

William Nevett Helped Found Anglican Church at St. Williams

Fascinating career of one of Norfolk's best known citizens

described by C. W. McCall, D.C.M.

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Assuming the strong cultural influence of the life of William Nevett will assure his being never forgotten in Norfolk is not good enough; for many other prominent early settlers of the county are already becoming more or less legendary because no proper biographical record has been attempted. Having considerable data about William Nevett, I am able to give a fairly complete outline of his career.

William, son of William and Elvia Nevett, was born 20 Oct 1821 at Kensington, London, England. William Sr., who was in the legal profession, was the son of Charles Shaw and Elizabeth Nevett. Charles Shaw Nevett, born in 1765, was the son of William and Mary Nevett. In my possession is an embossed silver cream jug which was a wedding present to this couple in 1764, and is engraved with the monogram W. & M. N. It has been thought that this branch descended from Sir Thomas Knyvett, who captured Guy Fawkes in 1605. The assumption was based on William Junior's pride in the exploits of Sir Thomas as described in a book about Fawkes in his library. The *Dictionary of National Biography* shows that Sir Thomas had no son, but quite possibly a brother was an ancestor.

Gunner at Quebec

Charles Henry, (born 1791), brother of William Sr., (born 1794) was a gunner on the Quebec garrison during the War of 1812-15. I have a diamond-shaped pin-cushion that he sent home to England as a souvenir. The top and bottom are beautifully embroidered with a floral design in dyed porcupine quills on birchbark. In ink are his mother's initials, E. N., and the date 1813. He was commissioned lieut.col. of the Royal Artillery in 1848. A large silver cup is still preserved at St. Williams, with the inscription (if my memory is not at fault) "Won by Capt. Nevett's Grey Mare, Miss Daddle, at the Guernsey Races, 1833." Also at St. Williams is a fine water-colour drawing of a New Zealand landscape, in a carved and gilt frame, that was purchased by the same officer in the 1840's.

Not long after William Jr., was born, the family moved to Westgate, Louth, Lincoln-



shire. At the Louth Grammar School (established by Royal Charter in the reign of Edward VI) William received a sound education under the regime of Wayle. He just missed having Alfred Tennyson, the poet, for a fellow-student, but a brother of the poet attended at the time. A close boyhood friend was Augustus Hobart, third son of the sixth earl of Buckinghamshire. Augustus became an admiral in the Turkish navy, being known as Hobart Pasha. Mr. Nevett was very fond of a framed coloured-print of his friend wearing a red fez. I have the same picture now at Vancouver.

Voyage Lasted Nearly Year

It is not generally known that William Nevett made a round trip to India as a midshipman. He sailed on the first-class East Indiaman *Larkins*; C. Ingram commander; from London, via the Cape of Good Hope. The voyage commenced 12 Mar 1849, and finished at London, on 27 Feb, the following year. In my possession is a log of the voyage in two volumes of the regulation form. The entries are made by Midshipman Nevett, being evidently copies from the official version. It is an invaluable record of daily life on the finest type of merchantman of the time, all the more precious because it deals with the era of sail. Here is a sample entry – for the p.m. of 10 June – made while rounding the treacherous cape: "Strong N.W. gales with squalls and rain. Down top-gallant masts on deck. Strong gales and squally, unsettled weather. In

third reef of the fore-topsail. Ship lurching tremendously, and notwithstanding the storm's grip on the long-boat and spare, found them beginning to give way; passed a lashing round them all through the ports on each side and swiftened them taut. Blowing a complete hurricane at times, with dark, gloomy weather. Ship lurching violently and breaking everything adrift on deck."

Settled at St. Williams

In 1849 William Nevett emigrated to Canada, and shortly afterwards married a great-aunt of mine – Elsie, daughter of Major Daniel McCall. For a while the couple resided at Walnut Cottage, as the latter's farm house was called. I have a pair of large glass fluid-lamps used by them there, even yet equipped with the original pewter burner and snuffers. The Nevetts lived a few years in Simcoe, but finally made their home at St. Williams. There they at first occupied the oldest frame house still standing in the village on the property known as the Wilderness. The dwelling was built in 1820, and until stripped of it recently, contained the finest early panelling in the locality. Later a move was made to a brick house in the village, built about 1840. At heavy expense, wings were added over a long period until the residence had much the aspect of an English mansion. In its setting of spacious lawns and well-kept flowerbeds it was a veritable beauty spot. Not content with beautifying his own grounds, Mr. Nevett planted the maples that still line the village streets.

In moving to St. Williams in 1872 from Lot 23, in the 5th Concession of Charlotteville, a number of pine boxes were lost. On 27 Apr 1876, Mr. Nevett had an extraordinary poster printed in the *British Canadian*. It is headed, "Lost – 4 Years Ago," and enumerates the contents of the missing cases. Amongst the long detailed list are "2 doz. of Old Whiskey in Bottles; also about the same number of small bottles containing Snakes, Lizards, Insects, Grubs, etc." Warning is given that unless the property is returned, a reward will be offered anyone giving information leading to the detection of those retaining the same. It is not clear whether the loss was not noticed until four years had elapsed. In any event, the chances

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of getting back the whiskey and snakes would be rather slim.

