

Making a Silk Purse from a Sow's Ear

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Young Mr. Smith in Upper Canada, Mary Larratt Smith. University of Toronto Press, Toronto and Buffalo, 1980. 216 pp. \$15.00. ISBN 0-8020-2376-2.

Henry Youle Hind (1823-1908), W.L. Morton. Canadian Biographical Studies, Vol. 7. University of Toronto Press, Toronto and Buffalo, 1980. 161 pp. \$7.50. ISBN 0-8020-3278.

The principal figures of *Young Mr. Smith in Upper Canada* by Mary Larratt Smith and *Henry Youle Hind (1823-1908)* by W.L. Morton had much in common. Born in England within three years of each other, each emigrated to Upper Canada, settled in Toronto, became part of its bustling society, prospered, and died in his 85th year.

Both gentlemen, as subjects of study, presented their biographers with the same problem: a dearth of available information from which to build a creditable life history. While one book, however, is an engrossing study, the other, ultimately, is a failure. Why?

Larratt William Violett Smith kept a journal from 1839 until just before his death in 1905. Unfortunately, his diligence in diary-keeping was not matched by his skill. We depend on the author, his granddaughter, not only to fill in the blanks but to carry the story along. But her interjections are too few and too brief. She is not unaware of the diaries' weaknesses, yet she allows herself to be intimidated by her material. Where she should have pruned ruthlessly, she has permitted the diaries to take over and carry the book, which they cannot do successfully.

Ms. Smith, perhaps unwittingly, says it best when she describes her grandfather's entries as "short," revealing him to be "pre-occupied with the weather." The weather, in fact, is well documented; so, too, are illnesses and the number of bedbugs killed in a night.

The entry for Friday, January 10, 1840, is a fair example of Mr. Smith's writing style:

Fine and mild. Mr. Draper sent me off on Wednesday to King Township about the Sandwich Lands. I rode home to our farm with Lawrence Sothers and arrived at 4 o'clock. Mrs. Gapper's party in the evening, a very delightful one and much the pleasantest yet. Started from home about 10 yesterday morning and rode into King, reached Snook's farm at 2 o'clock, had some dinner and slept there last night right in the same bed with him. Killed a mad ox at Snook's.

So much for Lawrence Sothers, Mrs. Gapper and her party, for Snook and the mad ox.

Entry after entry records names without explanation, events without reaction, places without description. We would have been none the wiser about Mr. Smith's "hopeless passion" for Aemilius Irving's sister, without his granddaughter's mentioning it.

Even Mr. Smith's wedding day entry is taken up with the time of day he arose, the weather, who the bridesmaids were, how much he paid the parson and servants, and how long and under what weather and road conditions he made the trip from Perth to Kingston.

In setting out to create a portrait of Henry Youle Hind who was a notable but not distinguished man of his day, W.L. Morton, now Professor of History at the University of Manitoba, found himself also disadvantaged, with "scattered and fugitive letters of his subject surviving."

Undaunted, he began a remarkably thorough search of every available scrap of information that would enable him eventually to produce a picture of a flawed but fascinating personality and the times in which he lived.

Morton rightly believes that "insight into Hind's career and personality requires understanding of the city and shire of Nottingham," where Hind's life began. What follows is a delightful opening chapter on the history, people, industry, town plan and terrain of Nottingham prior to Hind's birth in 1823 and after, up to 1837 when he left for study in Leipzig.

Referring to the people, many of whom, like Hind's father, were in the lace trade, Morton writes:

The impression one derives from the history of the city of 40,000 people in 1821 is thus one of invention, industry, and drive. The people of Nottingham were aggressive, curious, restless people who incessantly improved the crafts by which they and their city lived, and never missed a chance to push their products in the markets of the world.

Henry Youle Hind was to become a geologist and naturalist, who promoted his discoveries very much in the same way his father had marketed his lace.

An eager and tireless explorer and surveyor whether to the Canadian Northwest or northern New Brunswick, Hind remained a scientist on the periphery, despite lengthy and numerous publications, government and business connections, and his solid contributions to the life of the Royal Canadian Institute.

The reason was that, despite a family relationship "as sunny and peaceful as a summer forest glade," Hind's personality to outsiders was often abrasive, even outrageous, and his eagerness to draw credit to himself at the expense of others turned people against him.

"Hind," writes Morton, "was no deliberate plagiarist; he was not a designing fomenter of controversies created for personal advantage; he was a self-taught scientist who felt that science was an enterprise in which all might engage freely and even for profit. He saw no reason to forego its obvious utility; he clearly believed that he who got first to market was entitled to sell his findings."

Hind was at his best conducting quick, exploratory surveys. "He helped to open the Northwest," concludes Morton, "itself a considerable achievement for any man."

Perhaps Morton dwells overlong with his analysis of Hind; one could wish, too, that he had included some of those sketches and maps of Hind's expeditions we hear so much about, but there are many bonuses in this tiny volume to offset these trifles. Morton has managed through skillful use of clippings from the *Globe*, letters, and reports to bring to life Canadian society on the brink of Confederation. We are also left with some remarkable pictures of the untamed wilderness and some disquieting ones of proud, courtly Indians, who saw clearly their world tumbling before the aggressive incursions into their territory of explorers and surveyors.

Morton's book is splendid. It is a fine concluding volume to the *Canadian Biographical Studies*, a series designed as companion to the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*.

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