

Fifty Years of Scientific and Educational Work in Canada

CHAPTER I

BIRTHPLACE AND PARENTAGE

How it came to pass that the subject of this biography began his earthly career in October 1820, in the little town of Pictou, in Nova Scotia, will appear in this introductory chapter.

The county of Pictou was one of the more recently settled portions of the province of Nova Scotia, and its principal town, situated on an inlet, or harbour, of the same name, had attained to some local importance as a trading place, and had already a population of about two thousand souls. Small though its population was, yet, like most other towns and villages in newly-settled countries, its people were a very miscellaneous assemblage from

various places, having various kinds of previous training and social position, yet here nearly all reduced to one common social level.

The shores of the pretty landlocked inlet of Pictou harbour—a lake-like expanse, receiving the waters of three small rivers, and surrounded by a country rich in agricultural and mineral resources—were originally occupied by a tribe of Micmac Indians. The place was, no doubt, visited by early French explorers, but they seem to have been unaware of its special resources, and have left no traces of occupation except a few graves by the water-side, and a rudimentary Roman Catholicism implanted in the minds of the natives.

It was first colonised, toward the end of the last century, by a handful of immigrants from the United States,—then British Colonies. They were of Scottish descent, Presbyterian in religion, and mostly from Maryland; in character and previous American training they were well fitted to occupy a new country. With them, or shortly after, came a few negroes, still held in slavery, but soon emancipated. The next important band of settlers consisted of Loyalists, who had served on the royal side in the American War of Independence, and who, when driven from their own

country, were given grants of land in Nova Scotia. Tradition represents them to have been somewhat wild, dissipated, and irreligious, though with some better elements intermixed.

Subsequently, there came in larger numbers Scottish Highlanders, dispossessed in the "clearings" of estates in the north and west of Scotland, or sufficiently adventurous, spontaneously, to seek new homes; a sprinkling from the "Irish exodus;" and, when coal-mines were opened up, Scottish and English miners. To this substratum of mixed peoples were added various individual personages—English, Scottish, and American—traders, professional men, and others, drifted from older districts or from the Mother Country;—people who had seen better days, and who brought with them the remains of early culture, or perhaps the dregs of bad habits which had ruined them elsewhere. There were thus persons of good education and of reputable antecedents, mingled with all sorts of waifs and strays, down to the negro, recently emancipated, or to the poor Micmac, deprived of his lands and degraded into a gipsy and beggar. In such a society there is sure to be a large proportion of odd, eccentric, and misplaced people; and it

is the rule, rather than the exception, that men and women are forced to turn their hands to anything, and to occupy positions, and to do work, the most foreign to their early associations and training.

To a thoughtful boy growing up in such a community, the world, of which he judges from what he sees around him, seems a strange jumble, and according to his tastes or tendencies, and to the home influences acting on him, he may be lowered to the companionship of very worthless associates, or may have his ambition stimulated to aim at higher things. In any case, he is likely to have a wide range of experiences and associations, and to acquire adaptability to varied pursuits, as well as that adventurous spirit which leads to new enterprises. Hence I can recall many companions of my youth who have wandered far from their early homes, some of them to occupy honourable and useful places, others to fail hopelessly.

My parents were Scottish, but from different parts of Scotland, and reared under different influences and surroundings; they met each other owing to the accident of both migrating from their native land, and finding a new home in the same little colonial town.

My father's people were agriculturists in the north of Scotland, connected with an old family, the Dawsons of Crombie, but being descended from a younger branch, were themselves of the class of well-to-do tenant farmers. The tradition was, that the family originated with an Irish officer, who had come over in the interests of James the Second, and who, when the effort to excite a rising in favour of the exiled king had failed, consoled himself by marrying a Scottish maiden dowered with some landed property. He was a Roman Catholic, and the family continued for some generations to adhere to the old faith, and to Jacobite politics. My grandfather was said to have been present, as a stripling, on the side of the Pretender at Culloden Moor, but having escaped that dangerous day, afterwards married a Protestant wife, and in his later days went over to her religion; and their children were educated as Presbyterians. He was noted for his stature and strength, lived to a great age, and was regarded in his parish as a man of vigorous intellect, strong good sense, and sterling integrity. He acted as a burleyman, or appraiser of grain, in his parish, and was often consulted as an arbitrator in differences arising amongst his neighbours. His wife was an

eminently pious woman, earnest in the careful training of her children. Her maiden name was Mitchell, and she was a daughter of the Laird of Frendeaght, in Aberdeenshire.

