

HALIBURTON'S CANADA

Tom Marshall

The explorers, those who walk
in a waste place
unceasingly.
These we celebrate.

The squire, a cultivated
Sancho Panza, itinerant in judgement.
Sam Slick, his alter ego
(we also are Americans)
pushing clocks on the timeless.¹

THE FIRST VERY MEMORABLE character in Canadian literature is a stage-American, his creator an ardent Tory imperialist who went "home" to die in the British House of Commons. He wrote of the "white nigger" more than a hundred years before Norman Mailer and Pierre Vallières.

Thomas Chandler Haliburton was of both loyalist and pre-loyalist stock. He belonged from birth to the Family Compact, and he opposed the efforts of his friend Joseph Howe to obtain responsible government for Nova Scotia, but he had a sense of social justice as well. He was for the removal of the disabilities preventing Roman Catholics from holding office, for common school education at state expense, and against the cruelty of the farming out of paupers (whom Samuel Slick aptly termed "white niggers").

With Howe, he desired a railway from Halifax to Windsor as one means of stimulating industry among the Bluenoses. He was a local patriot as well as an imperialist, exhibiting the "dual allegiance" that, in one form or another, has characterized most Canadian writers. In 1829 he left the Legislative Assembly, and that same year published his *Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia*.

Thereafter he became a judge of the colony's Supreme Court.²

The first Sam Slick sketch appeared in Howe's newspaper *The Novascotian* in 1835. Sam was designed to reach a larger audience than Haliburton's history had done. The purpose was propaganda:

It occurred to me that it would be advisable to resort to a more popular style, and, under the garb of amusement, to call attention to our noble harbours, our great mineral wealth, our healthy climate, our abundant fisheries, and our natural resources and advantages, arising from our relative position to the St. Lawrence, the West Indies, and the United States, and resulting from the circumstances of this country being the nearest point of the American continent to Europe. I was also anxious to stimulate my countrymen to exertion, to direct their attention to the development of these resources, and to works of internal improvement, especially to that great work which I hope I shall live to see completed, the rail road from Halifax to Windsor, to awaken ambition and substitute it for that stimulus which is furnished in other but poorer countries than our own by necessity. For this purpose I called in the aid of the Clockmaker.³

Sam was intended to demonstrate both the undesirable and the desirable qualities of the Yankee in order to make the Nova Scotians rouse themselves from their lethargy for long enough to institute certain material reforms. The result is a series of sketches, each with moral appended, an approximation of picaresque. As in *Don Quixote*, and in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* later on, a pair of contrasted heroes is presented for our inspection. Each embodies an aspect of his creator and makes an appeal to something in the intended audience.

The squire, tolerant, relaxed and rea-

sonable, is akin to Haliburton himself. He epitomizes British virtues. Sam Slick, as many have observed, is a type of the Yankee pedlar, braggart and con-man. Naïve and cunning at the same time, he has the exaggerated self-confidence and childlike chauvinism that the British attributed to the Americans:

'I allot you had ought to visit our great country, Squire,' said the Clockmaker, 'afore you quit for good and all. I calculate you don't understand us. The most splendid location atween the poles is the United States, and the first man alive is General Jackson, the hero of the age, him that's skered the British out of their seven senses. Then there's the great Daniel Webster; its generally allowed he's the greatest orator on the face of the airth, by a long chalk; and Mr. Van Buren, and Mr. Clay, and Amos Kindle, and Judge White, and a whole raft of statesmen, up to everything and all manner of politics; there ain't the beat of 'em to be found anywhere. If you was to hear 'em I consait you'd hear genuine pure English for once, anyhow; for it's generally allowed we speak English better than the British. They all know me to be an American citizen here, by my talk, for we speak it complete in New England.

Sam is as charming or as obnoxious as Muhammed Ali.

He has, as one would expect, a firm belief in manifest destiny:

The Nova Scotians must recede before our free and enlightened citizens, like the Indians; our folks will buy them out, and they must give place to a more intelligent and *active* people. They must go to the lands of Labrador, or be located back of Canada; they can hold on there a few years, until the wave of civilization reaches them, and then they must move again as the savages do. It is decreed; I hear the bugle of destiny a-soundin' of their retreat, as plain as anything. Congress will give them a concession of land, if they petition, away to Alleghany's backside territory, and grant them relief for a few years; for we are out of debt, and don't know what to do with our surplus revenue.

