

THE HYBRID COMIC

Origins of Sam Slick

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THE SPEECH of Haliburton's clockmaker, Sam Slick, far from being the "genuine Yankee" it has often been held to be, is as palpably synthetic as his person. Not that Haliburton could not have heard the real thing spoken in his native environment. His forebears on the parental side, with whom he lived in close contact, were "tolerable pure" New Englanders, "about one half apple sauce, and t'other half molasses". Since they came, however, from what Haliburton termed "the gentry" class in contrast to "the mob" in their pre-Revolutionary homeland, it is doubtful if much more than an occasional Yankee phrase was heard in even their most intimate family circle, though their ears were surely well attuned to the idiom of "down East" country folk. But that Haliburton himself had plentiful opportunity to listen to that type of drawling loquacity we know from his account in *The Old Judge* of the annual spring-time arrival on the South Shore of Nova Scotia of a miscellaneous assortment of itinerant Yankees, including, besides circus performers and crews, quacks, and promoters, pedlars with their usual stocks of "notions". And he could also have listened to it closer to home, in the talk of the sailors on board the Yankee "hookers", that were often obliged to lay-up at Windsor just across the street from the house where he was born, while awaiting their turn to sail up-stream to take on their loads of "plaister" from the still-worked quarries along the St. Croix river.

The subjects toward which the moral of Sam Slick's long-winded yarnings was most persistently pointed Haliburton found readily at hand and everywhere about him. These were, in his earlier satirical-humorous works, the rising tide of

colonial complaint against the unrepresentative form of government in Nova Scotia and the poverty-stricken condition of the shiftless Jack-of-all-trades Bluenoses, as he depicted them, who habitually voiced that complaint. His later works, the provincial government having been reformed, were confined chiefly to the second of these topics. (During his middle period he departed from this pattern to consider current affairs in both the United States and Great Britain.) In presenting the more steadily recurring half of his double theme of what he vigorously maintained were the ruinous faults of the "lower orders" among his fellow colonists, Haliburton had a distinguished predecessor who could, and did, show him a gentler, though unheeded, way of correcting those faults. This was the Rev. Dr. Thomas McCulloch in his series of *Stepsure Letters*, contributed to the *Halifax Acadian Recorder* intermittently from 1821 to 1823. McCulloch, like Haliburton, employed for his principal spokesman — the biblically named cripple Mephibosheth — a comic dialect. But it was a dialect common in Nova Scotia, not a pretended imitation of one spoken by transient visitors there. Haliburton's choice of a clock-peddling Yankee, with a well-established reputation for long-headed "cuteness" in driving a bargain, to lampoon the down-in-the-mouth, out-at-heels Bluenoses into some awareness of the ridiculous figure they cut by always blaming everyone but themselves for their economic plight was a stroke of genius. Yet it can hardly be regarded as original.

Sam Slick, save for his clockmaking skills, was obviously modelled closely after Jack Downing, the creation of a State of Maine journalist, Seba Smith. Jack Downing made his first appearance in print as a gawky-looking country bumpkin sent into town to peddle a load of farmer's wooden by-products, axe-handles, hoop-poles, and the like. After proving himself no fool in a trade, he wandered into the locally sited legislative halls, and observing the amazing amount of political stupidity being enacted there, wrote a letter about it to the folks "back home." It was by means of this letter that Smith, early in 1830, undertook to regale the readers of his newspaper, the *Portland Daily Courier*, who by then had become completely disgusted with their lawmakers' indifference to civic welfare. Its success was instantaneous. All Portland laughed, and clamoured to be still further diverted. Other letters followed in response to this demand. As they increased in number their fame spread.

Jack Downing's social status heightened with his reputation. Commissioned in turn captain and major in the Downingville militia, he was sent to the disputed territory between Maine and New Brunswick to report on the progress (and futility) of events there. Later he became the private adviser of President Jackson,

and in that capacity accompanied the Chief Executive on his once much chronicled hand-shaking tour "up North." By that time in spite, or because, of his creator's using him to ridicule the Jacksonian administration, he had attained a truly national celebrity, and shortly afterward his popularity having led to an unwarranted reprinting of his opinions, his *Life and Writings* was issued as a protection against the altogether too complimentary circulation of Smith's uncopyrighted "down East" wisdom. To quote the publishers' Preface to the second edition of this work, the letters of Jack Downing "were copied into every paper all over the land, and his name was in everybody's mouth. Next to General Jackson he was decidedly the most popular man in the United States."

