

H.A. Robson's Autobiography¹

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Boyhood Memories

My recollection of my boyhood in the old country is that subjects of current public concern were more closely discussed than they are here now. Or at least that a boy was assumed to have intelligent appreciation at an earlier time than here.

It was a rule laid down by someone that a boy should begin school at four years of age. I remember being led off at that age in Barrow-in-Furness and I thought I was quite too young. And as life began at four you were soon taking things in. The idea of starting lads off at four is cutting off his natural time just as is done by compulsory retirement while a man is still in his prime. However that maybe I got going rather early.

It was not because there was the remotest chance that I would become a lawyer that I heard a lot about notorious cases. Such cases took the place of the 'thrillers' today. The case of the notorious Charles Peace was impressed on me by a street incident. The story of that criminal can be read in "Notable British Trials."

I do not know whether the habit is still followed over there but there used to be a trade in song-sheets carrying songs about startling events. I remember hearing a woman singing at a street corner in Newcastle-on-Tyne and each verse ended with a refrain in shrill tragic note about "The Murderer Charles Peace". The woman did quite a large penny-trade.

Whether it was to my advantage or not I will not say but I was once, while we were living in Newcastle, taken out to the Gosforth races. My main recollection being of noisy red-coated gentlemen shouting from book-makers stands something like "Two-to-one-bar-none".

Everything relating to the sea interested the British folk and we boys envied the lads that were sent to training ships and admired them in their uniforms when they returned for visits. I was living near Barrow-in-Furness at the time the "City of Rome" was being built. The ship was to be the largest in the world. "The Great Eastern" had held that distinction but as I recollect

¹ The following is an autobiographical sketch of Robson found in the archives. No more extensive manuscript could be located. While brief, it is included to permit readers to hear Robson's own voice and approach as he reflected on past events. H A Robson, Autobiography - draft and correspondence (ca. 1945, 1989, Legal Judicial Historical Collection), Winnipeg, Archives of Manitoba, (Q 26462, file 40).

the story was it was unmanageable and had to be broken up. The City of Rome was of a more modern type and its oncoming made great excitement. It was built at Barrow and the stocks were on Walney Channel. I don't know how I got there but I was in a small yacht and when this huge hull entered the water it made an enormous wave that seemed to take us near the sky. It was a great sight, the numbers of small craft that were jostled about by the surge of the waters but I think no damage was done in that way. Persons standing watching on the Walney shore got a thorough wetting; a horse and cart were drawn into the water and the horse drowned.

But there was a tragedy that overcast very heavily the otherwise joyous occasion. It was learned that in the launching a boiler exploded and a man and a boy had been killed.

The attractions of the sea-coast so dear to Englishmen are there at Barrow in abundance. In addition there is the picturesque ruin of the old Cistercian monastery known as Furness Abby with its spacious and beautiful park. I lived at ancient Dalton-in-Furness nearby the Abbey and we took every opportunity of making off to the imposing ruins to play around them or now and again to gaze through the barred entrances, study the hieroglyphics and wonder what in the long distant past it had all meant.

There was at that time a very high tower apart from the ruin and we were told that it was a watch-tower and signalling station and that from its elevation on the splendid "Grey Monument" in Newcastle could be seen. That may have been a story for boys. I was informed lately that the tower had been removed; perhaps the centuries overcame it at last.

Attending school in those days was a stern business. There were two schools in Dalton in my time. One was the Green School I believe under Parish control, the other the Board School, i.e. the School Board's school to which every Monday morning I took my fourpence. In that school the girls were kept separate from the boys. When I got to a certain standard I would have to take sixpence and many families were not anxious for that day to come.

It was a mining district.

There were a large number of boys at the Board School and certainly no Little Lord Fauntleroy ever came from there. Yet while there was plenty of internal fighting there was a cohesion due to an antipathy to the Green School and its supposed class superiority. It was a good thing the schools were a considerable distance apart. The Vicar had some visiting authority or perhaps just assumed it for at intervals he descended on us, gathered the boys in the playground and gave us much admonition.

