assures us that the "youth were far too fond of foolish amusements."

SUCH was the manner of social life among the Searly settlers. However much we may owe to the Loyalists and to those who settled around the lake, their lives were not always orderly. Over these people hung the sense of the bitter wrong which had driven them from their comfortable homes in the southern colonies. The round of life in the isolated clearing was not heavily charged with romance, and a sense of nation-building, so stimulating to many pioneer ventures, was almost absent. In the remoteness of life in the clearings, void of a sense of corporate life, the dear passion for king and the Empire was difficult to maintain. Romance in this sense came on the arrival of the squire-like, industrious, Tory commander of the Queen's Rangers, John Simcoe, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada. The Canada Act of 1791, by creating Upper and Lower Canada, gave the people of Ontario an opportunity to develop the pride in achievement which comes from a consciousness of nationhood.

Colonel Simcoe's father bequeathed to comes from a consciousness of nationhood. him a few thousand pounds in land, a tradition of active loyalty and a family crest on which was graven "*non sibi sed patriae*." At a time when the debate on the Canada Bill had lent him prestige in the British House, Colonel Simcoe left to bury himself in the colonies, leaving corruption to Dundas and triumphs to Pitt. "To establish the British Constitution . . . among a people who have steadfastly adhered to their loyal principles," "*non sibi sed patriae*" was Simcoe's ambition. Most of the documents relating to Simcoe are lodged in the Dominion Archives, but two biographies by D. C. Scott and Mr. Reade provide material from which to study his aims. Mrs. Simcoe has left a diary and a number of quaint sketches to be admirably edited by John Ross Robertson. Simcoe was an Imperialist in a day when Imperialists were few, when Britain was creating an Empire "in a fit of absence of mind." Simcoe was always acutely aware of the surrender with Burgoyne at Saratoga and though his aims in Canada were peaceful, he wished a settlement with the "blockhouse the heart and the head." Loyalty and religion were to be uppermost in the minds of his settlers, loyalty to the king, vassalage to the Established Church. While we may say of Dorchester that he failed to understand the minds of the trading class, the *bête noir* of Simcoe was the Republican. Itinerant preachers, whose republicanism was often unblushing, received scant consideration. A squirearchy seemed necessary in order to combat the republicanism. Influential gentlemen were granted large tracts and made Lord Lieutenants of them. Simcoe's ideals if they ever reached Burke, must have warmed his heart. In vision Simcoe saw the new provincial capital as a town wherein would stand a "palladium of British loyalty." "There was to be one Church, one university to guard the constitution . . . there at every street corner was to be a sentry, there the very stones were to sing, 'God Save the King.'"

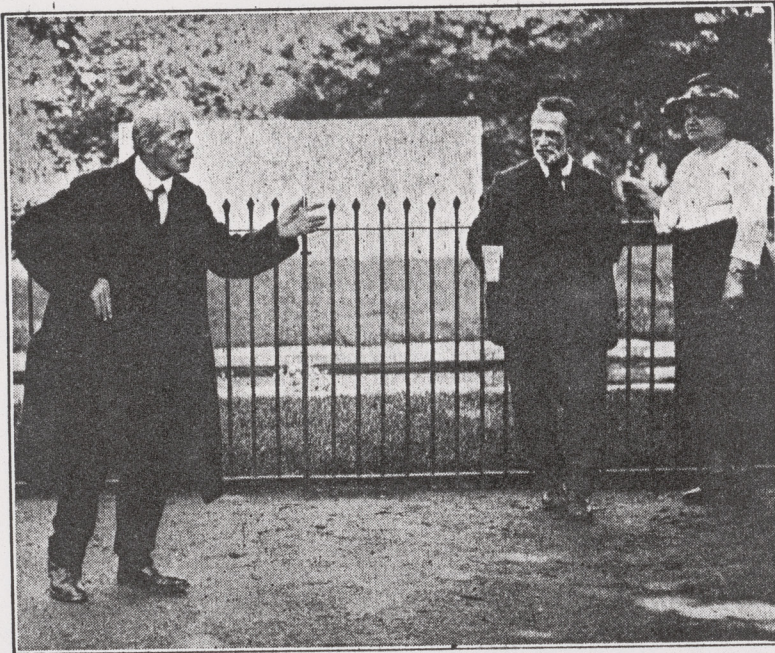
TO A GENERATION which is now finding unpalatable even the mildly omniscient principles of the British constitution, as defined by Mr. Dicey, Simcoe's enthusiasm seems absurd. And indeed, the compact bureaucracy which he instituted soon became obsolete. But the spirit of Simcoe inspired the province, and drew a halo of glory to crown the labor of the pioneer. The jaded settler now renewed his pledge to the Empire and found a country for which to labor.

