

Schooldays, Schooldays . . . Cocagne Academy in the 1840s

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Documents

Schooldays, Schooldays . . . Cocagne Academy in the 1840s

It is common knowledge that the standard of Canadian education in the middle of the nineteenth century left much to be desired, at least by today's values. While there remains a persistent nostalgia for the rural, one-room school where students received close personal attention, as opposed to today's consolidated schools to which children commute, the weaknesses of Canadian rural education are perhaps sometimes forgotten. Fortunately, the recollections and observations of one who survived that system and went on to become a scholar of considerable note, have survived. As they were originally published outside of Canada and have been out of print for some eighty years, it may be worthwhile bringing them forward for both their educational and historical interest.

George McCall Theal was born near St. John in 1837, the descendant on his father's side of a United Empire Loyalist from New York. His maternal grandfather was a sea captain, who lost his life in the Bay of Fundy. He was educated locally, as the following document illustrates, and in 1870 went to South Africa to teach at the famous Lovedale Mission. He then joined Cape Colony's civil service in 1877. Two years later he was appointed colonial archivist, and began writing and editing a series of still important books on South African history and native life. His major works include a *History of South Africa* (8 volumes), the *Records of Cape Colony* (35 volumes), and the *Records of South-East Africa* (9 volumes). He died in 1919.

Theal revisited Canada in 1894 and subsequently published a series of articles in *The Cape Illustrated Magazine*, which were reprinted as *Notes on Canada and South Africa* (Cape Town: Dennis Edwards, n.d.), from which the following is extracted.¹ The village of Cocagne, whose 'academy' Theal attended in the 1840s, is located on the Northumberland shore nine miles north of Shediac. Discovered and named by Nicholas Denys before 1672, it was settled after 1755 by Acadian refugees and by English immigrants in 1800.² As Theal indicates, it suffered a serious economic decline and outflow of population in the second half of the nineteenth century.

1 pp. 36-9.

2 Alan Rayburn, *Geographical Names of New Brunswick* (Ottawa: Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 1975), p. 82. I am grateful to Mr. Michael Swift of the New Brunswick Archives for supplying this reference.

Despite its Acadian origin, little effort was made to teach French in the school, although perhaps the significant point is that any effort was made at all. It is clear from Theal's recollections, and he was a man who valued education, that the Canadian school 'system' of the 1840s, of which he believed the Cocagne Academy to be representative, encouraged fear and truancy rather than an enthusiastic thirst for knowledge. Subjects were taught by rote, with no attempt being made to have students understand them or grasp their relevance. To what extent this was the fault of the 'system' or the unimaginative Rev. Alfred Horatio Weeks, is left to the reader to determine. Clearly, Weeks was attempting to replicate the English public school system, of which he probably was a product. One hesitates, having in mind *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (published in 1857) and other accounts of nineteenth-century English education, to conclude that he did so inaccurately. On the other hand, Theal concludes with evident relief that there had been a vast improvement in Canadian schools in the half-century since his school days at Cocagne Academy.

BRIAN D. TENNYSON

The first excursion which I made from Moncton was to Cocaigue,³ a mixed French and English settlement on a harbour opening into the Straits of Northumberland. If that harbour was on the South African coast it would be of great value, but in Canada secure havens are too common to be much regarded, and Cocaigue is seldom used as a shipping port. The harbour is a deep inlet, with an island in its mouth and a river running into the head of the curve. It is not an attractive place. In midsummer the heat is often intense, and in winter, unsheltered by hill or forest, it lies open to winds which sweep down from the north over great fields of ice, causing the cold to be felt in its utmost severity. Back from the road which runs along the shore stretch the long narrow farms of about a hundred acres each, such as were allotted to the early French settlers under a system of occupation which has not yet been improved upon.

At this place half a century ago, there was a school of some celebrity in the province, termed the Cocaigue Academy, which it was my fate to attend for four years. My visit was thus for the purpose of hunting up old class-mates among the resident families, and of seeing what changes time had brought about in the locality. It was the only place in Canada where I did not see any marked improvement. The forest that I remembered as coming down to the river's edge and clothing the whole country to within a mile of the shore of the Strait was gone, but there were very few houses on the bare bleak farms where it had stood. There was not a vestige of a saw mill or a dam or a ship-

3 Theal's original spelling has been retained throughout.

yard left. The timber trade had vanished, as it has done from many other parts of the country on which were once forests believed to be inexhaustible. Even the adjoining sea was less profitable than in olden times. Oysters and lobsters, once in the greatest plenty, were now so scarce, owing to the vast quantities that had been exported to England, that the tinning establishments were closed. Farming alone remained, and for that the condition of things was less favourable than in other parts of the province. The result was that young English speaking people moved away, though the habitans [sic] remained, and to-day the population is not greater than it was fifty years ago, but it is much more largely French. The most considerable change noticeable is a new and more commodious Roman Catholic church, standing close by the old one which has fallen into decay.