There was much to be said for that Board School. It was strictly business and part of that business was the study of the Acts of the Apostles. There was no religiosity but we had to learn, particularly, all about St. Paul's missionary journeys. I can see yet in my mind's eye the maps the Headmaster drew on the board.

The Master was a gentleman by the name of Myers. School facilities were not as they are now. While classes might be a little distance apart there were at times some going in the same room. There never was anyone so quick as Mr. Myers to detect inattention or conversation. There was no warning but the offender was up over the desk in a shot receiving a good caning on the seat of his corduroys. I know what I am talking about.

We paid more attention to Mr. Myers than we did to the Vicar and yet Mr. Myers was a kindly gentleman. When school would break up for holidays he would produce bags of filberts and pour them out on the floor for a general scramble. He was rarely absent but was in the Volunteers and went I suppose to camp at times.

On one such occasion a Mr. Rhodes was in charge. Mr. Rhodes was a competent man but too gentlemanly for that lot. There were threatenings at once and the school broke up one afternoon in wild revolution. No one complained to the Board about what Mr. Myers did on his return. The parents were of stern stuff. I have taken some time at this because it was the period in my schooling that made the most lasting impression.

There is another thing; not only was the navy always kept to

the front but the army and Volunteers also. There was usually war to talk about. It might be Egypt or Afghanistan but the hobgoblin of these days was that Russia was going to swoop down on India. Even if there were ever tranquility beyond the seas there was always Ireland. The Phoenix Park murders were said to have dashed to the ground all hopes of peace.

The Dalton community was just the right size for boys to know what was going on. We had a grand time during an election. It must have been the exciting election of 1880. The boys had to wear yellow or red rosettes or stay indoors if they did not want to be hurt. We joined the throng that went to the railway station to meet the Liberal candidates and escort him to his quarters. It got very hot as election day approached. On that day all shopkeepers of Tory leanings kept their shutters up. I remember some of the mob climbing up the wall of the Wellington Hotel, tearing out the fine clock and dashing it to the ground. But the worst was an attack on a planing mill from the upper window of which I saw a man thrown to the street below. The funny part was that other parts of the riding were just as violent the other way and the Liberal lost the seat.

I must take a line or two to say that I am entirely of Scottish descent. My mother belonged to Jedburgh and my father to the Southwest. I think Dumfries. But Dalbeattie in Kirkcudbrightshire is the Scottish home of which I knew and where I was sent to visit my Grandparents on my father's side. It is not a matter for my family to boast about but I notice that the notorious sea-rover, John Paul, later known as John Paul Jones, was born in Kirkcudbrightshire. However that may be his hatred of England was not general in the Stewartry it is safe to say.

Dalbeattie when I went there first was a very active, charming place. The granite quarries had a lot to do with its support and it has always been a renowned farming and cattle, horse and sheep district. Young men, scholars and journeymen were to be seen everywhere in the evenings. Volunteer drill, cricket and other like occupations abounded. But when I went back in 1926 it seemed comparatively deserted. For example the

sparkling musical smithy with its magnificent horses had become an unromantic motor-repair shop.

Taking a voyage abroad in those days was a momentous affair and yet America had a tremendous lure especially for those who saw little ahead of them in the old land. My father had gone ahead in 1880 sailing in the S.S. Peruvian and was somewhere in Manitoba or beyond. My mother set out in charge of her family of five comparatively young children. But she was very practical; she got the partings over with a minimum of fuss and took us all to Liverpool on 18 May, 1882 where we got on a tender and sailed out to "The Parisian," Queen of the Allan fleet. Everybody knows about The Parisian but at that time she had a fine figurehead which some iconoclast took off in a later year and deprived her of a fine feature. It is very odd how things repeat. Over thirty years later I became closely acquainted with Mr. W.R. Allan, son of Andrew Allan of the great line. He was a sentimental Scottish descendant and anybody who had crossed on the Parisian had really done something according to him. She was a vessel to be proud of and when under full sail and working her two Allan striped funnels she made speed and must have been a beautiful sight to behold. We were in what was called the Intermediate, that is, above steerage and below cabin rank. We were very comfortable and as we saw many spouting whales and great icebergs it was a happy experience.

