

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE HON. JOHN ROLPH, M.D. (1793–1870)

by

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INSPIRED by William Orcutt's book *From My Library Walls*, I glanced over the portraits, the marble busts and the other objects of medical-historical interest which here and there relieve the monotony of the book-lined walls in the Library of the Academy of Medicine, Toronto. My gaze lingered for a moment on a small velvet-lined glass case in which hangs a man's large gold pocket watch, bearing the inscription, 'Presented to Dr. John Rolph by one of his Associates and Co-workers in the Cause of Reform, 1837', and finally came to rest on the portrait of its owner. This portrait, painted in 1836, by an unlisted artist, Thomas Nelson Cook, presents Rolph in the full vigour of life, as a slightly bald, keen-eyed, clean-shaven man in his thirties. In contemporary circles, Cook was regarded as an artist of note and his works were given high praise in the columns of the daily press.

A full length portrait of John Rolph, Esq., is particularly worthy of notice, not only for the peculiarly happy manner in which the artist has caught both the face and figure of that gentleman, but also for the very superior style in which the work is done . . .¹

A quick perusal of readily available sources awakened a desire to pursue in more detail the career of this Canadian pioneer, who played the many-sided role of barrister, physician, rebel, exile, statesman and reformer. If this portrait and this watch could speak, as in the story of the gold-headed cane, they would pour forth a story beside which many others would seem dull and commonplace. Their owner was no ordinary man, but one possessed of talents and qualities which set him above the common throng. He was endowed with an original mind, remarkable and subtle intellectual powers, a style of eloquence at once ornate, yet lucid, 'a voice of silvery sweetness', and a noble and handsome countenance which commanded dignity and respect. In his portrait study the artist has caught on his canvas a suggestion of the strength and force of character which sustained this 'Grit Reformer' through the many political and professional tribulations of his tempestuous life. He lived in stirring times and for over half a century he exerted an important influence over the national and provincial progress of his country. His influence over the teaching and practice of medicine, which began in 1824, and ceased in 1870, only a few months before his death, earned for him the title of 'Father of Medical Education in Upper Canada'.

In order to understand the role played by Rolph in the annals of Canadian development it is necessary to have some conception of the political situation

which existed in Upper Canada at the time when Rolph became a figure in the public life of his country. The war of 1812 had given Canada a sense of national destiny. In the 1820's Upper Canada emerged as a community, its people no longer American, nor merely British subjects, but Upper Canadians. They were determined to remain a separate nation on the North American continent but the presence of 'The States' where good government and prosperity went hand in hand, where the pace of life was rapid, enthusiastic and optimistic continually presented a painful contrast to their own situation and fed the flames of discontent and suspicion of government from across the water. Privilege had deeply entrenched itself in Church and State. The governing body which came to be called 'the Family Compact' held the reins of government firmly within their hands. Privilege in politics cannot be separated from economic privilege. In addition to large salaries the favoured few enjoyed opportunities for speculation in land, banks, financial companies and canals. This is an inevitable result of all government, but what made it intolerable in the 1830's was the fact that the government could not be turned out through an election. The Constitutional Act of 1791 had given the people the power to govern themselves, providing a semblance of representative government, an elective legislative assembly, but in practice, the body actually had no powers. All legislation had to be passed by the Legislative and Executive Councils, and these bodies were appointed by the Governor.

The other great bone of contention was the Clergy Reserves: one seventh of the arable land granted was set aside for the support of the 'Protestant Clergy'. No settlement being possible on the reserves, they remained bush lots accumulating the unearned increment from the improvements of private holdings nearby. The other abuse in connection with the clergy reserves was the interpretation of the phrase 'Protestant Clergy' by the authorities to mean Anglican ministers, without question and grudgingly, the Church of Scotland. These were the minority Churches in the colony and this system fed the flames of religious animosity. The Upper Canada Radicals hated the Church of England, its relations with the State, its efforts to control education and its exclusive claim to the clergy reserves. The Family Compact, the little oligarchy of executive and legislative councillors at Toronto, held together this system of privilege for its own advantage.

