Travelogues as a Resource for Family Historians

By Michael J. Leclerc

One of the popular forms of entertainment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was attending lectures given by people who had traveled widely and experienced other parts of the world. Lecturers would often publish their travel journals, and these travelogues can be a fascinating source of information on your ancestors' homes and lifestyles. This can be illustrated by several typical examples.

In his *Travels through the States of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada during the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797,* Isaac Weld Jr. discusses customs of the day at length. His discourse on Montreal, for example, includes the following description of late-eighteenth-century funeral practices:

> The funerals, as in other Roman Catholic countries, are conducted with great ceremony; the corpse is always attended to the church by a number of priests chanting prayers, and by little boys in white robes and black caps carrying wax lights. A morning scarcely ever passed over that one of more of these processions did not pass under our windows while we were at breakfast; for on the opposite side of the square to that on which the cathedral stood, was a sort of chapel, to which the bodies of all those persons, whose friends could not afford to pay for an expensive funeral, were brought, I suppose, in the night, for we couldn't ever see any carried in there, and from thence conveyed in the morning to the cathedral. If the priests are paid for it they go to the house of the deceased, though it be ever so far distant, and escort the corpse to the church. Until within a few years past, it was customary to bury all the bodies in the vaults underneath the cathedral; but now it is prohibited, lest some putrid disorder should break out in the town, in consequence of such numbers being deposited there. The burying grounds are all without walls at present[1].

Weld's description helps us picture the funeral of our great-great-great-great-grandparents, with the altar boys carrying candles for the priests as they process to the church. Funerals obviously occurred during the morning hours--the processions would pass by while the author was eating breakfast--a practice that persists today. The cemetery as a rolling field with no barrier to separate it, which the author felt unusual enough to mention, is a vivid picture of their final resting-place.

Weld also relates some fascinating and colorful descriptions of the towns that he visited, such as this one of the town of Trois Rivières, Québec:

> The streets in Trois Rivieres are narrow, and the houses in general small and indifferent; many of them are built of wood. There are two churches in the town the one an English episcopalian, the other a large Roman Catholic parish church, formerly served by the Recollets, or Franciscan friars, but the order is now extinct in Trois Rivieres. The old monastery of the order, a large stone building, at present lies quite deserted; and many of the houses in the neighbourhood being also uninhabited, that part of the town wherein it is situated has a very dull gloomy aspect. The college or monastery of the Jesuits, also a large old building of stone in the same neighbourhood, has been converted into a gaol [2].

Canada is often thought of as our cold neighbor to the north, but how many of us have actually seriously looked at the meteorological challenges that faced our hardy ancestors? Weld tells us about the weather in this passage:

> The extremes of heat and cold in Canada are amazing; in the months of July and August the thermometer, according to Fahrenheit, is often known to rise to 96°, yet a winter scarcely passes over but even the mercury itself freezes. Those very sudden transitions, however, from heat to cold, so common in the United States, and so very injurious to the constitution, are unknown in Canada; the seasons also are much more regular[3].

Because of the severe cold one might imagine that Canadian winters were spent huddled in the house in front of the fire once the animals were tended to. Nothing could be further from the truth. Winter in Canada was a time of great celebration, a time when farmers and their families could let down their hair, so to speak, and enjoy themselves. Weld's travelogue may make us rethink our image of life during the Canadian winter, "the season of general amusement":

> The clear frosty weather no sooner commences than all thoughts about business are laid aside, and every one devotes himself to pleasure. The inhabitants meet in convivial parties at each other's houses, and pass the day with music, dancing, card-playing, and every social entertainment that can beguile the time. At Montreal, in particular, such a constant and friendly intercourse is kept up amongst the inhabitants, that, as I have often heard it mentioned, it appears then as if the town were inhabited but by one large family[4].

Transportation in Canada was actually much easier in winter than at other times. Horses and oxen could be attached to sleighs, carioles, fledges, and the like, to bring them long distances over the frozen waterways and icy ground. How much faster and more comfortable it was glide to one's destination than to attempt the rutted, muddy roads in the spring!