My father, James Dawson, was a younger son, and spent his earlier years on the paternal farm, and at the parish school. The oldest son was to continue on the farm, another received a more liberal education, fitting him for the legal profession, but my father had to be content to be apprenticed to a tradesman in the neighbouring town of Huntly. Of his experiences in this position, he thus writes, in a manuscript sketch of his life which he prepared in his later years:—

“Some of my apprentice companions were profligate and immoral, and presented such examples of depravity as I had never seen before, but fortunately for me there were others of an opposite character. These were decidedly pious, and though belonging to different communions, they stood firmly by each other as brothers. Two of them were church members, and besides taking part in conducting a Sabbath school, they met once a week, with some others, in the evening for mutual prayer. To these meetings they invited me. They had a number of religious

books at their disposal, and they freely offered me the use of them. They also invited me to attend their several places of worship on the Sabbath evenings, and of this I availed myself, but I attended the parish church in the forenoon. At the age of nineteen, after much serious reflection, I resolved to devote myself to the Lord, and accordingly, having applied to my minister, was admitted to the communion of the church in the summer of 1809.”

Having thus taken his stand on the side of Truth, he proceeded to improve his mental culture. He spent his savings on books of a high class, and read them with care. At a time when such views were regarded with much suspicion and disfavour, he became a Liberal in politics, and a dissenter in religion—being repelled from the Established Church by the loose and ungodly lives of some of the clergy of the district. When free from his apprenticeship, his love of independence prompted him to emigrate to the New World.

Thus, at the age of twenty, we find him accepting an offer made by the then leading merchant of Pictou, Nova Scotia. He gives a graphic account of his journey of one hundred and eighty miles, on foot, from Banffshire to

his port of embarkation at Greenock. Sending their principal baggage by carrier, he and three other young men, each with a pack of clothes and provisions, set out on their journey.

“For the sake of making a short cut, we were advised to go by a path which took us through the Grampians, by Kildrummy Castle, and which led in a straight line to Perth. We started on the 8th of March 1811, about midday, from Keith, and at night reached a little town or village called Tomintoul. It stands on the left bank of a rapidly running stream, which we could find no means of crossing, as it was swollen with the melting of the snow in the mountains above. After some search we found a ford, and decided to strip and wade through with our clothes on our heads and shoulders. We succeeded in crossing safely, though it took us breast high, and we had difficulty in resisting the rapidly flowing stream. On arriving in the village we found that none of the people spoke English, but one of our party knew Gaelic sufficiently to make himself understood, and we got a comfortable supper by a peat fire, and slept soundly on heather beds. On this, our first day of Highland travelling, we had passed through some fine scenery, had walked

along the eastern base of Cairngorm, and had picked up and pocketed the best specimens we could find of its famous pebbles.

“We started at daylight up a long valley called Glenavon, down which ran the stream we had crossed the previous evening. Our road was a mere sheep-path, which often led us along the face of precipices so steep and high that it seemed a false step might have plunged us into the stream some hundreds of feet below. When near the head of the glen, at the place where we had to leave it and turn off to the left, we found a hut or shelter, where the sweep of the river formed a piece of level or ‘haughland.’ The occupants of the hut—a man, his wife, and a boy—were in a field ploughing. The plough was drawn by a cow, with a horse in front of her. The man held the plough, the boy switched the cow, and the woman went ahead beating the horse. These people, however, were very kind to us. The cattle were turned loose, and we were regaled with hot oat cakes, baked on a stone in the ashes, for which they refused any remuneration. Shortly after leaving these hospitable folks we came upon some wild mountain scenery. For some time we had seen before us mountains covered with snow. We now entered amongst

