

HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF JOSEPH HOWE

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JOSEPH HOWE formed the habit early in life of keeping copies of his letters, as well as that of making memoranda on various subjects which aroused his attention. The letters on public questions which were deemed deserving of publication in print by his editors are to be found in the two volumes of his *Speeches and Public Letters*. In addition to these, there are extant several other letters, some of them dealing with current public matters, and others of a private nature, which have not been given to the public. Many of them throw an interesting side-light on public events and on public men, and others help to illustrate phases in the development of his own astonishingly vivid career.

At the age of thirteen years, Howe went into the office of *The Royal Gazette* to learn the printing business. The paper was published by his father and his eldest brother. He remained with them until 1827, when with James Spike he purchased from William Minns *The Weekly Chronicle* and changed the name of the paper to *The Acadian*. He thus settled down as an editor and publisher, and began his public career. But it might have been otherwise. It is not generally known that some seven years earlier he entertained the notion of quitting his Province for good and of settling in South America. He had become discouraged, as he explains in the following letter, with his prospects in Nova Scotia. Had he carried his purpose into execution, the loss to his native country would have been great; the public life of the country would have been deprived of much of its colour; and the eloquence of its gifted native son might have been lost to the language.

In 1824—he was not yet twenty years of age—the intention to go to South America was formed. In a letter, dated May 2, he explained:

About six weeks ago I told them (his parents) of my attention of going to South America at no very distant date. This will surprise you, my dear Jane, but I have many reasons for my determination. Trade, indeed everything in Halifax, has been very dull; at our business there is very little doing indeed. With the exception of about two months in the Spring, the Post Office and the printing office together hardly furnish half enough to

employ my head and my hands about; and we are so situated, being the servants of government, that we cannot extend our concern in any way so as to make more employment and more profit, because we can never take the popular side in anything that may be going forward, and by continuing where I am, I must eventually become a burthen upon the concern and in some measure stand in the light of John's children, which I am determined never to do; and added to this, as we are under government, we cannot enjoy here the free expression of our sentiments and are not infrequently subject to the caprice of men in office. This, while a boy, I never liked, and know when a man I never could put up with. These circumstances have naturally made me look round me, and as every part of South America presents excellent prospects for young men of industry and steady habits, I had turned my attention that way, and after thinking a good deal upon the subject, I finally made up my mind and mentioned it to my friends. Some of them approve of it very much, although they were all startled at first. Father is a good deal averse to it, although since we heard of Sarah's going to Lima he does not seem to be so much against it. My having been for some time telling them of the beauty and fertility of the country, and the excellent prospects it presented, served very materially to soften the idea of Sarah's departure for Lima. Before we heard of it I had not determined exactly where I should go. I had some thoughts of Buenos Ayres, but now shall certainly go to Lima. I shall feel the separation from my friends very sensibly, but shall also feel the necessity of the measure and am persuaded that you, upon reflection, will not condemn me for exerting my energies for the "glorious privilege of being independent."

Six months later we find that South America is still in his mind. Under date November 7th, he writes:

This is my year of suspense. I am something like a poor devil of a traveller who finds himself at the entrance of three or four roads—hardly knowing which to adopt but determined to prosecute one or the other vigorously whenever his starting time may come. For the present I must remain stationary. If John hears handsomely from England between this and the time that our Journals will be published in the Spring, I think I shall remain here or at least in one of the three Provinces because then it will give us the means of extending our business, which at present we have not. If I remain, John wants me to study law, and if my other business would be sufficient to keep me above the low chicane and unprincipled pettifoggery of the profession, I think it more than probable that I may . . .

I have some slight inclination for the profession. It would in a great measure assimilate with my earlier feelings, for I am confident that a life of study—not deep metaphysical nonsense and the exercise of it—in some profession of usefulness would please me much. A printing office in New Brunswick or Canada is another air castle; but if we do not hear from home, I am de-

terminated to be off the moment the winter's work is over, because my staying can in no way benefit the concern and the concern can do nothing for me. If I go I should prefer going to Lima as the prospect is equally good there and it would be a satisfaction to us both to be together, but the expenses will be so great that I should not much like to be so burthensome to my friends. I shall endeavor to get there however. If I cannot, I will go to the Brazils where there is every prospect for industry, for I am decidedly determined not to pass another such a summer of idleness as the last has been. At present I practice my old business of reading. I have acquired a sufficient knowledge of the French language to be able to read their lighter works with tolerable ease, not that I can boast of following Jean Jacques through his melancholy metaphysics, but the tales of Marmontel, Gil Blas and some others I can master pretty easily. I have now commenced Spanish without any assistance for there is none to be had here, but I hope by dint of labor to get some knowledge of the construction of that language and perhaps may teach myself to read it, which will be of eminent service to me in the prosecution of my future plans. If I study Law, I must learn Latin. God help me—a year ago I would have beaten anybody who would have told me I would ever have studied anything but plain English.