Our journey by train, or rather by several trains, from Point Levis to Winnipeg by way of Chicago was different. Of all the afflictions that passengers could ever have to endure that was the worst. There were such long stops, some explained and most not, and huddling in stations for hours between trains. But it made Winnipeg seem a cheerful place once it was reached. We stayed in Winnipeg for a few weeks. It was then the central distributing point for humans as well as for merchandise. The great prairies cried out for both.

Shortly after our arrival in Winnipeg a Scotchman came around looking for boys to plant potatoes. He was the Keeper of Louise Bridge and had a large field adjacent. The pay was to be

seventy-five cents a day and our dinner. I was taken on. It seems to me the planting must have been late but the potatoes came up and I was offered more days work hoeing but it would only be fifty cents per day at this time. I could not take it on as I was going in as office boy to an employment agent named Bruce, another Scotchman. To make three shillings a day at my age before being here many days was in my eye a complete justification for the attractive reports about this country which we had read in England. My days as office boy to Mr. Bruce were short but I ran messages about labourers to Major W.R. Bell of the Bell farm at Indian Head where much later on I had to visit the Major on business for the same labourers. I used to find the Major at the Manitoba Club then on Garry Street.

We went on to the Pile O'Bones, or Wascana Creek which was to be a C.P.R. townsite, and which is now Regina. I will take just a few lines more to finish our journeying. It was, as I recollect, August 1882 and the railway was in the course of being constructed on the prairies. We had a passenger train as far as Flat Creek, now Oak Lake. We then were shown into a box-car with considerable of our equipment. The line was newly laid and our experience during that two hundred miles can better be imagined than described.

Ultimately we reached the stopping place for the Pile O'Bones. It was a couple of miles this side of the creek and about opposite where Lorne Street is now. I think the rails had not got farther than just to the west of the Pile O'Bones; at all events fuel was available for the settlers in the shape of huge birch stakes which had kept railway ties on the flat-cars composing the many tie-trains which discharged their loads thereabout. Fortunately up to that time the creek was uncontaminated and our water supply came from there. The water tested of grass and had to be strained of beetles. Vinegar made it drinkable and there were no bad after-effects.

Pile O'Bones creek had more to its name than some of the other places that depend on myth. There were scattered over the prairie thereabout, as indeed elsewhere in the Territories, large

quantities of buffalo bones which told both of the numbers and sad fate of the herds which not long before had range over the plains. The bones had their final uses. There was a market for them I believe in St. Paul and cart-loads accumulated at Regina to be shipped out by rail. They provided a little much needed money and it was the poor half-breeds that did most of this trade.

My intention is to write about persons rather than conditions and I will be brief about the latter. The prairie at and about the townsite had many hummocky places whose low spots contained water. This was August or September; the water in the creek was ample and seemed fresh. Nevertheless there were all that fall and in fact in many of the earlier years very bad prairie fires. We fought a severe fire that threatened our tents; everyone who could wield a wet sack had to work for dear life.

As we had come down on nature rather suddenly there were wild animals about the place. A fox terrier and a setter had uncovered a badger and a bloody battle followed. I think everyone turned out and the contest was only ended when engineers observing from their elevation above decided to intervene and with a crow-bar despatched the poor native.

