

Another Source for Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *The Clockmaker*

by D.M.R. Bentley

As all readers of *The Clockmaker* know, Haliburton arranges for his narrator to meet Sam Slick while riding on horseback to "Fort Lawrence".¹ As the narrator is contemplating a "beautiful view of Colchester," he is overtaken by "a tall thin man . . . on a good bay horse" who speaks "[i]n a dialect too rich to be mistaken as genuine Yankee." Impatient with the infectious curiosity of the oddly dressed stranger, the narrator "bid[s] him good morning" and rides ahead at a "slapping pace." "I pushed Mohawk . . . to his best," recalls the narrator, and "[h]e outdid himself; he had never trotted so handsomely — so easily — so well." But it is not enough. As Slick again draws abreast of the narrator, he reveals himself to be "a Yankee, and a very impertinent Yankee, too" by his condescending compliments about Mohawk: "I guess that is a pretty considerable smart horse. . . ; there is not, I reckon, so spry a one on *my circuit* . . . Yes . . . a horse of pretty considerable good action, and a pretty fair trotter, too, I guess." His pride hurt and his curiosity further piqued, the narrator puts two questions to Slick: "Do you feel an inclination to part with [your horse]" and what precisely do you mean by a "circuit"? To the first question Slick replies that he "never part[s] with a horse. . . that suits [him]," and in response to the second he explains that he and his colleagues divide Nova Scotia "into circuits" in which they "separately carry on [their] business of manufacturing and selling clocks." Out of this cantankerous meeting are spun the episodes that constitute the three series of *The Clockmaker* (1836, 1838, 1840) where, as Fred Cogswell observes, "[t]he narrator. . . and Sam Slick . . . travel about Nova Scotia, and their seemingly chance encounters and observations provide the material for anecdote and conversation."²

In attempting to account for the enormous popularity of *The Clockmaker*, Cogswell calls attention to the "two incongruous elements" that are united in its style: "the formal English of eighteenth century prose" in which the narrator speaks and the colourful dialect of that "Yankee jack-of-all trades, Sam Slick! "In Sam Slick's conversations, Haliburton becomes a prose poet, daring in metaphor, building up adjectival climaxes without fear of barbarisms and utilizing all the local resources of dialect." As the principal inspiration for Haliburton's use of "vernacular speech" and such "eccentricities of Yankee character" as exaggeration and *braggadocio*, Cogswell cites Seba Smith's *Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing, of Downingsville, Away Down East, in the State of Maine* (1833), a work published three years earlier than the first series of *The Clockmaker*. Without denying the influence of Smith and other American dialect writers on Haliburton, I would like to suggest another possible inspiration, not only for the "two incongruous elements" united in the style of *The Clockmaker*, but also for the episode of "The Trotting Horse" that gets the series underway: an incident recounted by John Howison in *Sketches of Upper Canada* (1821), a travel-cum-emigrant guide whose influence can also be found in such works as *The Backwoods of Canada* (1832), *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* (1856) and *The U.E.: A Tale of Upper Canada* (1859)³

The incident concerned took place in "[t]he upper part of the Talbot Settlement"⁴ to the north of Lake Erie in the winter of 1819-20. After walking a considerable distance between Sandwich and Port Talbot through deep snows and on rough roads, Howison hired a horse, "and . . . again set out" ⁵ The "[a]musing rencontre and conversation" which then occurred may have provided the point of departure for *The Clockmaker*:

I had not proceeded far, when a mean-looking fellow, shabbily mounted, came up with me, and made some observation about the weather. I replied carelessly, and rode on in silence; but he still kept close by my side, and I at last spurred my horse into a trot, that I might get rid of him. He likewise quickened his pace, and then said, "Well now, *mister*, I vow that's just about as smart a thing to trot as ever I came across. Will you sell the *critur*?"

"No, I cannot — he is not my own."

"Oh, as for that, it may be or it may not be; but I like the *critur* considerably, and should be glad if you would let me have him. If you'll make a trade, I'll give you a good boot. I would willingly give this excellent English watch, which is as good as cash, and the thing I now ride, in exchange for your *critur*; by which means both of us would be satisfied."

"I have already told you that the animal does not belong to me."

"Well, now, I guess he don't; but when you first said so, I concluded you were only running me, to see how high I would come up. Well, *mister*, I see as how we can't make a trade — God Almighty never intended that *critur* for me — I suppose you've been up the Lake — was you at the Rondeau?"

"No, I did not pass that way."

"Well, I've just been in that part; for I had a notion of taking a lot there, and coming on it in the spring — but I'm off that plan now, for I'll be damned if there's any land or country up there at all."

"How can that be?"

"Why, because it's all covered with water — I would rather swing the axe for a whole year in the back woods of Kentucky, than make my pitch any where in this here Canada — but, *mister*, you don't seem to say much — we States peoples complain that you old country folks, when you fall in with a gentleman on the road, don't behave as clever and free to him as you might."

"And the old country people complain that you Americans behave too free — good morning."

The similarities between this passage and the opening episode of *The Clockmaker* are striking, and strongly suggested that Haliburton derived part of his initial inspiration from Howison.

