

A Servant of Empire: The Papers of Brig. Gen. George Strachan Cartwright, 1885-1920

by ANNE MacDERMAID

The British presence in Canada is an historical given which has been assumed and assimilated from their first history lessons by Canadian students. Governors general, lieutenant governors, commanders in chief, Forts Cumberland, Erie, George, Henry, York, and British garrisons at Halifax and Quebec, all evoke pictures of a military as well as political presence, manifest in the everyday life of the populace in a new colony. And terms such as Royal Mail and Dominion Archivist have been cultural touchstones and talismans of a continuing imperial presence, long after the last British soldiers left the Dominion in 1906.

Canadian archives are replete with references to British statesmen and other public figures who played active and essential roles in the shaping of our nation. These references can be as trivial as the autographs of politicians or as meaningful as the papers of John Buchan, First Baron Tweedsmuir. The reverse side of the coin has been less often viewed, but proves equally fascinating. Archivists and researchers should turn to find in their collections new evidence of the Canadian contribution to the British Empire. The extent of that record is both significant and instructive.

Canadians, for example, have played essential roles on the imperial military scene. One illustration is the courageous endeavour of a handful of voyageurs to guide an expedition up the cataracts of the Nile to relieve General Gordon at Khartoum in 1884-85. The bare facts of similar Canadian involvements are provided in such works as C.P. Stacey's *Canada and the British Army, 1841-1871* and G.F.G. Stanley's *Canada's Soldiers, 1604-1954*. How many other accounts, rivalling television's "The Jewel in the Crown" or Kipling's tales of empire for excitement, intrigue, and splendour, may be found hidden in the papers of maiden missionary aunts, great-uncles or grandparents, or as adjuncts to family collections in every archives?

A further fascinating example of the way in which the British Imperial presence affected a Canadian family may be found in the Grier Collection in the Queen's University Archives. This small collection of family papers brought together by Mr. J.E. Grier includes information on several family branches going back to Loyalist settlements and to Ireland and India in the 1830s and 1840s. The imperial connection, particularly with the Cartwright branch of the family, carried on until the Second World War, in the persons of Brigadier General George Strachan Cartwright and his son, Steven Cartwright.

George Strachan Cartwright was born in the Anglican rectory, "Pine Grove," in Woodbridge, Ontario in 1866, the son of the Reverend Conway E. Cartwright of Kingston, Ontario. George Cartwright was educated at private schools and at the Royal Military College of Canada. His lifelong imperial connection began when he was gazetted as a lieutenant with the Royal Engineers in 1885. He joined the School of Military Engineering at Chatham, England on 1 October 1885. On completion of his course there, he embarked for India in January 1888, but, on the way, was posted to Aden for three years. In India he built fortifications in Karachi, Rawalpindi, Jubbulpore, Bombay (where he worked on the harbour), Mhow, and Poona. In 1892 he went on the Isazai Expedition to the Indian northwestern frontier with the Sixth Company of Bengal Sappers and Miners. He returned to England in April 1895 on completion of his tour of duty and was stationed at Chatham, Exeter, Plymouth, and at the War Office in London during the Boer War.

He was posted to Halifax in September 1903 and had the distinction of being the commander in 1906 of the last detachment of imperial troops leaving Halifax. On his return to England, he assumed command of the 17th Field Company of the Royal Engineers at Aldershot. He returned in 1907 to India where he was stationed at Rawalpindi and Lahore. While Commandant of the Royal Engineers at Meerut, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, he was present at the Durbar at Delhi where George V's coronation was celebrated in December 1911. He returned with his family to England in March 1912 and served in various areas until the outbreak of World War I when he was appointed Commandant of the Royal Engineers 15th (Scottish) Division. He was in France from 15 July 1915 and present at the Battles of Loos, the Somme, Ypres, Salient, Wychaete, Messine Ridge, Lys, and the second Battle of the Marne. He was promoted to Chief Engineer (Brigadier General) in the 8th Army Corps. His war service won him five mentions in despatches, a CB, CMG, and French Legion of Honour (Officier).

