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PREFACE

Rummagings, 6: Romulus: The Village That Did Not Rise

Although successful examples of town planting received a good deal of attention in eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century Canadian writing, unsuccessful examples are rarely mentioned and almost never described in detail. There are obvious reasons for this relative silence: settlers and land companies alike had a vested interest in optimism, and in promulgating the idea that new towns were regularly being planted and brought to maturity. All an ambitious and savvy settler or speculator had to do, much of the literature claimed or implied, was to select a suitable site, establish a nodal homestead, attract several other settlers, and the rest—the tavern, the church, the store, the school, and the doctor’s surgery of *The Rising Village*—would soon follow. Nevertheless the chance that a new town would either fail or stagnate was acknowledged by, among others, Susanna and J.W. Dunbar Moodie. In part because “European settlers know but little of the value of situation,” observed Dunbar in the “Canadian Sketches” section of the 1871 edition of *Roughing It in the Bush*, many “detached, feeble, and unprogressive settlements came into existence” (508), a case in point being Belleville, which “was laid out in 1816 for a village” but “remained nearly stationary for several years” (508, 510). “When I first visited...[Hamilton] in 1832 it was a dull and insignificant place, which might, I suppose, contain a population of 1200 to 1500,” he adds, but “on revisiting it in 1849,” “I...[could] hardly describe my surprise...to behold a city grown up suddenly, as if by enchantment, with several handsome churches and public and private buildings of cut stone, brought from the fine freestone quarries in the precipitous mountains or table-land behind the city” (510). Poorly located towns were doomed to slow growth or worse, but well-situated ones, however inauspicious their beginnings, would grow and prosper rapidly.

Possibly the most mythologically ambitious and the most heavily mythologised of Ontario’s failed new towns was Romulus, the abortive brainchild of Henry Lamb, a United Empire Loyalist from Pennsylvania who settled near Rockton between Hamilton and present-day Kitchener. “[O]ut in the wilds of Beverly township there is a large city all laid out ready to be built,” reads the account of Romulus and Lamb in *Pen and Pencil Sketches of Wentworth Landmarks* (1897),

but beyond a few log buildings of a more than usually substantial character, and the nicely colored plan of the burg which exists somewhere there is nothing remaining to indicate the originally high aspirations of the place. It can scarcely be called a dead city, because it never reached urban importance, except in the mind of the founder, who, with his immediate relatives, now sleep the long sleep among the ruins of his hopes. To that extent, if not a dead city, it may be called a city of the dead. (118)

John Graves Simcoe envisaged the city that he planted at the forks of the Thames as another London and the founders and namers of Paris and Berlin (Kitchener) probably had similar hopes. Apparently Lamb's aspirations were even more extravagant: he and his metropolis would bask in the aura of the legends surrounding the foundation and development of Rome: its inception as a group of primitive huts in a sylvan setting, its spectacular growth to cultural and imperial prominence, and perhaps even—for he was a Loyalist and a child of the eighteenth century—its myth of fratricidal murder following upon an initial harmony between Man and Nature in the suckling of Romulus and his twin brother Remus by a she-wolf.

How much of Rome's founding tradition was in Lamb's mind when he named his settlement Romulus will probably never be known. What is clear is that the name proved inspirational to Robert Kirkland Kernighan (1857-1926), the writer to whom the editor of *Pen and Pencil Sketches of Wentworth Landmarks* entrusted the bulk of the book's two chapters on "A City that Was Never Built" and "The Legends of Romulus." A year before the appearance of the volume, Kernighan (or "The Khan" as he unfortunately styled himself) had published a hefty volume of verse through the *Hamilton Spectator*, and other works would follow in the ensuing decades. In "A City that Was Never Built," he loses no time in capitalizing on the legends evoked by the name chosen by Lamb to endow him with mythic stature. Beneath the heading "There Were Giants in Those Days," "[t]he man who founded Romulus" is cast as "one of them"—"[a] giant in courage, endurance and resource...[who] towered above his fellowmen as the great white pines of Beverly once towered above the black birches and the beeches that grew at their feet" (118). To anyone familiar with even the title of Kernighan's first volume—*The Khan's Canticles*—it would scarcely have come as a surprise that here and later in his account of Lamb alliteration is a major component of his rhetoric of aggrandisement.

After a mere sentence of biography and genealogy (Lamb, it appears, was of "Highland Scotch descent"), Kernighan reverts to what Northrop Frye calls the "high mimetic mode"¹ to assimilate his larger-than-life pioneer not only to Romulus, but also to the Titans:

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The stupendous obstacles in his path never for a moment daunted this old hero. From the door of the rude shack which he had built to shelter him and keep the wolves out, he could not see more than 50 yards in any direction, and naught but the moon and stars by night and the sun by day shining above his little clearing reminded him that the universe was big and God was great. All alone in his splendid isolation, in the superb stillness and Titanic uproar of the forest, in the sweet safety and terrible peril of the bush, he conceived of great things. He set words to the splendid music of peerless pines, the tapering tamaracks, the heaped-up hemlocks, the majestic maples, the honest old oaks, the bizarre birches and the cold calm cedars, and he began to chant that hymn all over the world. (118)

