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John Brooks

(1800-1890)

Prince Edward Island was raw, and it needed settlers. But one Island voice (as reported in the London Times of 9 November 1810) called for caution. “We have had four out of the five vessels from Scotland, with emigrants already arrived; and for the sake of humanity, I hope the fifth may not, as, independent of the late period at which they must arrive, if they come; the scantiness of our crops, arising from a long continuance of dry hot weather, will render it a very difficult matter for them to make out sufficient sustenance for the winter . . .”

The father of our John Brooks, who was also named John Books, was born about 1776 in Scagglethorpe, East Yorkshire. It is a place of little consequence (“-thorpe” means “hamlet,” and this one definitely still is). Our ancestor John was born in Scagglethorpe on 2 January 1800.

At twenty-two, with his wife Frances Brown, born on 2 September 1794, and thus six years older, he set out for Prince Edward Island. At seventy-six, being then a respected senior citizen, John was asked, in a list of 99 questions, about the earliest days. Here is a selection from his answers.

Charlottetown

“I was born near Malton, a Borough town in Yorkshire, on the 2nd January 1800, and came to P. E. Island in the year 1822, in the barque “Mary Elsdon,” which sailed from the port of Bristol. On board of which, besides the crew, were I think about 60 passengers . . . two Welsh families were landed at the Straits of Canso . . . the rest came on to Charlottetown, where they landed on the 3rd June. There were no births, and only one death of a child.

When I arrived at the port of Charlottetown and saw the town from the deck of the vessel it had the appearance of a small village in England. The buildings were principally in the centre of the town, the outskirts of which resembled a common, with here and there a small cottage . . . The houses were shingled, or boarded and battened . . . I have seen many roofed with bark. First frame houses 1830.”

The land was “in general, uncultivated, and presented the appearance of a forest; a few green fields, like oases in a desert, were to be seen along the shore . . . [The settlers got along at first] as best they could, sometimes they had a little bread and meat to eat, but more generally they lived upon fish and potatoes . . . The crops have been frequently injured by early frosts. I am told that about the year 1820 the potatoes were all in hills, and out of a hill containing 80 potatoes, only one or two would be uninjured. The only steps that can be taken to meet the case are to sow and plant early . . . game was much more abundant in old times than now, and there were plenty of wild pigeons here, and the farmers had to keep their eyes open, lest the pigeons should snatch up all their seed grain.”

“The roads were chiefly along the shore where small creeks were bridged over with slats; a path through the woods, where the trees were marked with a blaze, sufficed until roads were constructed . . . Often I heard Mr. Sullivan say that he had to leave his wife standing by one tree until he found another, with the mark for their guide, lest they should lose themselves in the woods . . . I have been crossing from C Town going at the rate of 16 miles a day, and have often been in danger . . . when very dark I looked up and could see an opening where the trees had been cut down for the road. In some cases people have been so bewildered that they had to turn their sleighs over for shelter, and some have perished with the cold.”

“The principal store in C Town was the property of the son of Mr Cambridge, a small shop was kept by M Murphy . . . At Charlotte Town there was a small Church of which Rev. Mr. DesBrisay was Clergyman or Chaplain. There were also a small Catholic and Methodist Church . . .”

“I know of only one school in C Town kept by Mr. Brown who for some time was principal . . . If there were any schools in the country they were like angels’ visits, few and far between.”

White Sands and Murray Harbour

“The road I traveled first was from C Town [along the south shore] to the Three Rivers in Dec. 1823. After leaving a house at the head of Vernon River, I did not see a house of any kind til I came nearly to Mr. George Atkins, whither I was going. There was only a bridle path, on both sides of which the trees were blazen to guide the traveler on his way. I crossed a brook at the head of Montague river where there was a saw mill, and woe to him who should fall off his horse into that brook on a frosty day.”



“At the first place where I took up residence [White Sands] were a grist and thrushing mill propelled by water, owned by the late Hon. George Wright, but at Murray Harbour were the large saw mill and grist mill, the property of the late John Cambridge of Bristol, England, which were resorted to by people far and near . . . the saw mill supplied small vessels with cargoes of lumber.”

“In the settlement of Murray Harbour and vicinity, taking in the whole township of Lot 64, there might have been 500 people, men, women, and children. The only shop in Murray Harbour was the one in which I was clerk, supplied with goods sent from England by Mr Cambridge, who carried on a large business in ship building, and the exportation of timber.”

“There was a small [church building] at Murray Harbour, seated with benches, which was built and occupied by Presbyterians and Methodists alternately . . . [then] the Presbyterians got a church of their own. In other places religious services were held in private houses.”

“John Steward was the first district teacher in this settlement. He has been dead a number of years. Patrick Ryan was the second; he was drowned in the harbour of Halifax. The writer was the third, who taught 25 years.”

Recent Times

Asked what change had taken place in regard to the amusements, comforts, habits, and mode of living of the people, John replied with a sort of sermon:

“Drinking and frolicking have given place to industry and sobriety; fish and potatoes, practically, to bread and meat; burnt barley for coffee without sweetening, to tea and sugar or molasses; homespun and moccasins, to broadcloth and boots; ignorance and vice, to knowledge and virtue, comparatively speaking. Exception in some cases may be expected, but such are a few of the advantages which result from an increase of knowledge.”

So speaks one who was himself a teacher for 25 years.

John’s wife Frances had died somewhat before this, on 23 September 1881. She was buried in Murray Harbour, with this reflection:

As gently shuts the eye of day
As dies a wave along the shore

John himself followed her on 3 February 1890. Their children, with their dates of birth and places of burial, are:

- John Jr (23 January 1823); White Sands PEI
- William (8 May 1824); New Brunswick CA
- Ann Frances (25 June 1825); Murray Harbour PEI
- Thomas Robert (29 June 1826); Attleboro, Massachusetts USA
- Mary (2 December 1827); Warton, Ontario CA
- Henry James (11 May 1829); Vancouver Island, British Columbia CA
- Joseph (10 June 1832); White Sands PEI
- Elizabeth Hannah (17 September 1835); Penobscot, Maine USA

Three of the eight had ventured further west into Canada proper; two had left for the USA. Five out of eight. It seems to be a pattern.

That pattern continues with Thomas Robert, and to him we now turn.