

1 'It Assumed the Form of An Epidemic': Election Day at St. Eleanor's, 1867

Introduction by Edward MacDonald

Without plenty of rum a candidate's chances for success were very poor, however good he or his party or platform might be. Each candidate supplied the rum for his supporters. It was kept at a booth, where they could drink all they desired; and some of them had large desires. One time the barrel supplied by a candidate was all drunk early in the day. The candidate was at another polling place several miles away. A messenger was sent with all possible haste to have him send another barrel of rum. The situation was desperate; he was informed that unless he sent another barrel at once he would not get another vote. The rum was sent immediately and the votes poured in like a river and carried the candidate to a glorious victory. It was a bad system.

Henry Mellick, Elmira (b. 1856?)

We often see the shape of the past, but we can seldom tell how it tastes or feels. It is both entertaining, then, and enlightening to read the following account, excerpted from the 4 March 1867 "post-election" edition of the *Summerside Progress*. Its author is equal parts amused and appalled by what he witnessed on "Polling Day" in St. Eleanor's, and his account brims with life as it seeks to convey the sights and sounds of a mid-nineteenth century election day on Prince Edward Island.

The heightened colour of the reportage in this excerpt is a measure of its undoubted author, the published and editor of the *Summerside Progress*, Thomas Kirwan. Born in Tryon in 1832, he apprenticed in the printing trade after a brief stint at Charlottetown's Central Academy. His subsequent career led him back and forth between Boston and Prince Edward Island. During one of those Island sojourns, in 1857, he started a newspaper, *The People's Journal*, but it lasted less than a year. Back in the United States, he fought on the Union side in the American Civil War, was wounded in South Carolina, and invalided back home. By 1866, he had settled in the Island's fastest growing town, Summerside, at the helm of its newest paper, the *Summerside Progress and Prince County Register*. Financed by an aggressive young businessman named R. T. Holman, the *Progress* was an apostle of, well, progress. Like most of its readers, the weekly opposed Confederation, but its stout advocacy of annexation to the United States was a decidedly minority opinion. While claimed political neutrality, the *Progress* was quick to criticize those in power, and that tendency is evident in the selection of detail in Kirwan's election day coverage.

So are Kirwan's literary pretensions. Back in 1857, he had announced his intention of publishing a history of the colony (in installments), and in 1866, he had experimented with a magazine offshoot of the *Progress*, the first attempt of its kind on Prince Edward Island. There is a Dickensian quality to the writing in this piece, an uneasy blend of bemusement and indignation.

Admittedly, Kirwan had good material to work with. The election of 1867 was hotly contested in 5th Prince. Most of the voters there lived in bustling Summerside, even if the polling was still held at the courthouse in nearby St. Eleanors, the nominal county capital. Across the colony, the ruling Conservatives were in disarray, tainted by a suspected weakness for Confederation and tarred with their use of the military to suppress the civil disobedience of the Tenant League's radical land reformers.* Prospects had initially looked bleak in Summerside as well. According to Kirwan, the local Tories had seemed "pretty well flattened out" on Nomination Day, 2 February 1867. But, he marvelled, "It seems that a certain slippery genius, who had been into Charlottetown, brought with him back from that gay and festive locality glad tidings of some kind, for he had no sooner circulated around among the faithful when sudden joy began to dispel the gloom from [Tory] countenances." (Translation: as in the recent general election in New Brunswick, Canadian money had been sent down to bribe voters in 5th Prince -- or so the *Progress* suspected.)

*For more about the election and the issues at stake in this election, see “‘Dear Clark’: Edward Whelan and the Elections of 1867,” in Number 52(Fall/Winter 2002).

Over the last days of the campaign, many supposed Liberals had experienced a change of heart. “Doubtless,” Kirwan mocked, “they had been enlightened on some points that had not been apparent before. Added to this, they had a chance to indulge quite freely in whiskey and other creature comforts, gratis, which chance did not present itself every day.” Whatever the reason, the contest in Summerside went right down to the wire on election day, 26 February. The prevailing system of open balloting allowed everyone to keep a running tally of the mounting vote totals for the candidates, Conservatives Colin McLennan and Daniel Green, and their Liberal opponents, J. A. McDonald and John Haszard. Knowing the score only added to the feverish intensity of the contest.