We got out of our tent and occupied a frame house in December. Next door to us, that is to say in the next tent, was a Mr. Bonneau and his family. Mr. Bonneau was a French Canadian trader. I had made the acquaintance of his youngest son, Joseph and to me it was a very profitable acquaintance. Where they had come from I do not know but Joe Bonneau was the source of much information. One evening he took me into their tent and I saw sitting around the stove four men who at once attracted attention. One of them was a kindly priest, another, evidently the head of the group, a dark man serious but also kindly, and there were two or three half-breeds. Much later on I saw these men again. The priest was Father St. Germain, the man I have referred to as head was Jean Louis Legare and the half-breeds were his men who had been with Legare during his experiences with

Sitting Bull. I refer to Legare later on.

It is needless to say that the new community attracted many Indians. They were very reluctant to occupy their reservations and preferred to wander about and see anything that was new. I have seen and heard pow-wows on the streets of Regina. The tom-tom was hammered, the squaws sat around and sang while the braves danced and sang till exhausted. That lot at length got away to the reserves near the Qu'Appelle Lakes north-east of Regina.

Still the nomads were in evidence for a considerable time and one would look about now and again to the outskirts to see where the latest lodges had arrived. For a long time they would enter tents or houses uninvited and, though harmless, of course frightened the women-folk. It should be said that probably some of these were wandering Sioux who did not belong to us or vagrants who simply would not be persuaded to go to their locations. Some of them got to sawing wood for stoves and helped their existence in that way. Even after we had got into permanent premises this went on. I remember the window of my little office would be darkened for quite a time by an Indian watching me writing out the law papers for my principals.

The seat of the Territorial Government had been moved from Battleford to Regina; and the Indian Department Offices for the Territories and the North West Mounted Police Headquarters had been established there. The Office of Lieutenant Governor and Indian Commissioner were held by the Honourable Edward Dewdney. He was a fine looking man and a gentleman. He had a pleasant word for everyone.

There happened about this time a very tragic affair that cast a gloom over the community. There had arrived from England a family by the name of Melmouth, very refined people. There were Mr. and Mrs. Melmouth, a daughter and two sons. Mr. Melmouth went North as far as Long Lake to look for land. He got separated from his party and was never heard of again. He had a gun with him and there was no trace even of it. The Mounted Police and volunteers of course searched thoroughly, but it was fruitless. Mr. Dewdney was a constant visitor at the Melmouth's

tent and did all he could. Mrs. Melmouth, the daughter and younger son returned to England. The elder son joined the North West Mounted Police.

Judge Richardson, as he was called, was a stipendiary magistrate for the Territories. He had been stationed at Battleford since 1876. He was moved to the new capital and commenced the first administration of civil and criminal justice there. Of his great part in affairs I will write in their turn.

In 1884 my Mother took us to Glasgow but, having seen her friends again, had the experience of thousands and preferred to be back in Canada. Passing through Toronto on the way back in the summer of 1885 there were tremendous cheering crowds and soldiers marching. It was a regiment that had returned from suppressing the North West Rebellion of 1885.

And here is where I really begin.

- finis -

The following, written on dissimilar paper, was with the foregoing. We believe it adds to the picture of Pile O'Bones in 1882:

It was an interesting sight, the constant unloading of trains with a stream of settlers and their supplies. The sight had been observed since in many other points but not to the extent then noticed at the crossing of Pile O'Bones Creek.

Other important points had for many years been "posts" of one kind or another and had formed the nuclei of towns but Pile O'Bones, that is to say Regina, was started on a spot in a vast wilderness where there had been nothing in the past but the nomadic native and the transient buffalo.

To the Pile O'Bones crossing everything had to be taken new, everything from a house to the minutest article of domestic use. For a while there was no station, no station platform, no unloading accommodation. Unloading was direct to the ground with occasionally a mule team coming forward for bigger shipments.

The hardy mule was a left-over from grading gangs and he probably liked the change of occupation. He had been the galley

10

slave in the animal kingdom, had become acquainted with all varieties of language and every kind of whip, even the long snake-whip with the piece of wire on the end of it. But he had the dignity of power and enjoyed a certain kind of respect. He could stand more work and abuse than the horse and was royalty itself compared with the ox. But as in everything else capability got the work to do.