

NOVA SCOTIA PHILANTHROPIC SOCIETY

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"This is the infant hour, or, if you will, the childhood of our country"

"Will you, on this night, pledge with me your faith that there shall come a time when Nova Scotian will be a name of distinction and of pride; when it shall be a synonym for high mental and moral cultivation"

"Providence has given us a separate country and the elements of a distinct character."—JOSEPH HOWE, 1834.

STUDENTS of Nova Scotian history are familiar with the steps in the struggle for self-government, which was preceded by a gradual economic and intellectual awakening, and accompanied by a widespread literary movement without parallel in colonial history. But few are aware of the fact that during the same period a distinctive Nova Scotian character emerged, to be perpetuated in all essentials to this day. Among the elements of that character one may note a "sense of the sea", love of country and confidence in its resources, loyalty to the British connection combined with friendly emulation of Americans, clannishness and pride in the achievements of fellow-countrymen everywhere, intense interest in religion and education, vigorous discussion of local affairs joined to keen competition for public office, fondness for public ceremonies, banquets, speeches and picnics, tolerance, goodwill and the spirit of fellowship.

All of these characteristics are manifest in the history of the *Nova Scotia Philanthropic Society* which I have chosen as a tangible expression of the growing national consciousness of native-born Nova Scotians, and one of many evidences that, despite the varying origins and prior loyalties of the different peoples who settled Nova Scotia, the younger generations of all were beginning to think and act not as Acadians, New Englanders, Loyalists, Germans, English, Scots and Irishmen, but as Nova Scotians. Each of these peoples, it is true, had made their contribution to the development of the province in their own name or under their own banners, and some of them had more or less vigorous national societies to perpetuate the memory

of their native lands; but their children were beginning to regard themselves as a separate people, and their social and political leaders were urging them to make a contribution to the world's work, not as Englishmen, Irishmen or Scots, but as Nova Scotians.

It was not unnatural that, in an effort to foster and give public expression to this feeling of national consciousness, the native-born Nova Scotians should imitate those benevolent organizations of their fathers, which had existed before they were born to promote the welfare or interests of their respective members amidst the pioneer hardships of the land of their adoption. It was not unnatural; but time was to prove that such a society would have a short life and die a natural death as soon as the sentiments which it fostered became generally recognized or could be taken for granted. Founded in 1834, it was maintained with enthusiasm until 1849, but quietly dropped out of existence in 1857.

The *Nova Scotia Philanthropic Society* had been fore-shadowed by the *British American Society*, which was founded in St. John, New Brunswick, in 1830, to relieve the distressed and strengthen the bonds of national union and brotherly love by affording opportunities for the interchange of liberal and patriotic sentiment. In calling attention to this organization the *Novascotian* said: "Some of the New Brunswick papers express a wish that the example may be followed in all the other colonies; and, as regards our own province, we should be happy to see such an institution set on foot for this plain reason:— During the earlier stages of these colonies, the great bulk of population was either English, Irish, Scotch, or their immediate descendants, a charitable society was organized by each of these national divisions, and a vast amount of human misery was relieved. Now the bulk of the population is of native growth and, although poverty lays its hand as heavily on the unfortunate as heretofore, there is no society on which that part of our distressed population which has been born upon the soil can fairly advance a claim. Here, we think, is a fair foundation on which those who have influence may rear an institution whose benefits, without fostering pauperism, might be extended to lighten the load of unavoidable misfortune."

It is difficult to say how far this account of activities in St. John actually influenced Nova Scotians, but in the autumn of 1833 "a few individuals, feeling the great want of that brotherly affection among natives of this province so visible among

the natives of England, Ireland and Scotland, unwilling to have their indigent brethren subsisting solely on the bounty of benevolent strangers, and seeing in perspective the vast fund of good they might be the means of producing, as well to the remnant of aborigines as to the rising generations of coloured and white inhabitants", met together frequently to lay their plans, and finally organized their society on April 7, 1834. The founders of the society were Messrs. W. A. Mc-Agy, W. B. Wellner, R. M. Barrett, Robt. A. Bigby, Thomas Wilson, Junr. and James Isles. Its membership later included Joseph Howe, Dr. W. B. Almon, Beamish Murdoch, T. B. Akins, Dr. James F. Avery, the equally well-known families of Morris, Cogswell, Black, Twining, Pryor and Starr, and by 1839 had risen to more than three hundred. But at first it had to hasten slowly, and win the confidence of the community. John Naylor was the first president, and W. B. Wellner the first secretary.

