

**THE
JOHN STRACHAN
LETTER BOOK : 1812-1834**

Edited

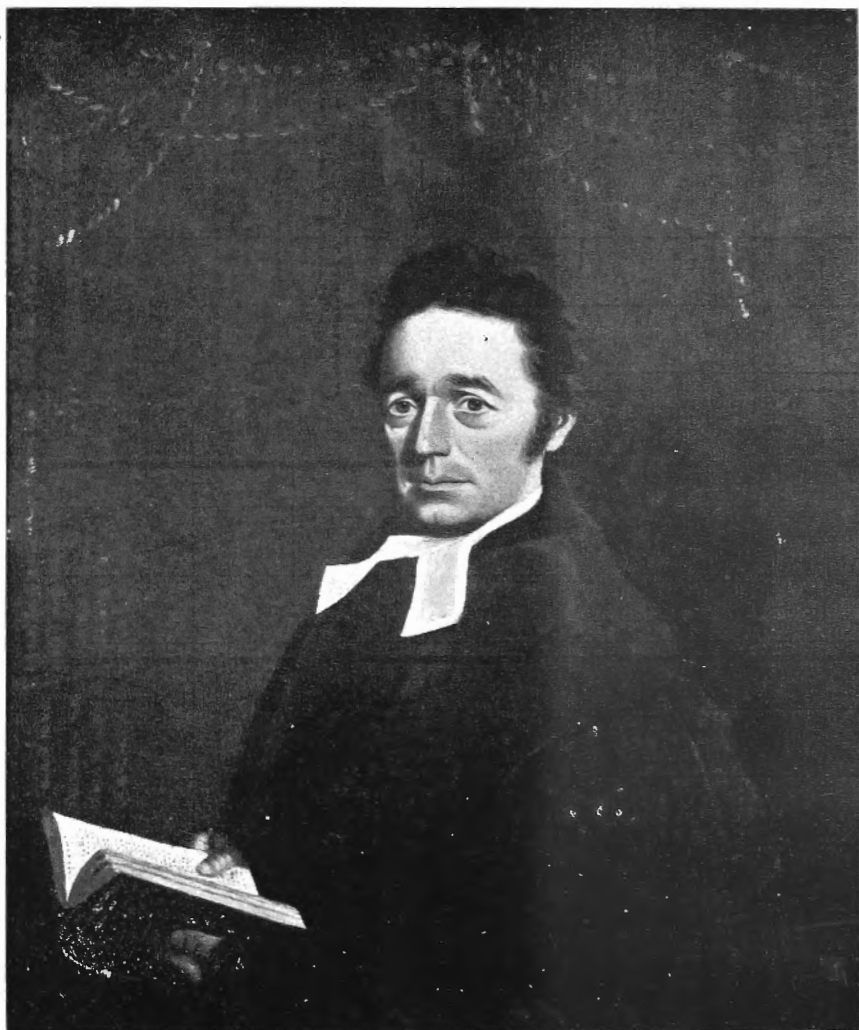
With an Introduction and Notes

by

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THE HON. AND REV. JOHN STRACHAN, M.A., D.D.

*[From a portrait (painted probably about 1820)
in the Collection of Trinity College, Toronto,
by kind permission of the Provost.]*

PREFACE

Although John Strachan was for long such an outstanding and controversial figure in Upper Canada—"the most consummate politician in the country"—comparatively little use has been made of his correspondence, partly because it was known that a life of Strachan was being written by the late Professor A. H. Young (whose death prevented the completion of that work), partly because Strachan's handwriting is not always easy to decipher and students may have been repelled by the labour involved in reading the original letters. Possibly, too, the very voluminousness of the correspondence may have caused some students to pause. It is with the object of making a number of Strachan's letters available to students of history in a form in which they may be easily read that I have transcribed the contents of one letter-book.

Strachan was a prolific writer, and much of his correspondence has been preserved. Some of the letters are in the hands of private individuals, but it may safely be said that by far the greater part of the correspondence now lies in the Department of Public Records and Archives of the province of Ontario. There many Strachan letters may be found in various collections, such as the "Cartwright Papers," the "Jones (Solomon) Papers," the "Macaulay Papers," the "O'Brien Journal", the "Ridout Papers," and the "Robinson Papers"; but the bulk of the correspondence is to be found in the "Strachan Papers": original letters written, in the majority of cases, by or to John Strachan, and in a series of ten "Strachan letter-books": draft copies of letters sent, or intended to be sent, to his correspondents. The letter-book here presented is the first of this series. At a rough estimate it represents somewhat less than five per cent. of the Strachan material in the possession of the Ontario Archives. It is dated 1812-1834, but nearly all the letters were written before 1823. Two of the letter-books are for the periods 1827-1841 and 1827-1839; it therefore is probable that another letter-book was (and still may be) in existence containing correspondence for the important years 1823-1827, when Strachan was, politically, at the height of his power, the period during which he was appointed President of the General Board of Education for the province and was successful in obtaining the charter for King's College. It is, of course, also possible that originally there were one or two more letter-books containing correspondence for the years before 1812.