More precisely (and as Kernighan subsequently makes clear), Lamb “hied him to England and advertised in...London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool for artisans and workers,” “promis[ing] them a house and a lot and firewood free,” “immunity from taxes for 25 years,” “plenty of game and fish,” and, in due course, all the amenities of a city:

He gave them a free site for a Church of England cathedral at the west end of the town and another site for the bishop’s palace and Roman Catholic cathedral in the east end, and free sites and building materials for churches of all other denominations. He gave a market square, a cricket ground, a race course; promised to erect a first theatre, concert hall and ballroom, and even advertised for an efficient chief of police. (118-19)

The many elements and “ands” of this passage emphasize the extent and manifoldness of Lamb’s beneficence, but the escalating scale of his promises also suggests that his plans were both extravagant and unrealizable.

In the short term, however, his efforts and optimism apparently met with success. He returned from England “and built the first and biggest hewn log house in Beverly” (119). He “erected a huge stone milk house...big enough to furnish the milk, butter and cheese of the new city.” He “opened a tavern, built a church...whooped her up generally” and “[s]ettlers clustered round him, a road was built past his very door...[and] [h]is became the great half-way house between the head of navigation [on Lake Ontario]—Dundas—and the great German and Mennonite settlement in what is now Waterloo county.” A rising and spreading village seemed solidly in the making. That it did not continue to develop, Kernighan suggests, was because of the premature deaths of Lamb, his wife, and his brother and “right-hand man”: “[t]he hardships and terrors of the American revolution, the great hejiva² northward, [and] the perils and dangers of the

unknown woods had sapped their strength and they died within a short time of one another" (119).

Less accomplished and engaging than "A City that Was Not Built," Kernighan's second sketch, "Legends of Romulus," is nevertheless notable for its further construction of Lamb as "a man of mystery" and a source of "terror" to his sons (121). Like the mythical Bluebeard, Lamb kept one room in his house—a "great room at the top of...[his] log castle"—that was "always closed," "heavily curtained," and off-limits to everyone except him and "associates." "They looked like other men," observes Kernighan of these "associates," "but there was something uncanny about them": they "came from afar...and put up their horses in the great corral"; their presence transformed their host into "a genial gentleman of the old school" and his wife into the "grande dame" that she was by descent; one "recited Virgil" and "[a]nother, a Cambridge man, gave Sophocles' Chariot Race, and when his weird and strange companions broke into a...shout of eulogy, a she-wolf screamed in the yard" (121-22). "There is talk of witchcraft, good Catholics cross...themselves, an old Indian employed about the place cut his wrist, and let the blood fall drop by drop on a burdock leaf" (122). "[U]nholy laughter," the burial of a box of "crowns, half crowns, and florins," and Lamb's "disappearance through the moonlit forest" heighten the Gothic atmosphere until Kernighan discloses the reason for the secret room, strange guests, and seemingly sinister behaviour: Lamb was a senior Freemason (122). The uncanniness surrounding Lamb is thus dispelled,³ but "[t]he old Lamb homestead" remains in Kernighan's mind at least a Gothic ruin: "what rare old stories would those walls tell!" he later exclaims; "[a]s I passed from room to room ghosts seemed to flit noiselessly before me, and as I went upstairs I noticed two ax marks on the banister rail, made in a desperate fight one wild winter's night. I would hate to sleep all night alone in that house" (123).

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Kernighan's account of Lamb's failed ambitions is its anticipation of Margaret Atwood's depictions of settler delusion and failure in such works as *Surfacing* (1972) and "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (1968). In contrast to Kernighan, who describes Lamb's death and the failure of his project as the sad results of historical circumstances, Atwood celebrates the madness and defeat of a pioneer as an instance of the breakdown of imposed order and a breakthrough to a higher than rational level of consciousness.⁴ Nevertheless, a remarkable similarity exists between the two writers in their referral of Canadian settler failure to mythical patterns of successful plantation and in their depiction of Canada's *flora* and *fauna* as witnesses to the folly of

human aspiration. In “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer,” the protagonist’s attempt to “proclaim...himself the centre” and impose rational order on the land is resisted by plants and animals alike: “Things [such as ‘a tree-sprout, a.../ weed’) / refused.../ to let him name them. // The wolves hunted / outside” (47, 50). In “A City that Was Not Built,” Kernighan positions Lamb similarly and envisages him generating a similar response:

He spread his rude map of British North America out on the top of a stump and laid a two-ounce bullet on the spot where the deserted hamlet of Romulus now stands. By the map he saw that he was located⁵ in the very heart of the British domains in America, right on the great highway from Quebec. This land was bound to have towns and cities. Why not have a great city right here under the bullet? He would build it. He bore the brand, not of Cain, but of a loyal subject and a true man, on face and forehead. Why should he not build a city? The wolves crept nearer and howled in derision, and the owls hooted with contempt, but he paid no heed. He took up 2000 acres of land around the bullet and named the new city Romulus. Why, it is hard to tell. Did the big she-wolf with hanging lugs and golden eyes that looked at him through the chinks of his cabin every night put the idea into his head? No one knows—but Romulus it was, although you will look vainly in the postoffice directory for it. It is a melancholy ruin—far more desolate than the majestic forest that Henry Lamb found. Now there is nothing but tumbling walls and broken roofs and weed-hidden paths and cold and barren fireplaces. (118)

