A COLONIAL ROMANTIC

MAJOR JOHN RICHARDSON, SOLDIER AND NOVELIST

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PART II: RETURN TO AMERICA

THE JOHN RICHARDSON who returned to Canada in February, 1838, was a vastly different being from the ambitious young ensign who had set sail for Europe in 1815. He was now almost forty-two years old, a major, a holder of a decoration from the Spanish queen, an acquaintance of almost all the literary men of London, and a successful novelist. Although his successes had been by no means unmixed with failures, he had some reason for pride in his achievements, and a substantial basis for the expectation that he would be received in his native country with respect if not with deference.

Once again, then, he set forth with high hopes. He had secured a commission from the London *Times* to act as their Canadian correspondent at a salary of £300 a year, and he had furnished himself with a letter of introduction to Sir Francis Bond Head from the Secretary of Colonies, Lord Glenelg.[1] His dream was to secure an influential public position in his native country. Like all his dreams, it was destined to frustration — frustration which was in large part brought about by his own tactless pugnacity.

The first disappointment came in New York, where he found Bond Head *en route* for England. The returning governor, obviously in a state of nervous agitation, said curtly that he could do nothing about the letter

[1] *Eight Years in Canada* (Montreal, 1848). p. 6.

from Lord Glenelg recommending Richardson for an official appointment, and handed it back with the suggestion that Richardson try it on Sir George Arthur. Thus Richardson received the first of many rebuffs from Canadian governors, a succession of whom, for the next ten years, he was to bombard with requests for official posts and pensions.

Proceeding by coach and steamer to Canada, Richardson paid a brief visit to his native Queenston, went on to Toronto, Montreal, and eventually to Quebec where he met the newly arrived Lord Durham. The meeting was a fateful one for Richardson. The two men, similarly haughty and impetuous, were mutually attracted, and Richardson, who had hitherto held the most reactionary views about the Canadian situation, was temporarily converted to the more progressive ideas of Durham. Richardson's first two despatches to the *Times* had been correctly conservative, but now he began sending despatches which favoured Durham and Durham's proposals. Naively, he expressed the hope that the editor of the Thunderer would accept his information as the work of an honest reporter: "I know your object is to obtain facts, and that if in the attempt to elucidate these I should occasionally clash with your own views on the subject, I shall at least have the credit of sincerity and impartiality."[2] The editor gave ample warning of his disapproval by appending a note to the dispatch, stating: "The writer of these letters is an occasional correspondent: it will be seen that he is a sort of partisan of Lord Durham." No more of Richardson's dispatches were printed, and his appointment as correspondent was cancelled. When he informed Durham of this, the latter wrote to Richardson on October 18, 1838 as follows:

> It is indeed most disgusting to see such proof of malignity in those who ought to value truth and fair dealing as the best means of informing the public, of which they profess to be the best possible instructors.
>
> Your course has been that of a man of honour and integrity, and you can hardly regret the dissolution of a connexion which it appears could only have been preserved by the sacrifice on your part of truth and justice — by the *suppressio veri,* if not the *assertio falsi.*[3]

Such praise was a salve to Richardson's injured dignity, but he needed more tangible help. Now that he had lost his position with the *Times,* he was desperately in need of an alternative source of income. He hoped,

[2] *The Times,* "Lord Durham's Administration", Tuesday, Sept. 18, 1838, p. 5.

[3] This letter appears as Appendix 8 of *Eight Years in Canada.*

of course, that Lord Durham would find a means of rewarding his services, and Durham did indeed, through his secretary Charles Buller, promise to do what he could. But Durham's sudden resignation, illness, and early death put an end to these hopes, and Richardson had to begin anew, at the age of forty-two, the task of building a career. For the next seven years, as letters in the Public Archives of Canada testify, he made repeated overtures and petitions to successive governors, begging that his services to Canada as writer and soldier be recompensed by an official appointment or a pension.