Although this letter-book thus represents only a small fraction of the available material on Strachan and deals actually with only some ten years of his life, it is of more importance than these facts would indicate. The years 1812-1822 include the war years and the changes which wars must bring about. They were years of beginnings: the beginning of opposition to the clergy reserves, of interdenominational rivalry, of increased assistance to the Church of England by the S.P.G., of a state-aided elementary school system, of the establishment of a university, of the formation of an organized opposition to the Government, and of the establishment of the Family Compact. And if this was a formative period in the history of the province, it was, too, a formative period in Strachan's life. Undoubtedly he had, while still at Cornwall, his theories of what might be accomplished in the province, but it was not till his appointment to York that he was able to forge on the anvil of practical politics those plans and principles

to which he was to hold fast throughout his life. Thus this particular letter-book has unusual value.

It may be mentioned here that there are in the Toronto Public Reference Library a number of Strachan letters collected under the title *Bishop Strachan Papers: Dr. Scadding Collection*. These are original letters sent by or to Strachan, not drafts or transcripts. Among them are some letters, written to Bishop Mountain, which also appear in this letter-book. It is interesting to note that these are practically identical with the letter-book drafts, and it therefore may be assumed that the letters here reproduced are substantially the same as the letters which were actually sent to Strachan's correspondents.

The contents of the Letter-book consist of letters, memoranda, and essays, which Strachan evidently considered to be of sufficient importance to himself to be worth recording. There are no copies of letters to his wife when she was at Cornwall and he at York, and we may infer that he wrote many other letters of a purely personal nature of which he made no copies. What we have, then, are letters which were written, in the main, to achieve some specific purpose: letters to church officials in the Canadas and in England, to government officials, to men of rank, to army officers, to his fur-trader friends in Montreal. These are of importance as disclosing what Strachan was hoping to achieve. But there are also letters of a more personal nature, written often to friends and relatives overseas, which throw light on his private character. Strachan lived at a time when much was achieved by means of correspondence; we thus are able, from a letter-book such as this, to form a fairly clear picture of his intentions and accomplishments. It must be added, however, that to form any clear conception of the history of the Church of England in Upper Canada up to the year 1839 the Quebec Diocesan Archives (housed in the Provincial Museum on the Plains of Abraham) should be consulted, as well as the materials in the Canadian Archives at Ottawa.

A certain number of pages of the letter-books are missing. These have been cut out with a knife, and were presumably destroyed by Strachan's executors for reasons at which we can only guess.

A word may be added regarding the form of the Letter-book. The book consists of unruled pages, twelve of which, lettered alphabetically, were reserved for an index. (Of this index, however, Strachan made no use.) The index was placed, not at the beginning of the book, but was preceded by a number of blank pages. Two pages before this index Strachan began to number the pages; but he began writing his letters two pages after the index, i.e., on page 28. From this point on the letters are arranged fairly well in chronological order. He apparently decided, however, to use the blank pages which remained at the beginning of the book for one or two long essays and a few memoranda — essays such as his *Letter to the Earl of Selkirk* and the *Life of Colonel Bishoppe*. These, though written later than many of the other letters, thus appear at the beginning of the letter-book as I have transcribed it. The letters which Strachan first wrote appear in this copy on page 9.

In this reproduction of the Letter-book it has not been thought necessary to give more than a summary of the *Letter to the Earl of Selkirk*, a

letter which was published in pamphlet form and which may be consulted in various libraries.¹ There have also been omitted certain memoranda which Strachan jotted down in preparation for the writing of essays: notes which today are of little interest to the reader. Otherwise I have attempted to give an exact reproduction of the Letter-book. In the text I have inserted in square brackets the numbers of the pages in the letter-book, so that reference to the original may be facilitated. With regard to the spelling I have thought it best to transcribe exactly what Strachan wrote, except that in some cases I have supplied letters (placed in square brackets) in words which were misspelt obviously through carelessness. As, however, there are other spelling mistakes, to which, in order to avoid a too frequent use of "*sic*", I did not wish to draw attention in the text, I have listed the words of unusual spelling in an appendix. The reader may therefore easily determine whether any such peculiarity is due to Strachan or to the copyist.

I may also add that in the introduction to the Letter-book I have dealt briefly with Strachan's life only as far as the year 1822. A second letter-book, that dated 1827-1839, is now being edited by the Rev. R. C. Good, of Toronto; to him I am leaving the task of narrating the chief events of Strachan's career from 1823 to 1840.

