

Fishing for Identity: Establishing Authorship of a Mid-Nineteenth-Century Manuscript Diary

by **JOHN STUART BATTS**

“Rough notes taken during an Expedition to the Salmon Rivers on the North Shores of the St. Lawrence in the Summer of 1849” is the anonymous diarist’s title for twenty-six pages of detailed entries in a bound volume recently acquired by the Public Archives of Canada.¹ While the diary is meticulous in recording the weight of salmon, state of water, and lures used, there is little indication of the diarist’s identity. A fascinating dichotomy is found, moreover, between the mention of some people by name and the identification of his principal companions only as “the Commissioner” and “the Baron.” The diarist, who returns “home” to Toronto on 6 August 1849, appears to be well connected in both Upper and Lower Canada. For example, he made a number of social calls in Quebec City, including one on Major-General William Rowan K.C.B., before the party set off for the north shore rivers.² The immediate problem for the reader of this diary was to identify an anonymous diarist of some social standing and to do so on the slender evidence in a diary kept during an eight-week fishing expedition.³

Three facets of the diary offered promising leads. First, this party encountered other fishermen at some of the favourite pools on the Goodbout and Mingan rivers; these anglers were all military men, one of whom, a Major Elliott, is described as “an old friend of mine.”⁴ Likewise, the phrase used on passing Rivière du Loup, “our old quarters,” suggests that the diarist had been a military man. Secondly, promising internal evidence for identifying the diarist is found when the party visited the Hudson’s Bay Company post at Mingan River (Mr. Nicoll, Resident Factor) and returned there for Sunday morning church. However, the post journal for that year no longer exists.⁵ A last piece of internal

1 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), MG24 H72.

2 Rowan was a Waterloo veteran who had been on half-pay since 1830.

3 The diary indicates that the sailing party had eleven members including the crew; some of the latter are mentioned by name: Jack; Stephen; Achille McLean; Xavier, also spelled Xavia; and the owner of the yacht, Capt. Latour. The fishing party proper was made up of the diarist, the Baron, the Commissioner, Adamson, Holyoake, and possibly a man named St. Quinton.

4 Presumably William Elliott, formerly of the 79th Regiment, who was gazetted as a major on 23 November 1841.

5 Information from Patricia Kennedy, Chief of the Pre-Confederation Archives Section, Manuscript Division, PAC.

evidence is the diarist's reference to having been on a salmon-fishing expedition two summers previously on the vessel *Shannon* which was wrecked at Matane.

It seemed likely that this event ought to have produced an account in one of the contemporary newspapers; there was even the possibility of lists of names. However, a check of the National Library of Canada's newspaper holdings disclosed that there were no mid-century newspapers published in Matane, Rimouski, Rivière du Loup, or Tadoussac. So the Quebec City newspapers for high summer of 1847 were scanned: the *Quebec Daily Mercury*, the *Quebec Gazette*, and the Anglican weekly *Bernean* offered nothing. The *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, however, gave a paragraph on page two for 3 August 1847:

We are informed that a party of military gentlemen from this garrison who had set out on a fishing excursion in the yacht *Shannon*, were unfortunately wrecked at Matane, about a fortnight since. The vessel went to pieces; and it was with difficulty that those on board were saved. The only loss seems to have been that of the yacht, and part of the luggage.

Clearly, given this brief report, the Quebec papers of that month were far too busy with mortality on the city doorstep in the form of severe outbreaks of cholera at Grosse Isle to give this story much attention.