The most elaborate of these petitions was addressed to Lord Sydenham on July 20, 1841. Never one to affect a modesty he did not feel, Richardson began by asserting that: "Your Excellency's Petitioner is generally known and acknowledged as the only Author this country has produced, or who has attempted to infuse into it a spirit of literature."[4] He went on to detail his literary activities, his military services, and the services rendered by members of his family, and ended by requesting that he be granted a pension from the Civil List. On this long and beautifully written petition, we can still read Sydenham's hastily scribbled note: "Reply. There are no funds for such a purpose." Such was to be the melancholy fate of all Richardson's petitions until 1845.

Meanwhile, Richardson sought to make a living in his native country by the exercise of his pen. In the fall of 1838, after his dismissal from the *Times,* he remained in Montreal to see his *Personal Memoirs* of the war in Spain through the press. He is also said to have written a pamphlet, the only surviving copy of which is housed in the library of McGill University, entitled *Sketch of the late Battle of the Wind Mill near Prescott.* An unsigned pencilled note on the title page of this pamphlet states, "This was written by Major Richardson who edited the few numbers of the Prescott, Ont. Sentinel which were printed." He also, in characteristic fashion, became involved in a quarrel with some officers of the Grenadier Guards, issued at least five challenges to duels, and was "posted" by the Guards for alleged cowardice when he refused to accept a challenge because the messenger was not, in his opinion, a gentleman.[5]

[4] Public Archives Mgg. G 20, Vol. 4, No. 415.

[5] For an account of this affair see the column "All Our Yesterdays" by A. E. Collard, Montreal *Gazette,* November 12, 1955. For Richardson's version, see his *The Guards in Canada*; or *The Point of Honor* (Montreal, 1848).

Perhaps because Montreal was too uncomfortable for him as a result of such feuds, Richardson went to Amherstburg early in 1839, hoping to settle in the town where so much of his boyhood had been spent. Unable to find a house in Amherstburg, he rented one in nearby Sandwich, and there he completed his third novel, *The Canadian Brothers,* a lively and patriotic tale of the War of 1812. He returned to Montreal early in 1840 to see this book through the press, and after a few weeks there set out for Sandwich driving a new sleigh and a team of spirited black horses. In typical fashion, he had neglected to consider that the sleighing season was almost over, and when he reached the town of Brockville he was stranded by lack of snow. While making arrangements there for a carriage, he saw a large house and extensive grounds which took his fancy, and impulsively bought this "Rock Cottage" at twice its market value. Presumably to meet this payment, he sold his commission in the British Army during the early summer.

At first Richardson found Brockville a dull and dispiriting place; moreover his pugnacious temperament soon got him into trouble with the local inhabitants. He became involved in a quarrel with a certain Colonel Williams at a private card party, and when Williams alluded to Richardson's alleged cowardice in the affair of honour in Montreal, Richardson displayed placards throughout the town accusing Williams of slander; another duel was narrowly averted.[6] He also objected bitterly to the habit of the male youths of the town of bathing in the nude near his house. In a long tirade in the August 19, 1842 issue of his paper, *The New Era,* Richardson lashed such offenders:

> "There is an unblushing depravity, a shameless immorality, among a certain class of beings in Brockville, such as we never knew to be equalled in any town in Europe . . . . We shall make it a point to take down the names of all persons found bathing within view of our premises, after sunrise, whether in or out of the limits, and this list we shall submit to the magistrates at the next Session".

This attack was contained in the final issue of *The New Era;* the first issue had appeared in June, 1841. He wrote and printed the paper himself, using a press he had specially imported from New York for the purpose. He commented on Canadian and foreign news, ran as serials his

[6] See the pamphlet *Major Richardson's Reply to Colonel Williams' Gasconarde* (1840), a copy of which is in the Queen's University Library.