On April 17, 1834, Howe, who was not yet a member, but sympathized with its objects and was destined to be its second president, announced the formation of the Society with the following wise and friendly note. "We know nothing of the circumstances under which it was formed, or what is the number of its members, but we presume that it will be liberally patronized. Everything which has a tendency to elevate the character or rouse the ambition of our native population does good; and so long as illiberal jealousy and contempt for those who come among us from other countries is avoided, and our young men are taught to rival them in knowledge, in charity, in industry and uprightness, without suffering their minds to be swayed by mere consideration of country, the more of these stimulants we have the better."

In this note Howe foreshadowed the direction that the Society should take in endeavouring not only to administer charity wisely but also to stimulate the ambition and patriotism of native-born Nova Scotians. At that time Howe was president of the Mechanics' Institute, which he had assisted to form three years earlier, and, in November 1834, he spoke to it on love of country, in an address that must have been an inspiration to members of the *Nova Scotia Philanthropic Society*, who could have found both justification and direction in the following paragraph. "Has Nova Scotia received the power to attach her children to her bosom and make

them prouder and fonder of her bleak hills and sylvan valleys than even of the fairer and more cultivated lands from which their parents came? I pause for no reply. The unerring law of nature is my answer; and though addressing an audience composed of all countries, it is with the conviction that their children are already natives of Nova Scotia, and that their judgments will approve of the direction I wish to give to those feelings of patriotism which that circumstance will inevitably inspire. You who owe your origin to other lands cannot resist the conviction, that as you loved them, so will your children love this; and that though the second place in their hearts may be filled by merry England, romantic Scotland, or the verdant fields of Erin, the first and highest will be occupied by the little province where they drew their earliest breath, and which claims from them filial reverence and care."

The original Society had a copper seal "with a Dove descending in Glory on joined hands, and the motto 'Love and Friendship' engraven thereon, within a circle formed by the Society's name". Membership was restricted to natives of Nova Scotia, who were not apprentices or under nineteen years of age, and could obtain a two-thirds majority at any general meeting. There were to be four meetings a year on the first Monday of January, April, July and October, the last to be the annual meeting. As soon as £100 had been accumulated in fees, dues and donations, the committee on charity could recommend assistance to needy persons; but, as the members were assessed for poor rates under the municipal laws, it was decreed that charity should be applied "rather to the relief and assistance of persons who have met with sudden misfortune or who suffer by occasional distress than continued allowance for settled poor".

The organization proceeded quietly during the next two years, but at the annual meeting in October, 1836, the officials reported a membership of seventy and a fund of £40, and arranged to hold a public festival, similar to those of the other national societies. Accordingly they dined with their guests at the Exchange Coffee House on Tuesday, November 1st, and after enjoying "all the delicacies of the season", good wine, and music from the band of the 34th Regt., they drank a series of toasts, which reveal at a glance the high hopes and aspirations of the Society, and the distinctive character of the native-born Nova Scotian.

Apparently there were no speeches in response to the toasts, but each was accompanied by an illuminating sentence or

paragraph which made further comment unnecessary; and when all on the programme had been disposed of, several volunteer toasts were offered as the spirit moved individual members. The following selections are the most characteristic:—

Our Mother Country—May she never make our clothes too tight, but leave us room to grow.

The Mayflower—Nova Scotia's Emblem. May its odorous buds, and ever-green leaf, never be trodden by the foot of a slave.

Nova Scotians Abroad. Good fortune and a speedy return—wherever they go, may they never forget or disgrace the land that gave them birth.

Our Sister Colonies. Our best customers—while they prosper, our agriculture and commerce must improve.

The Emigrant—Come from where he will, he is welcome to our shores and to a share in the blessings we enjoy.

Our Sister Societies. We have a common object—may we pursue it in a spirit of universal benevolence.

The Fisheries—Banks which always discount—the wealth we draw from them need never be repaid.

