

Pot-Pourri

“ . . . that memorable and long to be remembered day”: An Account of Sir John A. Macdonald’s Funeral at Kingston

by ALLAN C. DUNLOP*

In 1987, the Public Archives of Nova Scotia purchased a bound, onion skin copy book from an antique dealer. The copy book appears to have come directly from the old Stewart family home, Temperance Street, New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. The creator of the item, James Stewart, was born in New Glasgow, 30 May 1869, son of John and Ann (McDonald) Stewart, industrialist and iron bridge builder. After completing high school he had been sent to the Belleville Business College, to hone his business/accounting skills, with the object of becoming accountant/manager of his father’s industrial operations situated on the corner of Edward and Stewart Streets, New Glasgow.

Belleville, Ontario, with a population in 1891 of 9,916 was nearly three times as large as Stewart’s home town. The city raised in Stewart conflicting emotions: “. . . a rather dull hole. Still it is a very pretty city.” Indeed, the fact that between 3 May and 7 July 1891, Stewart wrote sixty-three letters in sixty-five days encompassing 242 pages of the copy book suggests he was bored — bored with the College routine, bored with Sarah Clapp’s boarding house, Bridge Street West, bored with life. No wonder this son of the Kirk jumped at the opportunity to be part of one of the most significant events in the short history of Canada.

The recipient of the letter, Mary McKaracher, was aged twenty in 1891 and residing in the family home, corner of Nelson and Granville Streets, New Glasgow, along with her widowed mother, three sisters and two brothers. She was to be prominent in local church and social circles for many years to come.

Jim Stewart returned to New Glasgow but never joined the family firm, opting instead to open a small brokerage business as well as to dabble rather successfully in the stock market. As the years passed he came to be considered somewhat eccentric and one of the town characters. His hobby was collecting and repairing old clocks. Neither he nor Mary married. In later years, he would each Sunday, walk the four blocks to the McKaracher residence and there prepare breakfast for the two spinster sisters, Mary and Chris. Jim Stewart died at New Glasgow, 18 March 1947, aged seventy-six. Mary outlived him by three years and died 29 March 1950, in her eightieth year. When a few years later auctioneer Jack Cunningham sold off the McKaracher estate, among items for sale were numerous old clocks and clock parts, the last evidences of Jim Stewart’s and Mary McKaracher’s lifetime friendship.

The final direct contact to the copy book was Ella Stewart, sister of Jim. Born on 22 September 1867, she celebrated Canada's centenary and died 23 July 1969 in her 102nd year. To Ella Stewart the archivist probably owes a debt. No doubt it was she who carefully stowed her brother's copy book in the furthest reaches of the attic, there to be discovered nearly two decades after the last Stewart had inhabited the family home.

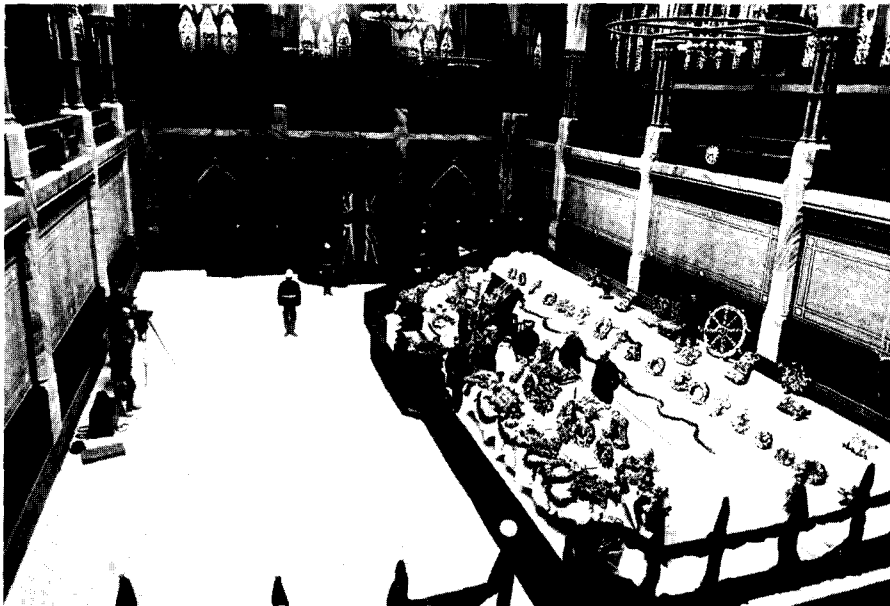
The letter which follows was written in Stewart's bedroom at Sarah Clapp's boarding house on Sunday June 13th, 1891. It was 92 degrees in the shade. Portions of the letter have been omitted in the interests of brevity; spelling errors corrected; and punctuation added for purposes of clarity.

Belleville June 13th '91

Dear Mary

Well Mary I was to Kingston on Thursday. You may consider me a great "spend thrift" but I never will regret my trip to that city and especially on so great an occasion.