In the search for the romance of pioneer life greatest attention must be paid to the rural districts. But the tales which abound in the history of the towns prove to be very interesting and give balance to the picture of those days. Kingston, Peterborough, York, Newark, Guelph, has each its contribution. When, in 1794, Newark was made untenable by the cession to the United States of the left bank of the River Niagara, Governor Simcoe desired to find in London, on the Thames, the future inland capital. But Dorchester insisted on York, even though navy yards were constructed at Chatham and Dundas Street was cut.

The history of York is typical of most of the

towns. For a long hundred years after Champlain's explorations the site of Toronto was seen only by predatory Mississaugas or an occasional coureur, who, after a night's camp, was eager to be rid of the unsavory swamp. By 1749 Fort Rouillé was to be found there, a trading post where Abbé Piquet found "good bread, good wine and everything requisite for trade." The post maintained a mosquito existence till in 1778 a few straggling settlers, lured by the bay with its fishing, came to build a rude home by the waters.

Simcoe made his first visit to York on May 9,



TWELVE-HOUR ANTI-EPSTEIN SPEECH IN HYDE PARK

Readers of the daily papers have learned of the very strong feeling against the memorial to the late W. H. Hudson, the work of the famous sculptor, Epstein, which has been set up in Hyde Park, London. Our picture shows Mr. Homerville Hague, painter and sculptor, during his twelve-hour continuous speech made against the memorial. His audience at this particular moment does not seem to be large but it looks interested. The memorial is in the background. Surely in no other country in the world could such a protest on such a matter reach such lengths of interest and intensity.

1793. The record of his subsequent visits may be found in the pages of the *Newark Gazette* and in the diary of Mrs. Simcoe. The first survey was made by Joseph Bouchette and on August 1st, 1793, the first division of the Queen's Rangers left Queenston for York. On landing all worked hard to build camp. August was given over to preparations for the change in the seat of government. Then on the 26th, as Governor Simcoe directed operations from his tent, came the news of the Duke of York's great (and only) victory in Flanders. A demonstration, to be held on the 27th, was ordered by Simcoe, when the flag was to be run up and the town christened Little York in honor of the prince.

THE DAY, we are told, was warm and clear. At twelve the flag was hoisted, while the guns reverberated through the silences of the woods and marsh. Governor Simcoe kept open house that day in his palace of canvas, said to have been bought by Simcoe at a sale of the property of the redoubtable Captain Cook. Officers and men alike sat by the great pine fires in the evening and kept passing the cup that cheers till far into the night.

From such beginnings York grew. The first permanent houses were constructed by the marshy ground near Ashbridge's Bay. Mr. Smyth writes in his *Gazette* of the building of Castle Frank "between the town and the Don," named after the Governor's son Francis. Under the direction of Mr. Smyth and the Cosens, other houses were built. King and Berkeley Streets became the centre; other streets such as Princess, George, Frederick, Duke, being cut out in time and named to beset the royal character of the town. In 1795, De la Rochefoucauld did not find it worth his while to go personally from his comfortable quarters at Navy Hall, Newark, where he was being entertained by Colonel Simcoe, but two friends who risked the journey to York found only twelve houses. By autumn of 1796 Augustus Jones and his men had hewed out Yonge Street to Lake Simcoe and wharfs and a canal were being constructed. Mrs. Breckenridge, who visited York in 1798 found it to be a dismal place, "not even possessing the characteristics of a village," for neither church nor school had as yet been built. In 1806 she found a change, "a church, a jail, a light-house building and many nice houses and the woodsolitary, I heard no voices, no quick footsteps of men

between the garrison and the town are fast disappearing."