them, and passed through gorges, with here and there great snow banks twenty or thirty feet high. At the greatest height to which we attained we saw, to our left, what seemed an open quarry in the face of a little hill. We turned aside to look at it, and found it to be a thick bed of marl, composed of what we supposed to be sea-shells of many varieties. The people in the low country had found it, and had been carrying it off to manure their fields. It formed a subject of curious conjecture to us how these shells could come to be there, at so great a height above the sea. Early in the afternoon we began to descend the southern slope of the mountains, and to leave the snow behind us, and we soon entered a forest where we saw a herd of deer. We crossed a river on an old bridge near the ruins of Kildrummy Castle, and passed the night at the Spittal of Glenshee amidst beautiful scenery. This day's journey proved too much for me, for I had no sooner entered the house than I fell down in a fainting fit. We were indeed all so much exhausted that we concluded to spend a day here in recruiting."

After undergoing other adventures and hardships, the wayfarers finally reached Greenock in safety, but were detained there some time,

as their ship, though advertised to sail on the 20th of March, was not ready till the 11th of April.

After a voyage of five weeks, they cast anchor in Pictou harbour on May 19, 1811. My father was then twenty-two years of age, and had but the proverbial guinea remaining of the money which he had brought from home. On the expiry of his engagement, he determined to remain in Pictou, and with the aid of his savings, to establish himself in mercantile business on his own account. He fell upon prosperous times, and in five or six years found himself in good circumstances, and with every prospect of accumulating wealth, and of becoming an influential man in the community. He was, indeed, no ordinary man! He was ever influenced by a strong sense of duty, ever a firm believer in divine guidance, ever ready to do good as he had opportunity, and too independent to conceal his opinions, or to cringe to men in place and power. This independence of character in some respects interfered with his advancement, and prevented him from obtaining the public recognition which he merited. For, at that time in the North American colonies, partisanship and subserviency to the bureaucracy of the day, were

essential to political or social progress, and were of more value than merit or ability.

When he married in 1818, he was a merchant and shipowner and at the head of one of the most prosperous businesses in the eastern part of Nova Scotia; but three years after my birth he was, with many others in that part of the world, reduced almost to ruin in the great commercial collapse of 1823-24. Yet he determined to begin life again, to struggle through his difficulties, and to pay all his debts. Throughout my earlier years, therefore, the condition of our household was that of a hard and honest struggle to maintain a respectable appearance, and to repair shattered fortunes. With all this, both he and my mother were willing to make the educational interests of their boys a first charge on their resources. Nor did he relax his activity as a worker in Bible Society, Missionary, Sunday-school, and Temperance enterprises; and ever retained a warm sympathy with the movements in favour of Christian union, peace, free-trade, and the abolition of slavery. In regard to temperance, for example, when I was yet a boy, he read Dr. Lyman Beecher's sermons on intemperance, and in consequence determined to abolish alcoholic beverages from his table, though the

resolution cost him some sacrifices in his social and business relations. He also became active, in the face of much opposition, in establishing a temperance society in the town of Pictou, which I believe was the second in British North America, the first having been begun by the Rev. James Ross, a Presbyterian minister, in a rude district of the county. He had always a strong zeal for education, and was willing to make great sacrifices to secure the best possible advantages for his two sons. My feeling of gratitude for this has only been deepened by the experience of maturer years.

It was a favourite maxim with him that he would rather give us training which no man could take from us; than property, which might be dissipated or lost. At the same time, he impressed us with a respect for honest labour, and taught us to prefer any useful employment to mere amusement. I have said that my early years were, with him, years of contending against misfortune, owing to his reverses in 1824. It was a source of much gratification to me later on that I was able to contribute, out of my earliest earnings, to the removal of the last burdens remaining on his property; and that ultimately, after my removal to Montreal, he was able to retire from business with a

modest competence, and to join us in our new home, where he spent the closing years of his life.

My mother, Mary Rankine, came of a different stock. Her forefathers were small landed proprietors of the "laird" class in Stirlingshire, farming their own land, but associating on equal terms with the neighbouring gentry, and rather despising the trading class of the towns. They were Whigs, and members of the Established Church of Scotland. Whilst my paternal grandfather and his family sided with the Jacobites in the north, my maternal grandfather, when a lad, was nearly captured by the "rebels," when going with his father's servants with a contribution of provisions for General Hawley's army, then in the neighbourhood of Falkirk.

