

## *Joseph Howe's Rambles*

*Joseph Howe* (b. 1804, d. 1873) is well-known for his career as a printer, journalist, advocate for freedom of the press and responsible government in Nova Scotia, and eventually as Premier and then Lieutenant Governor of the Province. These political aspects of Howe's life can be found in the biographies listed at the end of this document.

Less known are Howe's informative and entertaining accounts of his "Rambles" or travels across the Province. These clearly illustrated his love for Nova Scotia, its cultural landscapes and its people long before he became a famous politician.

Joseph Howe was only 24 when he travelled far and wide throughout Nova Scotia in his position as editor of the *Novascotian* newspaper, collecting accounts for his business.

From 1828 to 1831, he published a series of travel sketches in the paper, comprising his *Western Rambles* from Halifax to Digby via Bedford, Mount Uniacke, Windsor, Horton, Kentville, Bridgetown and Annapolis, and his *Eastern Rambles* from Halifax to Guysborough via Truro, Pictou, Stellarton, Antigonish and Sherbrooke. These, and letters recording his later travels on similar trips, contain vivid impressions of landscapes and the character of Nova Scotia and Nova Scotian society.

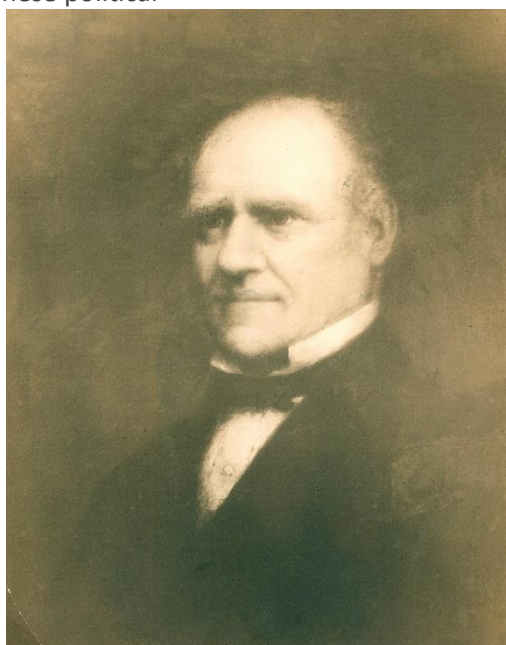
These first-hand accounts provide a perceptive literary record of the Nova Scotian countryside and people in the 1820s and 1830s, at a time of rapid demographic and industrial change, driven by immigration, new and expanding settlements and new technologies. Nova

Scotia would never again be the same, and Howe's *Rambles* capture it, and his deep feelings for the Province and its people, at a unique moment in time.

Very few roads existed when Howe made his journeys, and in 1828 only the two "Great Roads", were able to carry stagecoaches – the "Western Road" from Halifax to Windsor and Annapolis, and the "Eastern Road" from Halifax to Truro and Pictou. A few other short sections, usually in the vicinity of towns, were fit for smaller carriages. Most were largely unmaintained rutted and rocky tracks or corduroy trails laid with logs, and

frequently were passable only by single horses or those on foot. In seasons other than summer, even the Great Roads often became impassable.

Howe frequently remarked on the state of the roads, noting of the trail from Dartmouth to Musquodoboit and St. Mary's River that "The only pleasant reflection the road afforded was that every step brought you nearer to the end of it". Howe recommended travelers wishing to see the best scenery to use old roads versus "new cut"



A.R. Venables, Photo of Portrait of Hon. Joseph Howe, c.1873. NSM History Collection 23.72

roads when the former were available – also because the latter tended to be in worse condition.

When Joseph did travel through a scenic region, his literary skills reflected on them with flowery and romantic rhetoric. Describing the scenery in the Annapolis Valley outside of St. Croix, Howe painted an enchanting picture of the Minas Basin: “Around you the eternal hills are piled up, as though they were intended as a barrier to protect the fertility they enclose, and beyond...is the Basin of Mines, with its islands resting like ornaments on its bosom, and old Blomidon flinging his stern shadow upon its wave.”

