

Sydney Morton's Diary

Sydney Morton et John Leefe

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Documents

Sydney Morton's Diary

The discovery of this all too brief yet fascinating little diary is the result of a happy combination of a rainy Sunday and its attendant restiveness. Drawn to uncatalogued material in the collections of the Queens County Historical Society (whose kind permission allows the work to appear in this magazine) in an attempt to relieve dampened spirits, I was fortunate in coming upon Sydney Morton's missive. Though dusty and slightly tattered through a century's wear, its content is refreshingly delectable.

John Sydney Morton (1868-1955) was six when he and his father embarked on the "M. A. Starr" to coast from Liverpool to Halifax. Leaving his brothers at home in Milton, Sydney ventured forth to the provincial capital to join his mother who was convalescing at the home of her brother, John Stevens. Sydney's father, John Morton, had been a man of some substance in Queens County, that is until the Bank of Nova Scotia had foreclosed on the Bank of Liverpool in late 1873. Like so many other of the county's citizens, father John had lost heavily, suffering financial ruin in shipbuilding, shipping, and timber interests. Even the family home had hung in the balance. It was only through the timely intervention of Uncle John Stevens that the house and sawmill in Milton were not cast into alien hands.

The record of this visit, though written in the mother's hand, clearly portrays the Halifax of 1874 seen through a child's eyes. The round of familial visits, the central role of the female in the domestic setting, the — what must have seemed to Sydney — incessant tea drinking and the normality of Sunday service are indicative of typical life for the mid-Victorian child of Sydney's social standing. Placed within a wider context, these social ruffs suggest a certain maturity about Nova Scotian life by the 1870's.

Perhaps one of the more refreshing aspects of Sydney's chronicle is that despite the permissive society, despite the weakening of the family unit, despite the monster television, a six year old's interests appear to have suffered little basic change in the course of a century. A child's purchase of a ball, marbles, a wheeled toy are not at all unusual by today's standards. The

picture handkerchief would hold as great a novelty for today's child as it did yesterday's. The catching of the "Halifax flies" though perhaps seemingly a bit out of the ordinary is surely not far removed from the toting home of the proverbial frog in jar. The make-shift swing, harnessing a dog cart, playing with the hidden treasures of an unexplored attic, easily fall within the realm of the contemporary child.

Halifax society does not escape Sydney's purview. The description of Old Hayes, the disabled sailor, working, one expects, as the only alternative to starving, focuses on the acceptance of the old Protestant work ethic. The presence of the Indian squaws and their papooses at the marketplace seems to fall easily within Sydney's experience. He does not comment on the fact that he has seen Indians, only that he finds the papooses' postures amusing. Perhaps most novel is his amazement at the shenanigans of the Irish children. Their seeming lack of inhibition, their strange dialect and the sense of their belonging to a quite different kind of people all catch Sydney's fancy. Finally the "flea frolics" suggest that the commonness of parasites even within better social circles was recognized as a condition not to be desired, yet to be suffered with patience.

Interestingly enough many of the public places which Sydney finds remarkable are still prime attractions in Halifax. The museum, the Public Gardens and its swans, and Province House are visited annually by thousands of tourists. The children of today are somewhat the poorer for the loss of the Cheapside marketplace which is perhaps compensated for the fact that the modern child would find little astonishing in the presence of a public library. Though the horsedrawn trolleys are gone forever, Sydney's reaction to them is perhaps no more no less remarkable than that of a modern child to Montreal's metro.

All in all, this little work gives a great deal to think upon. In a sense it is a sort of social commentary from a vantage point one is not often afforded. It is a wee bit of history in a special package, intentionally written to be enjoyed by one, destined to be enjoyed by many.

JOHN LEEFE

Friday, July 24, 1874

Pa and I arrived at Halifax on the M.A. Star this afternoon at half past 5 o'clock, a quick passage from Liverpool, which we left this morning at 6 o'clock, having to stop at Lunenburg about noon.

Uncle John Stevens met us on the wharf. We found Ma sitting out by the front door under the trees with Grandpa, Aunt Kate, Aunt Nell, Josie, and Grace, they were all very glad to see us. After Tea Grace took me to a Railroad Concert, so they called it, held in Mrs. Tompkins barn, Grace was one

of the actors. The audience was composed of Irish girls and boys. I didn't think much of the play, they had a ghost in it, I knocked his hat off for the fun of it. That made the girls and boys laugh and they said it was the best part of the play. After it was all over they wanted their money back again, but the boy who took the money at the door had lost it, 35 cents net proceeds.