General Cartwright's return to England on 31 October 1918 was marked by his appointment as Chief Engineer of the Aldershot Command. He remained in that post under General Lord Rawlinson until June 1920, when he retired. After thirty-five years spent in the service of Britain, General Cartwright returned to Canada and settled in Toronto. He served from 1927 to 1937 as Director of Military Studies at the University of Toronto. He died at the age of ninety-three in 1959.

The deceptively modest two feet of his personal papers reveal much about General Cartwright's extraordinary career. The Aden and Indian periods give most clearly a sense of the "age that is gone." Rest and recreation in Aden in 1888 consisted of a jaunt over to Somaliland for a lion-hunting safari. A photograph sets the scene (figure 1); a few words sketch the details:

I sallied forth in the afternoon to shoot some guinea fowl for the evening meal, but was forced to return, owing to a heavy thunderstorm rolling up. In spite of the very heavy rain, the cook managed to make me a cup of tea, and that with some biscuits and tinned salmon made up my evening meal.

About 8 p.m., the rain slackened, and I went out to look at the water-course running past the camp. A red, turbulent torrent was now rushing down this channel, which had been dry when we pitched our camp. The stream was now about four feet deep, but still three to four feet below the level of the surrounding ground. I asked my men if it would not be better to

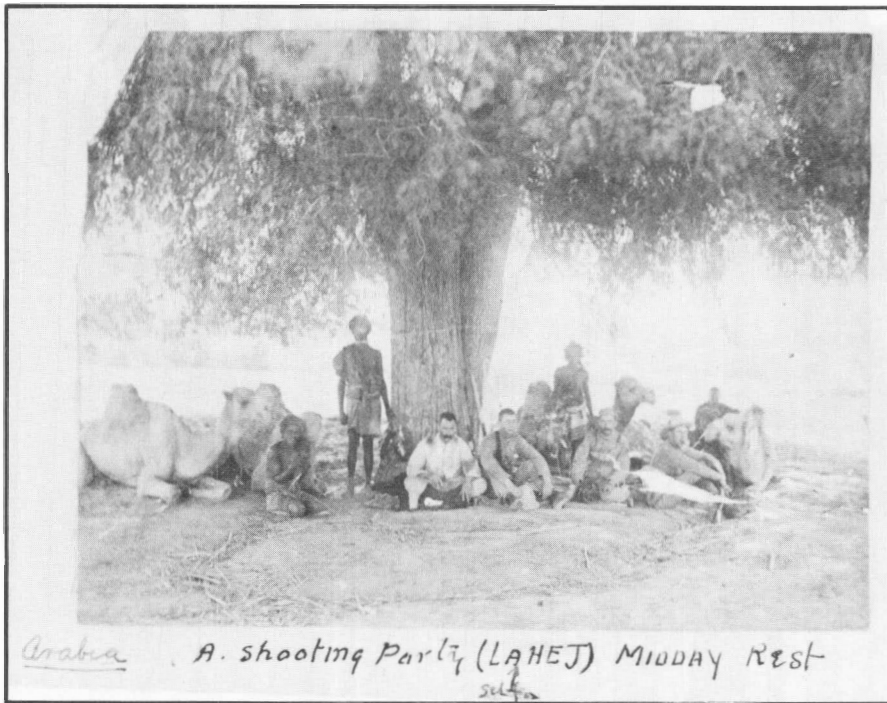


Figure 1: Cartwright's party at midday rest on safari in Somaliland, 1888. Cartwright is seated and fourth from the left in this photograph. Source: Queen's University Archives, John Grier Collection, Cartwright Family Papers, box 3, folder 52. Photograph courtesy: Queen's University Archives.