Recollections of the West Indies, Jack Brag in Spain, and *The War of 1812,* and sought to promote the sales of his other books by quoting laudatory reviews of them and soliciting subscriptions. It was, then, a kind of personal house organ of its editor and publisher — and very unlike the lofty journal he had advertised in his grandiloquent Prospectus:

> A journal essentially Literary, and of a moderate, or *juste milieu* tone of politics, having for its object the ultimate good and prosperity of the Country, without undue or slavish bias towards any party, is a desideratum which cannot be more seasonably hailed than at a moment when these stupendous Provinces, emerging from the comparative night in which they have hitherto been enshrouded, are about to take their initiative among Nations. Hence the project of The New Era or Canadian Chronicle, which the educated of all classes of society, and especially the more intellectual portion of the community, as well as the advocates of a consistent and good government are now called upon to support.

Since the support was not forthcoming in sufficient force, Richardson dropped the paper in August 1842 to devote himself to another grandiose project — completing his history of the War of 1812, of which the part printed in *The New Era* was only the first of three projected sections, in order that it might be used as a textbook in Canadian schools. He printed the first part in book form from the *New Era* plates, and then applied to the government for a grant to enable him to complete the remainder. The Assembly voted him £250 for this purpose, but the sale of the First Series was so disappointing that Richardson did not have the heart to proceed with the work. He argued, rather unconvincingly, that the grant had been a reward for previous labour rather than an aid to future publication.

Again Richardson turned to newspaper publishing, and early in 1843 founded in Kingston *The Canadian Loyalist or Spirit of 1812.*[7] *The New Era* had been relatively non-partisan in its political reporting and it had failed; this new paper was pro-Tory, and violent in its denunciations of the Lafontaine-Baldwin ministry and of Francis Hincks; no doubt Richardson hoped in this way to gain readers and to assure himself of preferment when and if the Tories succeeded to office. This, of course,

[7] According to *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century,* edited by Kunitz and Haycraft (New York, 1936) p. 521, this paper is also recorded as the *Native Canadian.* I have been so far unable to trace any surviving copies of it under either name.

was the outcome, in the summer of 1844, and Richardson almost immediately suspended the paper, confidently expecting patronage.

Richardson had to wait almost a year for preferment—but it did finally come, on May 20, 1845, when he was appointed Superintendent of Police on the Welland Canal. At last he had the public position for which he had been vainly petitioning for seven years. It was not a very lucrative post — the pay was only ten shillings a day — nor a very influential one, but Richardson resolved to make the most of it. Unfortunately his own belligerence ruined yet another opportunity. Within two weeks of his appointment he dismissed "several insubordinate and useless characters".[8] Within a month he requested the Chief Engineer on the project to cancel a holiday granted the workmen for July 4, and when asked to give reasons for his request haughtily replied: "I certainly am not aware that I am compelled to give any reason to any person employed on this Canal, the superintendence of which is confided to my judgment and discretion." A fortnight later he was inquiring from the Governor-General what rights he, Richardson, had to punish those constables who disobeyed his orders; and a week later he reported to the Governor that a neighbouring magistrate had sworn out a warrant for the Superintendent's arrest, and that Richardson had actually been arrested by one of his own ex-constables! In the light of such revelations of troublesomeness, it can have afforded the Governor little comfort to be assured of Richardson's efficiency in drilling his men to a high pitch of military precision. "In the meantime", Richardson reported on November 8, 1845, "I have my men regularly drilled to the use of the Broad sword, and taught such cavalry movements as may be most useful on the limited ground on which they would in all probability be required to act."

As a man with more commonsense would have expected, Lord Metcalfe was more impressed by Richardson's feuding than by his drilling. On January 17, 1846, the following letter was despatched to Richardson by Mr. D. Daly, the Provincial Secretary:

[8] This, and the following quotations relating to Richardson's employment as Superintendent of Police, is taken from the pamphlet *Correspondence (submitted to Parliament) Between Major Richardson, Late Superintendent of Police on the Welland Canal and the Honorable Domineck Daly, Provincial Secretary* (Montreal, 1846).

