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Rummagings 11: Charles G.D. Roberts and the Beating of Willie

*No modest youths surround his awful chair,
His frowns to deprecate, or smiles to share,
But all the terrors of his lawful sway
The proud despise, the fearless disobey;
The rugged urchins spurn at all control....*
– Oliver Goldsmith, *The Rising Village* 241-44

1883 is not generally regarded as a banner year for Canadian poetry. Charles G.D. Roberts's *Orion, and Other Poems* was published three years earlier and his *In Divers Tones* would not appear until three years later. Isabella Valancy Crawford's captivatingly entitled *Old Spookses' Pass, Malcolm's Katie, and Other Poems* was a year away, Archibald Lampman's *Among the Millet, and Other Poems* five years away, and the debut volumes of Bliss Carman and Duncan Campbell Scott still further in the future. True, 1883 saw the publication of William Frederick Parker's *Normeelyon*, J.E. Pollock's *Lorenzo, and Other Poems*, and the Rev. Ezra Adams Stafford's *Recreations*, but none of these volumes (or, for that matter, the second instalment of William Kirby's *Canadian Idylls* [1883]) has yet attracted scholarly attention or been subjected to interrogation from a Cultural Studies perspective. It is quite possible that one or other of H.F. Browne's *The Strange Adventures of a Carp* and *A Tale of a Whale*, both of which appeared in 1884, were written in 1883, but at present that must remain only a tantalizing possibility. Yet 1883 is not entirely devoid of events and publications of interest and significance to students of canonical Canadian literature, for on 4 April of that year the *New Brunswick Reporter and Fredericton Advertiser* revealed that Roberts, who at that time was the principal of the York Street School in Fredericton, was "arraigned in...police-court...on a charge of assault and battery"¹ in connection with an incident that had occurred the day before and that would lead before the end of the month to an amendment of a New Brunswick Board of Education's regulation pertaining to "the authority of a Principal...over...pupils" ("Authority").

The victim of the alleged assault and battery was William ("Willie") B. Hayes, a pupil at the York Street School in the department of Miss. Amelia Atherton, who was accustomed to "send[ing]...boys to Mr. Roberts when they required[d] a specially good beating." Such was not the case on 2

April 1883, however: the “beating” does appear to have been “specially good” but it was administered, not in the principal’s office, or even on school property, but some distance along the street. As Roberts explained in his sworn testimony on the first day of the trial on 4 April:

After dismissing school he remained ten minutes in the building and then went out. He noticed boys on the opposite side of the road snowballing.... He called the boys loudly and sharply to come to him.... Hayes started to run.... He called loudly to him but he went on.... [H]e recognized Hayes and called him by name. [H]ayes...then returned.... [Roberts] caught him by the collar, shook him and struck him on the back of his legs with his cane before speaking to him. He then asked him what he meant by running away when called. Hayes said he did not hear.... [H]e struck him again, twice, he thought...[and] shook him again somewhat more sharply, when he saw his collar come unbuttoned and his shirt tear away.... [Hayes] had begun to cry, but stopped when...[Roberts] let go of him.... He said he struck Hayes with his cane in a comparatively sharp manner, and intended that he should feel it.

Apparently Hayes did “feel it”: two witnesses heard him “crying in his room” later and one of them said that “the boy complained” that the bruises left on his hip were “hurting him.” As for the bruises themselves, the doctor who examined Hayes on the day of the arraignment testified that “[i]t would require a considerable amount of force to make a bruise of that kind,” but conceded that “[s]ome persons show marks of blows more easily than others.”

After the lawyers for the defense and prosecution made their concluding remarks on the second day of the trial on 5 April, the Police Magistrate reserved judgment, which was handed down less than a week later on 10 April. According to a detailed report on the judgment in the 11 April issue of the Saint John *Daily Telegraph*, the Police Magistrate first reviewed the case, then cited the relevant regulations of the School Board and the pertinent legal decisions and opinions, and, finally, identified the key questions to be decided, namely:

Was the boy Hayes a pupil of the defendant or of Miss Atherton, or had the defendant the right, as principal, to punish the pupil of another teacher for an offense committed outside the school and play grounds attached thereto, and as principal, what control, if any, had he over the pupils of another teacher...going and returning from school. (“Fredericton School Case”)

The Police Magistrate then gave his decision:

Being unable to find any authority whatever which [states that] the defendant, as principal, had control over a pupil of another teacher, or right to punish him for an offense committed going and returning from school, I am of opinion that the defence set up as justification by the defendant is in law insufficient, and do therefore adjudge him guilty of the offence as charged.

The report in the *Daily Telegraph* concludes by stating that “[b]y agreement with the prosecutor a nominal fine only was imposed” and that “[i]t is said that the case will be appealed.” In fact, the fine was \$1.00 and the case was not appealed.

As indicated earlier, the case did not end there, however. On 13 April, “the Principals of several City Schools [in Fredericton]...decided to memorialize the Board of Education for the purpose of obtaining a clear definition of the responsibility and authority of a Principal...regarding his direction of the discipline of the several departments, and his control over pupils going to and returning from school” (“Teachers”). Some two weeks later, on 28 April, the *New Brunswick Reporter and Fredericton Advertiser* informed its readers that “the Board of Education has so amended [the] Regulation...as to remove all doubt of the authority of the Principal of a school over the pupils of a subordinate department” (“Authority”).² On 2 May, the same newspaper reported that on the previous day “Mr. B.C. Foster assume[d] the duties of Principal [of the York Street School], vice [that is, in place of] Mr. Roberts who has been granted leave of absence” (“School Changes”).³

To what extent if any or at all Roberts’s “leave of absence” was a result of his conviction will probably never be known. On 10 March he had written to Carman saying, among other things, that his efforts “to make intellectual progress” were being frustrated by the demands of his “teaching” (*Collected Letters* 34), but between then and 3 November (by which time he had moved to Toronto to assume the editorship of *The Week*) no letters appear to have survived. In his letter to Carman, Roberts also states that he has recently written “almost no poetry,” a claim that is supported by the available evidence (see *Collected Poems* 72-76) and consistent with E.M. Pomeroy’s statement that “The Pipes of Pan” and “Tantramar Revisited” were written in the summer of 1883 before he left Fredericton for Toronto (see 47-48). Whether influenced by Roberts’s conviction for assault and battery or not, his “leave of absence” (which of course became a permanent severance upon his appointment at King’s College in 1884) was an enabling release that yielded two of his finest and most distinctive poems. 1883 was not a banner year for Canadian poetry but it had its striking moments.

Notes

- 1 This and subsequent quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from “The Principa of York Street School Charged with Assaultl.”
- 2 As quoted in “The Fredericton School Case,” the regulation states that “[t]he principal of a school shall have a responsible supervision over the time-tables, exercises, methods and general discipline pursued in all its lower grades.” In the 1887 edition of the *Manual of the School Law of New Brunswick*, this statement is supplemented as follows: “...in all its lower grades, and over the conduct of the pupils as committed to Teachers generally by the provisions of [other regulations]...; and it shall be competent for the Principal Teacher, in his discretion, to exercise, on occasion, paramount authority in discipline, and to administer the same” (76). It is possible, of course, that the regulation was further revised between 1883 and 1887.
- 3 See also the Editorial in the 11 April 1883 issue of *The New Brunswick Reporter and Fredericton Advertiser*, a condemnation of “corporal punishment in...schools” that states in part: “[i]t has always seemed to us to be a poor compliment a teacher pays to his own powers of discipline when he has to resort to cow-hiding a boy or girl to enforce obedience and subordination.”

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