

John Galt and North America

Introduction

In the time available this morning I can only give a very brief outline but I would like to tell you how Galt became involved with North America, what he did there and how he drew on that experience to inform the 2 novels have North American settings. In all of this – both the colonialism and the novels - I believe there are two important things to bear in mind. One is that Canada is the fulcrum of Galt's life. He thought that what he did there would be the culmination and crowning glory of his career: that this rather than his writing would be the reason he would be remembered.

The other thing is Galt's fascination with communities. How they are built, how they evolve and how they are affected by change and development. You can see it in the early successes. *The Ayrshire Legatees*, *The Annals* and *The Provost* all have communities at their centre and Galt saw Canada as an ideal test-bed for his ideas about colonialism, empire and community-building.

As you are all probably aware Galt had had a somewhat chequered career since leaving Greenock for London in 1804. He had been in business, gone bankrupt, started to train as a lawyer but dropped out after a few months to go travelling for 3 years around the Mediterranean, had had some success with published works of travel, history and biography, not mention school textbooks, but had yet to be the business success which he really craved to be. Then, in 1819, he was appointed as Parliamentary agent for the Union Canal Company which was trying to secure the passage of a Private Bill to allow that project to be undertaken. Galt's position was that of a lobbyist and facilitator, building support for the Bill and minimising opposition. He was successful and the Bill was passed in 1820.

He had acquired a reputation as a man who knew how Parliament and Government worked and that brought him to the attention of a group of Canadians who had suffered losses defending Canada during the War of 1812-14 between Britain and the United States. During the conflict US forces had invaded Upper Canada and caused damage to property there. These citizens, who had fought for Britain in the conflict and repelled the US invasion, felt that they were entitled to compensation and wished to petition Parliament to that end. They engaged Galt in December 1820 to progress their claims and offered him commission of 3% on any monies recovered but explained that it would not be possible to advance any funds for expenses. Galt was therefore committing himself to a great deal of work on a purely speculative no-win/no-fee basis.

This was not quite Galt's first encounter with Canada. He recalls in his autobiography that as a young boy he was visiting relatives in Kilmarnock who showed him a folio of pictures which included one of Niagara Falls. It made a deep impression on the boy and the adult Galt recalls that 'it was the wildest sight I had ever seen, and my juvenile imagination was awfully excited'. He also had a cousin, William Gilkison (1777-1833), who was an early explorer in Canada and who visited Galt in London, providing enough information for Galt to produce a magazine article in 1807.

The Colonial Office was not unsympathetic to the compensation claims but the Treasury was extremely reluctant to countenance any financial commitments from the British Government to the colonists. Galt then discovered that a statute of 1791 set aside one seventh of the land in every newly surveyed township for the use of the Crown and a further one seventh for the use of 'a Protestant clergy'.

The Protestant part was important since the Anglican establishment was afraid of the Catholic majority in Lower Canada and of the large number of dissenters, mainly Methodists and Presbyterians, in Upper Canada. Catholics, for obvious eighteenth-century reasons, and dissenters, who were felt to be dangerously imbued with democratic ideas, were perceived as a threat to the established order. Indeed, the number of dissenters was such that 'Protestant' rather than Anglican was as far as they could go in the 1791 Act without exciting widespread popular opposition. As the Canadian historian Arthur Lower puts it, 'the Methodists and other "dissenters" were advocating the secularisation of the clergy reserves' thus weakening Anglican and Tory power in the Province. It was into this situation that Galt, a known Presbyterian and wrongly suspected to be a radical, was about to step.

Besides these reserved lands the Crown also held a vast acreage which had not yet been surveyed or assigned to townships. Galt therefore hit upon the idea that a company could be formed to buy undeveloped land in Canada from the Government. In effect the company would buy land wholesale, divide it into smaller parcels, carry out some development in the way of roads and other infrastructure and then retail individual lots to settlers and emigrants. The theory was that the price paid by the company would be used by the Government to meet the claims of the 1812 war victims and to contribute to the expenses of the colonial administration.

