

**PERILS IN THE WILDERNESS:
PIONEER TALES FROM
THE REVEREND AMMI PARKER'S
"MEMORIES OF LIFE IN CANADA"**

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Because historians have not yet examined the American and British settlement of the Eastern Townships in detail, those interested in the early social history of the region have had to remain largely content with the reprinted works of nineteenth-century local writers such as the Reverend Edward Cleveland, Mrs C.M. Day, and B.F. Hubbard.¹ These individuals clearly wished to preserve a record of the pioneer generation before all its members passed from the scene. What their writing lacks in scholarship, it gains in a sense of authenticity and immediacy. The Reverend Ammi Parker aspired to become one of these local historians after his retirement from the Congregational ministry in Danville, but his health was already failing in 1875 when he began the manuscript entitled "Memories of Life in Canada." Fortunately it was preserved, along with many of Parker's other papers, after his death two years later.²

Among these papers is a second lengthy manuscript written around 1870 and describing Parker's career and the history of the Congregational Church in the Eastern Townships.³ Parker writes that he was born in Cornwall, Vermont in 1802, just when his father, James, was about to become a Congregational minister in the town of Underhill, near Burlington. The family would later move further north, eventually settling in Troy, a mere two miles from the Canadian border. Ammi served as an apprentice and store clerk in St Alban's from the age of fifteen to twenty-two, when he decided to become a minister rather than establish his own business.

After studying theology in Newhaven, he was "approved to preach the gospel" in the fall of 1828. An exploratory tour soon

afterward found him in the village of Stanstead where he preached for several months before travelling further north to Shipton Township, the outer limit of American settlement. Here he settled in the village of Danville, confident that he was beyond the reach of the Methodist missionaries who had undermined his once-mighty church in New England before the settlement of the Townships was well under way. And here this moderate evangelical would remain as one of the region's few Congregational ministers, retiring from his duties only in 1870 at the age of sixty-eight.

While Parker's second lengthy manuscript is based partly on his own early experiences as a travelling missionary throughout a large section of the region, its main focus is neither autobiographical nor religious. Rather, it aims to be a history of the region from the perspective of the settlers who arrived from the New England states, as well as his own observations in the field. In addition to following the standard historical approach of describing the early economy and society, Parker recounts a number of pioneer adventures in detail. "Memories of Life in Canada" is therefore a peculiar — and not entirely successful — blend of social history, oral history and personal memoir. Too incomplete and roughly written to merit publication as a whole, Parker's manuscript nevertheless warrants attention for the light it sheds on the early life of this historically neglected region.

Rather than select fragments from each section of the document, I have chosen to concentrate on the stories Parker recounted. Interesting as Parker's general observations about the pioneer economy and society are, it is the stories which describe the actual experiences of the early settlers and give the most tangible impression of their daily lives. Apart from diaries and family correspondence, all too rare in the Eastern Townships, such stories are the closest we can come to the settlers' own voices. Of course, these voices are filtered through the pen of an aging clergyman, and the tales generally have a moral basis. Their message is essentially that hard work, perseverance, and faith in God will be rewarded. But Parker was not simply sermonizing, and the fact that some of these stories had already been printed in less detail elsewhere suggests that they had become part of the local folklore.

While one who tells of his or her own adventures is certainly not recounting a folk tale, the pioneers whose stories Parker recorded were, in a sense, creating a folk tradition. Indeed, all the members of the first generation were long dead by the time Parker wrote his manuscript, and the minister's own adventures had

doubtless become a part of his people's oral culture. This culture played an important role despite the fact that literacy was nearly universal, for, as Parker himself pointed out, reading was for a long time largely confined to the Bible and religious tracts. Orality and literacy represent a continuum rather than two mutually exclusive processes.⁴

Perhaps Parker sensed towards the end of his life that the increasing proliferation of printed material was weakening the oral tradition at a time when its lessons were most needed to counter the potentially corrupting effects of a growing material prosperity. However, the clergyman was no Jeremiah, glorifying the past to condemn the present. In his words, he wrote "partly because numerous friends have urged us thereto, and partly because it may help to lead the descendants, and successors of the patriarch settlers to value the heritage they received, and to improve it manfully, while they recognise the good providence of God in the protection of those adventurous toilers amid their trials and toils. Let the present generation, and those who are yet to come, know at what cost the inheritance was achieved [sic]."

On the surface, the stories Parker recorded are simply yarns, meant to entertain an audience, but that is true of any folk tale. More fundamentally, members of the first generation who recounted their adventures were expressing pride in the fact that they were the founders of their communities, and that they had suffered great hardships for the sake of their children and grandchildren. The enemy in these stories is not Satan or temptation (aside from passing references to alcohol), but untamed and unpredictable nature in the tangible form of the gloomy forest with its animal predators, flooded streams, snow drifts, and unrelenting cold during the winter months. As Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood have pointed out, these same themes are echoed in much of English Canada's literary works.⁵ And not all the heroes in these tales are men. Despite the pronounced gender bias of Parker's language, and even though the female sphere in his stories never extends far beyond the cabin door once the long journey to their new home is completed, the pioneer women are given considerable credit for their resourcefulness and their courage.

Much of what Parker recounts must have been common to colonists everywhere in the northeastern regions of North America, but somewhat unique appears to be the extent to which the first settlers of the Eastern Townships scattered themselves

throughout the wilderness. Crossing many miles of very sparsely-inhabited territory in northern Vermont or New Hampshire, often in early spring to take advantage of the snow for sledding, the early settlers "did not come in colonies, or in any way associated, but as individual adventurers without any knowledge of those who might be their neighbours or fellow citizens."⁶ Parker adds that "The controlling [sic] motive with most was to acquire good land, at cheap rates, and on easy terms, so that they and their children might [establish] for themselves desirable homes and farms." As a result, many moved to isolated outposts such as Danville and New Ireland despite the fact that there were ample quantities of fertile land much closer to the American border. The result was a greater degree of economic hardship and social isolation than would have been experienced with a more gradual expansion of the frontier.