Howe waxed poetic throughout the *Rambles* on natural beauty and his love for Nova Scotia, but also illustrated the industrial and economic changes taking place in towns and villages such as Sherbrooke. The latter he depicted as “a rough and unsightly cluster of wooden houses”, a “creation of the Timber Trade” that, once prosperous, now looked “desolate” due to the effects of the 1827 depression.

But Howe always attempted to cast such observations in a positive light, by indicating ways such communities could become prosperous again – in this case, by shifting to shipbuilding and becoming a mercantile “entrepôt for the supply of the settlers, and an outlet for the produce of the country. Indeed, it must live by its commerce and manufactures, for there is scarcely land around it for a garden.”

While Howe’s love for Nova Scotia and Nova Scotians is evident throughout the *Rambles*, it is clear that he is also writing from the sometimes stereotypical and prejudiced viewpoint of a privileged nineteenth-century white British Protestant colonial. For example, while Howe subtly denounced religious bigotry and secular ambitions

of religious officials of all denominations, he still referred to the Acadians of the Clare region as being part of a “quiet and peaceful race, very industrious and very frugal... governed and controlled by their Priest, whom they regard with the highest veneration and respect.”



J.E. Woolford, “Cape Blow Me Down”, c. 1817, Watercolour, NSM History Collection 78.145.104

Howe’s fairly progressive views on the role of women also are apparent in the *Rambles*. He believed they had far more potential than society was allowing them to achieve:

“I cannot refrain from asking whether you think that nature

intended you for nothing better than lacing your stays, and curling your hair...or did she intend that your lives should be passed in combing children’s hair and making pies and pastry...Were your minds not formed for nothing better than this? Is there no pleasing study, no literary or scientific pursuit, that without interfering with or weaning you from your domestic duties, might elevate and enlarge your understandings... we may almost say the future destinies of Nova Scotia are in [women’s] hands; and in exact proportion as they are alive to the fact, the intellectual and moral character of the Province must be raised.” For an early nineteenth-century Nova Scotian man, such a view was almost radical.

More mixed were Howe’s views on African Nova Scotians. These combined socially progressive views with some of the common prejudice of the period. He commented on the frequent sight of African Nova Scotian women on the shores of Bedford Basin, carrying their goods to and from market in Halifax:

“And here too you are sure to encounter a goodly bevy of sable beauties, with their unsophisticated feet, and their woolly heads, adorned...with tubs and baskets of fair dimensions...trudging along with their hearts a great deal

lighter than their heads, and caring no more for the fashionable frivolities of their betters...”

In the *Rambles* Howe disagreed with those who argued that the Black Refugees who fled to Nova Scotia following the War of 1812 were “a burthen to the country” and comprised of “rogues and vagabonds”. He noted, in a somewhat backhanded manner, that the “immediate descendants of the race” who arrived after the War “may be little better than their parents, as regards industry and intelligence – but there is little in their color to prevent them from eventually becoming as good farmers as your grandchildren...” Howe had at least one elderly black servant, whose cane, a gift from Howe, is in the collection of the Museum.

While Acadians, African Nova Scotians and women are at least mentioned in the *Rambles*, the Mi’kmaq are not. It is often not noted in biographies that Howe served as Nova Scotia’s first Commissioner of Indian Affairs between 1842 and 1844, and also as Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Canadian government after Confederation, between 1869 and 1873.

In 1841, a petition from the Mi’kmaq chief Louis Benjamin Pominout, speaking on behalf of all the Mi’kmaq of the colony, was received by Queen Victoria, outlining how bad living conditions had become for them:

“My people are poor. No hunting Grounds – No Beaver – no Otter– no nothing. Indians poor – poor for ever. No Store – no Chest – no Clothes. All these woods once ours. Our Fathers possessed them all. Now we cannot cut a Tree to warm our Wigwam in Winter unless the white Man please.”

Howe, by then a member of Executive Council and Speaker of the House of Assembly, was consulted by

Lieutenant Governor Lord Falkland, who knew of Joseph’s travels and deep knowledge of the peoples of Nova Scotia. Howe proposed the creation of a Commissioner of Indian Affairs, who would serve as a liaison between Mi’kmaq chiefs and government, in an effort to both improve Mi’kmaq living conditions and to prevent widespread squatting by thousands of new white settlers on reserve lands, particularly in Cape Breton.

