EDITING THE LETTERS OF JOSEPH HOWE
ADDRESS TO THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA
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Ladies and gentlemen, members of the Bibliographical Society of Canada. It is hardly necessary for me to say that I am honoured to have been invited as the guest speaker at your annual meeting. I must admit, however, that I address this assembly with considerable trepidation. Although your good President assures me that the Society regards editing manuscripts as a respectable bibliographical activity, that assurance only partly dissipates the feeling of an outsider looking in on a professional body and wondering how much of what he is going to say will succeed only in boring his listeners. However, the risk must be taken. I can only hope that a plain, unvarnished tale of an editorial project completed will not be too far removed from what is expected of your guest speakers.

My subject is the editing of a collection of letters written by Joseph Howe almost a century and a half ago. Nova Scotians in the audience will require no introduction to that illustrious figure of our provincial past, but for others who may be better acquainted with the careers of Macdonald or Laurier, I should say that Howe was born in 1804 and died in 1873, that he led the Reform movement in Nova Scotian politics in the 1830's and 1840's, that he was many times a member of the Legislative Assembly of this province and also its premier, and that late in his life he was a member of Parliament and of the Dominion cabinet, the president of the Privy Council, the secretary of state, and finally the Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia. Being a man of many parts, Howe was also an outstanding orator, a polished prose-writer, and a minor poet. For our immediate purposes it is most vital to remember that, for about fifteen years, he was a very successful journalist, editor, and newspaper owner.

The surviving manuscript records of his varied and active life are very extensive. The correspondence alone would fill several stout volumes if it were to be published. My main interest in his correspondence has been limited to a relatively small portion of the whole, a series of letters written by Howe to his wife when he was travelling on business in the years from 1829 to 1836. The series consists of some eighty letters which range from epistles of several closely-written pages to brief notes. They were written in the years before Howe entered politics and when, as a young newspaper owner, he was devoting all of his time to managing and editing the weekly *Novascotian*.

It was Howe's practice to set out from his Halifax office each spring or early summer on a trip through Nova Scotia and, when possible, to New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Although he had forty resident agents scattered throughout the Maritime Provinces to receive his newspaper subscriptions, his own presence was necessary to collect overdue accounts, to gain new subscribers,

to ferret out and cancel delinquent ones, and to promote his newspaper among the ninety percent of Nova Scotians who lived outside of Halifax. Howe was also bent upon making the *Novascotian* a truly provincial newspaper, and to do that he had to know his province at first hand. For all these reasons, he made these summer excursions annual events, riding on horseback for hundreds of miles, sometimes on the so-called Great Roads, the main highways from Halifax through Windsor to Annapolis and through Truro to Pictou, but more often on the rough waggon roads or mere bridle paths which were the only means of reaching many settlements and settlers in the province.

The recipient of these letters was the young woman Howe had married early in 1828, Catherine Susan Ann McNab. She was the granddaughter of the first Peter McNab, the original settler of McNab's Island in Halifax Harbour — a sturdy Scot who had established a miniature feudal estate on the island and whose portrait is drawn so vividly by Thomas Raddall in his novel *Hangman's Beach*. Susan Ann, as Howe always called her, appears as a hazel-eyed enchantress and a paragon of noble womanhood in the several poems Howe wrote about her. She must also have been level-headed and efficient in her mundane role as the helpmate of an ambitious newspaper editor, for Howe depended upon her to oversee the business when he was out of town. She kept her eye on the apprentices who ran the press, took a hand in the make-up of the paper, saw that Howe's directives were carried out, and above all managed the frequently tangled finances of the business and family. Handling the Howe finances for even two months, especially in the depression year of 1834, must have been no mean accomplishment, for despite the popularity of the *Novascotian*, many of Howe's subscribers never seemed to have any cash on hand when he called on them. By 1835, his creditors owed him the sum of £4,313 (\$21,565). His predicament may be better understood if we realize that this seemingly modest amount would be well over \$200,000 in terms of our present currency. At any rate, his wife was expected to perform some intricate tricks of juggling in manipulating accounts, as this passage indicates:

"I send some signatures — also a Note to James for £50 — if he signs it, as I suppose he will, perhaps the old Bank will discount it and give us the money. Try on Thursday. If they will not, put it in the new on Monday, rubbing out the pencil marks, and let it go to pay Murison's and others — get his Notes out if possible, and if the Note should be discounted at [the] old Bank, send him £15 on account if Nutting's Note, to settle Naylor's. Put a wafer on James' Note, and send it to the store. Lay as little as possible to any . . ." One must assume that she could follow these bewildering directions.