If this is so, then the possibility cannot be overlooked that the very name of Haliburton's *Clockmaker* derives from Howison's *Sketches*. Shortly before the incident just quoted, Howison records an exchange between "a woman afflicted with acute rheumatism" and "one of the doctors of the [Talbot] settlement."⁶ "How d'ye do, my good lady, how d'ye do?" " begins a dialogue that continues: " 'Oh, doctor . . . I was wishing to see you — very bad — I don't calculate upon ever getting *smart* again.' — 'Hoity, toity,' returned the doctor, 'you look a thundering sight better than you did yesterday.' — 'Better!' exclaimed the sick woman, 'no, doctor, I am no better — I'm going to die in your hands.' — 'My dear good lady,' cried the doctor, 'I'll bet a pint of spirits I'll *raise* you in five days, and make you so *spry*, you'll dance upon this floor.' 'Oh,' said the woman, 'if I had but the *root* that used to attend our family at Connecticut; he was a dreadful *skeelful* man.'" As Howison's own italics indicate,

part of the purpose of this exchange is to illustrate the peculiarities of North American speech. As the concluding portion of the exchange also indicates, humour at the expense of the quack doctor, the bibulous woman, and her "credulous" husband is also a purpose of the exchange:

"But, doctor, are you up to the *natur* of her ailment?" inquired the husband. "Oh, perfectly," said the other, "nothing more simple; it arises entirely from obstruction and constitutional idiosyncrasy, and is seated under the muscular fascia. Some casual excitement has increased the action of the absorbent vessels so much, that they have drawn the blood from the different parts of the body, and occasioned the pain and debility that is now present." — "Well now, doctor," cried the husband, "I swear you talk like a lawyer, and I begin to have hopes that you'll be pretty considerably apt to raise my woman. The doctor now opened his saddlebags, and, having set forth many small parcels and dirty phials upon the table, began to compound several *recipes* for his patient, who, when she saw him employed in this way, put out her head between the curtains of the bed, and cried, "Doctor, don't forget to leave something for the debilitation." When he had finished, he packed up his laboratory, and ordered that something he had left should be infused in a pint of whisky, and that a table-spoonful of the fluid should be taken three times a day.

"Will that raise me *slick*?" said the woman;
I guess I had as well take it four times a day."

In a footnote, Howison glosses the meaning of the word "*slick*" as "Soon". Even without this word, the language, the tone, the comic characters, and the pace of the dialogue throughout the exchange anticipate the *Clockmaker*. Here, and in the meeting on horseback of the squirarchical Howison and the truculent American, surely lie some of the raw materials that Haliburton brilliantly shaped to his own satirical purposes.

Notes

I am grateful to Lorraine McMullen and Malcolm Ross for reading this essay on behalf of *Canadian Poetry*.

1. This and subsequent quotations from Haliburton are from *The Clockmaker; or The Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick, of Slickville* (Halifax: Joseph Howe, 1836), pp. 5-10. [\[back\]](#)
2. Cogswell's comments in this paragraph are quoted from "Haliburton" in the *Literary History of Canada*, gen. ed. Carl F. Klinck (1965; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 97-98. See also V.L.O. Chittick, *Thomas Chandler Haliburton ("Sam Slick"): A Study in Provincial Victorianism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924), pp. 371-377 where, after arguing that "Haliburton's obligations to the epistolary humors of the Jack Downing vogue constitute the most obvious of his literary indebtednesses," Chittick suggests a supplementary source for Slick's "linguistic idiosyncrasies": the *Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett of West Tennessee (1833) and An Account of Col. Crockett's Tour to the North and Down East (1834)*. Both Cogswell and Chittick cite Thomas McCulloch's "Letters of Mephibosheth Stepsure" (1821-22) as Haliburton's principal local source of inspiration. [\[back\]](#)

3. Trail mentions Howison in *The Backwoods of Canada* (London: Charles Knight, 1836), p. 50, and both Sangster and Kirby reveal their knowledge of his description of the Thousand Islands in *Sketches of Upper Canada* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd; London: G. and W.B. Whittaker, 1821), pp. 31-32: "I believe, they collectively exhibit, on a small scale, a greater variety of bays, harbours, inlets, and channels, than are to be found throughout the whole continent of America. Nature seems here to have thrown sportively from her hand a profusion of masses of the material world, that she might perceive what combinations of scenery might be produced, when they assumed their respective positions on the bosom of the waters. . . . The scene reminded me of the beautiful description of the Happy Islands in the Vision of Mirzah [in Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 159], and I thought at the time, that if the Thousand Islands lay in the East, some chaste imagination would propose, that they should be made an asylum for suffering humanity See *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay*, ed. D.M.R. Bentley (London, Ont.: Canadian Poetry Press, 1990), pp. 4, 53-54, and 138 and *The U.E.: A Tale of Upper Canada* (Niagara, 1859), pp. 43-44. [\[back\]](#)
4. *Sketches of Upper Canada*, p. 204. [\[back\]](#)
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-223. [\[back\]](#)
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-197. [\[back\]](#)