Volunteer toasts:—

The memory of Newton, Twining, Fawson and those other natives of the Province who have honorably distinguished themselves abroad . . . Miss Morris and those ladies who illustrate by their genius the beauties of their country.

The Rivers of Nova Scotia—lovely to gaze on—pregnant with power, inviting the poor to labor and turning the wheels of fortune for the rich.

The Coal Trade. Dirty work makes clean money, our stomachs need never be empty while the bowels of the earth are full.

The Granite Quarries—Jonathan gives us bread—we give him stones; the rocks that drove the old settlers to the States are attracting their descendants to our shores.

Our Dykes—though cropped for a hundred years, they are still abundantly fertile—may man industriously improve what God has so freely given.

The Export of Gypsum—when the old soils of the South get weak, they borrow strength from our Plaister.

The Joggins—The Mechanics of the World delight to hold their noses to our Grindstone.

At the same festival the following song, composed for the occasion by Joseph Howe, was sung by W. Hoffman, Esq.

THE BLUENOSE

Air—*Bumper of Burgundy*

Let the Student of Nature in rapture descant
 On the Heavens' cerulean hue;
 Let the Lover indulge in poetical rant,
 When the eyes of his Mistress are blue.

But fill high your glasses—fill, fill to the brim,
 I've a different toast to propose:
 While such eyes, and such skies, still are beaming for him,
 Here's a health to the jolly Bluenose.

Let the Frenchman delight in his vine-covered vales,
 Let the Greek toast his old classic ground;
 Here's the land where the bracing Northwester prevails,
 And where jolly Bluenoses abound.

Long—long may it flourish, to all of us dear,
 Loved and honoured by hearts that are true;
 But, should ever a foe chance his nose to show here,
 He shall find all our Noses true Blue.

During the next two years the Society was content with similar banquets held in Halifax; but in 1839 they inaugurated the custom of having an annual picnic to celebrate the founding of Halifax, which at that time and for many years to come was dated June 8th instead of June 21st, our present natal day. In the words of the editor of the *Novascotian*, "As there never had been a Nova Scotian good enough to be canonized, some difficulty was experienced in selecting a day upon which the Society should, following the good example set by the others, meet for the purpose of keeping alive an interest in the common object; and, by social and friendly intercourse, to bind the members together, and excite to a love of country, by those references to such topics as were likely to appeal to the better feelings of our nature." Accordingly the date of the landing of Governor Cornwallis was chosen, and the picnic was held at "Prince's Lodge".

It is significant that the editor of the *Novascotian* should anticipate Haliburton in a lament over the ruins of "Prince's Lodge"; but his lament was spontaneous and sincere, prompted by the meeting of the Society amid the ruins and on those deserted grounds where once the Duke of Kent had held high revelry. At the same time he saw much in the ancient recollections which every point in those beautiful grounds is "so well

calculated to revive, to add to the pleasures of the day" and, seeing in historical knowledge and reverence for the past a source of strength to the Nova Scotians of his generation, he dedicated to the Society the following song, written especially for the occasion:

SONG FOR THE 8TH JUNE

Hail to the day when the Briton came o'er
 And planted his flag where the Mayflower blows,
 And gathered the blossoms, unheeded before,
 To entwine with the Shamrock, the Thistle, and Rose.

Let us never forget, while our revels we keep
 'Neath the shade of the green woods that hang overhead,
 The labors of those in our churchyards who sleep,
 But fill up a bumper to honor the Dead.

Oh! dear to our hearts is the land they bequeathed,
 And the standard they reared proudly waves o'er us yet;
 While we gather and cherish the flowers they wreathed,
 Let us never the graves of our fathers forget.

They vanquished the forest to make us a home,
 Though the knife of the savage defended each grove;
 And, while ocean's proud waves round our headlands shall foam,
 This day must be honored where'er we rove.

The valleys their garments of emerald wear,
 The flocks on the mountains unharried repose,
 And the songs of our maidens rise mirthful and clear
 By the side of each stream in the starlight that flows.

The cities are growing with wealth in their train,
 The hamlet securely expands in the glen;
 And our white sails are glancing far over the main,
 To the islands that nourish'd those stout-hearted men.