Mrs. Howe must have valued the letters she received from her peripatetic husband, as she kept them for the rest of her life and passed them on to her son Sydenham Howe when she died in 1891. They were in Sydenham's possession for years, probably until his death in the 1920's. At any rate, that avid collector of Canadiana, William Inglis Morse, bought them and other Howe manuscripts either from Sydenham Howe or from his estate, and kept them in his collection until the 1940's, when he donated them and the rest of his Howe collection to Harvard University. For the last three decades, therefore, the letters have remained in the Howe Collection in the Houghton Library at Harvard. Microfilms of this Harvard collection were made in the 1960's, and so the letters may now

be read by a visitor to the Public Archives of Nova Scotia — a visitor, I must add, equipped with sharp eyesight and a good measure of patience.

This small portion of Howe's correspondence has a special interest for me. As all the letters are addressed to his wife, they are informal and not written for the public eye. They promise and indeed contain insights into Howe and his affairs that one does not find in his public or more formal utterances. As they were written before his career as a politician began, they come from the very part of his life that has interested me most as editor of his *Western and Eastern Rambles* (1828-31) and as close reader of the first decade of *The Novascotian*. In fact, the editing of the letters followed naturally from what I had been doing, for I had already read them to discover how they were related to his published sketches of provincial travel.

The first step in the preparation of the edition was of course to establish an exact transcript of the whole series of letters. This operation can be simple and straightforward, but in this case there were some difficulties. As the letters are in Harvard, it was necessary to be content with the available microfilm in preparing a basic draft. While the microfilm was generally readable except for a relatively small number of words, phrases, or passages, many frames of the film were naturally as faint and faded as the originals. Then of course there was always the possibility of photocopies of such material betraying one into errors, as bits of dust can be mistaken for commas or even for parts of letters. It was necessary to make notes of anything that was at all doubtful or indecipherable and to check with particular care when, much later, I examined the originals in Harvard. The deciphering process varied greatly in difficulty: sometimes reading was easy, sometimes a page was so badly faded or Howe's scrawl so hurried that several hours and the liberal use of a magnifying glass were required to read it. Not infrequently the poor quality of paper was at fault, or poor ink or pens. In one of the letters Howe blames his bad handwriting on the cramp caused by holding his horse's bridle for day after day, in another on the crippled pens and thin ink which were the best that a country inn could supply. A few of the letters were hard to read simply because they had been scribbled in haste as Howe rushed to catch the Halifax-bound mail-carrier.

Once a reasonably accurate text had been established, the problem of dating presented itself. Unfortunately, only a small number, a mere nineteen of the eighty letters, had been fully dated by Howe, and no one had ever taken up the task. Howe's usual heading was "Truro, Friday evening" or "Bridgetown, Saturday", or even "Sunday evening" with no place as well as no date. The first step was to assign undated letters to the proper years from 1829 to 1836. This turned out to be an elaborate jigsaw game with letters as randomly scattered pieces of the puzzle. Fortunately, there were enough dated letters to form useful points of reference, especially in 1833, 1834, and 1835. The year 1829 was the most troublesome as only one of the sixteen letters that turned out to be of that year bore a full date. What followed was a painstaking business of wroking backward and forward from the dated letters, looking for even the smallest clue that would relate one letter to another by references to Howe's journeying, to places, to people, to amounts of money collected and sent back to Halifax, to details of business transactions, to current events, to the writing Howe was doing while travelling, even to the contents of the *Novascotian*. When the letters had