> I have the honor, by command of the Administration of the Government, to acquaint you that His Excellency, in Council, has had under consideration the subject of the Police Force on the Welland Canal, and the question whether such Force may not with propriety be discontinued, and that His Excellency has been pleased to direct that your services and those of the Force under your command be dispensed with from and after the 31st of the present month.

Richardson did not take his dismissal without protest; he complained bitterly that the notice was too short, and that his Force was still needed. All his protests were, of course, in vain. No doubt intelligence had reached the Governor to the effect that were the pugnacious major to remain in command, violence was likely to erupt. In fact it did erupt in spite of his dismissal; at midnight on January 31, Richardson wrote to the Provincial Secretary from his home in Allanburgh:

> I have to acquaint you, for the information of His Excellency the Administrator of the Province, but with sentiments of unmitigated disgust, that this night has been characterized . . . . by a scene of outrage and confusion, and intended personal insult to myself — still the servant of the Government — which can have no parallel even among uncivilized nations.
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> These atrocities I shall later detail to you: sufficient be it for the present, to observe that more than thirty shots were fired opposite my house, which is situated on the Canal, accompanied by fierce shouts and yells, and that not only Canaliers but discarded Policemen, of my own, were of the number of the scoundrels.

Throughout these exchanges of letters, Richardson never revealed the slightest sense of doubt in the complete correctness of all his actions. His pride perhaps reached its apex on March 12, when he wrote from Montreal to the Provincial Secretary in part as follows:

> As I am by no means prepared to forego my claim to an honorary rank which has been acknowledged by Her Majesty herself, and by the Commander in Chief of the British Army, in several written communications from His Grace, at the caprice of any of Her Majesty's Colonial Subjects, however exalted their local distinction, I enclose and with the seal unbroken, the letter you have done me the honor to send to me, with a view to its being properly addressed.

And yet, six days after sending such an insulting reply to the Provincial Secretary, Richardson had the effrontery to dispatch a long memorial to Earl Cathcart, Lord Metcalfe's successor in the Governorship, detailing all his woes and laying further claims:

> That your memorialist however seeks not as a mere favor, but claims from the Government as a due . . . that he be placed in some situation of trust and emolu- not inferior to that which he has recently filled, or receive a gratuity from the Government whose summary proceedings have seriously affected his private pecuniary interests.

The governor's reply to this memorial, dated March 20, is curt, restrained, but very apt:

> In reply I am to state that His Excellency considers that it would be useless to direct that the unfitness of the manner, in which you have expressed yourself towards the members of His Excellency's Government, should be pointed out to you, since your own sense of propriety has not prevented you from expressing yourself in the way you have done.

Thus, in rioting and ignominious wrangling, ended Richardson's single tenure of public office in Canada.

By this time, 1846, Richardson was fifty years old, a widower (his second wife, Maria Caroline, having died during the first weeks of his Superintendency of Police), and a lonely and embittered man. He had tried and failed twice as a newspaper publisher; he had had a brief taste of public office and had found it bitter; he had sold his army commission to meet his debts; he had tried to sell his books to his countrymen and had found only a handful of buyers; and he had alienated the appointed governor from whom, rather than from the elected assembly, he had always sought favours. He remained in Canada until 1849, writing and publishing *Eight Years in Canada* and *The Guards in Canada* in the interval, but more and more he found himself casting envious glances over the border which as a boy he had defended against the Yankee invaders. Several times during his second stay in Canada he had visited the United States, and had found that his books were better known and more highly esteemed there than at home. Like many another Canadian writer after him, Richardson decided that fame and fortune could be won much more readily abroad.