Imitations of the original Jack Downing letters appear to have been legion. Most conspicuous among these spurious communications, and rivalling if not equalling the successes of the genuine, were those contributed by Charles A. Davis, a New York iron and steel merchant, to the New York *Daily Advertiser* during 1833-34, and in the latter year collected and published under the title of *Letters of J. Downing, Major, Downingville Militia*. While in Attic cleverness they were but slightly inferior to their prototypes, the undoubted favour which these simulated epistles of a secondary Jack Downing enjoyed was perhaps as much due to lucky accident as to merit. Living where he did, Davis found it possible to get his satires on the passing parade of political and other events of interest before the metropolitan public several days in advance of those of his State of Maine inspirer, with which they seem to have been indiscriminately confused and praised. But though both Smith and his publishers protested with much resentment against the unfair use of the name "Downing" by others, it had no discernible effect in checking the outpouring of Davis's "rascally conterfeits".

With two streams of this distinctly new brand of Yankee humour thus combined in full flood, not to mention the countless trickles from various unknown sources helping to swell the tide, it is no wonder that the merry torrent of literary production emanating from "Downingville" suddenly broke through its former bounds and overflowed from the United States into the British American colonies and Great Britain, and that as a consequence from 1833 on Jack Downing letters were copied and read in both these countries with as much avidity as in the land of their origin.

HALIBURTON'S OBLIGATIONS to the epistolary humours of the Jack Downing vogue constitute the most obvious of his literary indebtednesses. However consistently ignored in recent years, they were well enough known among his contemporaries to be freely and frequently made the subject of comment. Moreover there is evidence to show that not only was Haliburton not unfamiliar to his fellow Nova Scotians as "the Jack Downing of British America," but that he was also commonly believed to have endeavoured to become such. And he himself, though perhaps with quite other intentions, pointed pretty clearly to the most likely source of a much favoured part of his Yankee entertainment, when at the testimonial dinner ostensibly given him by his Haligonian admirers in 1838 as the Historian of Nova Scotia (but in actuality a vain attempt to stem the raging torrent of local newspaper abuse directed against him for his indiscreet attacks on Lord Durham, the vice-regal advocate of reform in colonial government) he responded to the toast to Sam Slick by proposing one to "J. Davies, Esq., the author of Major Jack Downing," who, he explained, was a "friend" of Sam Slick's that the Americans were "considerable proud of," "most popular in England," and "highly esteemed in the colonies". Whether this seemingly generous reference to "J. Davies" may be interpreted as an acknowledgment of his dependence for either inspiration or material in the shaping of Sam Slick upon any or none of the numerous exponents of the Downingsque style in humorous composition, the fact remains, as the publishers of *Jack Downing's Letters* remarked, that "had Major Downing never written the public would never have heard of Sam Slick." And, in spite of his apparently meaning to pay tribute to Charles A. Davies when he named the otherwise unidentifiable "J. Davies", it is not to the skilful copyist but to the true originator of Jack Downing that Haliburton owed his chief debt in creating Sam Slick.

From Seba Smith, in the first place, came the suggestion of a "live" Yankee among the Bluenoses, imparting for their guidance much needed advice in politics and still more useful concerns, just as Jack Downing was doing for his state and nation. It was from Seba Smith also that many of the comic devices employed by Haliburton for the amusement of his readers in the *Clockmaker* series were derived. Jack Downing's father, for instance, never wearies of telling over and over his Revolutionary War experiences at the "fatigue of Burgwine," while the elder Slick never tires of recounting his exploits at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Jack Downing attempts to trace his ancestry from Sir George Downing of England, and Sam Slick's father visits England for the express purpose of proving his

descent from the "Airl" of Tunbridge. Jack Downing indulges in the hope of getting an opportunity to "flog the whole British nation," and Sam Slick cherishes no illusions about a good American's ability to "lick" his full share, if not more, of that "consaited" people. Both Yankees aspire to the Presidency of the United States, and both raise themselves to positions that justify that ambition, Jack Downing becoming the confidant of General Jackson, and Sam Slick accepting the appointment of "attachy" to the American minister at London. Again from Seba Smith there were often extracted the various stray items of information which Haliburton called into requisition in his discussions of, or allusions to, such definitely American topics as the threat of nullification, the expected failure of the United States Bank, the political aspirations and oratorical eloquence of Daniel Webster, the terrors of May Day moving in New York City, and the conditions prevalent among the manufactories and factory "gals" "to Lowell."