Parker's history is lacking in analysis, but it is clear that a major cause of this unsystematic settlement pattern was the land-granting system. Once the townships were surveyed and opened to colonization in 1792, they were distributed to leaders and associates who were required to initiate development in order to make good their claims. Thus, the Montreal tavern-keeper, Elmer Cushing, was officially recognized as the leader of Shipton Township in 1801 as a reward for informing on David McLane, who was executed as an agent of the French government.⁷

The British government's aim was therefore to open most of the region at once, yet its Quebec officials threw up impediments by delaying or blocking the release of land titles to the American claimants in order to acquire the patents to the townships for themselves and their merchant allies. Thus was investment discouraged and much of the region left in the hands of large-scale absentee proprietors who had little will or incentive to develop their holdings. An additional factor in the slow and uneven development of the region was the withholding from sale of crown and clergy reserves distributed throughout each township. As a result, the frontier conditions described by Parker persisted in much of the Eastern Townships until mid-century.⁸ In his own words, "For the first half century there had been little to call out and to consolidate the social element throughout these communities."

In the final analysis, the stories Parker relates can hardly be said to provide an accurate reflection of the pioneer experience as a whole — there is too little mention of loneliness, discouragement, family and community conflict, or failure in general. But they do

represent the voices of those who persevered with some success, they do articulate the general sense of optimism and faith in progress which marked the Victorian era, and they should remain a part of the Eastern Townships region's cultural heritage. The following excerpts from Parker's "Memories" retain his sub-titles, organization of material, spelling, and syntax.

Methods of reaching their destination.

Parker introduces this section by stating that exploring parties of three to six men would enter the region equipped with little more than hatchets, a single musket, fish hooks, flint, and a pocket-compass. Once they had reached the highest hill in the general area they were heading for, they would fall a small tree against the tallest tree on that hill in order to climb it and survey the countryside.

When the Out-looker at Mast-head indicated the most promising tract of land, the tests being freedom from rocky mountain, sunken swamps, and an appearance of a good growth of hard wood trees, the company moved for the choice locality, and selected their several lots.

One of these exploring parties on the western border of Melbourne had finished their work and encamped for the night near a large birch tree at whose base they had lighted their fire, laid them down to sleep on the evergreen boughs which they had gathered and spread out for their bed.

Amid their hours of sleep the tree roots had burned away, and the tree came with a crash upon the sleepers crushing two of the little band in instant death. The grand-children and decendants [sic] of those pioneers, Mr. Trenholm of Kingsey and Mr. Cramer of Melbourne Ridge will not forget the story.

[...]

In one instance, the exploring party after choosing their lots, cut, cured, and stacked a half ton or more of wild hay which they had found growing on a beaver-meadow. This was to provide for their oxen when they should come in Autumn to make their first 'opening.' In October they came with a yoke of steers, and their axes, and began work with a will. The hay served a valuable purpose, but that year snow fell very early, twenty inches deep in one storm. After the snow, came a slight rain, and then severe frost, forming such a 'crust,' that neither men or oxen could travel away

from the 'camp.' The basket of provision became emptied, and the men and team eighteen miles from the nearest house or family. For three full weeks these three men were imprisoned in the woods without an article of food either animal, or vegetable, except beach-nuts.

The trees were loaded with nuts that year the severe frost had ruptured the outer shell and down came the luscious oily fruit like the manna of long ago, the crusted snow caught it on its smooth surface in baskets full.

Ample supply of this article was gathered up in a few minutes by day-light, and shucked by the light of their pitch-knot fire, by the men in the evening for breakfast, dinner and supper each succeeding day. On this, these toilers subsisted hearty and strong to labor for those three weeks, when a thaw came on and enabled them to make their way out to the settlement in Stukeley. This I had from the lips of the late Mr. Darby of Ely, one of the three, while he pointed out to me the portion of his farm where the first trees were chopped, and where the beach-nut camp had been erected and occupied.

[...]

The women and younger children were not able to tramp the tedious journey, hence oxen were yoked and attached to their legitimate sled, a chest with the family ward-robe, a box of provisions, a bed and its clothing, a little fodder for the oxen were packed, a seat as comfortable as might be for the mother, and [a] few snug little niches for the wee ones, and the team was off.

The man and larger boys accompanied, generally as an advance guard, and to clear the brush-wood and smaller trees away, so that the team with its treasure could pass between the strong natives of the forest. This, of course must all be done in winter when there could be a snow path over the uncleared land, and when the skill of all carpenters had been forestalled in the construction of bridges over all the brooks & rivers.

[...]

Perilous incidents in removing

Several of the brave mothers who came — some by one [of] the routes indicated and some by another — have told us how the Oxen tired. And the darkness came on when they were only about half way to the house nearest to the house they had left in early morning, and they were obliged to camp in the woods.

The sled which had served them as a vehicle, served them now

for as many as could be packed in, as a bed-stead — their cold lunch for a supper with snow as snow-water to moisture it. The men and larger boys gathered wood from some stub or decaying tree, and by the aid of flint and Jack-Knife struck a fire, and then gathering boughs from evergreen trees at hand, a part of which served for their bed, and part for their covering. Thus with their comfortably [sic] near the kindled fire they slept as sound and healthy [a] sleep as though they had been among feathers. Not one of the company took a cold or had a thought of being sick.

One family came from New Hampshire on their way to New Ireland a township in Megantic County into which two or three families had gone before them. Their road was through the 'Back of Shipton,' now Danville. At that date there were at this Danville just two families of recent settlers, Cleveland's and Flint's, whose best care was always given to straggling travellers. Thirty miles intervened between this and their destination without a house on the road. Snow was very deep and a thaw followed by severe frost had formed a crust so that it was impossible for their horse to go a mile where the snow had not been packed and where no [path] had been kept trodden. What was to be done they were not long in deciding. The horse and pung were to be left behind, a hand-sled was to be the supplement—the father, mother and all the children strong and hearty, all voted to betake themselves on the crust to their new home. But there was a baby boy to be provided for in the caravan and an appropriate place for him was soon found.

The family's wash-tub was placed on the hand-sled a bark rope was soon manufactured and the tub securely tied to the sled — the boy of two years was placed in the baby-carriage. Some parcels of provisions for the journey by his side and at his back, and off they moved with glee. At sunset the second day they landed safe and sound to take possession [of] Thurber hill which every body knows when they visit New Ireland. That last night in Chester woods, they reported, was passed in safety and with comfort.

It has been the lot of the writer to follow that father and mother and two of their household to the long home.

The boy of the washtub we believe still lives.⁹

[...]

