ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF
NOVA SCOTIA, 1823

In 1823 in Halifax there appeared an anonymous work bearing the title A General Description of Nova Scotia.¹ No public acknowledgement of authorship was made at the time of publication, nor two years later when a second edition appeared. In fact the author never revealed his identity, and the question of authorship was left unanswered until Henry J. Morgan listed the work in his Bibliotheca Canadensis; or A Manual of Canadian Literature² in 1867. But Morgan confused the matter by naming Thomas Chandler Haliburton as the author on page 170, and Walter Bromley, Headmaster of the Royal Acadian School in Halifax, as the author on page 47.

Apparently no further thought was given to the matter until John Parker Anderson assigned the work to Haliburton in preparing a bibliography for Haliburton: A centenary Chaplet,³ 1897, edited by A. B. deMille. De Mille himself disagreed with this conclusion, and appended his own note, which was published with Anderson's entry in the Chaplet:

" This work is wrongly ascribed to Haliburton in Morgan's Bibliotheca Canadensis, where it is also assigned to its real author - Walter Bromley, Master of the Royal Acadian School, Halifax, N.S. The book was published anonymously, but bears marked internal evidence of its authorship. "

Thus after three-quarters of a century the matter of authorship remained in dispute.

In 1924 V. L. O. Chittick's definitive study of Haliburton⁴ and his works was published. Dr. Chittick devotes a chapter to the General Description, and concludes that it was indeed written by Haliburton. He reaches his conclusion by a careful examination of all available evidence including two crucial letters from Haliburton to the Abbé Jean-Maudé Segogne and to Judge Peleg Wiswall, respectively dated September 5, 1825 and January 7, 1824; relevant portions are reprinted below. In addition Dr. Chittick makes a textual comparison of a section of the General Description and of Haliburton's later work, A Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia, 1829,⁵ a comparison which reveals that the later text is obviously a development of the earlier.

This should have settled the question. However, in 1934 Staton and Tremaine raised a small voice of doubt in their entry number 1282 in the Bibliography of Canadiana, being items in the Public Library of Toronto, Canada, Relating to the Early History and Development of Canada.⁶ Their annotation of a second edition of 1825 reads:

" The authorship has been ascribed to Walter Bromley, founder of the Royal Acadian School, Halifax. The

work appears to have been written by Haliburton."

They cite Chittick as an authority, but by their use of the word "appears", they slight his authority, and raise a question in the minds of those who consult the entry.

Since that time a number of letters have been added to the Haliburton-Wiswall correspondence, housed in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. These letters, which were not available to Chittick, solve the problem of attribution once and for all, and are interesting in what they reveal of Haliburton and his habit of mind, a decade before he created Sam Slick.

The first letter to Judge Wiswall is written from Annapolis, and is dated December 31, 1823. The portion relating to the General Description reads as follows:

" I gladly turn from this topic to something of a more agreeable nature. When I was last in Digby you were so good as to say you would correspond with me on subjects of general interest to the province. Such an intimation was the more acceptable to me as I intended to have solicited the favor. Want of society here has driven me to seek for sources of amusement at home and it occurred to me that I might find some employment for leisure hours in compiling a history of Nova Scotia. When I was in Halifax last winter I communicated my intention to Bromly, from whom I wanted to ascertain the number of Indians in the province, and told him I had traced an outline of such a work which I should complete as time and materials might enable me.

" He informed me that he had an unemployed press and solicited me to throw some of my materials into the shape of an emigrant's guide and offered to remunerate himself for his labours by the sale. I enclose one of the books of which I beg your acceptance. The hasty manner in which the sudden and inconsiderate alteration of my plan was executed, unavoidably permitted many errors to escape detection until it was too late to think of their correction. I have however steadily advanced with my original undertaking and have got into a state of considerable forwardness. I shall retain the division observed in the pamphlet, but the matter will be differently arranged and remoulded. There are two chapters which I find difficult to complete as I could wish-the 6th and 11th and shall be extremely obliged to you for your observations upon them. Your topographical knowledge of the Province will enable you to furnish much useful and statistical information upon the different townships for Chap. 6th and I know you are intimately acquainted with the politics of the period treated of in the eleventh. Upon

these parts and such other as you feel inclined to add to, I shall receive your remarks and contributions as a very particular personal favor.

" The Pamphlet you will perceive I have not publicly acknowledged as belonging to myself, for I knew its defects to be numerous, and although I feel that I can execute the work I have in hand in a much better manner yet I am sensible I have undertaken a task which is above my abilities, and had it not grown to so large a size I should be tempted to relinquish the undertaking. I hope to finish it in the course of a year or 18 months.

" I suppose you will be of the same opinion with my father, that I might be much better employed at my profession, I think so too, and when I once extricate myself from this scrape my highest flight shall never exceed a decree or plea."

The preceding letter defines the true role of Bromley in the making of what Haliburton terms a pamphlet, and provides us with his excuse for remaining anonymous: he was ashamed of it.