all been arranged by year as accurately as possible, the next step was to deduce the exact order and to assign the month and the day to each. It was a matter of constructing charts of Howe's travels, with constant reference to calendars by tracing his route and figuring out time spent at and between stopping places. Some letters fell into place readily enough, but others were annoyingly stubborn. One example will suffice. Of the eighteen letters which appeared to belong to 1830, only two bore dates. One was headed "Annapolis, Wednesday evening, June [3rd or 2nd or 9th], 1830", the other "Windsor, Tuesday morning, June, 1830". The Annapolis letter was indeed the only letter of the year with a full date, but, as luck would have it, the day of the month was so badly written that it could be read as "2" or "3" or "9". Moreover, though Howe's scrawled number looked most like a "3", June 3rd of that year did not fall on a Wednesday. The only thing to do was to see how the letter would fit into Howe's travels, dated first as the 2nd (a Wednesday) and then as the 9th. As to report the details of this exercise would take the rest of my time and be boring to boot, I need say only that the sequence of the 1830 letters finally came into focus. It turned out that Howe had written "June 3rd" by mistake for "June 2nd", and that he had left Halifax on May 23rd, had written from Chester on May 24th, from Lunenburg on the 25th and 27th, had gone on to Liverpool and then had ridden through the forest to Annapolis Royal, arriving there on June 2nd and writing the crucial letter that same evening. Thereafter his journey could be traced through the Valley to Windsor, on to Truro, to Pictou, to Guysborough, and back to Pictou.

Dating is by no means always a serious problem in editing letters. Usually the writer has been kind enough to date just about every one as, for example, in the recently published volume of F.P. Grove's letters edited by the late Desmond Pacey. One can understand why Howe, writing two and three times a week to a person who missed him enough to be a calendar-watcher and who knew his probable schedule, did not bother to indicate anything more than the place and day of the week, never thinking that his negligence would cost someone many an hour of concentrated work. But it was fortunate that the framework of travel held these letters together. Without it, extensive dating might have been impossible.

The next editorial task, that of annotating the letters, was never in doubt. It simply had to be done. A century and a half lies between us and Howe's words; moreover, the letters are sprinkled with references which even a person fairly well acquainted with the history of Nova Scotia would find incomprehensible. Therefore the aim was clear: to identify persons mentioned, to explain passing references to contemporary events and situations, to clarify casual or obscure remarks — in general, to supply a note for anything that appeared to need identification or explanation.

It turned out, when all was done, that no fewer than about 375 footnotes dangled from Howe's letters. Was this mere pedantry? I would say not, if pedantry is rightly understood to be an excessive and inappropriate display of learning and an overemphasis of minor details. A truly pedantic note to Howe's request to his wife to send him some more ginger beer would, I suppose, run like this: "ginger beer: a soft drink flavored with ginger, the pungent and spicy rhizome of the reedlike plants of the genus *Zingiber*, especially of *Zingiber officinale*." Such

a note is of course not only superfluous but a caricature of scholarship. An editor of old letters is simply obligated to use common sense, to keep clear of the one extreme of irresponsible negligence. It is really just another case of finding the mean between too little and too much.

A few of the notes were not only easy to write but would have been unnecessary if all prospective readers of the letters could be expected to have even a nodding acquaintance with Nova Scotia in the 1830's. As one cannot reasonably make such an assumption, however, when Howe first mentioned "Haliburton" a dutiful note had to follow: "Thomas Chandler Haliburton, at this time a member of the Legislative Assembly for Annapolis". Such easy explanations were the exception. Howe's many references to what was going into current issues of his newspaper — either from his own pen or contributed by local writers or reprinted from other publications — could be identified only by examining issues of the *Novascotian*. In fact, it became essential to keep a very close eye in what was going into the *Novascotian* while Howe was absent from his editorial desk in Halifax.

More troublesome were many of Howe's casual references to persons. For example, in a letter of September, 1829, written while Howe was stopping over in Saint John at the home of his half-sister Jane, the wife of William Austen, he tells his wife "Jane is looking well — Mary Ann much heartier than when she left Halifax — William is much in the old way, and the three children are pictures of health." Then in July, 1832, when he is about to cross the Bay of Fundy to visit Saint John again, he writes "I saw poor Mary Ann's death in a New Brunswick paper — I am not sorry the scene has closed before I got over, as I could have done no good, and would perhaps have disarranged Jane's household rather than assisted". Two puzzling questions were posted here: as Mary Ann was certainly not one of Jane's children, who was this person who apparently lived with the Austens in Saint John and died in 1832, and secondly, what does Howe mean by saying that William Austen was "much in the old way"? The answers were not forthcoming until they were stumbled upon in searching for something else. When looking through the St. Matthew's Church register of marriages, I happened to notice this entry "William Austen, bachelor, and Mary Ann Mansfield, March 1, 1809". Here was the key. William Austen had first been married to a Miss Mansfield, who must have died before 1816 (when he married Howe's half-sister) and left him with a child named Mary Ann. Predictably, a few pages further there appeared this marriage entry: "William Austen, *widower*, and Jane Howe, July 11, 1816." Then, under "Baptisms" in the same register, was the final evidence: "Mary Ann Mansfield, daughter of William and Mary Austen, June 10, 1810". So the identity of Mary Ann was settled. What "the old way" was for William Austen also came out in an unexpected manner. When reading letters from Sydenham Howe, one of Joseph Howe's sons, to George Johnson, who was working on a biography of Howe around 1900, I found Sydenham mentioning that William Austen had been a semi-invalid for most of his life. At once the phrase "much in the old way" made sense.