Saturday, July 25, 1874

I did not get up until 9 o'clock this morning. I slept with Aunt Kate, she thought I was tired out with my journey and would not awake me. After breakfast Grace took me over on the Battery and also showed me Grandpa's garden, yard and wharf. Grace and Josie wanted me to go in bathing with them but I did not want to go, so I sat on the shore and watched them, they looked so funny ducking up and down with old hats and dresses on. Grace then dressed me and we went up town. First we went to the Halifax Library which is an immense large room, the walls of which are covered with books. We next bought some cakes and then went down to the Market where we saw the Market Women selling all sorts of vegetables, there was some dear little calfs for sale, we were amused with watching the squaws making baskets with their papposes lying about on the ground. On our way home we saw Old Hayes, his donkey and show cart, standing by the Province building, he is such a funny looking man, he used to be a sailor but was shipwrecked in the "Mary of Miramichi" and cast on shore, his hands and feet were so badly frost bitten that they had to be cut off, he was a very large man. We next went down to see Aunt (?), then home to dinner. In the afternoon Pa took Grace & I up to the Depot in the horse cars. We had a grand ride all through Town. I saw for the first time the Mail cars and Steam engine, on our way home Pa bought me a pair of slippers. Ma gave me a rubber ball.

Sunday, July 26, 1874

I went to Church in the morning with Aunt Kate and Grace to St. Lukes, in the afternoon Grace took me to Sunday School and afterwards to Church. Josie was baptized during the service, Aunt Kate & Uncle Charlie acted as sponsors. I played out doors after tea with Jack. I almost forgot to mention that we all went down on the Lumber Yard Wharf in the afternoon with Ma driving in her perambulator, Pa went with us. After tea Grace got down a box of pictures and gave me some for myself and Arthur and a box to put them in. What fun the Irish children have on the Battery, Sunday and Monday is all the same to them, tis 8 o'clock, I am off to bed.

Monday, July 27, 1874

Was up Town all Morning shoping with Aunt Kate. We bought a nice pair of boots with copper toes for myself, ever so many people were walking about the streets, the horse cars passing up and down all the time with the horse

bells ringing made the streets look very gay and festive.

This afternoon I was amused watching the Irish girls bathing and undressing on the Battery. They ain't afraid of being seen as naked as kittens, after they are dressed they roll down the bank showing off their bare legs, some they got fighting, and slap and grab at one anothers heads. They have one dressing comb which they call a "rack". "Biddy when you have done racking your head give us the rack"; that is how they talk. I love to watch the Steamers and Steam tugs passing up and down the Harbour, puffing and blowing as if out of breath. I went up town again with Aunt Kate and Grandma. I got a new Scotch cap and Aunt Kate made me a present of a whip with a whistle on the handle. After Tea Frank went up in the attic and brought down an old wicker wagon to harness Jack into but bed time came before it was ready. Pa left here yesterday afternoon for Windsor.

Tuesday, July 28, 1874

Frank put Jack in the waggon this morning, I took the reins and my whip, and off we went. Jack is a grand dog for going, he gallops like a horse, didn't we go fast though. This afternoon I went up Town with Josie & Grace to visit the Museum but found the rooms locked, we were too late coming out I tumbled down the stairs head first, I hurt my leg awfully but I didn't cry. When I came home Aunt Kate took me over to Aunt (?) to Tea, she was invited to meet the Rev. Mr. Neish, I had to laugh at the cat, she would not stay off the back of my chair, she wanted to take Tea with me and I did not want any of her company. After Tea Grace came over to say the harpers were down at the West corner, so we went down to see them, there was four in all, one man played the harp, another the flute, the other two played the fiddle, and the people gave them cents. I had another ride with Jack in the wagon this afternoon.

Wednesday, July 29, 1874

I played about the yard and front door all morning, Frank made me a paper fly box. I put some sugar into it and am going to catch some Halifax flies, and take them down to Milton just for the fun of it. I was out all afternoon shopping with Aunt Kate, on our way home we call on Aunt Azor (?), they made us stay to Tea, the Major boys are good fellow to play with but they are all older than I. We got a letter from Aunt Min today, she says they all miss me at home, Fred says he never missed anybody half so much. I am going to take some sweets home to him, Ma says I can.

Thursday, July 30, 1874

Frank gave me a picture handkerchief this morning with hand shadows on it, and one for each of the boys, we will have some fun with them trying to make the same on the wall when I get home. Raining all morning, I had

to play in the house until this afternoon, so Grace and I played in the attic with her toys and Ma's things. We had bread & molasses to eat. Grace was Mother and wore a long dress. In the evening Aunt Kate had some company to Tea, Cousin Eliza and Jane, Cousin Kate Hill and Miss Mary Creed. There was a beautiful rainbow in the East after Tea & more rain.