Privations and suffering of the pioneer settlers

Before this section, there is a detailed description of how the first log houses and rudimentary furniture were constructed. Parker then notes

that because "there were no considerable villages or settlements for seventy five miles beyond our southern boundary," the early settlers had to travel up to one hundred miles for their supplies: "all this before roads were constructed, or streams bridged, and while only a small proportion of the inhabitants were owners of a horse or oxen to serve as a team for bringing home their needed and purchased supplies." To be milled, the early grain crops of Shipton Township had to be carried by canoe up the St Francis River to Sherbrooke, then up the Magog River to Lake Memphremagog and, finally, to West Derby Vermont. The return trip usually took eight to ten days, however a grist mill and saw mill were built at Richmond by Elmer Cushing in 1802.¹⁰

Parker also recounts in this section how an American midwife walked thirty miles on snowshoes to deliver a baby in Eaton Township, and how a Sherbrooke doctor accomplished a similar feat to attend a birth in Shipton. This section closes by recalling how "the early mothers" manufactured their own cloth from flax and sheeps' wool, and sewed all their families' clothing.

A man who stood at the head of one of the most honored families of Shipton left his family with a scanty supply to go to Three Rivers for flour for which he must pay eighteen dollars a barrel. Previous to this he and company of four of his neighbors had constructed a partnership boat, into this scow they loaded their several packages of Black Salts for market at the end of their journey on the north shore of the St Lawrence. Leaving their port near Danville they floated and polled down the Little Nicholet [sic] till they reached the head of impassable rapids — there they unloaded, and tugged their cargo, and then their boat for three fourths of a mile where they intersected the Big Nicolet river. Into this their craft was re-launched, and when they had again loaded the cargo they proceeded onward to the mouth of the Nicolet, and across the 'Big River' to the point of destination. Like others who go to market, they sold, and bought, and set away for home, but sleet, and snow, and ice rendered their upward trip terribly tedious.

It was a full fortnight before the weary man reached home to ask, first of all 'well, how have you kept yourselves alive?' And the good wife's story was this — 'Mr. Clough raised some wheat last year away in his clearing, put it in his log barn, and he has come on, and threshed that wheat and having no family here has gone away. The straw was left outside the threshing floor in a pile and I took two of the children with me. Leaving one to care for baby, we

hand-pulled that straw all over, and carefully picked the Kernels of Wheat and we got half a bushel.¹¹

Years afterward that mother said to the writer 'that was the best day's work I ever did in my life, I boiled that wheat and fed the children, but for that, it did seem as though the two youngest must have died of hunger.'

That woman's sons and daughters lived through any pinching times that came, and took an honorable position as parents and citizens, — those of them who survive are far enough from imprisonment in a log house or from the want of the necessaries or even the luxuries of life. One has rendered noble service as a teacher and as a minister of Christ's Gospel. The grand-children, and great-grand-children have come to occupy places of trust and honor in the community which the old folks helped to generate.

One of the patriarchal mothers of the County of Compton, has been heard to say that the people who came into the country in those early days couldn't starve if they tried, and that she could be a faithful witness, that herself and children had been reduced to as great straits as need be — and they had dug and eaten wild roots, — had peeled the bark of the White Pine and Basswood trees, had scraped and eaten the inner portion of this and had come out all right.

Another, in what is now the County of Richmond, gave this to the writer in her own house, from which he afterward followed her to the narrow house on yonder hillside. 'It was in June, and all our provisions were gone, we had planted a few potatoes, and Mr. P. took the old black horse — (I believe the only horse in Shipton at the time), and went to Richmond to buy some flour or meal. There he met two or three jolly companions, got to drinking, and was gone three weeks. I had five small children, the two oldest boys had been able to catch some fish in the little river not far off, but it commenced to rain about the time father went away, and rained every day till the brooks overflowed their banks, and not a fish could be caught. We had nothing eatable in the house. I went into the woods and gathered wild herbs and boiled them, and they were our only meals for many days, but there was little enough of nourishment in them. Finally I tried the leaves off from some of the trees, and we found that the newly formed leaves of the beach tree were better than any wild plants, they constituted our most reliable support. But all these days, my baby was pining away, and I feared that it would starve to death. As a last experiment, and effort to save my little one, I took a knife, scraped the

dirt away from potatoe [sic] plants, which were just shooting up, and carefully cut away all that could be spared the shooting plants to grow, and boiled the peices [sic] I got and [fed] them in sparing meals to the baby. That was what saved his life, and now you know he is a strong and healthy man, and has a strong family of children.¹²

The writer of this did know him, and know the other children, and the children's children. There are perhaps two scores of descendants of that mother, not far from where I write to day.

[...]

Prior to recounting the next story, Parker describes the dilemma faced by the pioneers who had an invaluable "source of relief" in their sugar maples, but no way to acquire the large kettles required to boil down the sap in the spring. These kettles were also needed for the manufacture of black salts or potash, a crucial pioneer commodity, but the closest source for them was Trois-Rivières, sixty to a hundred miles away.

More than this, there were no roads except the narrow brush path for the winter, and the intending purchasers had little enough to spare to make the purchase, and for two or three years not one man in ten was the owner of a horse, or team, so that the transportation of the needed kettles was a seeming impossibility. Years elapsed before half the families were able to possess themselves of the coveted Sugar-Kettle.

But when it was obtained it was worth gold. A family consisting of six sons and one daughter — living in such a log house as we have heretofore briefly described, had come to be the owners of one Cow, and one of the 12 pail Sugar Kettles. The little crop of the previous year was all consumed before the opening of spring — flour was very dear, and means to purchase very scanty.

They were just pitching in to clear a splendid tract of land covered with a splendid growth of maple. No matter how much sap should be drawn from these trees, so soon to be in ashes. The father, and older sons applied themselves to manufacturing buckets and troughs to hold the sap. When the sun-shine of April days indicated that the sap would 'run,' all hands set to the work of tapping the trees, often making several incisions in a single tree hoping to gain the more sap. Directly the boiling process was commenced, and followed night and day when there was a 'run.'

It was a 'good year.' They 'sugared off' twenty hundred pounds of sugar, and the honest father assured me that they ate it all

before Christmas day of the same year. Wanting entirely the articles of bread, and meat and butter, they took the sugar, in the varied forms they chose, in the stead and place of the real bread or meat or butter, and they lived on a tall and strong family. In later years the writer of this has been in the well finished houses, and prosperous houses of each of those six sons, and rejoiced with them in the kindly ordering of a gracious providence concerning them.