In a second letter from Annapolis, dated January 7, 1824, Haliburton replies to suggestions from Judge Wiswall concerning his new project, and voices at length his regrets about precipitate publication.

" Your suggestion of publishing the work in numbers is one which I ought to have adopted in the first instance. It is possessed of many advantages. As you observe the errors would not then have been beyond recall or conversion [sic] and if the performance attracted criticism much advantage might have been derived even from its enemies. It is also not improbable I might have received contributions of valuable matter from those who know the difficulty of the task and the value of it properly executed - these and many other reasons which might be urged shew at once the advantage, and necessity of that way of appearing before the public - But it is now one year too late to make a second experiment upon our community which is far from being a reading society, and particularly as the new will embrace most of the old work. Whoever is known in this province as the author of any publication must consider that he has voluntarily brought himself to the stake to be baited by the empty barking of some and the stings and bites of others. If he is not known and his work attains to mediocrity it will not be censured for fear that it should be the work of some established

character, nor praised for fear that applause should fall upon an unknown, whom the generality of wits if they have not considered as their inferior are at all events not disposed to place higher than on an exact level with themselves. The price of printing, too, at Halifax is beyond all reason and failure would be ruin - My intention was to go on progressively but steadily till I had finished the entire work, when I should send a correct copy to my friend Franklin in London, and desire him to sell it to a bookseller for the best price he could obtain, if he could not sell it to give it to the printer if he would publish it at his own cost, & if he could not dispose of it to light his pipe with it...

"...I shall as you request consider both our correspondence, and the purport of it strictly confidential. Indeed you are almost the only person, Goldsmith excepted, who knows who the author of the work is, or that I am still employed on the same subject..."

Eleven months later, in a letter dated December 1, 1824, Haliburton gives an account of progress on his new work, and in doing so makes reference to "the old work". It was this reference which led Chittick to make a comparison of texts.

"I have in the old work a chapter entitled 'Sketch of the administration of Sir Geo. Prevost - Dalhousie & Kempt' - I will in pursuance of your suggestion take all of the narrative part of it, which begins in 1807, and, with some alterations make it for a part of the summary, from - 63 to - 24."

In 1825 there appeared in Halifax a "new edition" of the General Description,⁷ "Reprinted for and sold by Clement H. Belcher". Chittick noted that this reprint failed to print revisions noted on the errata slip of the first edition, and this suggested a pirated edition. He was also able to point to a comment in a letter to Abbé Segogne dated September 5, 1825.

"When I was last in town I saw some of your friends there who were making enquiries after your health - the book you saw advertised in the papers, is strange to say, nothing more than a reprinted copy of the old one, which an unprincipled bookseller has pirated from me, thinking [it] no doubt a very clever thing to avail himself of the profits of my labour. I knew nothing of it till I saw it advertised. The second edition which I am preparing will take nearly a year to complete in a way to satisfy myself, as soon as it is printed I will send you a copy."

But Haliburton had already recorded his dissatisfaction with the reprint in a letter to Judge Wiswall dated July 23, 1825, the only letter in which he mentions the name of his first published work.

" You will observe by the Saturdays paper some meddling and impertinent person has taken the liberty to republish the Gen. Description of Nova Scotia not only without my consent but without my knowledge. "

Thus it is clear that Thomas Chandler Haliburton was the author of the General Description of Nova Scotia. This work, scarce in the 1825 edition and of the greatest rarity in the 1823 edition, is the first item in any Haliburton bibliography. Square brackets may be safely removed from all present and future catalogues and bibliographies.

Bibliography

1. Haliburton, Thomas Chandler. A general description of Nova Scotia. Illustrated by a new and correct map. Halifax, N.S., Printed at the Royal Acadian School, 1823.
2. Morgan, Henry J. Bibliotheca Canadensis; or, a Manual of Canadian literature. Ottawa, Printed by G. E. Desbarats, 1867.
3. Haliburton; a centenary chaplet. With a bibliography by John Parker Anderson. Windsor, N.S., Published for The Haliburton Club; Toronto, William Briggs, 1897.
4. Chittick, Victor L. O. Thomas Chandler Haliburton ("Sam Slick"); a study in provincial toryism. New York, Columbia University Press, 1924.
5. Haliburton, Thomas Chandler. A historical and descriptive account of Nova Scotia, in two volumes. Illustrated by a map of the province, and several engravings. Halifax, Published for Joseph Howe, and sold by C.H. Belcher; Robert Scholey, London; and Oliver E. Boyd, Edinburgh, 1829.
6. Staton, Frances M., and Tremaine, Marie. A Bibliography of Canadiana; being items in the Public Library of Toronto, Canada, relating to the early history and development of Canada. Toronto, The Public Library, 1934.
7. Haliburton, Thomas Chandler. A general description of Nova Scotia. Illustrated by a new and correct map. A new edition. Halifax, Reprinted for and Sold by Clement H. Belcher, 1825.

Basil Stuart-Stubbs