The search then went back to the dramatis personae. Here the most direct link was Adamson, a well-connected clergyman and, significantly, an ardent salmon fisherman, who under the pseudonym of "A Resident" wrote *Salmon Fishing in Canada*.⁶ Adamson was identifiable, but "the Commissioner" and "the Baron" were not. At this stage, I had the good fortune to meet Anthony Adamson of Toronto, a descendant of the Reverend W.A. Adamson, and I inquired if he had in his possession any diaries of the fisherman. He did not, but knowing the book, he was able to suggest that "the Baron" was the Baron de Rottenburg and "the Commissioner" was P.M. VanKoughnet, who between 1833 and 1841 was one of the eleven commissioners of the 5th division of the Cornwall and Roxborough Court of Requests.⁷

The next step was to compare matter and style in the manuscript diary and Agar Adamson's *Salmon Fishing in Canada* on the premise that the diarist might have used the convention of referring to himself in the third person. I soon saw that the diarist and Adamson were not the same. Some entries, it is true, may be temptingly read as evidence of the third-person convention, thus: "After prayers Mr. Adamson read us a very excellent sermon, Text 21 *John* 9 & 10 verses," (17 June). Yet the majority show differences: on 18 June the diarist was active whereas "The Parson [was] sick & seedy." Again, there are angling entries such as these: "Adamson took the morning fishing and I followed at 10 o'clock," (29 June); "Had one or two rises, so had Adamson," (29 June); "Adamson and Holyoake left me at ½ past 4 o'clock, having betted me three quarters to a dollar that I would not kill a salmon that day," (20 July) — the diarist went on to claim that he hooked two subsequently but lost them both! Clearly the third-person convention

6 W.L. Morton, "William Agar Adamson," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9 (Toronto, 1976), pp. 4-5; also [W.A. Adamson] J.E. Alexander, ed., *Salmon Fishing in Canada* (London, 1860).

7 See Henry J. Morgan, comp., *Sketches of Celebrated Canadians, and Persons Connected with Canada* (Quebec, 1862), pp. 699-701 for a profile of Baron de Rottenburg; and Bruce Hodgins, "Philip VanKoughnet," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10 (Toronto, 1972), p. 693.

is not in operation in this diary; the author could not be Adamson. At the conclusion of the diary several pages of notes on salmon and salmon-fishing follow. Here again the evidence links Adamson and the diarist, but as separate individuals; for example: "I wrote to my friend Mr. Adamson, who is, I think, one of the best fishermen on this Continent and he agrees with me...;" again, "In the Mingan river in the same month, two years later [i.e. July, 1849] Mr. Adamson and myself killed 28 pounds of salmon Peel in a couple of hours...."

From the foregoing it is obvious that Adamson held the key to the diarist's identity, and whereas no diary by Adamson has survived, his book *Salmon Fishing in Canada* is sufficient to provide clues. It recounts in a chatty way a number of expeditions that Adamson had made to the rivers of the St. Lawrence system. Interestingly, he does use the third-person convention, referring to himself as "the Priest," and even includes an autobiographical sketch. (p. 156) This presumably was a modest subterfuge to complement the anonymous authorship — "by a Resident." The book also refers often to his companions "the Commissioner," "the Baron," and intriguingly "a Captain" — each the subject of a verbal sketch.⁸

Adamson's portrayal gives some minor clues and one conclusive lead to the identity of the "Captain." The minor items include statements that the Captain was highly educated, a good churchman, not Irish [Adamson was born in Ireland], had read much and remembered well, had a fancy for oysters and claret, had great taste in dinners and in dress, liked his shirts, was a handsome man and knew it, was hospitable, married, was met first by Adamson in a far distant and distracted land, and was found to be an exceedingly agreeable companion. One note only of criticism obtrudes: "he would rather prefer to hook and kill the fish himself than that any other individuals in the wide world should do so."⁹ Before commenting on any of these clues, a decisive episode in the 1849 trip needs mention — namely the chase by a bull at Mingan harbour. Not only is this recounted by the diarist (in the first person), but it is also the subject of a sketch printed in *Salmon Fishing in Canada*. It should be explained that the bull was brought along one day to pull the boat, but literally got out of hand. The diarist's account is given on 14 July:

We landed and the bull was brought down fully caparisoned for the draught when catching sight of my red trousers and redder shirt he made a bolt with the man who had hold of him in my direction and very nearly settled me. Mr. Henderson [a Hudson's Bay Company post employee] attempted to stop him but slipped up and I running into the water and escaping he made a straight bolt for the bush ... pursued by all the curs of the village for a wigwam which was close at hand.