In another family consisting of as many sons, and three daughters, means had failed to keep pace with the wants of the household. Their crops had been scanty, one adversity had come after another, till in the hardest year of all, the bread-winner decided on a desperate effort. Every peck of their grains, and every bushel of their potatoes were put into the ground at seed time. The land had been well cleared, the soil was rich and mellow, and with their clumsy hoes, the man and his boys wrought like men, till the last of all their seed was covered.

Then what were the family to do for the season? It was a year when flour was enormously high in markets, the family's means to purchase, all used up, and even good paper would not buy provisions at that period. So the household had but one resource. Their maple sugar, supplemented by the milk of their two cows. So from the month of May till the first of September, the father and mother assured me, that neither they or their children tasted bread, or meat or potatoes, unless it were by chance that now and again one or other of them would accept a bit of bread, or a friendly meal in a neighbor's house. The maple sugar and the milk of the two cows sufficed to keep them all in good heart, and with no sickness occurring till they were enable[d] to reap and gather a generous and ample harvest in autumn.

Since that hard year, after the cold season neither the parents, or their children have ever been reduced to poverty. The sons and daughters still survive, and have their place as heads of families, and nearly all of them in possession of more than a competency.

[...]

Perils in the wilderness.

While stating that a chapter on the topic of wilderness perils would seem incomplete without giving wolves and bears "a somewhat prominent place and record," Parker admits that the threat these animals presented to humans were "very much over-rated." Because wolves and

bears killed sheep and raided corn fields, however, farmers declared war on them. According to one of Parker's stories, an angry settler tracked down a wolf which had destroyed several of his sheep, and dispatched it with a jack-knife. In another tall tale, two settlers in Ireland Township fell asleep after imbibing some of the molasses and whiskey mixture they had concocted for a marauding bear. During the night the bear herself finished off the drink and lay down between the two men for a heavy slumber, only to be shot when they woke up in the morning.¹³ Posing a much greater threat to survival than the animal predators, as the following attests, was the wilderness itself.

It would follow as matter of course that a settling down in a forest country, so much away from the abodes of civilization, more or less of special perils would be encountered, and so it was.

Sometimes the teams would break through the ice as they arrived to pass over the unbridged streams, and although it was seldom that the drivers and passengers went down yet this [sic] calamity did occur in a few instances, and sorrow came to suffering households. Cases had occurred too, where men travelling on foot, or on horse-back having been overtaken by darkness to discover the only indication of their way, the axe-marks on the trees they have been obliged to stop and rest as they could in the midst of the forest, not knowing what might befall [sic] them there. We have had a personal knowledge of several cases where this has occurred. Again, when the choppers were engaged in falling the trees, sometimes a decayed limb would drop on the chopper's head, or possibly the body of the tree at which they wrought would fall in another direction than the one sought by the chopper, & at times, one here, and another have fallen to be crushed by the tree they had hoped to master.

A thrilling case of being lost in the woods occurred within twenty miles of my own home since my lot was cast in this field.

In the township of Windsor a few families had settled in the earliest years of the present century, just on the bank of St. Francis River. The rear lands of the township had not been much explored, and not much estimated value placed upon them for a considerable period.

At length two or three families pushed through the swampy belt a little back from the river, and made a beginning on Hard Wood Hill some four miles from the neighbors they had left.

Their path was clearly enough indicated for day-light travellers, and soon after into the woods it crossed a stream which foot pas-

sengers must cross on a large fallen tree which served as their bridge. Below this, that is somewhat nearer to the River, another stream enters [?] the one which they were to pass and the combined stream could be passed on a similar log or fallen tree. From their new homes three or four persons went out one day in Autumn to convey messages and take some needed supplies. Among these persons was a young woman of eighteen who in a glee fit bounded away from her fellow travellers and challenged them to overtake her. In her haste she mistook the combined stream, for the smaller one which she should have crossed further on, and passed over on the wrong log, and in fact over the wrong stream. Along the banks of that stream she tramped till thick darkness and heavy rain came on, and the fearful truth came home to the poor wanderer, I am lost.

Meantime the companions from whom she had parted, reached their home just as the deep darkness came on, in full expectation that she would have arrived before them. Her widowed mother heard the story with an anxious, burdened heart such as none but a mother could know. No effective search could be made for the lost one that night partly because there were almost none in reach capable of making search in the woods, and partly because the pouring rain would extinguish and [sic] torch light which the hunters could get up. Morning came, and messengers hastened away to the 'settlement' to convey the tidings. Immediately every man who could be spared was on the alert traversing the woods, and tracing the streams, hallooing and blowing horns as they went, but no voice responded to their calls, no form of the girl. Meantime the falling rain had so raised the stream, that the log on which the hapless girl had passed became overflowed so that no one could believe [sic] that she had passed or could have passed at that point below the junction of the two streams and be wandering in a vast unbroken forest southward where her road lay to the East. No trace was found the first day, and on the second, an additional force had turned out, and for nearly twenty days companies of men from every township and village within twenty miles around traversed, and re-traversed the great forest they had entered, and no sound, or vestige of the lost one had rewarded their search. It was estimated that probably two thousand days of exploration, and search for the lost girl had been expended. And no trace appeared.

During nearly all these days cold autumn rains had been falling, till streams and swamps were full and overflowing. At length the

jailed companies of volunteers disbanded, — all hope of finding her a living girl was relinquished, they returned to their homes with aching limbs, and downcast hearts, having done what they could to recover a lost one, but regretting that they had labored in vain.

During these twenty days that poor girl had traced that stream up to its mountain spring the very source, and back along its bank to its junction with the larger stream, day in and day out, finding no bridge or down-fallen tree at the mouth on which she could cross, for the continuous rains had so swollen the stream the log was entirely overflowed.

During all these days she had subsisted solely on the choak-cherries, and the wild cranberries, just then at maturity, and growing in abundance in that swamp, and along that brook side. We said existed 'solely,' but there was one exception. On one of those dreary mornings, she heard the report of a gun, which had been fired by one of the exploring companies, fired as a signal for themselves to marshal and begin another days search, and also deeming it possible that it might be heard by the lost one.