Then fill up a bumper, uncovered, we'll name,
 And drink to the Dead, and the day they've endeared;
 May the spirit they left, like a circle of flame,
 Guard forever the homes and the standard they rear'd.

A comparison of this song with *The Flag of Old England* or *Song for the Centenary* which Howe distributed widely during the official celebration shows that he had revised and expanded it considerably, referring to events that had happened locally in the intervening decade. Furthermore, his later song is more restrained, and has no reference to the "bumper" which marked the dinners and picnics of the period.

In 1842 a *Young Men's Nova Scotia Society* was formed, and the two carried on, holding regular meetings and annual picnics until the great year of 1849, when they seem to have exhausted their energies in celebrating the centenary of the founding of Halifax. On that occasion both Societies appeared in the parade, with their banners of "Sky Blue Silk, fringed with gold, and emblazoned with the Crown and the word *Acadia*, surrounded by a rich wreath of mayflowers, the emblem of Nova Scotia, and the motto 'We bloom amid the snow'." Two active members of the parent society took conspicuous parts: Beamish Murdoch delivered the centenary oration, and Joseph Howe distributed his *Song of the Centenary* as fast as it could be printed from a press drawn in the procession. At the same time, "The windows of the houses in the line of Procession were sparkling with bright eyes and healthful cheeks, and welcome smiles of the Fair Daughters of Acadia, many of whom displayed, treasured up for the occasion, bouquets of their own beauteous mayflower, that blooms amid the snow".

After 1849 there are no further references in the newspapers to public meetings or picnics of the Society, and the same men remained in office from that year until 1857, when the Society was dissolved. Nova Scotians in the interval were busy adjusting themselves to the new responsibilities under self-government, and deeply concerned with political and economic questions which their new status had thrust upon them.

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The *Nova Scotia Philanthropic Society*, then, had a short and brilliant career, when compared with the Scottish, Irish and English benevolent Societies which have lasted for one hundred and fifty years and are still enjoying a happy old age. It was both a symbol and an experiment: a symbol of progressive discontent, and an experiment in nation-building by imitation. As a symbol it was successful, because it gave expression through its banquets and picnics to ideas which were nebulous at the time but, as they took form and received public recognition, became part of the heritage of all Nova Scotians. But such a Society could not have had a permanent appeal in Nova Scotia, any more than English, Irish and Scottish national Societies can be permanently maintained in England, Ireland or Scotland. The latter came into existence in the colonies naturally, for mutual support in the maintenance of national traditions against new and strange ways, or to soften

that nostalgia which all emigrants feel in lands where they are vastly outnumbered. But Nova Scotians were at home; and every year increased the proportion of native-born, who knew no other land except through accounts of their immigrant parents or grandparents. They, therefore, needed little stimulus to think of themselves as Nova Scotians, although they were inclined to depreciate their own value and their own resources in comparison with the inhabitants of the British Isles and the United States. Moreover, when Nova Scotia had won self-government in 1848, and its people were free to provide social, cultural and humane institutions for all without distinction, no such organization with a limited membership was necessary, or could be expected to elicit much enthusiasm. When all were Nova Scotians, none had the right to set themselves apart and decide by a two-thirds vote whether another could be admitted to membership.

But, despite its brief life and its limited membership, it had helped to express the inarticulate yearnings of the native-born for a country of their own, which they could venerate as their fathers venerated the lands of their birth, and it helped them to formulate standards by which to judge the contributions of their fellowmen to civilization. At first they tended to glorify the founders of their country as the English, Irish and Scots glorified their patron saints. From this they passed to pride in native-born Nova Scotians, who had won distinction in Great Britain as artists, authors or military men: Newton whose pictures were hung in the National Gallery, Twining, a distinguished surgeon who wrote a definitive book on cholera, and Fawson who gave his life to the Empire under the Duke of Wellington. Finally, they began to see signs of genius in those amongst them like Maria Morris, Haliburton and Murdoch. Thus, by the middle of the century, their character both national and personal was formed, the "Nova Scotia-ness" of Nova Scotians revealed; and when later the province was merged in the Dominion of Canada, Nova Scotian Societies were destined to spring up in the other provinces, side by side with British national Societies, representing a similar nostalgia for Nova Scotia and things Nova Scotian.