AS YORK was the seat of government, society was the best in the province. By 1820, not less than twenty cultured families besides the ever-present military, were settled. The precise walls of the government building, surrounded by grounds planned by Sir Peregrine Maitland himself, contained many gatherings other than those occasioned by the dry round of government business. Sir Peregrine and Lady Sarah led in entertainment. The evenings, while the Legislature was in session, were enlivened by dinners and balls, and at least once a year a "grand ball" was given, to which most of the town was invited. The simple, old-fashioned house of Chief Justice Powell, with its two-storied verandah facing the lake, was made a centre of social life by his jolly family. The parish house as an intellectual centre found serious competition in the small, but cheery house of Attorney-General Robinson. The court house was a small, unpainted building near King and Yonge Streets, while the jail maintained a rickety existence on King Street.

Of the entertainments of those days, that held in honor of John Galt on New Year's Eve of 1817 is typical. The Canada Company had spent the three years since its foundation in the hazardous business of bringing settlers to its tract near the Huron. While these new settlers, the Stricklands, the Lizars, the Van Egmonds, the Dunlops, were settling in the West, Galt at York was celebrating the close of a successful season with the "Canada Company's Fancy Dress Ball." Lady Sarah was, at the time, being closely contested as the arbitress of the York society by Lady Mary Willis, and Galt, ever an opportunist, decided to favor the runner-up by asking her to be the hostess. The smallness of the circle in York society made the occasion all the more pleasurable as the company assembled as one large, interdependent family. As to dress, even if while in the bush it suited those pioneers to wear the red

shirt of the woodsman, on an occasion such as this costume was an affair of moment. Sir Peregrine Maitland was resplendent. Nothing less than square-cut, olive-colored velvet breeches and waistcoat would satisfy the arbiter of Upper Canada. Judge Willis was there in his black velvet and the usually sober face of Chief Justice Powell now beamed on the merry-making of all.

Mr. Thompson, the clerk in the York office, was commissioned to issue the invitations and the company met at "Frank's," whose inn boasted of a large assembly room. The hosts had spent the afternoon in decorating. The company arms glistened in all prominent positions, while the floor was covered with an immense representation of them in chalk. "The supporters of the shields were of colossal proportions" reads the chronicle, now resting in the archives of Ontario, "two lions rampant bearing flags turned opposite ways; below, on the riband, the motto of the company, '*non muta genus solum*.'" Bowers of green hemlock relieved the bare corners and the whole was made as day with "innumerable colored lamps bearing floating lights." Lady Mary appeared as the Queen of Scots, to whom to the scandal of Judge Willis, Mr. Thompson played a fervent Rizzio. Miss Willis, the sister of the judge, a very Diana Vernon in York society, played Folly, with cap and bells.

IT IS TO be hoped that Mr. Galt was entertained to the fullest degree on that evening, for he had little liking for York. He described it in his autobiography as a "place provocative of blue devils," and indeed there is another face to the picture of "Muddy" York of that time, and life is not all gay, even when viewed in the perspective of a century. A less ideal picture is preserved by Mrs. Jameson in her "Sketches of Canada," when, the last person to reach the bay before the close of navigation in 1836, she received her introduction to York. "The wharf was utterly deserted, the arrival of the steamer being unexpected, and as I stepped out of the boat I sank ankle-deep in mud and slush." The day was cold, with a lowering snow-laden sky. Half-blinded with snow, and, Mrs. Jameson is not ashamed to add, her tears, she "walked through a quarter of the town mean in appearance, not thickly inhabited . . . through dreary, miry ways, never much thronged and now by reason of the approaching snow, almost