move to a small knoll just behind us. They, however, all declared that the rain was stopping, and the flood water would rise no higher. They pointed to some neighbouring zerabas, occupied by several families, and their flocks, and all these were on a lower level than our location, and the shikaries also stated that these people had lived there for some years, and were apparently quite satisfied to 'stay put.' Therefore we were all right. The rain had made everything damp, and not too comfortable, so I did not turn in as early as usual, but was reading by the light from a lantern, when about 10 p.m., a very heavy storm broke in the hills to the south, some miles away, and coming in our direction. It was raining 'cats and dogs' with incessant thunder and most vivid lightning. Suddenly, I heard my shikaries shout, 'Sahib, sahib, pani alta hai, jeldi quo.' 'Sir, sir, the water is coming, come quickly.' I sprang to the tent door, and peering out, saw by a flash of lightning, the water coming down in a great wave. I seized my rifles, and calling to the men to grab what they could. As I emerged from my tent I was met by a wave nearly up to my knees, and I lost my shoes, I tried to turn back to get another pair, but my two shikaries seized me by the arms, saying, 'No, sahib, we must see you safe, we could not go back to Berbera without you. If you were washed away in the flood, it would be too big a shame for us.' So they half dragged and pulled me through the thorn hedge surrounding the camp, and we all

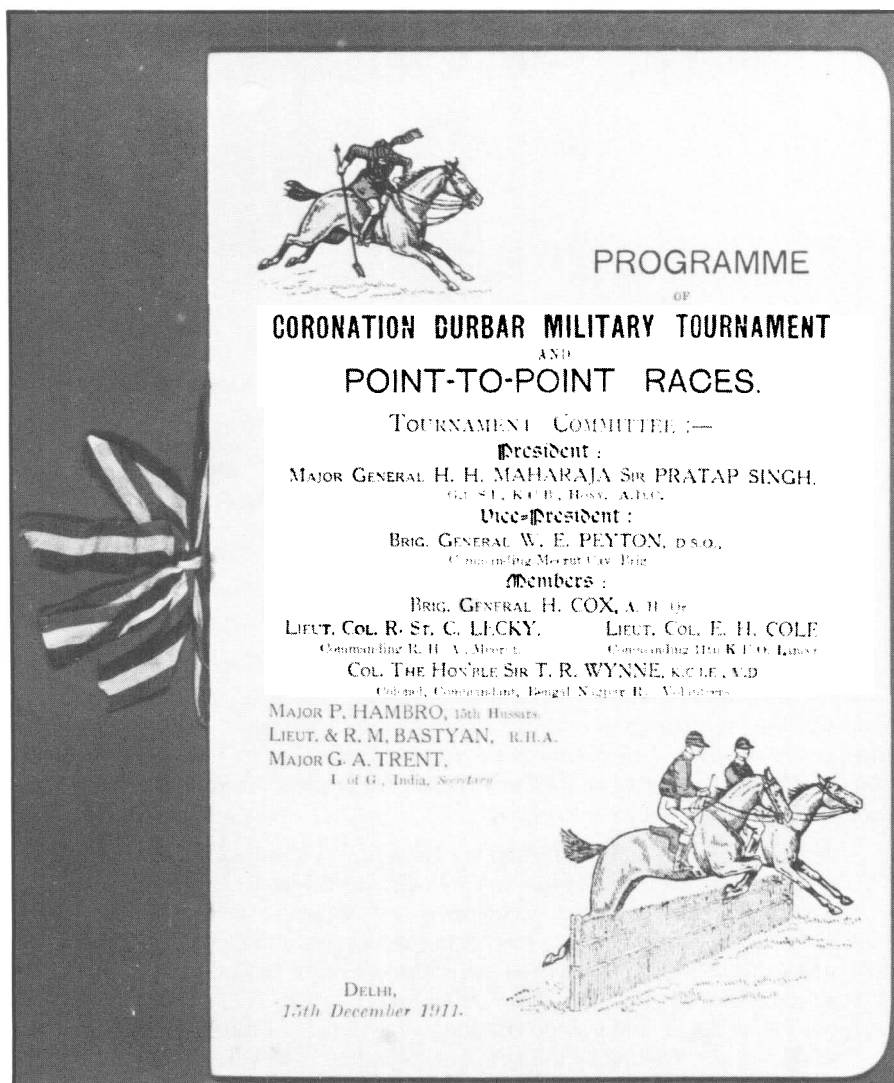


Figure 2: *Programme of the Coronation Durbar Military Tournament, Delhi, India, 15 December 1911.* Source: Queen's University Archives, John Grier Collection, Cartwright Family Papers, box 3, folder 53. Photograph courtesy: Queen's University Archives.

gathered on the small rocky knoll and collected the various articles that had been salvaged [*sic*] from the deluge.