Atwood’s poem ends with an allusion to Frye’s bizarre conception of Canada as “an inconceivably large whale” into which “[t]he traveler [or settler] from Europe edges...like a tiny Jonah” (“Conclusion” 824): “in the end...the green / vision, the unnamed / whale invaded” (50). Kernighan draws his sketch to a close with a description of the Romulus cemetery that is freighted with allusions to Matthew 7. 24-25 (the “wise man, which built his house upon a rock”)⁶ and to the Pyramids at Giza that emphasize the pathos and even the irony of Lamb’s project and its fate:

...[Lamb, his wife, and his brother] sleep side by side and are the only occupants of one of the strangest and most pathetic graveyards in the world. Henry Lamb built this city on a rock, and he and his were determined to be buried in the middle of the town. The bodies were placed in their rude coffins side by side on the top of the ground and were covered with tons of great stones. A stone wall was built around them, and this was filled in and over with soil, so that when it was finished it formed a cairn 18 x 27 feet at the base and ten feet high. There they slept peacefully like the ancient Egyptian kings and queens in the pyramidal tombs, and every night the wolves foregathered

above them and fought for the highest seats of the mighty. To-day these graves are unkempt and the wall in ruins. Groundhogs make their homes there down among the dead men's bones and the wind and the weather of three-quarters of a century have left the cairn only four feet high. (119-20)

Although the “[g]roundhogs” of the final sentence tip this passage towards bathos, their presence adds a local element to the description that is present also in the earlier and possibly ironical allusion to *The Seats of the Mighty* (1896), Gilbert Parker's historical romance about the fall of Quebec that was enjoying great acclaim and popularity at the time of the publication of *Pen and Pencil Sketches of Wentworth Landmarks*.

Like Parker's novel, Kernighan's sketch participates in the desire to eulogise Canada's past that swept through Canadian writing in the last two decades of the nineteenth century from two principal sources: nationalism and nostalgia, the former a product of the country's post-Confederation affirmation of its “Canadianism”⁷ and the latter a result of increasing urbanism and encroaching modernity. In 1897, Canada was thirty years old and Romulus, like the French-Canadian hamlet in Duncan Campbell Scott's *In the Village of Viger* (1896), within easy distance of a “city that was growing rapidly” (Scott 3). As the end of the century approached, Canadians sought evidence of their nation's identity and found respite from their cacophonous cities in visions of heroic pioneers, isolated homesteads, and small villages where, they imagined, people lived in harmony with one another and with the Canadian landscape. “A City that Was Not Built” is a chronicle of unfulfilled hope,⁸ but in the combination of local pride and rural longing in *Pen and Pencil Sketches of Wentworth Landscapes* as a whole lie intimations of the celebration of Canadian village life in the finest work of Canadian fiction of the post-Confederation period: Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912).

Notes

- 1 See *Anatomy of Criticism* 33-38, 50-51, 58-59, 62-65, and elsewhere for Frye's discussions of literary works in which the hero is either “a divine being” or exhibits “godlike heroism” (33, 37).
- 2 The hegira (or hejra or hijra) was Mohammed's flight from Mecca in 622 AD, from which is dated the Muslim era.
- 3 See Bentley, *Mnemographia Canadensis* 1: 125-39 for a discussion of some instances of the uncanny and related phenomena in Canadian writing.
- 4 See Bentley, *The Gay] Grey Moose* 26-28 for a discussion of the context of “Progress-

sive Insanities of a Pioneer” in the writings of Norman O. Brown, R.D Laing, and others. The conceptual framework of Atwood’s *Survival: a Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) is derived largely from Eric Berne’s *Games People Play: the Psychology of Human Relationships* (1964).

- 5 In the colonial context, “located” means “establish[ed] legally as a settler on land under terms of settlement set by the government” (*Gage Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*).
- 6 In “Legends of Romulus,” Kernighan continues the mythologizing of Lamb by referring to him as a Moses without a Joshua (123).
- 7 For a discussion of the meaning and use of this term in the late nineteenth century, see Bentley *The Confederation Group* 72-110.
- 8 Written almost a century later, “Diaspora: Lipton, Sask.” (1996) by Robert Currie (1937-) is a poignant treatment of “Jewish farmers [who] wandered here from Russia” and “moved on scattered” after “the wind blew their crops away,” presumably in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Set in Lipton’s “Jewish cemetery,” the poem relates that two members of the colony, Moses Swartz and Jacob Baratz, stayed on “beneath tin-plated roofs / safe in the line of final homes / that make a Main Street / in the village of the dead” (102-03). Its closing image is of white tombstones surrounded by “a haze of purple thistle” and “brown-eyed Susans bending in the wind” (103).

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