Weld describes different modes of transportation during his journey. At one point he discusses the "calash," a type of carriage used by the settlers in Lower Canada. He writes:

> The calash is a carriage very generally used in Lower Canada; there is scarcely a farmer indeed in the country who does not possess one: it is a sort of one horse chaise, capable of holding two people besides the driver, who sits on a kind of box placed over the foot-board, expressly for his accommodation. The body of the calash is hung upon broad straps of leather, round iron rollers that are placed behind, by means of which they are shortened or lengthened. On each side of the carriage is a little door about two feet high, whereby you enter it, and which is useful, when shut, in preventing any thing from slipping out. The harness for the horse is always made in the old French taste, extremely heavy; it is studded with brass nails, and to particular parts of it are attached small bells, of no use that I could ever discover but to annoy the passenger[5].

The picture below accompanies this description. Imagine riding through the country with the accompaniment of the ringing bells!

Weld describes other kinds of transportation as he experienced them. Traveling customs that have long fallen into disuse can be fascinating. For example, Weld describes how travel in Québec involved the "Bons Dieux":

> The Bons Dieux are large wooden crucifixes, sometimes upwards of twenty feet in height, placed on the highway; some of them are highly ornamented and appointed; as the people pass they pull off their hats, or in some other way make obeisance to them[6].

During the spring, summer, and fall much of the transportation was done by way of Canada's vast number of rivers, lakes and streams. The map reproduced from Weld's book (below) gives but a small inkling of this vast network.

In his published memoirs, entitled *Travels in North American in the Years 1827 and 1828,* Captain Basil Hall gives extensive notes on his voyages in Upper and Lower Canada (now the provinces of Ontario and Québec). He gives us a dramatic picture of the French-Canadian voyageur, who often transported people and their cargo:

> I had often before seen small canoes paddled by a couple of Indians, but it was a very different thing to feel oneself flying along in the grand barge, as it might be called, nearly forty feet long, by upwards of five in width. She was urged forward at the rate of nearly six miles an hour, by fourteen first-rate and well-practised Canadian Voyageurs...
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> Each Voyageur wields a short, light paddle, with which he strikes the water about once in a second, keeping strict time with a song from one of the crew, in which all the others join in chorus. At every stroke of the fourteen paddles, which in fact resemble one blow, such is the correctness of their ear, the canoe is thrown or jerked forward so sharply, that it is by no means easy to sit upright on the cloaks and cushions spread nearly in its centre[7].

One can almost see the burly, bearded Frenchmen traversing the waterways of Canada with their loads of furs, supplies, and, of course, settlers!

One of difficulties facing settlers in Québec was their own lack of modern farming tools and techniques. This, combined with smaller and smaller farms as parcels were divided among children from generation to generation, was one of the major reasons for the massive migration of French-Canadians into the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1833 Captain J. E. Alexander published his *Transatlantic Sketches, Comprising Visits to the Most Interesting Scenes in North and South America, and The West Indies.* In addition to very strong opinions, Captain Alexander provides some insights into the habits of the people he writes about:

> I was much gratified in witnessing the comfort of the French habitans of Lower Canada; their neat houses, clean persons--their abundant fare, and contented faces! True, their agriculture is not on the most approved principles; their breed of cattle, sheep, and hogs, is not the best; yet withal, they are happy, attend to their fields in summer, and visit each other, and enjoy themselves in social communing in winter; they really seem to taste far greater happiness, and to know how to extract from their

> lot a far greater share of felicity, than those who at all times and seasons wildly strive to accumulate riches, without knowing or thinking how to spend them rationally[8].

While he does present something of a caricature of the "poor French peasant happy with his lot in life," his observations of their agricultural pursuits are accurate.