I with about a dozen college boys left by Grand Trunk at 12:30 a.m. (midnight) and got to Kingston at 3:30 a.m. Every hotel and boarding house in city full and we were obliged to walk the street till morning. So we took in the city. At 4:15 we went into city hall where the body of our beloved premier lay guarded by six soldiers and an officer. In this large room (about size of Murdoch Hall, N.G.) lay dead "Canada's beloved Son Her Greatest Statesman Her Premier." About the middle of room was the coffin and right above it was built a kind of canopy of crepe in shape of a soldier's tent. All round the



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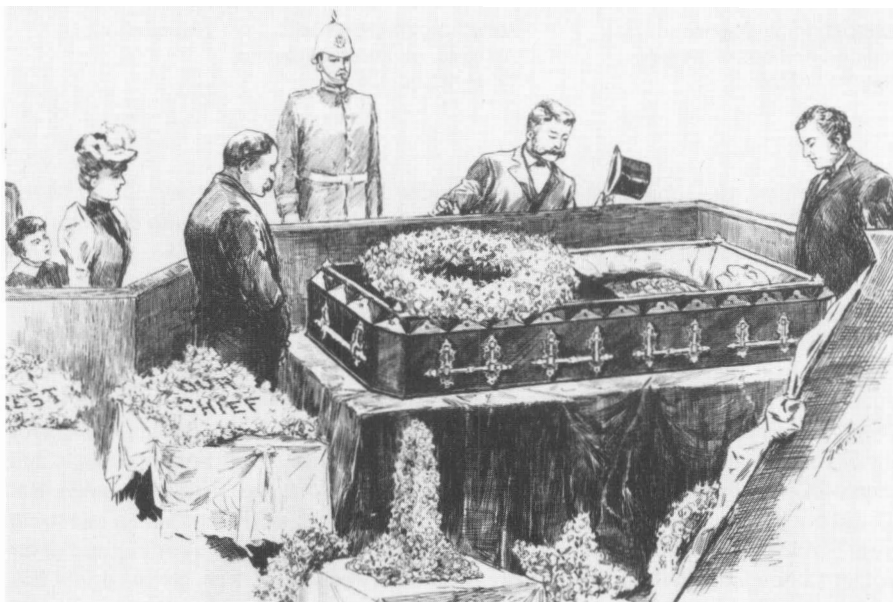
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walls were hung oil paintings of the departed and above them viz. "Canada mourns her loss." "She sees her beloved premier sleeping." In the end of the hall was built up a kind of platform on which all the flowers were beautifully arranged. You can never imagine anything like the way that room was fixed up. It would fairly make one cry when ever they opened the door.

When the door was opened the first thing to catch your eye was the solemnity of the inside. There lay a handsome coffin. (The same exactly as "Pres. Garfield's.") Above it a canopy of crepe. On either side of the coffin stood 3 soldiers in full military dress.

When we went in we were all alone, no rush at all. But one hour after, it was almost impossible to move even in the vicinity of the building. So we had undoubtedly the best chance to see and study that noble old face. "Honored in life and sure honored in death."

The flowers were grand. The floor was covered with white cotton duck and everything else black except the red coats of the guards. I just stopped before leaving the room and thought for one moment — looked up at the top of the little tent "Canada's — Our beloved premier lying at rest." I went back and looked at him again. You would think he was just going to waken up and open his eyes. He did not look, to me, like a dead man. Was quite comfortable. He lay there in a "Privy Council" suit of clothes, (worth about \$150 to \$200) fine black serge nicely finished with gold braid. The finest suit I ever set my eyes on. He wore a pair of thin kid slippers. His hair was thrown off his forehead just as you always saw his picture. I tell you Mary it would make anyone lonesome to stand (for we had ½ hour) and look at, he who did so much for Canada, and think that you were there beside him in death.