Cucumber Robbery

Remarkable as the poster is, I have another that even outdoes it. This was printed at Louth, Lincolnshire, 7 Jul 1864. The heading is “3 Guineas Reward.” Then follows between two double lines, “Louth Association for Prosecuting Felons, &” It goes on to say “Whereas some evil-disposed Person or Persons did, on Monday night, or Tuesday morning last, steal, take and carry away from the Garden of W. Nevell, Esq., near Mrs. Clapham’s Lime Kilns, in Louth, several CUCUMBERS. Notice is Hereby Given, that any Person or Persons who will give such information as will lead to the discovery and conviction of the Offender or Offenders, shall, on such conviction, receive a Reward of One Guinea from Mr. Nevett, and a further Reward of Two Guineas from the said Association.” It is impressively signed by Goe & Wilson, “Secretaries and Treasurers to the said Association.”

William Nevett, Jr., had a scientific bent to a marked extent. I have his weather observations, in manuscript, from Apr 1845 to May 1849. They show the day, wind, barometer and thermometer readings (the latter in the shade and in the sun), and remarks. He probably kept similar records in this country, but none seem to have survived. Old residents will remember his minimum and maximum thermometers at St. Williams, wired to ring an electric bell in the event of frost or fire. He possessed probably the best microscope in the county at the time. An amateur photographer, he kept an account book of expenditures from 1860 to 1879. The book shows that the hobby cost him \$389.84. It is of much value in recording equipment in use during the period.

Founder of Church

One of the founders of the Anglican Church at St. Williams, Mr. Nevett took an active interest as warden. He presented the church with a pair of large tablets copied from those at Louth; also with the Royal Arms painted in the proper heraldic colours. In politics he was a Conservative, but held no party office.

Mr. Nevett was an inveterate pipe-smoker, and was the greatest connoisseur of pipes that ever lived in Norfolk. To begin with, he left a collection of 1000 behind in England. I have a framed daguerrotype of him, taken in 1848, in which he is smoking a Turkish hookah. Old residents will remember the astonishing variety of pipes he used in Norfolk. My father sold him clay

pipes that would be selected after tapping and breaking a dozen or more. I have the papier-mâché cigar-case that he brought to Canada. The cover is embellished with a painting of Jenny Lind, done while she was singing in London in 1847. The inner case still contains a cheroot with a metal mouth-piece, a cigarette with a glass one, and a complete packet of cheroot papers.

The large turned rosewood table-snuffbox that served two generations of the Nevetts, and that was always kept filled with a special brand of Malaber snuff, is now in my possession; also an oblong one of box-wood, with a French shooting print on the hinged cover. Another Nevett snuff-box, with a miniature of Francis Jeffrey (prior to his becoming lord advocate) on the cover, is now at St. Williams.

Auctioned Home Contents

On 18 and 19 Jun 1874, the contents of the Nevett home at Westgate, Louth, were dispersed by auction. I have the 24 page printed catalogue, and two books in which the prices obtained were recorded by the clerk. The first day’s sale took place at the Corn Exchange. The groups listed are “Glass & Sundry Old China Ornaments, Sporting Articles, Wines & Silver (200 oz.) Electro-plated Goods, Engravings & Prints, Water-colour Drawings; Rare Old Oil Paintings in Gilt Frames; Linen and Books.” The second day’s sale was on the premises. The headings are “Far Pantries; Scullery; Front Kitchen; Dining Room; Entrance; Drawing Room; Staircase; Front Chamber; Green Chamber; Chamber No. 3; Top Front Chamber; Top Back Chamber; Lumber Chamber and Garden.”

No less than 150 lots of books were sold, some individually comprising sets of many volumes. Along with other items, a few were ‘bought in’ and sent to Canada, among them being the Nevett scrap-book. This is now in my library. It is folio size and is fitted with ink, wash and water-colour drawings, as well as numerous engravings including remarkable political cartoons. Nothing it contains is of later date than 1830. I have many other Nevett books, chiefly a folio atlas of 1844 with 101 coloured maps, and a fine quarto, “Views in Lincoln,” of 1805. Just how many of these were in the sale is hard to say.

Historic Candlesticks

It would appear that a watch-clock in my collection is the “Time-piece with glass shade” of the catalogue. It is a silver-dialed verge watch by the famous master clock maker, George Etherington, of London, who died in 1730, that subsequently was given an ormolu mount. It still keeps perfect time, and ticks away as it did in early

Georgian days. Having been told that Mr. Nevett used to relate a story about the time-piece and then burst out laughing, I made every effort to have it related to me by those who had heard it. However the anecdote is now lost through everyone having forgotten it. Also in my collection is probably the “Pair of bronze candlesticks” of the sale. The candlesticks are of the altar type, with incense cups. They were taken to England by a friend of the Nevetts – Lieut.-Col. Oldham of the 8th Royal Veteran Battalion – from Italy where he had been serving in the Calabrian campaign against Napoleon. This officer was the father of Capt. John Oldham, who was killed in the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava. The “Caddy spoon” listed in the catalogue is evidently the one that I have. It is of silver in the jockey-cap design. The type is so rare that specimens to-day in London bring eight pounds apiece. My specimen is engraved with the griffin crest, and date-marked 1816-17.