Here is the American attitude to other cultures and peoples (and, by implica-

tion, to the natural environment) perceived and expressed as plainly as by any Canadian nationalist of the 1970's. And yet, paradoxically, Sam is assigned the task of telling the Nova Scotians what is wrong with them. His own deficiencies of moral and spiritual insight do not invalidate his criticisms.

Slick combines the dialect and characteristics of the New Englander with those of the western American folk-hero: the rustic superman; Davy Crockett; Daniel Boone. He is a Canadian parody of the American folk-hero, the teller of "tall-tales" about Paul Bunyan and others. As John Matthews has observed, the invention of Sam involves the harnessing of the Yankee love of the "smart" con-man to a moral purpose.⁴

If Sam is intended, as he is, to represent a social barbarism, then why is he made so attractive, so charming? How is it he can be so acute in his criticism of the Bluenoses? What is Haliburton's attitude to him?

The answer to such questions is known instinctively to sensitive Canadians, so much so that we do not normally bother to ask them. We live quite naturally with a kind of doublethink about America and Americans. It is a truism that we are appalled at many things American, and yet cannot help but admire American inventiveness and energy. Envy, admiration, amusement, disapproval, even horror — these are the mixed feelings aroused by the antics of our close kinsfolk to the south. To deny our cultural kinship with them, and our necessarily very ambivalent feelings about the United States, however, is to distort the essential (and continuing) task of defining our very real differences. It is hypocrisy not to admit that there is an "American" within us all.

The learned and respectable judge Haliburton was also a man of the new world. A questioner once received from him this reply: "I am Sam Slick, says I,

at least what is left of me.”⁵ He had roots in New England as well as old England. He is reported to have had a strong streak of coarseness in his nature, loving bawdy jokes and the company of “hostlers and fishermen rank with the obscenities of the stable and the dory.”⁶ He loved the tap-room and excelled in the art of telling unprintable stories. He seems to have been (not altogether unlike Al Purdy) an interesting mixture of roistering good fellow, on the one hand, and scholar and gentleman on the other, i.e. the squire and pedlar combined. The two heroes reflect two aspects of his character, and *The Clockmaker* itself expresses the “Canadian tension” between the ways of old world and new.

Haliburton deploras American social disorder, and predicts the civil war. But he also supplies Sam with a speech attacking the conceit and condescension of

the Englishman visiting North America: “He swells out as big as a balloon; his skin is ready to burst with wind — a regular walking bag of gas . . .” As for the Nova Scotians, they are described as “a cross of English and Yankee, and therefore first cousins to us both.” Their country is “like this night; beautiful to look at, but silent as the grave—still as death, asleep, becalmed.” The unrealized nature of the place and people (here confused, as if they had achieved a union) is seen in terms of “a long heavy swell, like the breathin’ of the chist of some great monster asleep”. The image of the sleeping giant, who embodies our sense of space, of which more later, was always appropriate. In their refusal to confront or engage this myserious space, the people condemn themselves to a species of paralysis that mirrors the land’s apparent emptiness.

The Americans, of course, have con-

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fronted the wilderness, but in a fashion so aggressive and destructive that we should be reluctant to emulate it. Slick is moved to observe that Nova Scotia is a happy backwater — in fact, “one of the happiest sections of all America” — but he feels that it could be one of the richest as well if the Bluenoses would abandon political agitation between reformers and Tories in order to concentrate on the development of natural resources. It would, I suppose, be smug of us (with our jaundiced hindsight) to ask whether Haliburton mightn't have been aware of the eventual problems and excesses of growth, of pushing clocks on the timeless. That is asking too much of a man of his time (unless he be Malthus). Sam's job was to teach the Bluenoses “the value of time.” They were not supposed to acquire any of the less desirable American characteristics in the process.

Haliburton's politics are pragmatic. The reformers are characterized as misinformed and overcome with passion, and Haliburton's own Tories are not spared, since Sam warns them of “the prejudices of birth and education” and remarks shrewdly that “power has a natural tendency to corpulency”.

