No. 2

EARLY BRITISH COLUMBIA IMPRINTS

SAWNEY'S LETTERS,

—OR—

CARIBOO RHYMES.

—o— By James Anderson

FROM 1864 TO 1868.

TEXTS BY

W. KAYE LAMB

DOMINION ARCHIVIST AND NATIONAL LIBRARIAN

AND

MICHAEL R. BOOTH

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, ROYAL MILITARY COLLEGE

SAWNEY'S LETTERS have a twofold interest. From the literary point of view, they are virtually the only publication of any merit whatever that came out of the Cariboo district during the famous gold rush of the 1860's. The historian, for his part, reads the verses with attention because the comments of contemporaries show that they reflect, with considerable discernment and accuracy, the character and temper of the period.

Their author was a Scotsman, James Anderson, who was born in Coupar Angus, Perth, about 1839. As his father was a lawyer, banker, and landed proprietor of some prominence, it seems safe to assume that James received a good schooling. He married in 1860, and a son was born the following year. In spite of these growing ties at home, the lure of the gold fields in faraway Cariboo proved irresistible, and James set out for British Columbia.

By the fall of 1863 he was in Cariboo. He must have found the contrast with Scotland startling, for the mining community was a primitive one, in which both population and the fortunes of individuals fluctuated violently. In winter it became a little isolated world, locked in for many months by the cold and snow. Its centre was the town of Barkerville, in which Anderson seems first to have settled. The claims from which a few drew fortunes and the majority reaped disappointment were scattered along the beds of various rivers and streams. Names that were famous at the time include Williams Creek, upon which Barkerville stands, and Lightning Creek, which was the scene of Anderson's own last efforts to find gold.

Though fortune failed to smile, Anderson soon became a well-known figure. He had an attractive personality; he had a pleasant singing voice and a fund of songs to keep it company; and, as the *Letters* show, he could express the joys and sorrows of the time in

rhyme. During the long winter evenings life centered about the public reading room in Barkerville, and Anderson took part in many of the concerts and entertainments held there. In 1866 he and a friend were issuing a weekly handwritten newspaper that was read aloud on such occasions, and afforded much amusement. Some of the *Letters* may well have appeared in this manuscript paper. Others—or fragments of them—were printed from time ot time in the *Cariboo Sentinel,* a small weekly first published in the summers of 1865 and 1866.

Some of Anderson's verses—we do not know how many, as no copy seems to have survived—were collected and printed in the summer of 1866. This edition, advertised in the issue of the *Cariboo Sentinel* dated July 30, is described as being printed on a "sheet of letter paper in a form suited for transmission by mail". It may, perhaps, have resembled the "steamer letters" published by the Victoria papers in gold-rush days; these had a selection of local news items printed on one side, while the other side was left blank for a personal message.

It seems more likely, however, that the format was the same as that of a second edition, printed by the *Sentinel* in the early summer of 1868. This consisted of a single sheet, folded quarto-fashion, and dated Williams Creek, June 22, 1868. It was entitled *Sawney's Letters, or Cariboo Rhymes.* Both these editions were printed while the *Sentinel* was still using the first press ever brought into British Columbia.*

If we may judge by the comments in the *Sentinel, Sawney's Letters* were well received and enjoyed a steady sale. A letter that was in effect a review of the little pamphlet appeared in the *Sentinel* for July 9; the writer was one W. Smithe. The *Letters,* Smithe wrote, would "vividly recall to old hands their experience in the hardest days of the hardest country that ever invited civilization to take up its abode in its rugged mountains". They had, he felt, hit off very deftly the vices, foibles, and virtues of the time. The ups and

*[For further details on British Columbia's first press see Basil Stuart-Stubbs, "British Columbia's Peripatetic Press", *British Columbia Library Quarterly,* 22:25-30, July, 1958.—EDITOR.]

downs of gold seeking, the behaviour of those who gained wealth suddenly, the eternal gambling, the hurdy-gurdy dancing girls—all these topics and many others Anderson contrived to touch upon in a few pages. ". . . anyone desiring to let his friends have an idea of what Cariboo is like," Smithe wrote, "can do so by no means so well as by sending them a copy of Anderson's epistles to Sawney". His one regret was that Anderson had seen fit to write his verses in Scottish dialect, "for doubtless very many who would otherwise have taken a great interest in them will be unable to appreciate them as they deserve, from their simple inability to understand the peculiar phraseology in which they are written".