Once more then, but for the last time, Richardson set out on a new adventure with high hopes. In New York City, it must have seemed to him at first that his long-deferred dreams were to come true. In the space of three years he was able to publish four new novels — *Hardscrabble, Waunangee, The Monk Knight of St. John,* and *Westbrook* — and to

issue new editions of *Wacousta, Ecarté,* and *The Canadian Brothers* (under the new title of *Matilda Montgomery*). He was something of a celebrity in the great American metropolis, as he had formerly been in London, a man whose name could add lustre to a newspaper. Thus we find this passage in the biography of "Frank Forester" (H. W. Herbert), a prominent Anglo-American journalist of the mid-century:

> When *The Sachem* was commenced by the same parties who had essayed the establishment of *The Era,* an editorial position was reserved from motives of friendship for Herbert, although the paper had been designed to serve as a species of Native America organ. Nevertheless, its projectors contemplated the employment of the best available talent in the production of an unrivalled literary paper, regardless of national prejudices . . . . As literary associates to Herbert were conjoined Major Richardson, author of *Wacousta,* a popular Indian romance; William North, author of *The Slave of the Lamp,* and a poet of no mean order . . . .[9]

But it was not long before Richardson's pugnacity got him into further trouble. Shortly after the passage just quoted comes this revealing sentence: "After the contribution of several excellent articles and a few historical sketches, Herbert retired from the paper, in consequence of a misunderstanding with Major Richardson and Mr. North, upon some political questions connected with the rule of England in Canada."

Indeed, although much remains to be discovered about this final phase in Richardson's career, it seems certain that it was no less troubled than the earlier phases had been. The new books were all mere potboilers — *The Monk Knight of Saint John* in particular is the 1850 equivalent of the most lurid and erotically perverse of today's pocketbooks — and they were published by the notorious firm of Dewitt and Davenport in fifty-cent paperback editions which brought their author meagre financial return.

He died, supposedly of erysipelas complicated by malnutrition, on May 12, 1852, at his lodgings at 113 West 29th Street, New York City. Legend has it that he sold his Newfoundland dog, Hector, a few days previously in order to buy food. His obituary notice, as it appeared on May 14 in the New York *Journal of Commerce,* is more matter-of-fact:

[9] *The Life and Writings of Frank Forester (H. W. Herbert)*, edited by David W. Judd, London, n.d.

Died — On the 12th inst. Major John Richardson, late of H. B. M. Gordon Highlanders aged 53 (55) years. His friends are invited to attend his funeral, without further invitation, from the Church of the Holy Communion, corner 6th Avenue and 20th Street, this day at two o'clock, p/m.

Haughty and belligerent to the last, Richardson declared near the end of his life that he had no desire to be ranked among Canada's future men of genius or to share any posthumous honour reserved for them. A man of genius, in a literary sense, he certainly was not; but he was, according to his lights, a man of honour. He was a Hotspur who forever sought, and found, trouble; a romantic whose dreams always outran reality and who was capable of infinite self-pity and infinitesimal self-judgment; a colonial whose insecurity and sense of inferiority led him to distrust and despise his fellow-colonials; a man who did in many ways serve his native country but whose consciousness of those services robbed them of much of their lustre. His chief lack was a sense of humour, a sense of proportion; his chief virtue was that he was never, in any circumstances, merely dull.

FOR REASONS of space, the articles by **Pierre Berton** on the literature of the Klondike and by **Hugo McPherson** on the novels of Robertson Davies which were announced for publication in this issue of *Canadian Literature* have been delayed, but they will certainly appear in the fourth (Spring, 1960) issue.

Among other articles to appear in that and later issues will be essays on the poetic vision of Wilfred Watson, by **John W. Bilsland**, on epic strains in contemporary Canadian poetry by **Paul West**, and on theatrical taste in the Canadian West by **Michael R. Booth**, as well as studies of Canadian anthologies by **Robert Weaver**, of the immigrant in literature by **Ruth McKenzie**, of the CBC Critically Speaking programme by **Tony Emery** and of the plays of Gratien Gélinas by **Marguerite Primeau**, together with a bi-lingual feature on the poet and the translator by **Anne Hébert**, **F. R. Scott** and **Jeanne Lapointe** and further reflections on Canadian Literature by **Ethel Wilson**. Among other features planned for early publication are studies of the teaching of literature in Canadian schools, of children's literature in Canada, and of certain aspects of publishing in this country.