So it was heard by the poor wanderer, and she hastened as fast as her strength and limbs could carry her, in the direction from which the sound had seemed to come. Before noon she came in sight of fire, logs were still burning which had been rolled together, and constituted the camp fire of one of the searching parties. The men had gone quite beyond the reach of her voice, she knew not which way, and could not follow.

But O the sight and luxury of that fire for one literally soaked by night and by day with the October rains, it was a God-send.

In addition to the relief [sic] and comfort of the fire the poor fugitive found the bones of some partridges which had furnished the breakfast of the hunders [sic], from these she gleaned a little taste, and picked a few small crusts which had dropped by the rude log-table, and so her almost spent life and hope received a new impulse, wanting which she more probably would have perished in that wilderness. The hand of Providence was in it, and inspired her fainting hope anew, but the benevolent hunters were beyond the reach of her calls and cries, and there was no trace by which she could follow them. After having warmed and refreshed herself as she could, she betook herself again to wandering up and down the stream, till weary and worn she had come almost to utter despair of relief [sic].

No sounds or voices greeted her ear, after the report of that sig-

nal gun, the companies of men in search had all retired from the woods with no expectation that she could be alive, but on the morning of the twenty first day of her exile she wandered down her beaten path to the mouth of the stream, and discovered for the first time the fatal log over which she crossed into the untracked wilderness. Till now it had been entirely submerged by the swollen stream, and out of sight, but by the falling away of the water it was now in sight.

Here, after having passed three full weeks in a way that few besides her had ever been called to pass, she glided over the log, and took to the path which led to her widowed mother's dwelling. As she emerged out of the woods into the edge of the little clearing in which the house was situate, her brother saw a strange looking live creature approaching, and ran for his very life to save himself from being dragged off, or eaten up by the strange looking wild animal.

The poor girl reached the house, lifted the latch, and walked in to hear her mother scream, and to see her faint at the sight, but it was not long ere mother and daughter on each other's necks in an embrace which [...] few mothers and daughters ever know. The process of her recuperation was slow, and her life even endangered by over-feeding and over-talking, but she did recover, and a little love story may be pinned on here.

A young man who had a special interest in the case pending, absent now at the distance of several hundreds of miles, in order to acquire a little pocket money, had heard that she was a lost one in the woods, and had come to the rescue. He had joined one of the searching companies, and acted well his part, but like others had given up hope that the lost would ever be found, and had returned to his distant temporary home to mourn almost in widowhood.

In due course the glad tidings reached him that the 'lost was found,' — and at the time appointed he came again to Canada, and a welcome yoke was placed upon the necks of these two, and they became 'one' as the social head of a worthy household.

[...]

Midway between Shipton and Quebec, alongside the Craig Road constructed in 1811, lay the isolated English-speaking settlements of Ireland, Inverness, and Leeds Townships in Megantic County. The arduous journey of one American pioneer family en route to Ireland Township is recounted above, but, because they were fellow

*Congregationalists, Parker was also familiar with the families from the Isle of Arran who settled in Inverness. His account differs in some interesting details from that later published in the Annals of Megantic by one of their leader's descendants.*¹⁴

It was in the year 1829 when twenty eight families from the Island of Arran Scotland arrived in Quebec and traced up Craig's road to a point opposite the southern part of the township of Inverness. Thence there was nothing better than a bush-path, to rough and rocky hundred acre lots which each family might take for a home. It was in the month of August in that year that these people parted with their carters, and took their boxes and baggage on their shoulders and made way as they could to the outlet of the small Lake, lying mostly in their newly chosen township, and then they set up their banners — at the Ford.

Their occupation in their old and rocky home had been that of fishermen, of course they were not accomplished axemen, nor at all accustomed to the kind of work which was now to devolve upon them. They had yet to learn the science of falling the trees. They lacked the skill to select those most appropriate for their need, and the aptitude to frame and connect these together for the construction of even a comfortable hut, and having no one to act as their practical instructor, they made slow progress, and poor jobs in the building line.

Their temporary resting place, till they could erect houses, was located on the flats at the outlet of the Lake and in our day would have been esteemed as a curiosity. Two rows of small perpendicular poles, — not too high, — with a crotch at the top were duly installed in mother earth, — into these crotches, other, and longer poles were laid horizontally and the building, or camp was framed. So far this was according to art and orthodoxy.

Then the walls, and the roofing. The good people had not learned how the strait small Spruce and Fir trees, abundant at their hand could soon have formed ample walls, and with a row of poles to support it, the branches of these evergreens could have formed a reliable roof.

Instead of utilizing these home-grown materials, they took bits of Carpets, Table Cloths, Blankets, emptying all their boxes, and using nearly all their contents in those lines to form the outside walls and roofing of the long camp, which they duly partitioned so that each family should have an allotted space. Here a great calamity almost befel[l] them. The autumn rains had fallen so as

to swell the waters of the lake, till the flats were quite overflowed, and the whole company and their effects were in imminent danger of being swept away by the flood.

But through divine mercy they were spared, and the men set about building houses as best they could. They were quite unaccustomed to the use of the axes and unskilled in the framing and fashioning of timber, unskilled too in the selection of trees of suitable dimensions and quality for the purpose now required, and of course made a sad misapplication of their energies in the line of building.

In some way they had acquired the notion that the houses must be constructed of hard wood trees, maple, beech, and birch, and so trees of these varieties of wood about six inches in diameter were selected, and formed into the walls of their houses by the strong arms of the willing workers. Trees of this description were always more or less crooked and illshaped, and of course the interstices between these poles constituting these house-walls would often be inconveniently large. We have seen them of a capacity to allow small animals to pass through if they had been there, and had made the attempt, of course, it would not be easy to calk these large chunks so as to exclude currents of cold air. Take a survey of these early homes of these worthy settlers, a house without floor, or fire-place, or any description of stove, without a part[it]ion or ceiling, many of them with no door except an extended blanket, and this in a Latitude of 46 1/2 degrees north, and we need not tell, we could not describe the amount of suffering endured from the cold, endured by those families during their first winter in Canada. A mother has told us how every article of provision would be frozen in one hour, and how in endeavoring to take a cup of tea it would be frozen in the saucer before she could get it to her mouth.