Friday, July 31, 1874

I awoke this morning and found the sun shining brightly in the window. I was out again shopping with Aunt Kate this morning, and she took me to have my likenesses taken, but a horrid flea got on my back and I could not keep still, so the artist got vexed and gave it up, but we are going again to-morrow. Aunt Kate took Grace and I over to Dartmouth in the afternoon, we went over and back again twice it was so pleasant crossing the Harbor, on coming through Town we stopped at a toy shop. Aunt Kate bought a game for us boys and Grace bought me a horse on wheels to haul about. When we came home, Josie, Aunt Kate and I took Ma out for a drive around two squares, then I went up Town with Josie and bought a stick of sugar barley which was very good. Frankie Creed (?) came up to see me to-day, he was very shy I could hardly get him to shake hands with me. Tis 8 o'clock I must be off to bed, Aunt Kate and I have flea frolics every night, she says we will have to keep a pistol in our room to shoot them with they are so troublesome. I hope they will sleep sound tonight and not bother us. We got a letter from Aunt Helen to-day, she says she is having a lovely time up at Uncle Edmunds, they want Aunt Kate to go up also.

Saturday, August 1, 1874

Grace and I have great fun every morning out in the barn playing on the swing, with an old side saddle. This morning Josie took me up town to have my likeness taken, we had better luck this time, we got two, one I am going to give to Aunt Kate. This afternoon Grace took me out to the Public Gardens, we bought some cakes & candy on the way out, and when we got there, we met some little girls with whom Grace was acquainted, they had oranges so we shared our refreshments. We had brought a slice of bread to feed the swan with, but he would not come out of his house, the keeper thought he was sick, he is a beautiful large fellow, I mean the swan. We gave the bread to the ducks, there was about two dozen of them swimming around in the pond. The flowers were beautiful in the gardens but we were not allowed to touch any of them. We spent a real pleasant afternoon, and returned home hungry and in good time for Tea. Ma and Josie had just returned from their usual drive, so Grace and I wheeled the perambulator over to Aunt Hills barn where we keep it. Bye the bye, I forgot to put down our visit to Miss Cogswells birds, Grace and I took some seeds up there after dinner and we saw the birds thirteen in number. There was two cages in the room, but the

birds were flying all around, the window was covered with a fine wire net work, to prevent their flying away. Aunt Kate has just finished tubbing me, I ran in to kiss Ma goodnight in my draws and shirt, but on seeing Dr. Read there I ran off up stairs as quickly as I could, and got into my snug nest, so here I am as snug as a bug in a rug. Frank has got a row boat he promised to take me out for a row in the morning but he is always home too late, so I am afraid I will have to do without my row, only two more days and then we will start for home and take Ma with us.

Sunday, August 2nd, 1874

I was surprised on going into Ma's room this morning to find Pa there, he came down on the train last night staid at the International Hotel and came down to breakfast with us, he gave me 10 cents and a little brass box (?); and I showed him my new boots and Scotch cap. I was to St. Lukes Church this morning with Josie and Grace and they told Ma when I came home that I was a very good boy. This afternoon, Grace & I went to Sunday School. Bella, our girl, promised to meet us after School and take us out to the Cemetery which she did, we saw two funerals and walked about among the graves, looking at the tombstones and pretty flowers. When we came home we took Ma out for a ride Pa was the Pony Cousin Kate Hill and Josie went with us. We have just been looking out at the window at the row and sail boats passing, long gigs with six men in them. I should be afraid to get into one, for of upsetting, they are so very narrow. I think the men ought not go out boating on Sunday it is wicked. Grandpa Nivins has been putting some kerosine oil in Jacks back to kill the fleas, Jack was very much annoyed about, and would not look at Grandpa or Frank, he took it as an insult.

Monday, August 3rd, 1874

I did not care to go out this morning, Grace wanted me to go up Town, but I wanted to stay at home and play in the barn on my swing and side saddle. When I got tired of that Ma cut out some paper fish for me and I fished over the verandah. After dinner Ma gave Grace & I 20 cents to buy car tickets and cakes and sugar barleys, we started off about 3 o'clock and went up as far as the Depot in the horse car then we came back again and got out at the horse stable where we met Minnie Creed, she Grace and I chased each other and after a while I looked around and found myself quite alone. I had lost both the girls, and pretty lonesome, not knowing which way to go. In the mean while Grace had gone home and not finding me there before her was sent in search of me. She met a man out of Grandpa's yard who had passed me and directed her where to find which she did some distance from home, they were half wild about me at home fearing that I was lost running in every direction looking for me. I was glad to see Grace and get home again Ma was very anxious about me. We all packed up ready for a start on the morrow and we

are going to take Ma with us. I want to get home now to see the boys and Cabby, we have such fun with him.