Many notable paintings were auctioned, among them being *Catherine of Braganza, Queen of Chas. II* by Sir Peter Lely; *The Centurion* by Guercino; *St. Cecilia* by Parmigiano; *Garden Scene* by Antoine Watteau; *Ladies and Cavaliers* by Paul Bril; *Ladies, Cavaliers and White Horse* by Philip Woverman; *Ruins, Figures and Cattle*, by Nicholas Bergem; *Large Landscape* by the Elder Williams; *Pigs in Sty* by George Morland; and others signed by Fabris, Hornfield, Molineau, Vanschendal, Hemskirk and Sir Augustus Calcott. Twenty-one family portraits were not put up at all. They were sent out to Canada.

Valuable Paintings

After my great-uncle’s death in Nov 1898, my parents, myself and brother moved into the big house in St. Williams to live for a year with his widow. I did not get many glimpses of the 17 miniatures, as the parlour in which they hung was usually closed up. I was only seven years old at the time, so would not have understood much about them anyway. I recall admiring the circle of diamonds edging the mat of one, and being struck with the way the cover of the Diamond Jubilee issue of *The Illustrated London News*, lying on a table, matched the paintings. However every night on going to bed I passed by the life-sized picture of the two boys in the lower hall, and the two three-quarter lengths of the lord and lady upstairs. The first was by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and was valued at £1000. The two others were by Sir Peter

Lely. The genius of the two great masters had made the figures of the portraits so life-like that they seemed like real living people to me.

As there were no Nevett descendants to inherit them in either England or this country, they (including the miniatures) had to be shipped to the nearest relatives in England, the Lucas family. I remember getting down onto my knees to obtain a last look as they were boxed up. It appeared like a real funeral.

On the same day I got the worst fright of my life up till then. The scene was the "Den," the frame store-house on the estate. Always kept locked and shuttered, it had a mysterious atmosphere anyway. Taking the opportunity of doing some exploring while my father and the late Mr. J. L. Buck, the executors, were working with the cases outside, I entered. Looking behind an inner door in the semi-darkness, I came face to face with an apparition consisting of a powdered wig and two eyes. It turned out to be a large portrait so black from need of cleaning that it had been kept with the shipping boxes. If anyone wants to know what it feels like to see a real eighteenth-century ghost, just send him to me.

History of 50 Years

As only the family portraits were to be returned, the few remaining pictures that had come to Canada are here yet. I have the copper-plate engraving of Louth, with the corn-field (or rather, wheat-field) in the foreground. This will be remembered by old acquaintances as the engraving in the attractive curly-maple frame. I brought a roll of large prints to Vancouver. Being marred with damp-spots, these had not been framed. I restored them to their original state. They are now properly matted and suitably framed. One is a splendid proof mezzotint on India paper of Louth Church, engraved in 1827. This church, completed in 1515, is noted for its finely-proportioned steeple and spire measuring 300 ft. in height. Besides the mezzotint, I had framed two proof tinted-lithographs of 1847 and 1848 of the same church; also a quaint lithograph of the old vicarage house. Mr. Nevett had a pictorial record of world events in his 50 years' issues of *The Illustrated London News*, to which he subscribed. The whole 100 volumes are now in my library.

As Mr. Nevett was the last of his line, the family coat-of-arms is now obsolete. Appropriately, therefore, this article is illustrated with one of his bookplates. It was selected from a stack that he kept in reserve. The translation of the Latin motto is "The eagle does not catch flies."

Mr. Nevett always made use of the arms on his stationery and the griffin crest on his linen, having a lever press for embossing the former, and three stencils – by Culleton of London – for making the latter. He lost a valuable gold signet ring, with the arms engraved on stone, alongside the foot-path north of the southern entrance to the Wilderness at St. Williams. It was never found, being just one more instance of the lengthy list of hidden treasures in Norfolk. I have the stencils, also an eighteenth-century Nevett monogram seal on a 30-inch double-linked silver chain. The Nevett non-armorial fob seals that my great-aunt wore until her death after the Great War are still at St. Williams.

Many other interesting things could be told about Mr. Nevett, or even about his celebrated talking crow, Jim. In his obituary notice he was likened to an old fashioned English country gentleman. His life was, indeed, a rare blend of England and Canada, of the past and the present.

The author, Clayton W. McCall (1891-1973) was the elder son of Andrew D. McCall and Emily Dease, both descendants of Norfolk pioneers. A bachelor most of his life, this First World War Distinguished Conduct Medal winner and amateur historian lived with his parents both in St. Williams, Ontario and later Vancouver, British Columbia, until their deaths, sharing their fascination with, and collection of, local historical artifacts. This article is not an exact transcription from *The Simcoe Reformer* newspaper. Minor style and punctuation changes were made to enhance readability.