Moreover they were nearly fifteen miles from neighbors, and fully that distance from any supplies of provisions, and there without roads, and without teams. In such circumstances it is almost matter of wonder that the whole colony had not perished from cold and starvation during that first winter. But the eye that had watched them, and the hand that had led them thus far, would not forsake them amid their 'perils in the wilderness.' We have previously spoken of some American families locating many years before this in the Township of New Ireland, there they had toiled at great disadvantage, but but [sic] with a measure of success, had cleared their land, had built houses, and barns, and had acquired

stocks of cattle and sheep and horses, and especially that year 1829 they had gathered a most abundant harvest, double the yeild [sic] of any previous year.

This primary settlement was but about fifteen miles from the new comers who had made their way into the wilderness from an opposite direction, but instead of a highway to connect the two colonies of settlers, part of this distance consisted of the waters of an unnavigated lake, and other parts led through a rough and rocky forest apparently impassable. Nevertheless through the ordering of a gracious providence, the skill of some of the Yankee men of Ireland was brought into requisition, and a way was opened up so that one of the farmers there undertook, and succeeded in transporting supplies of home-made flour, meal and other provisions, amply to supply these 'foreigners' for the winter. In this new-found market too, such seed as should be required in spring could be readily obtained, and a detachment of the men found ready employment in summer with with [sic] those from the other country who had so long preceded them in breaking new ground.

This intercommunication between the two classes and their families came to be a matter of no little benefit to each. The Scotchmen were taking lessons in the matter of adaptation to life in the woods — how to do it, — and the Yankee settlers were getting quiet salutary lessons in the catechism of scriptural morality, and our obligation to heed the word, and observe the worship of God.

These pioneers of Inverness feared and honored God, and so on the first sabbath after landing 'at the Ford,' and ever afterward until more public ministrations were secured, the families all gathered around, and their honored and noble leader Capt. McKillop read to them some gospel treatize, and catechized and instructed them in Bible lessons, and these lessons bore good life-fruit. The influence of those instructions and counsels was salutary and far-reaching.

[...]

While we thus write of that locality, and of that particular group of its inhabitants, there may be a measure of propriety in noting an instance of personal peril to myself. Somewhat late in the month of March 1844 a pressing message came, requesting that I would meet Rev. Mr. Atkinson, then Minister of the Cong'l Church at Quebec, at a day as early as could be arranged, and accomplished, for the purpose of organising and recognising a

church of the same denomination at Inverness.

Snow had fallen that winter to an unusual depth, and at that date was giving no signs of decay, the only bridges across the two rivers and the smaller streams intervening were as secure as ever, but of course would fail ere long. Postal communication was then slow and indirect, so that some days of April must elapse before all the parties could be notified and be able to meet each other and the people on the ground where service was to be held. But the parties concerned, deemed it a call of God, and stood committed, 'if the Lord will,' to unite and engage in the solemn and delightful service.

Accordingly, about the fourth day of April, in company with two Christian brethren, Flint of Danville, and Arms of Sherbrooke, we set away from our embryo village to make the journey of sixty miles, much of it winding among the trees as though it had been a snake's path, and the remainder of the distance through newly formed French settlements. It cost two full days of time to reach our destination, but the reception we met and the service in which we were permitted to share, would repay more than one such journey. The hearty greetings, the fervent sympathies, and Christian testimonies in which we shared, and to which we listened during that Friday and Saturday would seldom have a parallel. Words could not describe the sacred joyousness which pervaded those social groups during those two days.

The Sabbath came, and with it the blessing of Him who dwelt in the bush. Fully eighty persons came to participate in the ordinance of Him who is Master of the Feast, and in that comparative wilderness sit together in a heaven like place, drawn there by his love and grace.

It was a hallowed season not soon to be forgotten, and whose influence has been, and will yet be far-reaching.

But the rain had come upon us. It had commenced on Saturday night, and continued to an incessant pouring untill [sic] the sabbath evening.

It had not hindered the services, nor seemingly detained a person from any part of a whole day's service. But all this over, other thoughts loomed up to the view of the travellers so far away from home. The snow there at the time was fully four feet deep, and so penetrated and softened by the rain, that horses would sink and struggle, if they could travel at all. Besides, those two unbridged rivers which were to [be] crossed on the ice if crossed at all, and which must now be rapidly rising.

A brief council was held, and resolved that we should leave at five o'clock on Monday morning, in order if possible to utilize the ice-bridges before they should fail. At five o'clock A.M. we were in our sleighs and our poor horses commenced to plunge, and struggle, and make way homeward as best they could. In six hours, we had made about sixteen miles, and the jaded animals needed rest if ever horses needed it. At six in the evening we had made fourteen miles more, and took such lodgings as we could obtain a[t] a small Canadian house. We had yet both rivers to cross, and we knew not what perils to encounter. A kind providence so ordered that that evening a young man of our acquaintance who could speak both languages, came to pass the night, and who kindly offered to do the office of pilot for us in the morning. The smallest of the two rivers was but a mile away, and as we reached it in the morning, were thankful that the ice had not moved away.

But we had no sooner crossed the stream and ascended the bank, that [sic] two men met us, and cried out in French to say 'big river all broke up.' Of course we should have been glad to hear other tidings, but now there was nothing but to press on. So we did, and when we came in sight of the river it was as clear of ice as though it had been June, the banks were full and beginning to overflow, and the current of the broad stream, fearfully swift. Looking upward there was nothing but a perfect roar of waters. Following the bank downward we soon discovered that at a bend in the stream the ice had lodged and formed an immense pile, against which the floating cakes from above found an insurmountable bar. After a brief survey and consultation, being perhaps the more venturesome man of the three, I alighted from the sleigh gave my horse a long line, and bidding him follow me, I stepped from cake to cake, the horse following, and both the horse and myself finding each cake of the ice beginning to sink, we were willing to make rapid steps, so as to avoid going too deep in water, through the good hand of our God, we passed safely across the broad stream. When my fellow travellers saw that I had come safe to land, they followed in the same style, and we stood together on the other shore.

But the perils of the day were not yet all accomplished. We had then a long mile to travel before intersecting our road leading homeward, and in this distance another river to cross. This Black river, smaller than the other, was a sluggish creek-like stream, and passing through forest country altogether. When the sun made almost no impression, we were assured that the ice there would be

sound and safe. But suppositions are not always realities. When we reached the stream it was as clear of ice as in mid-summer, about twenty five yards wide, and twenty feet deep, with steep banks. We stood and took counsel for a little, and then gave a peice [sic] of silver to each of the French Canadian lads, who were still with us, to take each one his horse and sleigh, drive into the stream and swim them across to the oposite shore. The banks of the stream were so steep, and the water so cold that we had fears that the horses might not be able to leap out of the water on to the opposite bank. In fact this thought and fear had become so engrossing, that we stood watching the experiment and wholly forgetting ourselves. We looked across and saw our horses and vehicles all safe on the other side, but we ourselves were left behind.