Galt's vision was that as infrastructure was provided and settlers began to prosper, land values would increase and the company would make considerable profits in the medium to long term. This is exactly what happened but unfortunately, largely because he failed to impress such a timeframe on the company, Galt's association with it did not survive long enough for him to share in the rewards his foresight had predicted.

Nevertheless, in 1824 Galt had managed to put together sufficient investors to form the Canada Company and began negotiations with the Government to grant a charter to the company and to reach an agreed price for the sale of land to it. The charter was granted in 1826 and Galt was appointed to 'look after the company's interests in Canada with salary and expenses of £1,000 a year'.

The Colonial Office held back on final agreement of the plans until an evaluation of the lands had been made and appointed a commission for that purpose. Five commissioners were picked to undertake a fact-finding mission to the Province. Two were chosen by the Government, two by the Company, Simon McGillivray and Galt, and one, a commissioner of Crown Lands in Lower Canada, jointly. They landed at New York on 25th February 1825 and made their way overland to York (later Toronto) where they received their formal

commission from Sir Peregrine Maitland, the Lieutenant-Governor. The commissioners compiled a report and left York on 1st May 1825.

After further negotiation the Company finally became responsible for the settlement of 2,484,013 acres, purchased at 3s.6d. per acre. Galt believed that the money paid by the Company to the Government would be applied to settle the claims for the war losses but after the agreement had been reached he discovered that the proceeds were to be appropriated for the use of the Provincial Government. He protested to the Government but there was no change of mind.

Galt was appointed as the Company's Commissioner and set off for Canada in October 1826, landing at New York on November 23rd. On the overland journey to York Galt, as instructed by the Directors, studied the operations of two of the most respected land companies in the Genessee country of northern New York State and wrote back that his 'visits to the Pulteney and Holland land companies was most satisfactory'. Not only did the information he gained inform his views on land development and disposal but it provided the background and setting for the bulk of the novel *Lawrie Todd*.

He reached York on December 12th, then went to Quebec to register the Company's charter with the Governor-General. On his return to York he began his work in earnest and identified a block of 40,000 acres which might serve as the Company's first settlement. This became the City of Guelph which was officially founded in April 1827. It grew at a rate beyond Galt's greatest expectations. In August he pushed on further west to the shores of Lake Huron and found a natural harbour which he named Goderich. The name Guelph is the family name of the Hanoverian monarchs and Goderich is Viscount Goderich who had just been appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Unfortunately, while he was doing all this good work Galt had fallen out with the Lieutenant-Governor, the Anglican establishment and the Company Directors back in London. The Company had never subscribed to the medium-term nature of the enterprise: they wanted quick profits and were becoming increasingly alarmed at the imbalance between inflow and outflow of cash. They recalled Galt in 1829 on the grounds that he had not kept adequate financial records.

He left Guelph in April 1829 and once back in London he was dismissed and then was promptly sued for a debt of £197 14s 8d by the headmaster of his sons' school. He couldn't pay and was committed to the King's Bench prison.

Galt did not gain his ideas about colonisation out of a clear blue sky. His investigations in the Genessee country gave him the basic model and he refined that to fit the British and Canadian circumstances. The soundness of his method is borne out by the fact that it remained unchanged after his departure and that the Canada Company made considerable profit from the 1830s until it was finally wound up in 1953.

He was undone by a combination of his own failings, the impatience of his Directors and shareholders, and the difficulties of communication over time and distance. He had warned

the company that this was a medium to long term investment but did not do enough to secure the Company's commitment to that goal.

More seriously, he did not pay sufficient attention to the details of his accounts. There is no suggestion that he misappropriated money but there is considerable evidence that he did not keep proper financial records. For a company worried about the drain on its finances before profits were made this was a serious matter.