Adamson's account reads more whimsically: "The first time we sailed in his yacht he [the captain], from some unaccountable whim, arrayed himself in a full suit of scarlet jacket, scarlet waistcoat, and scarlet trousers." He notes, too, the manner of escape from the bull when the captain found "a small opening underneath the wharf and got into 5 feet of water to hide scarlet." And finally Adamson relates how "The Captain gladly emerged from his concealment looking very like a sickly river God in a pantomime."¹⁰ It seems,

⁸ Adamson, *Salmon Fishing in Canada*, pp. 152, 143-48, and 149-152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-52.

then, that the diarist is indeed the captain and the issue is clinched by a frontspiece etching titled "The Captain and the Bull" showing a charging bull, a fleeing officer close to water, the boat that was to be hauled, and even a distant Indian encampment at the edge of the bush.

So far one has only been able to establish that the diarist was a military captain and that he was a friend of Adamson and by implication the Commissioner (VanKoughnet) and the Baron (de Rottenburg). But *Salmon Fishing in Canada* also gives the crucial evidence for the identity of the captain. Though, as explained earlier, "the Resident" is very sparing with identities, there are two occasions when names are mentioned. One is curious syntactically: in the chapter "Sport at the Esquemain" the "Priest" [Adamson] recounts one of the best mornings of sport during a stay of four days when

upon going on deck about five o'clock we perceived a schooner at anchor to the eastward of us, and a bell tent pitched on an island close adjoining. Figures were moving about the tent, which our glasses told us were those of fishermen, a fact which tended to expedite our movements towards the favourite pool. Upon arriving there our very worthy friend and Captain Vaughan, perceived that there was a net set in its southern side, from which, having drawn it ashore, he drew five fine salmon. In the meantime the Commissioner and I plied our rods, and soon had three noble fish stretched on the green grass when Vaughan came to me....¹¹

Now it is possible that the captain referred to throughout *Salmon Fishing in Canada* is this man Vaughan. He is, after all, described as "our very worthy friend;" and on that very page the good morning's sport is linked with "the occasion of our first meeting the Captain on a fishing cruise."¹² But notice that the definite article has been used; the fisherman is "the Captain," Vaughan is simply "our ... friend and Captain." On that same page, "the Captain" was called "our pupil ... who with his own rod played and landed forty-two salmon and grilse in two half-days." A check of Vaughans in the *Army Lists* for 1848-49 and 1849-50 gives eight possibilities, only two of whom were captains. Eugene James Vaughan, promoted to the rank of captain in 1841 and serving with the 57th Regiment of Foot, was a half-pay officer from June 1845. And Henry Herbert Vaughan, made a captain in September 1823, was on half-pay from January 1831 and is listed as unattached.

Before needing to link either man with Lower Canada in the late 1840s, however, another less mystifying passage of *Salmon Fishing in Canada* gives a superior clue to the identity of the captain (and presumably the diarist). In the chapter "The Goodbout," Adamson praises the river as "one of the best rivers in the world" (p. 219) and recalls three occasions when he had fished it: in 1845, "I was one of two white men who first threw a fly upon its upper pools" (p. 219); in 1847, when Captain J.M. Strachan "took forty-two salmon in parts of two days" (p. 219); and 1849, when in about two weeks "only twenty-one fish were killed." (p. 219) It is obvious, then, that Strachan is "the Captain who may in some degree be denominated our pupil, and who with his own rod played and landed forty-two salmon and grilse in two half-days." (p. 181) This context also establishes that Strachan was the captain who was with Adamson and the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹² *Ibid.*

Commissioner on the morning of great sport at the Esquemain when Vaughan appears.¹³ There is no easy way to resolve the apparent contradiction. It may be that Vaughan was the captain of the boat on which the party was sailing; it may be that there was indeed a military Captain Vaughan in the party along with Captain Strachan; it could even be that Adamson had muddled the reference over ten years later. What is clear is that J.M. Strachan was a captain, was no mean fisherman himself, and was judged to be something of his own pupil by Adamson — who was forty-eight in July 1849 when Strachan was just forty.