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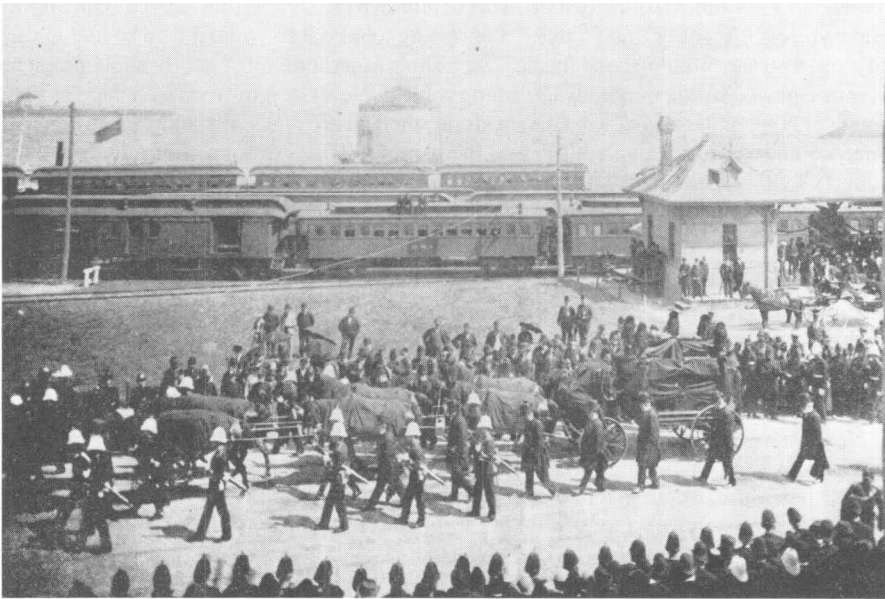
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We then left the room and went down stairs. Went all over the city. Down to the penitentiary and I purposed to go in and we were admitted and taken into every corner. Take a look there and that will do for a life time. You have heard of breaking stone? Well you just should see them at it in the hot sun and the sweat rolling off them. Then in the blacksmith shop. Then the shoe factory. Then the tailor shop etc. and those in solitary confinement. We then went down where dinner was being prepared. (In all there are 630 inmates. Just imagine!) And all hands have their meals together. Before each was a quarter of a loaf, $\frac{1}{2}$ pint of water and a plate of pea soup. How would you like this for 10 years? I guess you would not fatten much. We then took a cab (horse car) and started for the city again and then out to the lady's college and thence to old Fort Frontenac and then walked to the noted Kingston Military College, the one Basil Fraser attended. But we did not have time to go in for it was now 11:30 and as yet we did not have a bite to eat from 6 o'clock the night and had not been able to get a seat in the train coming and never got into a hotel for even a drink of water, so you may believe we were getting pretty sick of that kind of thing. We started back from the college for the main part of the city ($1\frac{1}{2}$ miles) and got there at 12:00 and went straight for hotel for dinner, and as luck always has it we had to wait $\frac{1}{2}$ hour.



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Whenever we got dinner, went back to city hall. (By the way, if you remember some years ago, the parliament used to meet in Kingston and new and grand buildings were built much like those at Ottawa, and this is, you see, spoken of now as Kingston City Hall.) A building about $\frac{1}{2}$ again as high as N.G. Post Office and as long as from post office corner to R.A. Walker's corner and has a fine centre tower. The outside of the building was all draped and flags hung $\frac{1}{2}$ mast. In fact Mary the whole city. Every building was almost covered with black.

At about 1:15 a military officer came along on horseback and arranged the funeral. First all the flowers were taken and arranged in a kind of waggon built for the purpose and drawn by two black horses led by soldiers. Then the hearse drawn by (8) eight handsome brown horses covered with a black rug (military) and each led by a soldier. Next followed a buggy in which was H. Macdonald M.P., Sir John's son, and then all the members, and they followed by the Free Masons, and then the citizens etc. On either side marched the soldiers in single file down from front to rear of funeral. Oh, by the way, in the very lead was a mounted company of infantry. (Company is not proper word but I forget at present.) They marched eight deep. The funeral was about $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 miles long and 8 deep making it about 8 miles of ordinary 2 deep funeral. Can you think of it! And not one quarter of the people in the city joined the march.

The band of 47 brass instruments played the "dead march" and the walk very slow (about two miles per hour). The music was grand and they played all the way to the

cemetery (3 1/4 miles from city hall). There were two bands and they played spell about. Have you ever heard "Dead March"? I am going to send it to you if it is to be had in this city and also the other piece of music, "Sir John's funeral march," another solemn piece of music played by the band. I was wishing some of New Glasgow men were here as they could let N.G. have an idea what can be done when all are one. Grits and Toreys were all one. You could not draw the line. No. It was not a Tory but a brother man and "our country's chosen leader," and Canadians are loyal and you could, yes, feel it that day. And now we are at the open grave and then on our way home and he is now numbered among the dead, but not, no never will, among the forgotten in the world's history.

I have a few sprigs that I took from the coffin, and as they are held dear and sacred in memory of our young Canada, I am going to herewith enclose you a small piece. Perhaps you don't take much interest in these remembrances, but I am very, very fond of such and will send you a few leaves. I managed to get one flower and a few leaves. (Stole them for I asked nobody.)

Now I have done my best to tell you and give you an idea of the solemn affair. But can leave it to your own imagination to see the solemnity for words written can't give it. It will be a pleasure for me to tell you all about it when I get home for I never will forget it. And you know is the most important event that has happened in Canada in our life time so far.

20,000 persons visited the city that day and the most perfect silence reigned all day. Not one drunk man. Not a loud word. I hope it has been interesting to you, Mary. I have given you all principle points. I wish you had been there for I know you would like to see the loving, brotherly feeling that was so widely shown that memorable and long to be remembered day. Hoping you have a slight idea of how it was. I pass from it now.

Jim

Notes

- * The writer would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following natives of New Glasgow: Dr. James M. Cameron, historian; Mr. Jack Cunningham, retired auctioneer and Mr. Greg MacDonald, lawyer. Donald MacLeod, archivist, Government Records, Archives of Ontario, went out of his way to assist on questions concerning Belleville. The citation for the copy-book is MG 1, Vol. 1311A, PANS. The letter will be found on pp. 180-191.