What now was to be done? Only one way, said the oldest and most experienced man of the Company, and that is to follow up this river till we can find a tree fallen across, and touching both banks, make that our bridge, and cross over on such a bridge as the Lord has made for us. To this we fully assented and at once and followed under his leadership in pursuit of our bridge. We had travelled about three fourths of a mile [before] a down-fallen tree reaching across the stream could be discovered.

There we found one touching both banks, but it was a small tree of only about ten inches in diameter, the bark was off, and the water was flowing over it to the depth of about four inches, for nearly the whole of its length. Not very assuring, and as I had always a fear of high places, I demured making the experiment, till all other methods of crossing seemed hopeless. I needed some side support, something which would help me to keep balanced and upright. I discovered at a little distance a stack-pole, a light and dry spruce pole about twelve feet in length, around which a quantity of wild hay had been put up in summer, and had been removed in winter.

I hastened to secure the pole and at once entered upon the log, balancing myself by aid of the pole at my side, I was moving on with all confidence till having arrived near the middle of the river, my pole refused to reach the bottom, and in a instance a watery grave seemed my certain destiny. Never during my entire life has death seemed more near or more nearly certain than when I stood on that slippery log about midway of the stream, and poised at an angle of several degrees, relying on a prop which utterly failed me. But somehow, and it seemed almost miraculous, the Lord enabled me to regain an upright position and to walk safely to land. Now

on the right side of the rivers, we made our way to the nearest, and only house to be seen, got our horses well cared for, a good lunch for ourselves, and for an hour stood and steamed around the big stove till our drenched garments showed signs of some dry threads, and we shared the experience that a good fire, a good meal, and a good cup of tea, are valuable means of grace to wet and weary travellers. Then we had fully twenty miles to make before home would be in sight, and more than half this distance through the forest, and by the bush road to which we were not quite strangers. Driving onward a few miles we had to pass through a circular hollow which for most of the year would be dry ground, but into which the matted snow had so flowed that both horses and sleighs were obliged to swim, but this was all done safely and with little delay.

Farther on, after wading through water a foot in depth, across an extended [sic] flat, we came to a brook sufficiently large to drive a good number of mills, afterward erected. Over this brook some lumbermen had constructed a temporary bridge in early winter. — The covering of the bridge consisted of small round poles secured in no way to the timbers below, except as snow had been thrown over them, and so moistened with water that the frost had cemented the whole, and made it secure for the winter. Now spring had come, and the stream was overflowing both its banks and its bridge. The covering was [sic] still there, but the swift current passing over it, and immediately on horses passing over, the adhering ice which held the sticks together would be broken and the entire covering of the bridge float away. So it was — we passed rapidly over, and stopping on the bank for a moment we looked back and saw the whole floor of that bridge float away toward the St. Lawrence. That day we had known a little of ‘perils of waters,’ and of ‘perils in the wilderness,’ but out of them all God had graciously delivered us, and had put a new song into our mouth ever praise to our God, as we came to share the genial light, and warmth and rest of home.

[...]

Discomfort and Inconvenience while travelling on land.

In this section Parker continues in the same vein, describing some of his adventures travelling along the rough bush-roads of Ely Township and beyond before reaching the more densely settled areas to the south and west.

[...]

On another occasion having a call to pass to, and through Waterloo, we chose the shortest, and only direct road, leading through South Ely and Stukely. On reaching Ely, we ascertained that although it was then mid-winter only one team had passed through the six mile woods, and therefore mud, and roots, and logs would be plenty. Yet, resolving to try it we engaged a young man quite versed in such matters, to go as pilot and guard, as far as the first house in Stukely.

Time was precious, and so, contrary to counsel which should have been heeded, we entered the dreary woods at too late an hour of the day. It was tedious plunging and climbing and tumbling, and darkness was upon us before we were far on in the way. At length the horse plunging in a deep slough, a crash was heard, and the proof came out that a thill was broken. This was [un]welcome fact, and the more unwelcome because it was intensely dark, and there was neither match or flint or any method of striking a fire or a light within our reach. Well D. this is a bad case. What is to be done? Pilot D. felt about, found the broken part of the thill which had been left behind sticking in the mire, and having ascertained just the shape and extent of the breaking up, he said quietly O I guess we'll fix it somehow, and then disappeared into the woods. Time seemed long, and I began to fear that the stranger had deserted. However, he answered to a call, and not long after, as I was listening, heard a 'crack' somewhat like that of a shot from a revolver which gave satisfactory proof that he had not abandoned the wreck.

In due time he reappeared, and instead of any verbal explanations he put into my hand two halves of a stick about a yard in length, and two inches in diameter. Light was at once shed upon the transaction, he had felt about the forest till he had found the small tree he wanted, and with jack knife in hand had bent it well out of its perpendicular, and whittled away till it was cut half way off and giving it a powerful wrench had split the tree at its center — this had occasioned the 'crack' we had heard — then cutting off the other half, and severing the top to be left behind, he had come [sic] his two prepared 'splints' just what was required to mend up the broken shaft. Here were the splints, but where is the bandage?

Failing to have on board a cord or strap which could be available [sic] for lashing up the broken limb of the vehicle what could be done? Here our scientific back-woods' man proved himself

worth a score of gentlemen idlers.

The moment the want was ascertained he was off again into the woods without a word except that short comprehensive sentence which seemed to have been born into him, 'O I guess we'll fix it somehow.' He was out of sight, and out of hearing, and the waiting seemed long but, faithful fellow, he turned up, but with nothing but an untrimmed brush in his hand.

My temper began almost to kindle this time — it seemed like a mockery to bring a stick as thick as one's finger, and as long as a common whip stock, what could that avail towards mending a broken sleigh? In reply to my question 'What', he just quietly asked [me] to hold one end of his stick, and he began at the other end to twist and twist, till the whole was a flexible cord or small rope, known at the factory as a withe.

There were the materials, the hands to apply them, the shaft of the vehicle repaired, and all without day-light, or moonlight or lamp-light, our only tool or implement a jack-knife.