His sister was lost at sea on a return voyage from Peru, and Mr. Howe then abandoned his plan of going to South America. The next letter which we have is dated March 26th, 1826, and we find him still somewhat unsettled. He is resisting a strong desire to write poetry. He had published in one of the local newspapers—probably Mr. Minns's *Weekly Chronicle*—his poem on Melville Island, and it was very well received. In this letter he puts the following on record:

As much as three years ago, finding the habit of verse writing too much calculated to foster feelings and give rise to hopes, which only made me unhappy, and fearing lest by a gradual growth it might interfere with things of more consequence (although even to this day I am convinced that I never for a moment neglected business to pursue it) I came to the resolution to root out the inclination—and I have ever since pursued a kind of warfare with the Muses. I read scarcely any Poetry, Plays or Novels. I have very seldom “committed the sin of rhyme”—until this winter when I wrote Melville Island. The success which that met with (for it was praised here more than it deserved) although it has not caused me to alter my resolution, yet has awakened feelings which I have long striven to smother, and sometimes calls up hopes, which I readily recognize as the spectres which flitted before my path, even in childhood, throwing a shade over it of doubt and restless, agitating uncertainty. If I could be content to go along quietly and peaceably like my neighbours and at the end of some fifty or sixty years tumble into my grave

and be dust, I should be happy—very happy. But this infernal feeling, whatever it be, still points to something ahead which is viewless and undefined, and would, right or wrong, have me pursue.

Some of my friends, who wish me well, make occasionally similar attacks on me. They tell me I ought positively not to give over writing—that it is my duty to write, etc., etc. Judge Haliburton talked even greater nonsense than this. . . .

I keep urging John to go home and get a decided answer to his claims, so as to set matters at rest and if unsuccessful throw us upon our own resources to better our fortunes. He promises me faithfully he will go this summer. My own inclination would lead me to quit the path which he and my father have trod to so little purpose, for like the young Roman I have too much reason to exclaim

Our fathers' fortune would almost teach us
To renounce his principles.

I am partial to the printing business, and I am convinced that I can always provide for myself by starting a paper either here or elsewhere, which, if they determine at home to send us no relief, I will immediately do.

A letter dated May 19th, 1827 contains an interesting account of his hopes of success with his paper *The Acadian*. He writes:—

After the death of poor Sarah I gave up my South American scheme, because father and mother would have looked upon it as certain destruction if I had gone. Since then I have endeavored to attach myself more strongly to my own country; and as the probability of my ever seeing any other had vanished, it is daily becoming more dear to me. And although I have given up the idea of ever being rich, yet I do not despair that the same industry and activity of mind, which, if exerted in a wider field, might have made me so, will at least earn for me a moderate independence. If John succeeds, as I have little doubt he will, the *Post* and *Gazette* offices should give him a living, and my own concern, which is daily increasing and, of course, will increase with the increasing prosperity and intelligence of the country, will ere long become valuable. You will be glad to hear that in addition to retaining all Mr. Minns's subscribers, with the exception of four, we have already added 120 to our list. This in five months, considering how little leisure I have had to devote to it, is doing a good deal. When John comes and takes the anxieties and his share of the labour of his own concerns upon his back, I shall be able, besides doing my other business, to make my paper more useful and interesting. My partner, Spike, is a steady, slow going second edition of Jem Story—with no talent and little or no energy, but he is always in the office and takes the greater part of the charge and labour of the printing part of it off my hands and is, so far, very useful. . . .

As it is I contrive to make the *penny candle* burn as brightly as its neighbors, and under the editorial shelter of that great battery *we* thunder away as much nonsense as my contemporaries.

I shall soon become a perfect quidnunc. I already read papers by the dozen, write long leading articles upon subjects about which I know nothing, and speculate most gravely upon political changes and affairs of state and all the various "accidents by flood and field" which come within the reach of my good quill. When tired of editorial restraint and its attendant cant and humbug, I put on the reverend wig and sober phiz of Fred Maple* and ramble along in my own way—perhaps mount Pegasus and gallop a distance of four or five verses which you may occasionally see signed with four stars.

Howe's work in *The Acadian* was not distinguished. He was still very young, and had not yet got into his stride. Some of his articles, however, are not without local interest. His poems—*To Mary*, *Friendship's Garden*, *Cornelia's Answer*, *La Tribune*, and a few others—first saw the light in his own paper. He wrote also four articles entitled "Chizencook", (thus spelling the name of that settlement), an article on Ferguson's Cove, the Regatta, May Mornings and a West Indian Sketch. He sold his interest in *The Acadian* to his co-partner "the steady, slow-going" James Spike in December, 1827, and purchased from Mr. George R. Young for £1,050 *The Nova Scotian* with which he was to be so intimately connected for so many years. *The Nova Scotian* of December 27th, 1827, contained a notice of the sale to "Mr. Joseph Howe,—a young gentleman who had already by the intelligence and spirit which he had displayed in the conduct of a similar publication proved that he was fully competent to sustain any character which *The Nova Scotian* may yet have acquired." The issue of the paper of January 3rd, 1828, contained a Prospectus, unsigned, by the new editor.

His first few years with his new venture he describes in a letter dated July 5th, 1829:

I began the world, to be sure, only a year and a half ago, at which time my goods and chattels were not perhaps worth more than £5.

Having trust in Providence—and (as you know I always had) a modest reliance on my own head and hands, I saddled myself with an obligation to pay £1,050 or £210 a year for five years, and went to work to feed and clothe the former and to fulfil the latter, as well and as fast as I could. I took the paper from Young, under the conviction that I should lose at least 100 subscribers the first year, as I was a stranger to them all, and perhaps might not be able to keep it up to the old standard—instead of which I have now nearly a hundred more than he had, and in the past year did as much job printing as doubled my

* "Fred Maple" was Howe's pen-name subscribed to several of his articles in *The Acadian*.

calculations when I took the concern. In addition to this I have been printing 3,000 copies of Haliburton's History of the Province by which I shall clear a handsome sum, so that, all things considered, I have great reason to be thankful, as I believe few who began with nothing have done more in a year and a half. I now feel no apprehension but what I shall, in a few years, realize a permanent, perhaps, handsome, independence. I work hard and live frugally and have no debts that I cannot meet when they are due, and none that in good time I cannot extinguish.

(To be continued)