In all of this one can see the ability to see two or more sides to every question, a pragmatic rather than a reactionary conservatism, an ability to live with uncertainties and antagonistic philosophies, an awareness of shifting perspectives. This is “Canadian”. On the subject of systems of government Haliburton's mouthpiece Mr. Hopewell opines:

‘When I look at the English House of Lords . . . and see so much larning, piety, talent, honour, vartue, and refinement collected together, I ax myself this here question: Can a system which produces and sustains such a body of men as the world never saw before and never will see ag'in, be defective? Well, I answer myself, perhaps it is, for all human institutions are so, but I guess it's e'en about the best arter all. It wouldn't

do here now, Sam, nor perhaps for a century to come; but it will come sooner or later with some variations. Now the Newtown pippin, when transplanted to England, don't produce such fruit as it does in Long Island, and English fruits don't preserve their flavour here neither; allowance must be made for difference of soil and climate . . . So it is . . . with constitutions; our'n will gradually approximate to their'n, and their'n to our'n. As they lose their strength of executive, they will varge to republicanism, and as we invigorate the form of government (as we must do, or go to the old boy), we shall tend towards a monarchy. If this comes on gradually, like the changes in the human body, by the slow approach of old age, so much the better; but I fear we shall have fevers and convulsion-fits, and colics, and an everlastin' gripin' of the intestines first; you and I won't live to see it, Sam, but our posteriors will, you may depend'.

Hopewell is an American clergyman, but surely he suggests here what Haliburton wants for Nova Scotia, i.e. a British system of government well adapted to North American conditions. This is the practical Canadian via media. Ironically, here is also an accurate prophecy of the American monarchical presidency.

Few (if any) of my observations here are very original, but my purpose is to suggest a situation and a pattern that persists in later Canadian writing. I am not aware that this pattern has ever been very fully examined as it emerges from the styles, textures and formal structures of our major works of literature. One finds in Haliburton's comedy a certain ambivalence; the things Canadian, American and British that he criticizes are inside him as well as outside him; one senses divided loyalties, ironic undertones. Similar but more complex and subtly developed ambivalences may be observed in the best humorous or satirical work of Leacock, Klein, Purdy, Mordecai Richler, Robertson Davies and Leonard Cohen.

Personally, I find *The Clockmaker* just a bit tedious as reading-matter, but it is the first notable attempt to articulate

Canada, and therefore a good place to begin.

NOTES

- ¹ Tom Marshall, "Macdonald Park", *The Silences of Fire* (Toronto, 1969).
- ² Greater detail about Haliburton's life and career up to his departure for England in 1856 may be found in Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada* (Toronto, 1952) and Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* (Toronto, 1965), which contains an excellent essay by Fred Cogswell.

- ³ V. L. O. Chittick, *Thomas Chandler Haliburton ("Sam Slick"), A Study in Provincial Toryism* (New York, 1924), p. 179.
- ⁴ John Matthews, *Tradition in Exile* (Toronto, 1962). For more about Sam and his place in an American tradition, see Chittick's "The Hybrid Comic" (*Canadian Literature* no. 14).
- ⁵ Chittick, *Thomas Chandler Haliburton*, p. 342.
- ⁶ Ray Palmer Baker, "Introduction to *The Clockmaker*" (New York, 1927). I am indebted to Mr. Baker for his expression of the idea that Sam and the Squire represent two aspects of Judge Haliburton.

THOMAS MCCULLOCH

Marjorie Whitelaw

IN A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE appended to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Stepsure Letters* (the only item of Thomas McCulloch's writings easily available today and now generally held to be the first work of Canadian satirical humour), there is a comment by John A. Irving that McCulloch is one of the least known of the great nineteenth-century Canadians. This is still true, though since that 1960 issue of *Stepsure* there seems to have been a growing appreciation of McCulloch and his achievements and an apparent wish to have more understanding of the man behind the work.

A copy of the one portrait of McCulloch known to exist hangs in the old high school of Pictou, his former home. It shows a very Scottish face — large nose, long upper lip, straight determined mouth, steady eyes. In many a minister of the day such features would add up to an expression of stern spiritual purpose, but McCulloch's gaze is steadfast rather than stern. The expression is open, fully-developed, as indeed many Scots faces

are, with nothing closed-in or parsimonious to its emotional range. The mouth quivers on the edge of laughter. Underneath the portrait is his name, and the words: "Child of Scottish Heart and Mind."

When I first looked at the face and read that brief and perhaps romantic phrase, I had a sudden impression of a powerfully attractive and interesting character. That early impression has not altered — in spite of the revelation of strong and not always sympathetic Presbyterian overtones to McCulloch's career — and for me he continues to project the essence of the true Scots intellectual, in whom the heart is partner to the mind.

McCulloch's writings, which were voluminous, grew almost entirely out of the circumstances of his life and his work. Except for *Stepsure*, the writings are almost unknown today, but the life and work are well known enough.

He arrived in Pictou from Scotland in 1803, en route for Prince Edward Island — a married man of twenty-seven with a wife and small family. He had been, as