Another hazard in annotation is one's own obtuseness. One blunder in my own editing is a good illustration. In a letter in which Howe describes how he spent a whole day among his subscribers in the Antigonish area without collecting a penny there occurs this remark: "my next stopping place was Priest's

Grant, at the Gulf Shore — he gave me a bottle of good wine — and a promise to have the Bill paid in town”. Because Howe’s hand at this point in the letter was very hard to read, “Priest’s Grant” was not at all clear, and the pronoun “he” seemed oddly used, but repeated staring at the words only confirmed the original reading. But where was “Priest’s Grant” on the Gulf Shore? It was common enough at the time for tracts of land to retain the original name they bore as land grants — Fisher’s Grant, Meagher’s Grant, for example. But nowhere on old maps or in histories of that part of the province did the name “Priest’s Grant” appear, and when I was writing an introduction to Howe’s *Rambles* and needed to quote this particular passage, it was necessary to place a bracketed question mark after the mysterious place name. Not until months later did the light dawn, and quite by accident. In reading about the history of the various churches in Pictou and Antigonish counties, I noticed that the Reverend Colin Grant came to the Gulf Shore area in 1816 and served there as parish priest for many years. “Priest’s Grant” was therefore “Priest Grant’s”. Howe’s grammar was correct, and only his odd use of “Priest” rather than “the Reverend” was at fault. Howe might be held partly responsible, but a perceptive editor should have seen the truth of the matter much more quickly.

The bane of the annotator is finally the note that cannot be written, the reference that eludes explanation no matter how persistently the editor tries to track it down. One has to expect to be foiled by some references in old letters, especially when they are addressed to a person very close to the writer, a person who needed only the most casual mention of persons and events in order to understand who or what was meant. Nevertheless, it is frustrating to be foiled very often, and even embarrassing when an editor whose field is English literature fails to identify lines of poetry tossed off by Howe from memory. Such was my experience with these lines in one of the letters:

For the flesh is like the dark and heavy cloud
That lows along the horison’s broad expanse;
The spirit — like the breeze by which it is impell’d.

Hours of memory-searching, of concordance-hunting, and of skimming volume after volume of late eighteenth-century and early Romantic verse were of no avail. All that could be done was to write this shamefaced note: “A diligent search has failed to discover the source of these lines.”

Sometimes people were just as elusive. In the second letter of the series, written on Howe’s first visit to the town of Pictou, this intriguing sentence appears: “I went to McKenzie’s Meeting this forenoon and heard the famous Mr. Donelly, who astonished Martin’s parishioners — he gives a good stave — his voice is unpleasing, his grin horrible and some of his actions ungainly — but on the whole he is very fluent and sometimes gives a sentence a tolerable lift with his fist.” It was easy enough to see that Howe was attending a service in the Reverend Kenneth McKenzie’s church; that a guest preacher, a Mr. Donelly, was holding forth; and that he had previously somehow “astonished” the congregation of another Presbyterian minister, the Reverend John Martin, in Halifax. But who was this “famous” Mr. Donelly? No mention of him appeared in local histories or in the early Pictou records. Perhaps, then, he was a travelling evangelist. If so, what was he doing preaching in the staid Kirk at Pictou, of all

places? Surely the sober Presbyterianism of the Church of Scotland would have been an unlikely atmosphere for, say, an American revivalist of the kind visiting the more emotional Baptists and Methodists of the period. Perhaps he was an American Presbyterian of some note. But histories of Presbyterianism in the eastern United States failed to mention him. Finally, the newspapers of Halifax and Pictou for August, 1829, carried no advertisements for Mr. Donnelly and not even a notice of his appearance in either town. Again there was nothing left to do but to append another reluctant note: "However 'famous' Mr. Donnelly was in Nova Scotia at the time, his fame seems to have left no imprints. All efforts to identify him have been in vain."