A third and considerably enlarged edition entitled *Sawney's Letters and Cariboo Rhymes,* price one dollar, appeared in the spring of 1869, probably in May. The 1868 edition may have been sold out, or the remaining copies may have been burned in the great fire that swept Barkerville in September, 1868. The new edition included eight additional poems in the Sawney series, and twenty-four pages of Cariboo songs. Presumably, like its predecessors, it was printed in the office of the *Cariboo Sentinel.* Still another edition was published in Toronto in 1895 by W. S. Johnston and Company, printers and bookbinders. As already noted, no copy of the 1866 edition is known to exist, and all the later issues are now rare. Indeed, probably the only collection possessing all of them is the Provincial Library and Archives, in Victoria.

The *Sentinel* for November 25, 1871, announced that Anderson was at last leaving British Columbia: "Mr. Anderson has been a resident of Cariboo for the last eight years, during which time he has won the esteem of many friends, and we are certain has made no enemies. Fortune, we are sorry to say has not smiled on him; and weary of wooing her embraces in the search for gold, he now returns to his old Scottish home, where a fond wife and family have long been mourning his absence. He was one of the original members of the Amateur Dramatic Association, and by his vocal talents rendered much assistance at their performances, his songs being always much admired."

Anderson himself contributed a farewell poem to the same issue, and it seems fitting to include it here.

FAREWELL!

Cold Cariboo, farewell!
I write it with a sad and heavy heart;
You've treated me so roughly that I feel,
'Tis hard to part.

'Twas all I asked of thee,
One handful of thy plenteous golden grain,
Had'st thou but yielded, I'd have sung "Farewell!"
And home again.

But, time on time, defeat!
Ah, cold and cruel, callous Cariboo!
Have eight years' honest persevering toil
No more of you?

Ah well, then since 'tis so—
Since Fate hath will'd I should no longer here—
I e'en submit, while disappointment starts
The hidden tear.

But still I'll picture thee
As some dear loved one in the days gone by,
And think what might have been, till dreaming brings
The soothing sigh.

Farewell! a fond farewell
To all thy friendships, kindly Cariboo!
No other land hath hearts more warm than thine,
Nor friends more true.

Back in his native Scotland, Anderson settled down at "Pitfar", one of his father's properties near Dollar, in Clackmannan, Fife. Later he moved to Cupar, in the same county. His last days were spent in England, where he died about 1923, aged about eighty-four years.

A son informs us that Anderson wrote home from Cariboo very regularly, but unfortunately not a single letter of the long series appears to have survived.

W. KAYE LAMB

I am much indebted to Mr. Willard E. Ireland, Provincial Librarian and Archivist, who hunted out many of the details given in these notes, to a memorandum prepared many years ago by Mr. G. P. Bainbridge, of Vancouver, and to Dr. Michael R. Booth, of the Royal Military College, who discovered the 1866 edition of the Letters. *The text was prepared originally as an introduction to a reprint of the 1868 edition of the* Letters, *published by the Bibliographical Society of Canada in 1950. This revised version has been prepared and published by kind permission of the Society.*

CARIBOO SONGS.

THE ROUGH BUT HONEST MINER.

AIR—"CASTLES IN THE AIR."

SUNG BY MR. JAMES ANDERSON, AT THE THEATRE ROYAL, BARKERVILLE, 13TH FEB., 1869.