Had Haliburton followed Seba Smith in the art of transcribing the Yankee dialect, the hearing of which, as we have seen, must have been a happening of almost every day occurrence in Nova Scotia, as carefully as he did in these other respects, it would have been the better for Sam Slick's credibility, for Smith had an undoubtedly well-deserved reputation for fidelity to the speech of his "down East" countrymen, and depended upon his genuine Yankee wit rather than on ludicrous misspellings to provoke the smiles of his readers. Unfortunately from the point of view of realism, Haliburton, who was prone to laying his colours on thickly, chose the easier method of caricature and grotesqueness, and fashioned his recording of Sam Slick's language, in so far as it was tolerable Yankee at all, upon what he presumably found in the Jack Downing letters of Charles A. Davis, who to a much greater degree than Smith resorted to perversions and distortions of New England pronunciation in pursuit of his comic effects. Apart from this probable borrowing of some slight share of his dialect humours, Haliburton seems to have been beholden to Davis for practically nothing.

Haliburton's ill-assimilated borrowings give substance to the angry rejection by Professor (later President) C. C. Felton of Harvard of Sam Slick as a passably representative Yankee. Felton, to be sure, was prejudiced against Haliburton for mercilessly exposing the hollowness of the far-famed omniscient sounding rhetoric of Edward Everett, the American ambassador at the Court of St. James (and Felton's friend) as that of the "Sockdolager" in *The Attaché*. Still, angry though he was, he had too high a reputation as a discerning critic of Yankee mannerisms to warrant one's brushing aside his opinions regarding their genuineness. Nevertheless he went on to admit that Sam Slick was "widely circulated" and

“praised” in the United States. James Russell Lowell, than whom there was then no better authority on New England characterization, stated in the Introduction to his *Biglow Papers* that he “had always thought ‘Sam Slick’ a libel on Yankee character, and a complete falsification of Yankee modes of speech.” And G. W. Curtis in one of his “Easy Chair” essays placed Sam Slick in the category of “extravaganzas and caricature” of American character-types “seen without imagination and drawn without skill”.

ODDLY ENOUGH, none of these repudiators of Sam Slick’s authenticity puts a finger on the one ingredient in his make-up that most emphatically proclaims him as no true Yankee. This was the ever recurrent intrusion into his speech of the western “ring-tailed roarer’s” lusty idiom. The archtypical roarer was, of course, Davy Crockett, whether actual or mythical. (Given time, Davy was both.) The ring-tailed “half horse, half alligator” Kentucky river-man brawler when genuine would rather fight than eat; when spurious he merely boasted that he would. Both sorts announced themselves as ready for a fistic (or any other kind of rough-and-tumble) encounter by going through a ritual of neighing like a stallion, or crowing like a rooster, and flapping their “wings.” The roarers’ bravado, too, often fell into the ritualistic mode. Mock or real dire threats of bodily injury and vaunts of physical prowess were phrased to terminate in some variant of the formula “I hope I may be shot [or meet with an equally horrendous fate] if I don’t [or if I can’t] . . .” Crockett made his initial entry into extended print in the anonymous and partly apocryphal *Sketches and Eccentricities* of 1833, and his next in the *Narrative* of his life, allegedly written by himself, 1834. (Whoever wrote the former almost certainly wrote the latter, in each case with the help of a “ghost”.) Within a year of the publication of these books, Haliburton in Nova Scotia was familiar with the first, and perhaps with both, and was drawing upon their common store of Crockett yarns and jests before the serialization of Sam Slick’s soon to be famous “Sayings and Doings” was more than barely begun.

From the first *Clockmaker* on through *The Season-Ticket* the trail of Crockett’s influence can be plainly traced in every one of Haliburton’s humorous works, with the exception of *The Letter-Bag*. No later than the third chapter of the

earliest *Clockmaker* Sam Slick refers to “Col. Crockett as the greatest hand at a flam in our nation.” Davy’s valediction to his constituents after they had failed to return him to Congress, concluding with “You may all go to Hell, and I’ll go to Texas,” is summarized and praised in *The Attaché*. His insistent motto “Go ahead” is urged by Sam Slick on anyone who will listen to him, no fewer than sixteen times each in three of his creator’s volumes. Davy’s addiction to stump oratory, or to “speakin’ off a whiskey barrel,” is recalled in two of Sam Slick’s allusions to “politickin’,” and once he reminds his hearers that Davy was as physically formidable as he was forensically eloquent. “Lord bless you,” he said, while bragging of how “we [Americans] licked the British when we had only three millions of people,” “we have fellows like Crockett that would sneeze a man-of-war right out of the water.”