The rival *Summerside Journal*’s report of the election would be laconic: “In this District, especially, the election was a tight one. Everyone, at all interested seemed to be up and doing. Everything passed off quietly, of course there was a little hard talk between opponents, a few fights among those who had indulged in intoxicating drink, but we believe no one was hurt.” The *Progress*’ version is far more illuminating. From it we get a flavour of electioneering in an era when balloting was open and oral; when a man’s oath, and not some printed list, was surety for his right to vote; when drinking near the poll was illegal only on paper, and when a voter’s mind might be changed by having his head broken or his debts called in.

“Election Day”

Election day was ushered in with bustle and excitement. The day was clear and frosty, without being very cold. At an early hour the sleighs of the various parties, decked with banners inscribed with the names of the candidates, mottoes and devices, etc. were scouring around at a rapid rate, collecting the voters and carrying them off to St. Eleanor’s, where the polling was opened. Life, spirit and energy seemed to pervade the men who were in charge of the various teams, and while we could not help admiring their zeal and industry, we pitied the poor horses. There was something, also, in the enthusiasm manifested by the men of the two parties when they passed one another, and gave cheer for cheer, that was catching. It assumed the form of an epidemic and spread more rapidly than the measles. Even the doctors caught it, and lawyers, and grave magistrates, and constables, and boys – aye, even to the dogs – but it didn’t seem to hurt them much.

Seizing an opportunity, we started early for the polling place. As we neared it, we became aware of more flags, more sleighs, more people and more excitement. As alighted from the sleigh, we observed a drunken individual, seemingly on his last legs, uttering what seemed to be his last dying speech and confession, “Herraw for Green and McLennan!” “Vote for ‘em me boy.” Passing him we gained the inside of the Court House, where the polling was going on. There, on the identical spot where the grave chief justices have so often sat in judgement, we beheld the Deputy Sheriff, surrounded by the candidates, a few of their friends, and the regular and special polling clerks. In front of them was a dense crowd of voters, which rapidly became denser from the very natural desire of all of them to record their votes as quickly as possible. But the method they took to carry out this very laudable design only served to embarrass its execution. Instead of going in at one side and passing out at the other, in their eagerness to get in they left no room to get out again; and the efforts of the men to get out again after voting was often frantic. And ridiculous. How some of them – especially the stout ones – contrived to get out at all presents a mystery to us to the present day. We saw one fat man disappear in [the] crowd and we haven’t laid eyes on him since.

The votes were taken in very slowly. The antiquated custom of compelling a man to qualify, and

deciding upon the veracity of the testimony he produces to prove he's an elector, is one of the most incomplete (not to say unjust) heirlooms which our forefathers bequeathed to make us do penance by. There is a great deal of time used or rather wasted, in an imperfect effort to qualify a voter at the polls, that could at least be as well done elsewhere. It is not only a ridiculous custom, but is a great means of defeating the just ends which the franchise is intended to serve, by giving ample opportunity to the candidates and others interested in their behalf, to question, bully, bluff and confuse the poor voter, and object to his vote on the most trivial excuses. If a way were desired, that would best serve the ends of the most unscrupulous man to bring his ledger influence to bear on the people, we think a better one than the present could not be thought of. We were more than ever convinced, while looking on that scene, that voting by ballot was the only escape from such an odious yoke as this places upon the people in the exercise of one of their most sacred rights. This is a much more simple and far less expensive method than the present one, and if our legislature were not a hundred years behind the times they would have given it to us years ago.

We grew tired, sick, disgusted with the work after a while, and strolled outside to take a look at the "elephant."* We saw groups of from ten to fifty men dotted around like checkers. Some were engaged in earnest or excited talk, others in endeavoring to persuade one another that it was all wrong, while others again were deeply engaged in witnessing the spectacle of drunken men endeavoring to hurt each other, or themselves, in vain efforts to decide the relative merits of their respective political creeds. Sometimes these fights assumed the character denominated "free." That is, two or three men would rush in to stop the fighting, separate the combatants, and then commence to fight a little themselves, to be in like manner interrupted by others, and so on, til the whole crowd would have a hand in it. But to do the people justice, there were comparatively few cases of this kind, and they generally conducted themselves well and as became peaceable citizens. We are glad to record this, for there is no greater sign of a low standard of intellect than to behold people fighting upon a difference of opinion. It is true there were some low, filthy, rum guzzling bullies who seemed more like bull dogs than men in their pugnacity; but they were few and the fewer the better. We have a theory with regard to such characters, which we consider to have a very reasonable foundation, and that is, that professional bruisers, or bullies for every occasion, should be disenfranchised, as they are more of the animal than the man, and should be caged and muzzled during the times of political excitement. This might serve a dual purpose. It might stimulate them to cultivate what little brains they have, instead of their muscles, and thus do society a benefit by making them better and quieter animals than they usually are. We think every man is right in being able to take his own part if attacked, but we believe much more in that morality of character that will never allow its possessor to willingly insult any man who may differ or oppose him in politics. But we suppose men must be taken as they are, even if some seem inclined to go the whole "animal" as respects bullying and fighting.