I wish to thank Miss McClung, of the Ontario Archives, and Miss King, of the Ontario Legislative Library, and her staff, for the assistance which they willingly and cheerfully have given me; also my daughter, Elizabeth, who helped to check copies of many of the letters. Particularly I wish to thank Dr. J. J. Talman for suggesting this particular piece of research and for his help in carrying it out. To make available to students the treasures in the Ontario Archives was one of his ambitions, and though now, to the loss of the Province, he is no longer the Provincial Archivist, yet his works do follow him.

Finally I must add that the defects in what is here presented are my own peculiar contribution.

Toronto,
June, 1941

G. W. S.

P.S. Chiefly owing to the shortage of labour occasioned by the late war, the publication of this volume, which was begun in 1941 and the greater part of which had by that year been set in type, was at first greatly retarded and then, for a very lengthy period, completely arrested. A long period of time therefore elapsed between the date when the preface was written and the date of publication.

Toronto.
February, 1946.

G.W.S.

¹ The imprint reads: London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown; W. Blackwood, Edinburgh; W. Turnbull, Glasgow; A. Brown and Co. and James Strachan, Aberdeen. There is a copy in the Toronto Public Reference Library.

INTRODUCTION

I

In the year 1812 the writer of the following Letter-book, which was begun in the late summer of that year, was appointed incumbent of the parish of York, Upper Canada. As the correspondence contained in the Letter-book is that of a man whose views and aims were largely formed before his removal to York, it seems advisable to give a brief account of his previous career.

John Strachan was born at Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1778. He attended the University of King's College, Aberdeen; then, after having taken his degree, he became a 'partial attender' in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of St. Andrew's. Wholly dependent upon his own exertions for his university expenses, he had taught school when an undergraduate, and after graduation he became the schoolmaster first of the parish of Dunino and later of that of Kettle, both of which were not far from St. Andrew's. Obviously he had an aptitude for teaching: he attracted the attention of, among others, the Rev. James Brown, minister of Dunino, who, when he had been appointed to a professorial chair at the University of Glasgow, wished to take his young friend with him: and he evidently found his work enjoyable, for he later referred to himself as a "merry dominie". In the spring of 1799 he was approached by a brother of the Hon. Robert Hamilton, of Queenston, Upper Canada, and was offered a position as tutor to the children of the Hon. Richard Cartwright, of Kingston, the latter having at one time been a partner of Robert Hamilton. With the tutorship was to be combined the mastership of the town school, for which a government salary was expected, and hopes were held out that he might become a professor, if not president, of a proposed provincial university.¹ He accepted the post and arrived at Kingston on the last day of the year 1799. Having reached the scene of his labours this ambitious but almost penniless young schoolmaster of twenty-one found that no government salary was to be provided for him, and that the founding of the proposed university could be expected only in the remote future. He lodged in Mr. Cartwright's house, and there gathered and taught a small number of pupils.

Strachan had taken his passage to Kingston by way of New York, intending to "endeavour to secure a retreat *there*, in case my situation should prove disagreeable".² As it turned out, his position did not measure up to his expectations, and for a time he was undecided as to his future course of action. Finding, however, that there was a possibility of his being appointed to the charge of a parish in the Anglican Church he determined to "accept of it. If not, I shall first go to the lower Province and learn to speak French — from Lower Canada I shall go to the States where if I do

¹ The setting up of such an institution seemed more than a possibility in 1798: in July of that year the Legislative Council expressed their thanks for the "royal intention to provide a fund for the establishment of free Grammar schools and in due course of time other seminaries of a larger and more comprehensive nature." (*Report of the Ontario Archives, 1910*, 76.) See also G. C. Patterson [properly Paterson], *Land Settlement in Upper Canada, 1783-1840*, p. 84 (*Report of the Ontario Archives, 1920*).

² Strachan Papers, Strachan to James Brown, Aug. 25, 1799. (The letters in the Strachan Papers from Strachan to Brown are originals.)

not think I can easily succeed, it is probable I shall recross the Atlantic & try my fortune in Britain".¹ The offer of the parish was, however, made, and in 1803 Strachan received orders in the Church of England and was appointed to the incumbency of Cornwall, though it must be admitted that his acceptance of his new duties was not made with thorough whole-heartedness. "The society of Cornwall," he wrote, "is very indifferent and only my fear of not being able to do anything better at home could have ever induced me to accept a living here."²

At the request of the parents of the children who had studied under him at Kingston to continue his instruction he opened at Cornwall the school which became famous as the institution in which so many of the eminent men in the Canadas received their education. Cartwright, his patron, was a member of the provincial Legislative Council, and it was natural that from the time of his first arrival he should take an interest in provincial politics, though these were, he wrote in 1801, "hardly worth notice." But he soon learned to depend on his friends in the Legislature to advance his interests. In 1804, anxious that his school should be conspicuous, he felt the need of a "small apparatus" for the academy³; in 1806 a bill, sponsored by Mr. Sherwood, was passed⁴ providing "certain apparatus for the promotion of Science"; the apparatus reached Strachan probably in the spring of 1809.⁵