Is Strachan, then, the diarist? It seems so. The diarist was certainly on fishing expeditions to the Goodbout River in 1847 and 1849; the diarist also shares Adamson's poor opinion of the 1849 fishing there: "I doubt whether we shall have any great success this year in this river," (diary, 28 June 1849). Such a statement is not proof, but a better comparison is available in the diary entry for 25 July when the two, the diarist and Adamson, or as the book puts it, the "Captain" and the "Priest," fished some of the Island pools. There the diarist killed four salmon, two of which were seventeen and one-half pounds; Adamson writes: "...proceeding in the pools, passed a delightful afternoon, killing on that little sandbank, which neither of us will easily forget, five fresh-run, short & beautiful fish of 12, 15, 17, 19 and 21 pounds weight."¹⁴ Fittingly, both writers record then the return to the schooner.

It does seem that the captain is the diarist who, therefore, is J.M. Strachan. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (hereafter *DCB*) indicates that James McGill Strachan, the eldest and favourite son of Bishop Strachan, was born in Upper Canada in 1808.¹⁵ Numerous descriptions in this biography fit Adamson's captain and the anonymous diarist. Strachan bought a commission in the 68th Foot in 1826; a detachment of his old regiment went to Rivière du Loup in 1841;¹⁶ he had trained at Sandhurst and had travelled throughout Europe. Moreover, he had purchased a captaincy in 1833, resigning in 1836, though retaining the title even after he had been admitted to the bar and had become a formidable figure in Toronto legal circles. The *DCB* even comments upon Strachan's handsome appearance and wit (noted by Adamson in his verbal sketch of the "Captain"), upon his speculating habits, and his predilection for "leisurely sportsman's pursuits." His service as military secretary to Lt. Gov. Sir Francis Bond Head during the rebellion in Upper Canada in 1837-38 and his subsequent marriage in 1844 to the daughter of John Beverley Robinson reinforces the notion of a well-connected sire of the Family Compact.¹⁷

As nature proverbially abhors a vacuum, so no archivist is altogether happy with an anonymous manuscript. Diaries after all are a particularly personal form of expression, and in the presence of an anonymous journal one is keenly aware that only some injustice of history or provenance has separated the writer from his prose. It is one thing for a medieval lyric to soar attractively for centuries on the viewless and authorless wings of poesy, but altogether different for a nineteenth-century work to elude attribution. Its very

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

15 Roger D. Hall, "James McGill Strachan," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9 (Toronto, 1976), p. 751.

16 Charles H. Stewart, comp., *The Service of British Regiments in Canada and North America: A Resumé* (Ottawa, 1962).

17 Marian MacRae, *MacNab of Dundurn* (Toronto, 1971).

existence, like Hamlet's ghost, points a finger at its subsequent custodians and readers alike. Here the call for revenge is the need to amend the ravages of time and history by preparing the manuscript for accurate archival description.

In more prosaic terms, the discovery of J.M. Strachan as author of "Rough Notes taken during an Expedition..." puts in place one more small but hitherto puzzling piece in the jig-saw of Upper Canada's literary past. So positioned, this diary shows more clearly the upper province's close-knit, wealthy, and powerful élite at play. The attribution ascertains the precise viewpoint of the diarist; yet notice how there is no indication whatsoever that he had apparently been bankrupt during the recession of 1847 as the result of land speculation in Toronto! Such a reflection allows one to ponder the interplay of friendships among representatives of the Anglican Church, the Army, the Law, and the government. The finding of the diary's author thus gives one a special opportunity to gauge the subtle underpinnings of the Family Compact.

"Rough Notes..." should therefore take on a degree of significance henceforth beyond the charm of recording how seriously the leisured took their recreations in mid-nineteenth-century Canada.