Wednesday, August 5, 1874

We are now all safe and sound at home. I must give an account of my journey home. We were all up, had breakfast and were ready for a start at six o'clock on Tuesday morning, so we put Ma in her chair, Pa wheeling her and off we started, Aunt Kate, Josie, Uncle John and Grace accompanied us, we were in good time for the steamer M.A. Star, the wharf was crowded with passengers. We took Ma into the Captains state room, we then had only time to say goodbye to our friends when the Steam whistle sounded and the steamboat glided quietly out from the wharf. Ma got at once into the berth and they brought her a tin can. I asked what that was for, Ma told me she would be seasick and would need it, I did not know what seasick meant, but was not long in finding out. I was not seasick going down to Halifax, the day was calm and I stayed in the open air all the time, so Pa laid me on the couch and he waited on Ma and I, and was almost sick himself from being in the cabin and seeing us so sick. We thought to arrive at Liverpool about 6 o'clock in the evening but everything was against us, the steamer ran into a net which twisted around our fan and retarded her movements. The Captain said he thought it was well chewed up before we arrived at Liverpool. On coming up the Harbor we were obliged to wait for the tide to take us over the bar, then we stuck in the flats and had to work our way along very slowly, it was half past ten o'clock when we arrived at the wharf. Grandpa Morton was there to meet us with a carriage and Fred was there also with Grandp's man and a waggon to carry our luggage on. Ma was too sick to go up home, she had to stay in Town all night at Mr. Hills Hotel. Pa stayed also, Grandpa took Jack and I home, Pa and Ma laughed at me when I said I was "bound to see Cabby (our big Newfoundland dog) before I went to bed", they said they thought I loved Cabby quite as well as I did the boys. When I got home I found Grandma and Aunt Melinda waiting for us, Cliff and Arthur had sat up until ten o'clock but they got so sleepy that Aunt Minnie had to send them to bed, I was sleepy and tired too, so after I had taken Tea Fred and I went off to bed, I did not need rocking to sleep, I was so done out. They were all disappointed that Ma did not come with me. I had a splendid time in Halifax and enjoyed my visit greatly. It will be Arthurs turn next.

Thursday, August 6th, 1874

This morning the boys awoke & asked for their sweets, but Aunt Minnie told them they must wait until Ma came home and then the trunks would be opened. Pa and Aunt Minnie went down after Ma and about 11 o'clock as we were all playing on the road we espied the carriage coming up and ran

to meet it. The boys were all glad to see Ma, Arthur got into the carriage & the rest of us on behind, our house looked very gay, we had three large flags out in front and one on the flag staff. Aunt Melinda was waiting to hand Ma out, Carlo would have nothing to say to Ma but Cabby tried to make friends. Aunt Minnie then opened the trunks and took out the sweets, I gave each boy a bag full and had one for myself. Ma gave a story book for Fred & Clifford, a belt to Arthur, Frank Rudolf sent handkerchiefs for each of us boys with hand shadows on them, we will have some fun in trying to imitate them. I had lots of little things to show the boys, the horse Grace gave me my ball, my picture & fly boxes, marbles, and fancy bottles, walking cane & LL Ma had lots of visitors in the afternoon, she was glad to get home and we were all glad to have her back again, and I was the boy to bring her home, of course Pa helped me. I forgot to say that Wednesday, the 5th was my birthday. I was just six years old, I have been going to school since last May, know all my letters and am half way through the first book, Cliff goes to the same school, but Fred attends the one on the other side of the river. I must now draw this diary to a conclusion, Ma has written it for me and is going to put it away in the draw where my card (?) is kept and lock it up so that when I am able to read it for myself. Ma says it will be very amusing for me to read it over it will remind me of my visit to Halifax, otherwise I should forget all about it.

Goodbye

John Sidney Morton

Added pages to same diary:

Sidney adventure

July 11th, 1881

Last evening about 7 O clock Sidney went off to the woods to look for the cow, not finding her he was about to give up the sirsch and return home when he herd a crackling a ways of and on looking in the direction from whence the noise came he saw a black animal which he supposed to be a heifer moving towards him. Sid continued walking loking back occasionally when at last in order to satisfy himself as to what it was he turned around and stood still, the animal at once stopped and threw itself into a most striking attitude by standing on its hind legs and waving its huge paws gracefully in the air as if to say, a fair good night to thee, love, a fair good night to thee and pleasant be thy path though it be not with me. Sidney beheld to his horror that his traveling companion was a large bear you will not be surprised when I tell you that Sidney did not pause a moment in order to

ascertain the color of its eyes, neither did he wait to examine whither the expression of its countenance was hostile or friendly, but no his flight from that spot can be more easily imagined than described, as an arrow from a bow, a bullet from a gun or as like the stag which the poet Scott speaks of with one wild bound the corpse he cleared" and arrived at the border of the woods almost breathless, not having paused a moment to breathe nor even to wink". I doubt if that boy will ever know whether he walked or flew whilst escaping from the bear on that memorable evening.

Signed: F. Clifford Morton