Lonerig, in the parish of Slamannan—my mother's native place—is a ridge of land on the bank of the little river Avon, and the old house and stables still stand, or did so a few years ago, with some modern additions. In my mother's youth there were trees and gardens, since swept away. Her father, who had married somewhat late in life, died when she was young, leaving two children, an only brother and herself. Young Rankine was thus

without paternal guidance, and came into possession of his property at a time when foreign war had inflated trade, and raised the price of agricultural produce, and when extravagant speculations and costly improvements were in vogue, instead of the old-fashioned economy of the small proprietors. When the reaction came he was not in a position to preserve his paternal inheritance. Portions of it had to be sold, and at length the hard necessity pressed upon him of disposing of the whole, and of forsaking the home of his fathers. My mother often referred in later years to her happy girlhood, and to the heartbreaking separation from old friends and dependants when that home had to be broken up. Long afterwards, when I revisited the place, and the tombstones in the kirkyard were the only remaining relics of the family, I found the tradition of William and Mary Rankine still fresh among the older people. Standing on a rising ground, where a turn of the road gives a last view of the old homestead and the ridge on which it is built, I have attempted to realise the feelings which must have wrung hundreds of Scottish hearts transplanted from homes in the motherland to take root in the New World of the West.

William Rankine, still a young and unmar-

ried man, went out into the world alone, leaving his sister to the care and kind hospitality of distant relatives in Edinburgh, and with the little remainder of his means, and a commission as the agent for some wild lands in Nova Scotia, succeeded in a few years in making a new home beyond the sea, to which his sister came. She remained with him until she became my father's wife, a step in which she had but one deep regret, that she had to leave her brother to a loneliness which she feared might not be conducive either to his welfare or to his happiness, and which lent bitterness to her sorrow when he died while yet only in middle life.

I was but a boy at the time of William Rankine's death, but old enough to feel the loss, and to weep with my mother; for "Uncle Rankine" was my dearest friend, always glad to see me, kind and liberal in ministering to my childish whims and desires, and ever willing to play or romp with me. In his youth he had belonged to a corps of yeomanry, raised when a French invasion was dreaded; and in Pictou he became the captain of an artillery company organised to defend our town against American privateers. I have a vivid remembrance of his showing me the sword exercise with a sabre which had belonged to his cavalry outfit, and which flashed

before my astonished eyes with a brightness at once awe-inspiring and delightful. Once, when I fear I must have been a very naughty boy at home, I remember packing my most valued toys in a box, and marching off with the threat that I was going to stay always with Uncle Rankine; but he comforted me, and in due time brought me back, with apologies, to my mother. Dear Uncle Rankine! His was a kind and generous heart—too much so, I fear, to hold his own in the struggle of life. I have no doubt that his hope was to amass enough in the New World to enable him to recover his Scottish patrimony, and he had made some progress towards this, when he was borne down by the calamities which in the years following 1823 told so heavily on my father, and on many others in the maritime provinces.

What shall I say of my mother? What can any man say of a loving mother to the careless world? She was a woman of deep affections and of many sorrows, aggravated by a disposition not too buoyant or hopeful. Her girlish years had been saddened by the death of her parents, and by the mournful breaking up of the old home. Her early married life had been clouded by the financial losses of her

husband, by the loss of her only brother, and later, by the death of the younger of her two boys, a stroke from which she never fully recovered. She was a good woman, but never entered heartily into the new colonial social conditions into which she had been cast, though she had a few warm and attached friends, and was very kind to such of the needy as she could help. The world, to her, was in many respects a vale of tears. She died before my removal from Nova Scotia.

In looking back upon my parents, it is difficult to say to which I owe most of character or influence. I can detect in myself much of the constitution and lineaments of both, and am sometimes disposed to think that I inherit more of their failings than of their virtues. They differed essentially from each other, in temperament and early training, but were one in simple piety, in love for their children, and devotion to the serious duties of life.