Of Sam Slick’s employment of the ring-tailed roarers’ boast formula the instances are innumerable. (The unexplained referents in the following examples are of no significance in the present context.) “I’ll teach him the road to good manners) if he can save eyesight to see it — hang me if I don’t.” “I’ll put you on trial so sure as you are born; I hope I may be skinned alive by wild cats if I don’t.” “I am a pickaxe, and will dig you out of your hole like a badger, I hope I may be gouged, if I don’t.” And, slightly varied, “If they had dared to venture that sort of work in Old Hickory’s time, I hope I may be skinned alive . . . if he wouldn’t have blowed every cursed craft they have clean out of the water.” “I hope I may be darned to all darnation, if I would n’t chaw up your ugly mummified corpse, hair, hide, and hoofs this blessed minute as quick as I would mother’s dough nuts.” Sam Slick himself was once called a “very ring-tail roarer . . . a regular sneezer.” Though he denied the charge as spoken ironically, he was capable to asseverating on his own: “We can out-talk thunder, out-run a flash of lightning, and out-reach all the world — we can whip our weight in wild cats.” And in the third *Clockmaker* he introduced a full-scale specimen of the roaring breed (though a phony one), symbolically labelled Lucifer Wolfe, bragging “. . . you will find me just a leetle the ugliest colt you ever undertook to brake [*sic*], there is no back out in me, for I’m a snappin’ turtle, so you’ll fight or play, that’s a fact, and no two ways about it, so take your choice, for I feel intirely wolfish and savagerous, and have half a mind to give you a tickler [bowie knife] in the ribs that will make you feel monstrous amiable, and set you a considerin’, I tell you.” To that extended display of ill-natured belligerency Sam Slick’s tongue-in-the-cheek comment was, “Only thinkin’ of fightin’ such a ring-tail roarer as that, nearly broke two of my ribs short off.”

Eventually Sam Slick, as might be predicted from what we have seen of his evolution, or rather of the multiple changes in his line of talk, approached the standing of a fully accepted “out West” folk-hero. Witness the broadside *Sam Slick, the Yankee Pedlar*, hawked about the streets of London in the early 1860s, its verse, sung to the tune of “Yankee Doodle,” alternating with spoken prose passages. Two brief excerpts from the latter will serve to illustrate its special quality:

. . . Now look at me. I’m cast iron all over, and pieced with rock. One of my blows is either sudden death, or long sickness. If I was to hit a fellow it would knock him into mortal smash, and it ’ud take about eternity to pick up all the pieces — it would, I reckon! We Yankees are a tarnation ‘cute race; we make a fortune with the right hand, and lose it with the left. I’m half fire, half love, and a little touch of the thunderbolt! . . . I — Sam Slick the Yankee Pedlar — can ride on a flash of lightning and catch a thunderbolt in my fist. I’ve the prettiest sister and the best shooting rifle in all Virginia. I’m the most glorious, original, and never-to-be-forgotten, smash-biler-bu’sting, free and enlightened nigger-whipping Pedlar as ever was raised, and no soft-sawder. So, go-ahead.

A comparison of these samplings with two fragments of Davy Crockett “flyting” at his ring-tailed best shows how closely the popular version of Sam Slick merged with its exemplar:

I’m that same David Crockett, fresh from the backwoods, half horse, half alligator, a little touched with the snapping-turtle; can . . . ride upon a streak of lightning and slip without a scratch down a honey locust; can whip my weight in wild cats, . . . hug a bear too close for comfort, and eat any man opposed to Jackson. . . .

Ain’t I the yaller flower of the forest? And I am all brimstone but the head and ears, and that’s aqua-fortis. . . . [Now] you know what I’m made of. I’ve got the closest shootin’ rifle, the best coon dog, the biggest ticlur, and the ruffest racking horse in the district. I can kill more lickur, fool more varmints, and cool out more men than any man you can find in all Kentucky.

Sam Slick, as Haliburton said of him, was indeed “quite a character.” But even so, and long before the folk took him over, his manner of speaking clearly reveals that he was no genuine, “down East”, Yankee comic.