The rough but honest miner,
Wha toils night and day,
Seeking for the yellow gold,
Hid amang the clay—
Howkin' in the mountain side,
What does he there—
Ha! the auld "dreamer's"
"Biggin' castles in the air."—
His weather-beaten face,
An' his sair-worn hands
Are tell-tales to a'
O' the hardships he stands;
His head may grow grey,
And his face fu' o' care,
Hunting after gold,
"Wi' its castles in the air."

He sees an auld channel,
Buried in the hill,
Fill'd fu' o' nuggets—
Sae gaes at it wi' a will,
For lang weeks and months,
Drifting late and air',
Cutting out a door
To his "castle in the air"—
He hammers at the rock,
Believin' it's a rim,
When ten to ane 'tis naething
But his fancy's whim—
Sure when he gets thro'
He'll find his hame-stake there;
There's miners mair than ane,
Built this "castle in the air."

In 1863, when James Anderson came to the Cariboo and, by the evidence of his second letter to Sawney, bought a claim from the famous Cariboo Cameron, Barkerville was already a boom town fast replacing nearby communities as the centre of the Cariboo gold rush. Two years later the boom had reached its peak, and anywhere between five and ten thousand people huddled in the tents and cabins of Barkerville and Williams Creek, a population larger than Victoria's, the highest anywhere in the Canadian West.

Barkerville's appearance was typical of countless mining towns which sprang up from about 1850 to 1880 all over the West. Between hillsides denuded of trees straggled a long street of frame houses, stores, restaurants, hotels and saloons, of different sizes and heights, reflecting in their crazy irregularity the haste and energy with which the town had been built. Running between makeshift wooden sidewalks was a filthy, muddy, potholed street, a constant source of complaint in the *Cariboo Sentinel.* Floods and spring freshets sometimes rendered it almost impassable, and for protection the buildings had to be raised on posts. Down this street eddied the life of the Cariboo: miners, merchants, hurdy-gurdy girls, Chinamen, those who had struck it rich far outnumbered by those who had not, perhaps the most prosperous of all being the storekeepers and saloonkeepers who charged rich and poor equally high prices.

Anderson was not one of the lucky ones, as his verses tell us. The first claim he bought from Cameron at Williams Creek was moderately remunerative, and in the summer of 1865, after an unfortunate venture at nearby Lightning Creek, he was making fairly good money. However, like so many other miners, he was not content with enough, and sank all his money into prospecting and shares in other claims which yielded nothing.

Thocht ilka day I'd strike it big,
Sae didna mind the costs a fig.
O! had I kent what I ken noo
I'd sent my siller hame to you;
For long afore the winter's snaw,
My cash took wings and flew awa'.

By the time Anderson wrote his third letter to Sawney in 1868, his money was gone, and he was working as a labourer for ten hours a day, a fate that overtook miners with no other way to support themselves after their own claims proved barren, and with no money to leave the country.

Like foot-ba' knockit back an' fore,
That's lang in reaching goal,
On feather blawn by ilka wind
That whistles 'tween each pole;
E'en sae my mining life has been
Foo mony a weary day,
(Will that sun never rise for me
That shines for makin' hay?)

Yet Anderson remained three more years in the Cariboo, seeking his elusive fortune once more at Lightning Creek, and once more failing to find it. When he finally left, he was, as he admits, beaten.

And this the burden o' our sang
To ilka ane that comes alang,
Freend, be advised and turn aboot,
For Cariboo is noo played out!

In 1871, the year of Anderson's departure, Barkerville was a slowly dying town. Gold was increasingly hard to find, and Barkerville was fulfilling the inexorable destiny of a gold rush town: frenzied settlement, booming, short-lived prosperity, gradual decline, migration, and ultimate dereliction. Like most gold rush towns, Barkerville passed from birth to death in a life-cycle of only a few years.