In due time we were on our way in the old fashion, and at eleven o'clock reached the only house to be found for miles before us. It was a small newly built log house, without partition, with a floor of split basswood, a rough board door and a six lighted window. The string of the wooden latch was pulled in, and when we knocked and called, and asked shelter for the driver, and stabling for the jaded horse, the middling tempered man let a moderate oath or two escape and made ready to take us in.

While the master of the house and myself were away making the best provision we could for the horse, the kind mistress of the house had risen and put their only bed in the best possible order for the travellers, and against remonstrance insisted on taking the floor themselves. Next morning we were on the road in time to reach Montreal same evening — in those days a quick passage.

Since those days, the line of that portion of that road to which we have given most attention, has been some what changed, the country settled and improved, a daily mail established, and to-day one may drive in that direction over as many miles in a half day, and during that drive he will pass not less than eight or nine Protestant houses of worship, one college, and a whole line of Common school houses, with signs of business life to correspond.

[...]

Encounters with snow drifts.

Previous to settlement in my own present home I was 'missionating' and on one occasion very much desired to fulfil an appointment six miles from my temporary lodgings.

There had been a terrific storm and wind for two days previous, but a calm had come and having decided to make the attempt, and contrary to advice, set away. The horse had struggled through drifts for about a mile, the willing, faithful animal hesitated, he stopped, and turning his head looked back, asking as best he could, to be excused, but when bidden go he made no flinching.

But the mass of snow was so formidable, the pile was vast, and closely packed so that a few rods was enough. The horse had struggled forward till he was banked mid-side deep on the right hand and on the left, and the outlook ahead promised nothing better. After a good deal of tramping, and hand-digging of the snow, we got the horse extricated from the sleigh and dragging it by inches and then by feet to the mouth of the snow cave where it could be turned, the horse power was re-attached and we returned to our quarters more wearied than by any ordinary fatigue of a whole day's work, and suffering from several uncomfortable frost-bites a little rest in-doors was not unwelcome.

On another occasion while endeavoring to reach a small village. When within a short mile of my destination and less than a hundred rods from a farm house, leaving a section of the road somewhat sheltered, and coming into open ground the road was filled from fence to fence and the wind blowing with mighty force directly across the road the horse was soon struggling in snow mid-side deep, and sometimes unable to make more than two yards at a stage. Meantime the snow was pouring in waves upon us and around us, till the possibility of being buried alive became a thought not wholly to be resisted.

It was in vain to call for help, for in such a hurricane no one could hear, and if any could have heard, how was it possible that human aid could reach and relieve us. The last twenty rods before emerging from the drift and reaching the only house it were possible to reach we believe [sic] had cost a full hour's time and had apparently come near being the last effort that the missionary horse would ever make whatever might become of his driver.

But mercy interposed, the doors of a hospitable family were opened for the stray traveller, and the members of the household kindly ministered to his necessities till the road was shovelled and broken out late on the third day before we could reach the village

only half a mile distant.

Were this the most profitable thing to be done I might extend the list of 'casualties' and personal encounters with danger so as to blacken a number of pages. But this was not the aim of our writing, only so far as should enable those with whom I had walked side by side, and perhaps those of more favored years coming after, to bless God for preserving, and employing one of the most unworthy to witness, and to share in the transformation of the Canada wilderness into a country seldom surpassed for beauty, fertility and prosperity.

[...]

NOTES

- 1 Rev. Edward Cleveland, *A Sketch of the Early Settlement and History of Shipton, Canada East* (C.S. Smith, 1858, reprinted Sherbrooke: Page-Sangster, 1964); Mrs C.M. Day, *History of the Eastern Townships* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1869, reprinted Belleville: Mika, 1989); B.F. Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings: The History of Stanstead County, Province of Quebec* (Montreal: Lovell, 1874, reprinted Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1988). Much of the more recent scholarship has focussed on the township leaders and other notables, and can be found in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.
- 2 The manuscript is located in the United Church Archives, Montreal and Ottawa Conference [UCA], and catalogued as Ammi Parker Papers, 5/Par/1. I wish to thank Marylou Smith and Susan Stanley for their kind assistance with these papers.
- 3 UCA, APP, 5/Par/4. See Douglas Walkington, "'To Prevent the Heathenising of Christians': The Memoirs of Rev. Ammi James Parker," *Bulletin of the Congregational Library*, XXXI, no. 2 (1980): 4-13; and J.I. Little, "Serving 'the North East corner of Creation': The Life and Times of a Rural Minister in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, 1829-70," forthcoming.
- 4 Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 175-7.
- 5 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden*; Margaret Atwood, *Survival*.
- 6 This pattern conforms to that observed by New England historians of migration who stress the importance of the nuclear family over more distant kin. See John W. Adams and Alice Bee Kasakoff, "Migration and the Family in Colonial New England: The View from Genealogies," *Journal of Family History*, IX, no. 1 (1984): 24-42.

- 7 F. Murray Greenwood, "Stephen Sewell," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, VI, 700; Cleveland, *A Sketch*, p. vii, 11, 14.
- 8 For brief explanations of the leaders and associates system, see G.F. McGuigan, "La concession des terres dans les cantons de l'est du Bas-Canada (1763–1809)," *Recherches Sociographiques*, IV, 1 (1963): 71–89; and J.I. Little, "Samuel Gale," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, VI, 268–70. For more details on the land-granting process and its impact on the Eastern Townships, see Ivanhoë Caron, *La colonisation de la Province de Québec: Les Cantons de l'Est, 1791–1815* (Québec: L'Action Sociale, 1927). Cushing himself became an outspoken critic of government policies. See his *An Appeal, Addressed to a Candid Public* (Stanstead: S.H. Dickerson, 1826).
- 9 A brief version of this and the following story, omitted here, is printed in Cleveland, *A Sketch*, p. 17–18.
- 10 Cleveland, *A Sketch*, p. 28.
- 11 This story also appears in Cleveland, *A Sketch*, p. 52–3.
- 12 A brief version of this story is recounted in Cleveland, *A Sketch*, p. 53.
- 13 This story is also recounted in Cleveland (*A Sketch*, p. 48).
- 14 See Dugald McKenzie McKillop, *Annals of Megantic County, Quebec* (Lynn, Mass.: privately published, 1902, reprinted Inverness, Que., 1966).