By one flash of lightning, I beheld my seven camels, and the two oxen, with some of my men trying to get them out through the thorn hedge surrounding the camp, the tent was still standing. A few minutes later, only six camels were to be seen, these had been driven out through a gap made in the

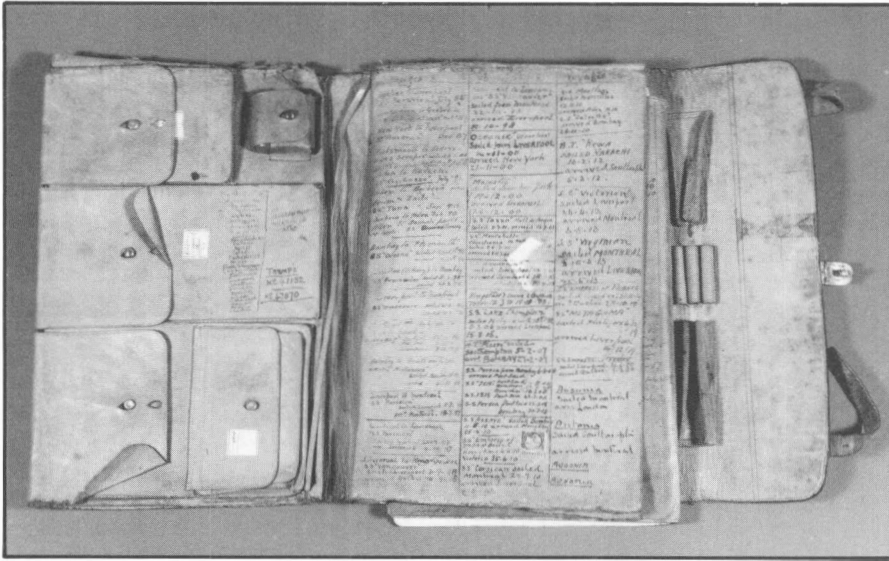


Figure 3: *The notes written on the despatch case Cartwright used between 1885 and 1920 indicate how an artifact can also be an archival “document.”* Source: Queen’s University Archives, John Grier Collection, Cartwright Family Papers, box 2, folder 34. Photograph courtesy: Queen’s University Archives.

thorn hedge, but one camel and the two oxen had been swept away by the flood waters, and all that was to be seen was a surging, boiling expanse of yellow water, seething and foaming over the ground where the camp stood, but a short time ago.

The men consoled me on the loss of almost my entire outfit. They truly said, ‘Sahib, if our nuseeb (fortune) had not been good, we also would have been carried away by the raging waters.’ I quite recognized this, and I felt very pleased and touched by the staunchness and faithful behaviour of all on this, and other occasions.¹

Life in India was luxurious, as the sumptuous festivities at the Delhi Durbar illustrate. Guests at the Durbar’s week of receptions, church services, royal and state processions, polo tournaments, and band concerts were regaled by a kaleidoscope of flags, flowers, crowds, gilt coaches, and triumphal arches, all in celebration of King George V and his Queen being crowned as Emperor and Empress of India (figure 2). Aside from the prose reminiscences carefully kept by General Cartwright, another most telling item, and one which illustrates most aptly the use of an artifact as an archival document, is his leather despatch carrying case much bedecked with a long list of postings inscribed in India ink (figure 3). Correspondence, several photograph albums, notebooks, army orders, news clippings, and memorabilia help to create both a portrait and a story.

¹ Queen’s University Archives, John Grier Collection, Cartwright Family Papers, box 3, “A Subaltern’s Somaliland Safari.”