There were only two of my old schoolmates left in the place, and one of these was away from home. From the other I learned the history of many of those who had once been my companions, and who were afterwards scattered far and wide over Canada and the United States. Of the old residents, many of the names even had died out. The Cocaigne Academy had long since disappeared, and in its stead was a school under the modern system, an improvement so great that the young people of the present day can hardly realise it.

A large portion of my life in South Africa having been occupied in teaching, the school system of Canada was one of the subjects which I was desirous of comparing with that of the Cape Colony, and I wanted also to be able to compare that system now with what it was half a century ago. For this purpose I made the acquaintance of the superintendents general of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, from both of whom I received much information, I visited a number of schools and watched the routine, and I collected a considerable quantity of reports, regulations, manuals, and books in use.

Let us look first at the Cocaigne Academy, a good specimen of a Canadian public school — regarded as of the first class — in the olden time. The building, erected by public subscription, stood close to the shore, at one end of the long wooden bridge that spanned the river at its mouth, so as to be in a central position. All the classes were taught in one large room, which was warmed in winter by an immense stove in the centre, round which the desks were ranged. The principal was the reverend Alfred Horatio Weeks, a clergyman of the church of England, and the assistant, or usher as he was termed, was Mr. David Miller, a layman. The government did not contribute anything to the support of the institution, which was maintained entirely by school fees and by subscriptions guaranteed in case the fees fell short. The hours of attendance were from 9 to 4, with an hour for lunch, except on Saturdays, when the school closed at 1. The holidays were about half as long as those at present given. The discipline was cruelly severe. The reverend principal was conscientious, and as he really believed that to spare the rod was to spoil the child, he tried to do his duty regardless of his muscles.

I asked my old classmate if he remembered the punishment inflicted on a particular occasion upon several boys for what would now be regarded as a very trifling fault. I have need to, he replied, and baring one of his wrists he showed me a large mark which he has borne ever since as the result of it.

Yet the reverend principal was not naturally a cruel man. He was a very strict disciplinarian, but he could say kind words and act generously enough outside the schoolhouse. He made me a present of a pair of skates once, so, in spite of the drubbings I received, I have a warm place in my memory for him. He was still living, though at a very advanced age, a widower, and childless, when I was in Canada, but I had not time to visit the part of the province where he was then residing, and shortly after my return to London I received intelligence of his death.

The school being a place of terror, it was a natural result that no one went to it of his own free will. If a boy did not know his lessons, he would argue he might as well play truant for the day, as the punishment for the one offence would be no worse than for the other. And there was frequently a strong temptation to play truant, even when a boy could repeat his home task, but knew he would likely be belaboured for something else. In the spring time a habitant was making maple sugar only half-a-dozen miles up the river, and it would be so nice to help carry the little bark dishes of sap from the trees to the boiler, and get a block when it was taken from the mould. Or later the wild strawberries — the delicious wild strawberries of Canada — were ripening in some warm locality, and each boy thought he would like to be the first to eat them. And then as the season advanced there were the wild raspberries and the blueberries in the newly burnt clearings on the border of the forest, and later still the hazel nuts on the island, all powerful magnets for schoolboys dreading the reverend principal's cane. Or a report would pass round that the fishing was particularly good in a certain stream, or that a big wolf had been trapped by somebody, or a schooner was to be launched, or in winter the river and the harbour would be one great sheet of ice inviting races on skates; with these on one side and the rod on the other, the pupils of the Coclaigne Academy often turned away from the path that led to knowledge.

One day — it was the 3rd of November 1847 — four boys were standing on the bridge watching great clouds of wahwahs [wild geese] and wild ducks of other kinds that were on the wing from the north towards warmer latitudes, knowing by instinct that winter was approaching. The oldest of the four had a gun, but somehow the flocks all took a course that led away from the bridge, and he had no chance of testing his skill. A light canoe was fastened to one of the piers, so, tired of waiting, three of the boys jumped in, and with two of them paddling and the other holding the gun in readiness, shot out into the harbour to a spot that the birds were passing over. The chance came, but the gun recoiled, and with even so slight a shock the canoe turned over. The water was so cold that to swim very far was impossible. One of the boys who

clung to the canoe was saved, the corpse of the one who had the gun was found that night just where the accident took place, and the body of the other was recovered nearer the shore. The effect of this sudden death of two of the brightest boys in the school was felt long afterwards.