Finally, Galt's own personality was a major contributor to his downfall. He tended to behave as though whatever he believed to be right should be equally evident to everyone else. Consequently, he seldom tried to prepare the ground adequately for his policy proposals and, when faced with opposition, resorted to affronted self-justification. J K Herreshoff, who wrote a thesis on Galt's Canadian letters, says that: 'frequently the letters written by Galt during his Canadian years reveal a considerable degree of self-delusion and a continuing pattern of self-destructive behaviour'. Greater awareness of the consequences of his actions on other people, and a much more diplomatic approach to the Provincial Government would have buttressed Galt's position both locally and with the Company in London.

Had he lived long enough Galt would have seen that all three of his sons made their homes in Canada and built on his efforts to make a mark on the country. John became registrar of Huron County and Thomas was knighted as Chief Justice of Upper Canada. Alexander was also knighted, having achieved both wealth as a businessman and acclaim as a statesman, being a principal architect of Canadian Confederation and one of the first Canadian High Commissioners to Britain.

Out of work, in debt, and in prison Galt did the only thing he could do. Like Sir Walter Scott at much the same time he wrote. His output over the next few years, until he was slowed up by a series of strokes, was prodigious. In terms of North American subjects he contributed at least 25 articles to magazines and periodicals, including political pieces, short stories, and travellers' tales. They throw an interesting light on his thinking but they can be discussed on another day.

In the time left I'd like to say something about the 2 novels he produced with New World settings – *Lawrie Todd* and *Bogle Corbet*. *Lawrie Todd*, published in 1830, takes as its starting point the real autobiography of a Scot named Grant Thorburn who had emigrated to the US and eventually made good there. Galt met Thorburn in New York and bought the manuscript of his autobiography from him for, he proudly tells us, 'an author's, not a publisher's price'.

The novel has 9 parts and the first two are closely modelled on Thorburn's autobiography. From the beginning of Part III onwards it is pure Galt because he takes the narrative into, literally, new territory and away from Thorburn's life but he retains Thorburn's character in Todd the overtly religious but sharp businessman who ascribes his success, in a rather self-satisfied way, to the workings of Providence and the favour of God.

To give you some idea of Thorburn's character I'll give you 2 quotes from his autobiography. Thorburn says of his first marriage that 'I stuck to my hammer till the usual hour of seven o'clock, joined the company at eight, drank tea, was married, and got home before ten o'clock'. In the preface he says that 'I have thought for many years that it was a debt I owed to society to publish my life'. As an author who had made his name with novels of ironic self-revelation Galt must have seized on this manuscript with relish and picks up on these traits in the character of Lawrie Todd.

Todd is a nailmaker who is arrested for sedition in Scotland – this was in 1793 at the height of the panic about the French Revolution – but he skips bail and flees to New York where he makes some money and starts up a business as a seedsman. This is initially successful but then he goes bankrupt. The real Thorburn stays in New York and recovers from that to be successful but this is the point that Galt departs into fiction. He has Todd go up into northern New York state, to the Genessee country, to found a new community. That process is the heart of the book. It is full of hints for would-be settlers and emigrants. Galt says in his *Literary Life* that in *Lawrie Todd* 'the disposition to be didactic was more indulged than I previously thought could be rendered consistent with a regular story'.

Part of the didactic purpose of the novel is to let Britons know of the nature of the wilderness; thus there are descriptions of forest fires, snakes, encounters with bears and wolves. Galt seeks to avoid the obvious in his didacticism; each of these episodes has the dual purpose of providing a dramatic moment in the plot as well as an opportunity to instruct readers about what may be encountered in this new wild land. He also shows what must be done to make the wilderness habitable. Without labouring the point he demonstrates the method of building temporary dwellings and then houses, taking care to note that unseasoned timber will shrink in warm weather, and the best way to clear the ground of trees.

He has acute observations to make about which kinds of settlers prosper and which fail and he also has a lot to say about the conflicted feelings emigrants have about the country they have left. Todd goes back to Scotland for a long holiday (and to acquire his third wife) but he is eventually, and reluctantly, forced to the conclusion that Scotland is no longer his home. He has become an American. Todd concludes that 'of all the passages of my life, this visit to Scotland was the most unsatisfactory'.