To this day, I cannot recall without deep emotion the remembrance of the sacrifices they made, and of the anxieties they incurred to secure for me opportunities of improvement. The memory of such benefits grows in power as we advance in age, and we regret that the time is passed when we could have repaid

them, and that we have in our turn, been so little able to confer similar benefits on our own contemporaries and successors.

I would specially record with gratitude that, at a time when he was in straitened circumstances, my father contributed liberally in aid of educational institutions, then being established in Pictou, with the view of securing their benefits for his sons, and that he and my mother aided and stimulated our early tastes for literature and science. After my brother's death, they were willing to permit an only child to go from home, on excursions more or less dangerous, and to travel abroad, at a time when this was much less safe and speedy than at present,—when, too, their means were not over abundant. Our home, I may add here, was a very quiet one, except when strangers, especially men engaged in missionary and benevolent enterprises, were occasionally invited as guests. To some of these I was indebted for much information and guidance; and, of a few of them, I may say that they were in spiritual things as angels entertained unawares. There was always much work and study in the winter evenings, and I remember with what pleasure I used to listen to my father's reading, chiefly in history and bio-

graphy, for the benefit of my mother, when busy with her needle, as well as of my brother and myself, after our lessons were finished.

There were, as already mentioned, only two of us—my brother James and I. He was cut off, while still a boy, by scarlet fever, which at that time was remarkably prevalent and fatal. He was a fine boy—handsome, cheerful, affable and frank, a favourite with all, and very dear to me; for, though he was some years younger than I, we were constant companions, and as we advanced in age, the difference seemed to become less, especially as he was less diffident than I was. I remember but one incident in my intercourse with him, which I repent of, and which even yet causes a pang when I think of it, though it was sixty years ago. One day, not long before he was seized with the illness which proved fatal to him, he asked me to assist him with a difficult piece of Latin translation. I was busy with some affair of my own, and refused. He went away disappointed, and it was not many weeks later when he was taken from us. Such little acts of unkindness may form bitter drops in the cup of life, even when repented of and forgiven.

My brother's death for a time darkened the world to me. It seemed as if the sunshine

had been blotted out of my life, and I can date from this time my first serious impressions of the realities of life, as distinguished from the merely visible things with which we are chiefly occupied in this world. In all these sixty years my brother, dead to me, lives to God, in that land of eternal realities to which he has gone; whilst I have been striving here below, in this world of appearances and vain shows, often having to contend for the truth, as well as to help the wounded in the battle of life. The two lots are widely separated, but they meet at the last, and there may be blessing in both.

My early home had much in it to foster studies of nature, and both my parents encouraged such pursuits. A somewhat wild garden, with many trees and shrubs, was full of objects of interest; within easy walking distance were rough pastures, with second-growth woods, bogs, and swamps, rich in berries and flowers in their season, and inhabited by a great variety of birds and insects. Nothing pleased my father more than to take an early morning hour, or rare holiday, and wander through such places with his boys, studying and collecting their treasures. The harbour of Pictou, too, with its narrow entrance from

the sea, affords ample opportunities for such investigations, and its waters teem with fish: from the gay striped bass and lordly salmon to the ever-hungry smelt—the delight of juvenile anglers. In such a basin, visited every day by the ocean tides, there is an endless variety of the humbler forms of aquatic life, and along the streams entering it a wealth of curious animals and plants with which an inquisitive boy could easily make himself familiar, in his rambles and occasional angling expeditions. But I now must leave these more domestic matters and youthful incidents and turn to others in which I had to do with the outside world.

CHAPTER II

EARLY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

BEFORE my birth, Pictou and the neighbouring country had been leavened to a great extent with earnest religious feeling, and purged from the rude ways of its early population of disbanded soldiers, principally through the missionary work of James MacGregor, a Scottish Presbyterian minister who had settled himself in the district while still in its infancy. He was a man of truly apostolic spirit, and gifted with rare energy and ability. He travelled through a wide district, then almost without any means of civilised communication, preached both in the English and Gaelic languages, and had done much to awaken among the people a zeal both for religion and education.

Such men are of inestimable value in recently settled countries. Families removed from old associations and restraints tend to relapse into a sort of heathenism and semi-barbarism, while the children without education, and with no experience other than those of a forest farm,