In 1842 Howe was the first to be appointed to the new position, which had no salary. His mandate was to “improve” the condition of the Mi’kmaq by furthering efforts towards their cultural assimilation by continuing to settle them on reserve lands for agriculture, while taking various measures to protect those same lands from settler squatters.

In this role Howe again travelled widely, at his own expense, visiting reserves. Howe recommended the setting aside of more lands for the Mi’kmaq, and expressed his concerns over the poor quality of some of the existing reserve lands allocated to them, noting:



J.E. Woolford, “Settlement of Sherbrooke on the River St. Mary’s”, c. 1817, Watercolour, NSM History Collection 78.45.79

“It is to be regretted that so little judgment has been exercised in the selection of them – the same quantity, if reserved in spots where the soil was good, on navigable streams, or in places where fish was abundant, and game within reach, would now be a valuable resource.”

Howe gave up this post in 1844, regretting that he could no longer afford working in an unpaid position. His time in the federal role between 1869 and 1873 was largely spent focused on the Red River Rebellion in Manitoba (1869-1870), the new Western provinces joining Confederation, and the transfer of provincial reserve lands, such as those in Nova Scotia, to Canada.

Howe's views on the Mi'kmaq also changed along with his politics and his position. While an anti-Confederate politician in the Maritimes in early 1867, Howe argued that the provincial handling of Indian affairs was quite sufficient for the needs of the Mi'kmaq, and resented the idea of any "Canadian" interference on this subject. Yet in his annual report as the federal Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1871, he essentially accused the colony of Nova Scotia of having mismanaged the reserve system and of providing poor relief to "idle and profligate" Indians.

Following contemporary views on self-improvement versus charity, Howe vowed that such assistance would now only be provided "to promote education and encourage habits of industry...to those who show a disposition to advance and help themselves". By this time, with his changing views on Confederation and shifting loyalties, it was unclear which of these views Howe genuinely believed.

That said, it is clear that Howe had been deeply moved by the plight of the Mi'kmaq, and his dedication to assisting them impressed many. The Mi'kmaq appreciated his obvious humanity. John Jeremy, a Mi'kmaq befriended by Howe, even named his son Joseph Howe Jeremy. The son later dropped his surname and went by Joe Howe alone, as a mark of respect for the man.

While other contemporary writers such as Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Thomas McCulloch and John Young shared similar insights in their writing on the slowly-developing agriculture, industry and cultural life of Nova Scotia, and an optimism for the future, Howe's *Rambles* reveal more about these themes and about Howe the man himself.



The man at left is possibly Joseph Howe Jeremy, c. 1890, at Shubenacadie. NSM Ethnology Collection MP0264.

Joseph Howe's passion, energy, and sensitivity to the concerns of Nova Scotians at all levels of society emerge from almost every sketch of a community or landscape. It is clear that the young Howe's *Rambles* reinforced his love for Nova Scotia and all of its peoples that was so evident during his later career. Yet Howe was also a man of his

times. As with any historical account, one should always consider how some topics were treated, and which were not discussed, and why, when searching to recreate Joseph Howe's perceptions of Nova Scotian society in the nineteenth century.

#### **References and further resources:**

Nova Scotia Heritage Day, "Joseph Howe, 1804-1873, 2016 Honouree" <http://heritageday.novascotia.ca/content/2016-honouree>

Nova Scotia Archives (NSA), "Sydenham Howe's Scrapbook – Joseph Howe and His World", <http://novascotia.ca/archives/howe/>

Nova Scotia Museum, "Joseph Howe – Learning with Objects", <https://museum.novascotia.ca/joseph-howe-learning-objects>

Nova Scotia Museum of Industry, "Joseph Howe's Industrial Connections", <https://museumofindustry.novascotia.ca/nova-scotia-industry/joseph-howes-industrial-connections>

Joseph Howe, *Western and Eastern Rambles: Travel Sketches of Nova Scotia*, ed. M.G. Parks (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1973).

Journal of the House of Assembly, 1843, Appendix 1, p. 6.

"Memorandum respecting the Indians of Nova Scotia," Legislative Council Journal for 1842, Appendix 6, NSA MG 15, vol. 3, #76 Doc. 11

Petition from Louis Benjamin Pominout to Queen Victoria, NSA CO 217/179 f. 406