Fortunately, if an editor is persistent enough, such admissions of failure should not be frequent. But he does have to be persistent. In editing letters such as these, perhaps one of the most severe tests of his patience will come from genealogical tangles, the intricacies of family relationships which have to be sorted out in case they should throw light on otherwise meaningless or obscure remarks, or perhaps distinguish one James or Mary or William from another. Certainly the families referred to in these letters — the Howes, the McNabs, and the Austens — could be considered genealogical delights. First, the Howe family tree is complicated by the two marriages of Joseph Howe's father, John Howe Sr. By his first marriage to Martha Minns, John Howe had six children — John, William, David, Martha, Sarah, and Jane. By his second marriage to a widow, Mary Ede Austen, he had two more children, Sarah and Joseph. As the second Mrs. John Howe brought five children into the family fold — Joseph, Henry, William, Mary, and Sarah Austen — Joseph Howe was blessed with one sister, six half-brothers, and five half-sisters, of whom eight were still living in the 1830's. Needless to say, he had a multitude of nephews and nieces, and other assorted relatives. Then the Halifax McNab family, with branches in Cumberland and Cape Breton, was extensive enough to keep one busy in the Archives for some time. Howe's wife, Susan Ann, had only one brother, but her uncle, the second Peter McNab, had seven children. Then too the McNabs were partial to certain Christian names, most markedly Peter, James, and Ellen, a practice that is quite an obstacle for an editor when he is confronted with first names only. One runs into the same difficulty in the Austen family with the names William, Joseph, Henry, and Mary. Naturally one cannot always succeed in identification, but the effort has to be made.

These, then, are some of the tasks and difficulties encountered in preparing an edition of Howe's early letters to his wife. If the recital has sounded like a tale of woe, that is not at all the intention. In fact, this kind of research is interesting and pleasurable. Even the act of assigning a precise date to an undated letter is satisfying, for one has restored just a little more order and pattern to chaos. Then the urge to play detective that slumbers in most of us is stirred into life by the challenge of unearthing clues, of following a faint and dusty track, of now and then recovering bits and pieces of lost truth. The total accomplishment, the completed work, may not be important to many people and certainly not of great significance, as if one had just edited a volume of unknown letters by Shakespeare or Dante. In its small way, however, a carefully prepared edition of less exalted old letters is, I suspect, of more consequence than many

of the critical articles in the humanities that are published in such profusion nowadays.

It is worth noting that in Canadian literary studies, where a remarkable expansion has occurred over the last two decades, there is still much to be done in scholarship as distinguished from literary criticism. Articles and books on Canadian writers and writing are being published now at a rate that would have astonished us twenty years ago. Few of us would doubt that such a change is a good thing for Canadian culture. Yet it should be noticed that a very high proportion of this flow of publication is devoted to living writers and to impressionistic criticism, and not to the results of scholarly research. While all of this is probably natural for a country that has only recently come to take its writers seriously, what many people may not perceive is the heavy imbalance. Scholarly biographies of Canadian writers, scholarly editions of the letters of Canadian writers, scholarly editions of the collected works of Canadian writers, even scholarly or at least edited editions of individual literary works — these are few and far between. Moreover, our nineteenth-century writers have been particularly neglected in all these modes of scholarship. Even if we think only of Maritime writers, the deficiencies are striking. For example, T.C. Haliburton's best work of fiction, *The Old Judge*, can be purchased only in scarce old editions or in an abridged modern paperback which leaves out over one-third of the original book; the need for a well-edited and complete edition is obvious. The only modern edition of James De Mille's masterpiece, *A Strange Manuscript found in a Copper Cylinder*, is also a paperback. There is no collected edition of Howe's letters or of Haliburton's letters, no collected or selected edition of the works of Haliburton or Howe or De Mille. The list could go on, but the point is sufficiently clear: the laborious but fascinating and fundamental pursuit of biographical, bibliographical, and editorial research and writing remains a relatively undeveloped field in the study of Canadian literature. The need is obvious. Let us hope that it will gradually become less obvious as our literary culture matures.

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