Other aspects of Cartwright's varied career also emerge from his papers. The blood and sweat of life in the trenches, between 1915 and 1918, even for a commandant or brigadier general, is reflected in a diary of 1918 which details, for example, "Tuesday, 9 April, Foggy, Front heavily attacked — especially corps on right — no letters. 10 Wed. Foggy. Boche attacked our front — heavy fighting." Casualties and funerals are mentioned; much attention is given to weather conditions, which obviously affected physical comfort as much as military operations. Rain and fog in April necessitated a request to Hawkes and Company for waterproofs and a tin hat, which arrived two weeks later. The most frequently recorded item of information in the diary, aside from military movements and references to the weather, is the notation of letters sent to and received from General Cartwright's wife. Familial contact and support was obviously a mainstay in the midst of hostilities.

It is strange that Cartwright's papers provide little direct evidence of his impressions of or attitude towards his military service in Britain itself. The one relevant folder of correspondence includes a letter of 1920 from the Chaplain and Chairman of the Parochial Council of St. George's Church, Stanhope Lines, Aldershot, thanking the Cartwrights on their departure for Canada for their support of the church while they were in England. Brief letters from former colleagues in both India and Britain continue to arrive to General Cartwright in Canada well into the 1930s, indicating that strong links of friendship had been forged, but no evidence, aside from a file of army orders, has survived to fill in the details of military life in England.

The Grier Collection and others like it could be used to embroider and enliven a theme. The collection could be utilized either for a footnote or a major study. For the archivist, such collections are ready-made for use in teaching kits, displays, and audio-visual presentations. Through use of collections like this, both researcher and archivist can delight in the opportunity to see and understand the events of an era through the life of an individual who helped to shape it.

The collection also illustrates day-to-day problems that face archivists. Fortunately, it has proved exemplary in demonstrating that despite storage by several generations on many continents, where climates range from tropical to arctic, the physical state of a set of papers need not deteriorate markedly. The most obvious difficulty was not tropical mildew, insects, deterioration of leather, or brittle paper, but the unsightly stains left by the cellulose tape used to reinforce charming sepia photographs of the Cartwrights in India. With the exception of these stains, now being removed by a conservator, the collection is in excellent physical condition.

The Grier Collection helps fill in details about other branches of the Cartwright family which were less well known despite the existence of other sets of Cartwright family papers in the Queen's University Archives. The quest of the archivist for the minimum and essential biographical details is not always as readily fulfilled as in this case.

The interesting archival problem caused when various members of a family create documents is also illustrated in this collection. The archives at Queen's has at least five separate bodies of Cartwright papers, each of different provenance, each indisputably authentic, and which when seen together, form part of a much more useful whole than the varied and uneven individual sections might suggest. Some, such as the Grier Collection, have come to Queen's from a source outside the family, and are known by the name of their collector. The problems which records archivists face in retaining all the hierarchical

and administrative links of individual sous-fonds are thus mirrored in the problems of manuscript archivists in providing for researchers an accurate picture of the family's archival legacy. Neither body of archival material has been static; their changing natures create descriptive problems archivists must unravel.

Finding aids must be sophisticated enough to draw together all such collections in a subject index in order to maintain valuable interrelationships. While apt descriptors might be available to relate all portions of family papers, Canadian archivists have not yet developed a lexicon which makes the description of these interrelationships uncomplicated and routine, as librarians have done in describing multi-volume sets or series of publications. As a result, the affinity of the Grier Collection and Cartwright Papers is highlighted only if the archivist chooses to point to it in some portion of the collections' descriptions. A manual system of cross-indexing might or might not pull these collections together. A computerized keyword index almost certainly would highlight the relationship and point as well to any other related references to be found in the archives. For example, all references to the Reverend Conway Cartwright, the father of General Cartwright, found in at least three separate collections of papers relating to the family, would appear together in a computerized key phrase index. All other references to the Reverend Cartwright in the holdings of the archives would also be juxtaposed in the index. References to World War I which appear in the Grier Collection would be juxtaposed with numerous other references to the war found elsewhere in the archival collections.

The developing professionalism of Canadian archivists in dealing in such ways with the archival record can ensure that the archivist, the record, and its users benefit from analysis and description of family papers both as a generic type and as a scholarly resource.