One day there was a violent storm. The north-west wind in its fury swept over the Strait, and piled the water in Cocaigne harbour higher than had ever been known before. The moon was full, and under ordinary circumstances the tide line would have been within a few feet of the schoolhouse, but now the water surrounded the lonely building, great waves came rolling in before the gusts to dash against the outer wall of wood, and soon the place was a wreck, to the intense delight of every boy that saw it. But our mutual congratulations were soon over. A gentleman who lived close to the other end of the bridge, and who had a number of sons, offered a wing of his house, and in a few days the school was opened again.

I have yet to describe the method of teaching, and to enumerate the subjects taught. The usher took spelling, reading, geography, arithmetic, what was called philosophy, and once a week French. Only once a week was there a lesson in one of the principal languages of the country, and then it was bare reading without any explanation whatever. The geography lessons were home tasks, and were nothing more than the repetition by each boy of a certain quantity of matter in a book. It was really a test of memory, and nothing else. The philosophy meant answering by rote a series of questions from a long catechism, and for practical value may be classed with the geography. The arithmetic was better, and as this was Mr. Miller's strong point, we really got some explanation of rules and were helped forward in our work.

The principal took the Latin and Greek languages, history, and penmanship. His own handwriting was remarkably good, almost like copperplate, and he laid down the sensible rule that the test of writing was the ability of any one whatever to read it without hesitation or difficulty. He used to set a copy for us to follow, and then warm with his cane the hands of those whose performance was not to his satisfaction. The history taught was that of Greece, Rome, and England, but we learnt little more than lists of events and names of rulers. Of the life of the Greek people, of the effects of Roman institutions upon modern nations, and of everything in fact that would be really useful for us to know, we remained ignorant. The great movements of our own times, the stirring events of modern Europe and America, even past occurrences in Canada, were utterly ignored. We could repeat the legend of Romulus, and could remember the name of Miltiades, but we never heard in school of Frederick the Great or of George Washington, except indirectly as their actions affected England. A knowledge of the Latin and Greek languages was, in the opinion of the principal, the first and highest object of a schoolboy's life, and consequently a very large portion of time was taken up with those studies. I went to the Cocaigne Academy from an infant school,

where English grammar was beyond the capacity of the pupils, and the day I entered it I had a copy of the Eton Latin grammar put into my hands, with a long home task marked off in it. Thereafter two hours every day I stood before the principal declining Latin nouns and adjectives and conjugating verbs, without ever a word of explanation or comparison with the structure of English speech, with no help or guidance whatever but the rod when a mistake was made. So it went on, through the *Delectus*, and the Commentaries of Caesar and the Lives of Cornelius Nepos and the *Aeneid* of Virgil, all dull rote, with no life and no real teaching in it at all, so that I believe unless a boy had an extraordinary natural inclination for Latin lore, his training at this school would forever have repelled him from it. Mathematics were not taught at all, and if I had not at a later date had the advantage of a course of lessons in this branch of knowledge from an Irishman named O'Donnell — an eccentric but very estimable man — of algebra and geometry I should have remained absolutely ignorant.

The institution which I have been describing was a fair specimen of a public school in Canada half a century ago. The system of instruction was then generally held to be good, and the severe discipline was regarded as scriptural and correct. No parent dreamed of complaining about it. There was but one exception that I know of: the Grammar School of St. John, of which Dr. James Paterson was the principal, under whose guidance many boys were trained who have made their mark in Canada. It was my good fortune to attend this school for some time after leaving the Cocaigne Academy, and to Dr. Paterson more than to any other teacher I owe what little knowledge I had when I entered upon the duties of active life . . . His idea of a school was that it should be a place of preparation for a boy to educate himself, the teacher could only lay a foundation, the pupil must build upon it; but he took care to lay the foundation strong and well, and he pointed out the way in which the edifice should be raised. He devoted more time to Latin than to all other subjects put together — it was the custom of the day, — but the *Aeneid* in his hands was a thing of life and beauty to his pupils. A single lesson from him on the use of globes was worth more than all the geography ever taught at Cocaigne. He pointed out too the good for admiration, and cast scorn upon the mean and bad, till every boy felt an enthusiasm to do what was right. He worked by attraction, not by fear, and I never knew of a case of truancy from his school. But, as I said before, the Grammar School of St. John was exceptional in its system, and I think just on that account many people looked somewhat askance upon it; the other institution, which I described first, represents the ideas of education at that time.

The Cocaigne Academy, its style of teaching, its mode of maintenance, the whole system of which it was a representative, might have been in Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs as far as any trace of it can be observed in Canada today. The past and the present are thrown into striking contrast in the Dominion in nothing more than in the public schools.