Galt says that he completed 'in as satisfactory a state of misanthropy as I could well work myself into, the novel of Lawrie Todd' but it is essentially optimistic, as Katie Trumpener has noted. At the time of writing he had not given up on those hopes and illness had not yet put an end to them so optimism is not a surprise. Galt believed that if his precepts, as outlined in the text, of good preparation, hard work and sober living were followed then emigration represented an opportunity for both individual and collective progress.

Bogle Corbet, on the other hand, is considerably more downbeat. It was published in 1831 when Galt was beginning to realise that for health and other reasons he wasn't going to be the great colonialist he aspired to be. The first two thirds of the book are set in Scotland, London and Jamaica. It is only at the very end of the second volume that the narrative reaches

Canada. The aim of the novel is just as didactic as *Lawrie Todd* but Corbet and Todd are very different characters. Corbet is middle-class and Galt is quite specific about his aims. In a preface to the novel he states that the object of the work is to 'show what a person of ordinarily genteel habits has really to expect in emigrating to Canada'. He says that he is 'teaching in parables'.

One of Galt's prescriptions for successful colonisation and empire-building is that the Government should encourage middle-class emigration. It is only if emigrants have some capital that they will have the means to invest and then to employ the workers that the Government was so anxious to send abroad.

Like *Lawrie Todd* and the early Ayrshire novels it is written in Galt's favourite form: a faux autobiography studded with ironic self-revelation. It is also a critique of the then fashionable stadial theory which held that societies move in stages from hunting through shepherding and agriculture to commerce and that that progression represents steady upward progress. Galt recognised that progress is not an unalloyed good. There were advances but there were losers as well as winners.

He also has a lot to say on slavery, not all to his credit. Galt had never been to the West Indies but there's a big chunk of the book set in Jamaica with detailed descriptions of plantation life and how happy the slaves are under kind and paternal masters. He notes that slavery has a coarsening effect on the whites, he sees abolition as inevitable but he worries about the effect of it on West India property.

He reserves his real scorn and venom for highlanders. They are mocked mercilessly for a number of supposed faults. They are, perhaps unsurprisingly, clannish and 'have but little kindness to spare for the common offspring of Adam' compared to their own 'kith and kin'. Galt ignores the fact that lowland Scots were equally guilty of congregating together when they emigrated to Canada, as is the case in this novel. The language of the Highlanders is mocked as 'the dislocated Celtic gibberish in use among the lower classes who frequent the Lowlands' and when they do speak English it is an excuse for more mockery as in: 'Thank Got we are true clansmen, though we pe in Canada, och hon, umph!'.

The Lowland emigrants consider the Highlanders to be dirty and lazy declaring that 'they'll no' be overly industrious anent improvement' and that they have 'splendid propensities for dirt and indolence'. These attitudes towards Highlanders were not uncommon among Lowland Scots at that time but it is still surprising to see Galt adopt them with fewer qualifications or caveats than he would apply to blacks or Indians. His empiricism and judgements based on observation rather than prejudice seem to have deserted him when considering what were, after all, his fellow-countrymen and that, perhaps, is the reason.

Both novels are far too long. Galt was always happier with more concise forms but his publishers, Colburn and Bentley for these books, stipulated that each book should be 3 volumes and in the case of *Bogle Corbet* that each volume should be of at least 320 pages. Galt delivered but only by padding out the texts with appendices, extraneous material and lengthy and tedious back stories. Nevertheless, they are not without merit. As always with

Galt, he can't help introducing humour, and there are some genuinely funny scenes in both novels.

Jennie Aberdein notes of *Bogle Corbet* that throughout 'there are scattered good things – interesting thoughts and observation, vivid characterization, energetic action' and that judgement could apply equally to *Lawrie Todd*. She is right: both novels contain too many longueurs to be wholly satisfying but they are worth reading for the qualities she mentions.

But over everything else in both texts there is the consistency of Galt's views on what is required by the Governments in London and Ontario, by colonisers like the Canada Company, and by settlers themselves, to create successful new communities. The same policies which he has been promoting in his journalism and in his dealings with the Colonial Office are repeated here within the confines of an entertainment.