Anderson was a prolific writer of verse and songs, a sociable man who must have contributed much to Barkerville's social and cultural life. He was vice-president of the Cariboo Literary Institute and a member of the Cariboo Amateur Dramatic Association, which had opened a theatre in May, 1868. This was the first theatre in the interior of the Province, and followed the building of theatres in Victoria and New Westminster by eight years. It was destroyed in the fire of September, 1868, but a new one (shared with the Williams Creek Fire Brigade) opened in January, 1869. To the opening Anderson contributed a gracious and elegant prologue, which remarked:

> And here tonight within this spacious hall,
> Built by kind labour volunteered by all,
> We meet again—and by your beaming eyes
> You're pleas'd once more to see the curtain rise.

He appeared once on the stage in Oxenford's farce *Uncle Zachary,* and may have written British Columbia's first native play, *A Trip to Peace River,* given once at the Theatre Royal in December, 1869. Advertised as "a new melo-drama", it concerned the gold discoveries in the Peace River area and the race to get there that was going on at the very moment of acting. Unfortunately, the play does not survive.

Upon the publication of *Sawney's Letters and Cariboo Rhymes,* the *Sentinel* triumphantly declared that "Cariboo the despised, is, we are happy to announce, capable of appearing in print and producing a book". A correspondent of the *Sentinel* declared that the pleasure he got from *Sawney's Letters* "is more than anything I had hoped to experience from anything in the way of literature, produced in a place like Cariboo". One of the merits of Anderson's verse, therefore, is that it does represent some kind of enduring local literary achievement, unique in the Cariboo gold rush, that can give pleasure a hundred years later.

The poetry itself is of no great literary merit. *Sawney's Letters* often read like a cross between Burns and Robert Service; their value really lies in their graphic illustration of the miner's life. Anderson was a keen observer, although his eye for detail was sometimes too

exact for poetry. For instance, the beginning of the first letter is taken up with the pay of miners, the high price of staple foods, and the shortage of milk. Anderson then discusses the prevalence of gambling (estimating in a later letter that nine of ten miners gambled). He advises his friend Sawney not to come to Cariboo:

> Ye mauna think we houk up gold
> As ye the tatties frae the mould.
> Gude faith, ye'll maybe houk a twa'l mo't
> An' never ever get a glisk o't!
> An' then what comes o' us puir devils,
> We get as thin and lean as weevils.

The first letter concludes with nostalgic memories of home.

The second letter comments more directly on the hardships of the Cariboo miner's life, especially in the winter, when there was no work. Although some left owing debts,

> Still here the miner on the whole
> Is a straight gaun honest soul,
> Wha pays his debts baith fair and free
> Gif he's the cash to pay it wi'.

The pleasures of dancing with the hurdy-gurdy girls (imported from San Francisco for Barry and Adler's saloon) are vividly described, but in spite of the pleasantness of Cariboo social life, thoughts of home intrude:

> Ah! Sawney, man, I lang to see
> The friends at home sae dear to me.

The third and last letter is undoubtedly the best, more economical in style, tighter in construction, and shrewd in psychological observation, reaching at moments into genuine poetry. After reviewing the difficulties of his mining life and his failure to strike it rich, Anderson reflects on the changes gold makes in men and in the world's attitude to rich and poor.

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Yet tak the bawbees frae the ane,
An' gie them to the ither,
This man will get the warld's hand,
And that man its cauld shoulther!

To Anderson, perhaps the prime value of a mining life was that it revealed the truth about men.

There's naething like a minin' life
In ony trade or art,
That brings to licht sae forcibly
Each feelin' o' the heart.

The *Sentinel*'s correspondent previously quoted found it remarkable that "hard knocks and rough living are powerless to destroy the spirit of poesy". In Anderson, rather, they stimulated it. The truthfulness of his observation impressed this correspondent most, and the *Sentinel* also found it to be the chief value of his verse. It is a judgment which remains valid for the modern reader. Although by no means a poet of stature, he is the earliest British Columbia poet to attain any kind of literary survival, and his undoubted virtue is his vivid picture of a rough mining life in one of the most significant periods and places in British Columbia's history.

MICHAEL R. BOOTH

577 4463
RBSC