It is well known that the French-Canadian and Irish immigrants to New England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were major antagonists and these problems existed in Québec as well. Passage to Canada was much cheaper than passage to the United States, and many Irish emigrants came there before permanently settling in the United States. Alexander discusses some of the problems between them:

> But Irish emigrants ought to be kept at a distance from the French Canadians. The Scotch and English commonly proceed at once to Upper Canada, or to the eastern townships, but the Irish sit on the skirts of the habitans. Thus, in riding out in the country I frequently witnessed a Canadian peasant returning from market, with the poultry, cheese, or vegetables he had taken into town to dispose of, and with a scowl on his countenance retracing his steps homewards. The cause of his discontent was simply this: --The Irish now crowd the markets in Lower Canada: at first they ask the same prices as the habitans, but being, as usual, "from hand to mouth," they speedily reduce their price, and take whatever the can get for their pork, butter, eggs, &c.; and they can afford to take a low price for their commodities, for in Canada, as in Ireland, they huddle together filthily in single rooms, each corner being occupied by a family; they therefore save fuel and house-rent, whilst the habitans live at much more expense, but respectably[9].

Hall includes some letters from settlers in the newly opened areas that discuss their experiences there. The following was written by a man concerning his arrival with his family to their new home in the wilds of Ontario:

> Having arranged our bedding and the younger children on the sleigh, we proceeded; the snow nearly knee-deep, and for the last two miles in darkness; so that we were right glad to see the cheerful light of a good fire shining through our log-hut windows. Here my sister and most of her family met us to welcome us to the woods. Our house appeared large and wild, as, from the difficulty of procuring boards at the-saw mill, there was not a single partition in ours put up; even on the floors, the boards were scarcely sufficient to prevent the children's feet from going through. When we set about to prepare our beds, we found the floor covered above an inch thick with ice, of which we removed as much as we could with axes and spades, and then put a layer of chips and shavings, upon which we spread our mattresses and blankets; then having hung up some blankets at the doors, and also for partitions, we lay down to rest, being pretty well fatigued; and upon looking upwards from our beds, we saw the sky through the roof; and have often, during the time we lay in that manner, amused ourselves watching the stars passing, and others appearing[10].

How clearly this passage brings an image to mind of this newly arrived family on the frontier. In another passage he describes this scene in Lower Canada (Québec):

> But if the natural beauties disappointed us, the smiling works of man, and the still more smiling looks of the black-eyed French-looking women, and the nice clean, lively children, with great broad straw hats, delighted us all the way from Quebec to St Anne's--a distance of twenty-five or thirty miles through a country very densely peopled, where the houses lie close to the road--each with its narrow strip of cultivation behind it, fenced off in parallel lines. Nothing we had yet seen in America could pretend to rival these white-washed cottages, capped with sharp-pointed tin-covered roofs, all very fantastic and old-fashioned. The lintels of the doors and the sills and sides of the windows, also, were painted black, with steps or tiers of flower-pots ranged along them, behind the railings matted with creepers in full blossom, so as to make us feel as if we were in Italy or in the south of France[11].

One immediate drawback to using travelogues is that most of them are unindexed. Many of them do not even have a table of contents, although it is quite common to see a listing of a chapter's contents at its beginning. Many of them were undertaken for specific reasons, such as to extol the virtues of a particular area to encourage emigration to that area. Furthermore, the travelogues are filled with caricatures and stereotypes. Despite their shortcomings, though, they are a wonderful resource. While they do take a bit more time to use than computerized databases, compiled indexes, and the like, the rewards are great. The ability to really see the lives of our ancestors as they lived it is powerful. I hope you will take the time to use them. I believe that Hall sums this up quite nicely near the end of his book when he says:

> For my part, I have found by experience, that as it is not possible to see every thing that is worth seeing in a foreign country, any more than it is possible to read every book which is worth studying in a library, there is generally more eventual profit in viewing a few things well, than in running over a great number slightly[12].

Footnotes

1. Isaac Weld Jr., *Travels through the States of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797,* 4th ed. (London: John Stockdale, 1800), 223.
2. *Ibid.*, 307.
3. *Ibid.*, 275.
4. *Ibid.*, 276.
5. *Ibid.*, 219.
6. *Ibid.*, 219-20.
7. Captain Basil Hall, Royal Navy, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (Edinburgh: Cadell, 1829), 381-82.
8. Capt. J. E. Alexander, T., *Transatlantic Sketches, Comprising Visits to the Most Interesting Scenes in North and South America, and The West Indies, with Notes on Negro Slavery and Canadian Emigration* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Key and Biddle, 1833), 326.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Hall, 314.
11. *Ibid.*, 394-95.
12. *Ibid.*, 398.