But, although his success in teaching his pupils at Cornwall was, as he acknowledged, "certainly tolerable", his thoughts on education were not confined wholly to the institution he was conducting. In addition to his having promoted the Act providing him with his "apparatus" he has been held to have been largely responsible⁶ for the passing of the School Act of 1807⁷ establishing grammar schools in each of the eight districts into which the province was then divided. Strachan's school was "of course" chosen for one of these. These "Public Schools" continued to exist, and in some cases to flourish, until they were included in the school system of Canada West established after the union of 1841. At his school there was conducted every year a "general examination", useful, he considered, "not only to the pupils in such a sequestered corner as this, but to the Province in general by spreading the desire of educating the Youth, and making every person eager to promote any reasonable plan for effecting it."⁸ In future he intended to "pronounce an address at every examination, shewing the great advantages of literary establishments among ourselves, and the means we have to erect them. This will open the eyes of many and

¹ Ibid., same to same, Oct. 23, 1802.

² Ibid., same to same, Oct. 27, 1803.

³ Ibid., same to same, Oct. 15, 1804.

⁴ This was the provincial statute 45 Geo. III. c. 3. £400 was appropriated for the purchase of "Instruments suitable and proper for illustrating the principles of Natural Philosophy, Geography, Astronomy and the Mathematics, for the use of this Province." A list of these instruments is given in a letter from Strachan to Brown, Oct. 9, 1808.

⁵ Strachan Papers. Strachan to James Brown, Oct. 9, 1808; Oct. 21, 1809.

⁶ So Chief Justice Robinson stated at the opening of King's College in 1843. But on this see my paper "John Strachan's Contribution to Education, 1800-1823", *Canadian Historical Review*, June, 1941.

⁷ 47 Geo. III. c. 6 (Statutes of Upper Canada).

⁸ Strachan Papers. Strachan to James Brown, Oct. 20, 1807.

in time induce the government to take up the business, and to appropriate lands of which they have plenty to the education of the young." To carry out such a purpose he proposed to enlist the aid of the Lieutenant-governor. "Indeed I am just thinking," he proceeded, "of addressing the Governor upon the subject directly, as it is in his power even at present. My discourses annually will not be lost, tho' he should take up the matter now as most of our Provincialists are ignorant & require to have their eyes opened before they would send their Children to a University." From the Bishop of Quebec he also asked assistance in making further provision for education; the Bishop's reply, though cordial, was not helpful.¹

In 1807 he married the widow of Andrew McGill, of Montreal, a brother of James McGill. "I had almost forgot to tell you, that seeing no prospect of my ever being to return home," he wrote naively to Dr. Brown, "I married last spring, and find myself happy in this connexion. My wife has an annuity of three hundred a year during her life. She has a great share of beauty — in her twenty-second year, & as good an education as this country could afford, which by the way is not great . . ."²

To increase his standing in the community he solicited and obtained in 1811 an honorary degree from the University of Aberdeen, and he became the Rev. John Strachan, D.D. "An Honorary degree however," he wrote, "would be of great service to me here, for altho' there are no distinctions of rank in this country, no people are so fond of them If a fellow gets a commission in the Militia however low he will not speak to you under the title of Captain. Squires and Colonels we have without number — the same rage pervades persons of sense, from custom, so that I have no doubt, but that a degree might in some measure increase my influence . . . You will be entertained at all this, and I should laugh at it myself, were I with you in St Andrews, but here I have nobody (I mean no literary person) to laugh with . . ."³

While at Kingston and Cornwall, perhaps through the good offices of Cartwright, Strachan became acquainted with several of the Montreal fur-merchants. The fur-trade was the chief industry in the Canadas in 1800 and these were the wealthy men in the commercial metropolis of the colonies, but they were evidently impressed by the qualities of the young school-master and they became his friends. The alliance was strengthened by his marriage with Mrs. McGill. For many years his correspondence was largely with James McGill, John Richardson, Isaac Todd, Thomas Blackwood, the Auldjos, and the McGillivrays; indeed, if Strachan was, before 1818, a member of any "Family Compact", it was of that true family compact composed of himself and the Montreal fur-traders.

While Strachan was thinking of education from a provincial viewpoint he was concerned too with the Church not only in his own parish but throughout the colony. Always he was convinced that only the lack of a sufficient number of Anglican clergy prevented the Church from gaining the adherence of a majority of the population. The Methodists he feared

¹ Ibid., Bishop of Quebec to Strachan, Feb. 19, 1809.

² Ibid., Strachan to Brown, Oct. 20, 1807.

³ Ibid., Oct. 9, 1808.