*"To see the elephant" was Civil War slang for going into action.

We believe the election law makes certain regulations in regard to the sale or giving out of liquor on the day of election, within a certain distance of the polling place; but we found that the Government men had secured and opened a public house, and we saw magistrates and others, whose duty it was to enforce the laws, passing in and out with half-drunken men, leading them along like cattle, to vote as directed.

About noon a short recess was taken, and voting suspended, to allow the sheriff, candidates and others to fortify themselves for the closing struggles.

The sheriff's court then shifted its quarters to outside, on the hustings, where the work of voting recommenced. Here was a better field for them to poll their votes – at least one would think it was; but whether from accident or design, the same indiscriminate crushing and crowding from all sides prevailed.

Here was the same continuous arrival and departure of teams, the same rush by the runners of the parties to lay hold of the newly arrived voters, and the same frantic efforts on all sides to get up to vote. We thought it strange that those who voted did not fall back; but the curiosity which is so characteristic of

the Celtic and Saxon races, induced many to stay in to see how the others voted, and the jam became so great, at last, that even those who wished to get away could not. We saw the “Muddy Holler” man, linked arm-in-arm with some of his “Kunswervitit” friends coming out of the “open house,” no doubt having had his fill of his favorite whiskey, and we could hear just enough of his conversation to know that he was denouncing “bil jinkers” in no very choice language.

The unterrified were divided, as before, into small crowds, the centre of whose attraction generally were a few drunken men engaged in fighting or preparing to “pitch in” to one another. We believe there was one important buffing match, which attracted all hands into one of the fields or back yards; but did not have the curiosity to go and witness the brutal display.

Abundant evidences of “scrimmages” met us in all directions in the shape of men with clothes torn, and bloody and blackened visages. Still there wasn’t as much fighting as might be expected; too, the amount of blood spilled on such occasions is generally in keeping with the amount of rum used – a very good argument for temperance men to use. Bestiality and brutality are closely allied with intemperance, as any one could plainly see on the occasion we are referring to. It was the best temperance lecture we have heard (and seen) for some time. . . .

Scrutiny

At this point, Kirwan’s coverage of the election moves on to other, related issues, such as the likelihood of the results being appealed. For while the Liberals had swept to victory elsewhere, taking 19 of 30 seats in the Island’s House of Assembly, the Tories had triumphed in Summerside. The official results were Colin McLennan and Daniel Green, Conservatives, 330 and 323 votes, respectively; J. A. McDonald and John Haszard, Liberals, 303 and 293.

In the aftermath of the contest, McLennan and Green took their seats, and the *Progress* repeated its call for the introduction of the secret ballot and official voters’ lists. While it endorsed the idea of voters’ lists, the *Summerside Journal* sided with many Islanders in continuing to prefer open voting. “There appears to be something cowardly and conspirator-like in a man’s giving a secret vote,” it declared.

By the time secret balloting and voters’ lists finally became law in 1877, Thomas Kirwan’s career had gone south again – back to Boston, where he would spend over three decades on the editorial staff of the Boston *Herald*. Only two years later, in 1879, a new Conservative government abolished the secret ballot as a cost-cutting measure. It would be 1913 before the secret ballot was re-enacted. Until then, “manly” open voting ruled, bringing out the best, the worst, and the most entertaining in Islanders. “Verily,” as Thomas Kirwan concluded his account of election day, 1867, “the ways of men are curious, and their heads are soft and hard by turns.”

Sources

Besides the newspapers and *Island Magazine* articles cited above, the reader can refer to Frank MacKinnon’s classic study, *The Government of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951). For more on Thomas Kirwan, see Cecil T. Bagnall’s affectionate portrait, “A Name Which Sends Our Thoughts Back to the Old Time,” *Prince Edward Island Magazine* 4(December 1902)10: 351-53.