The Upper Canada Reformers sought redress for these grievances. Politically Canada was reaching upwards a measure of independence, but an independence which could be worked out within the framework of British institutions. She sought a measure of political autonomy which would keep her free from the Republican influence of the United States, and which would tie her with bonds of loyalty and fealty, not with bonds of colonial subservience, to the British Crown.

A Canadian Nationality was stirring when Dr. Rolph stepped upon the scene of political and professional life. The times and the man were right for each other, and Rolph became a prominent figure. As one of the prime movers for responsible government, and the secularization of the clergy reserves,

The Life and Times of the Hon. John Rolph, M.D. (1793–1870)

and also as a leader in medical education in Upper Canada, he deserves a greater place in the story of Upper Canadian development than history has accorded to him.

Early Years

Rolph came from an illustrious family which could trace its origin back to a John Rolph of Almondsbury, Gloucester, England, born in 1671. Thomas Rolph, John Rolph's father, born 29 April 1761, surgeon of Grovesend, near Thornbury, came to Canada about 1807 and settled in Charlotteville, Co. Norfolk in 1810. His son, our John Rolph, was born at Thornbury, 4 March 1793. It is doubtful if John accompanied his parents to Canada, but more probable, since he was an eager student, that he remained in England to pursue his studies. In the summer of 1812 he set sail across the Atlantic to join his parents in Canada, travelling by way of New York. However, before he reached New York war had broken out between the United States and Great Britain. In order to make the trip less tedious Rolph occupied himself with solving problems in Euclid. The American authorities suspected him of being a spy and his mathematical equations of being sketches of the American fortifications. He was forthwith detained. He always referred to the kindly way in which he was treated by the American surgeon and other officers while held a prisoner. After the Battle of Queenston he was allowed to cross into Canada and served as paymaster to His Majesty's militia forces in the London District. At the close of the war he returned to England to continue his studies and entered one of the Colleges of the University of London. As evidence of his intellectual prowess he studied law and medicine concurrently. Studying medicine under the renowned Sir Astley Cooper, he was enrolled as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons at the same time as he became qualified as a Barrister-at-Law of the Inner Temple.

In 1821 he returned to Canada and took up residence in Charlotteville, at that time part of the Talbot District. In Michaelmas Term, 1821, he was called to the Bar of Upper Canada, and became the fourth bencher in the province. Although he did not procure his license to practise medicine in Upper Canada until 1829, he nevertheless pursued the two professions with energy and zeal as is shown by a contemporary comment:

My first introduction to Dr. Rolph was at the assizes in London, about the year 1827 or 1828, when he came into Court carrying a pair of saddlebags in his arms, one side being filled with surgical instruments, vials and packages of medicine, etc., and the other with briefs and legal documents and books. He would attend to a case in Court, and, when through, would catch up his saddlebags, descend the Court House steps, mount his horse tethered nearby, and ride off to visit a patient. He was not much of a lawyer, though an eloquent counsel.²

Dr. Rolph was legal adviser and friend of Colonel Thomas Talbot and one of the originators of the Talbot anniversary. Later, however, an estrangement took place between them, no doubt resulting from their divergent political views. Colonel Talbot was a member of the Legislative Council and a supporter

of the official party. Rolph had not been resident long in Upper Canada before he became keenly aware of the many official abuses and his sense of justice rebelled at the domination of the Family Compact. The prosecution of Robert Gourlay aroused his just indignation, and he was soon to espouse the cause of Reform. Almost immediately he became prominent in public life. In 1823, he was a public school trustee and a member of the Board of Education. About 1824 he moved to Dundas where he resided for several years.

Political Career

Although it is in Dr. Rolph's medical career that we are most interested, his political career is of no small importance in Canadian annals. Many of the professional rivalries and jealousies which he encountered in the teaching of medicine resulted from his political views and activities.

In the year 1824, Rolph crossed the threshold of the political scene. His years in politics were to be many and stormy ones. They would bring him triumphs and tragedies, exile and even the accusation of being a traitor. His speeches in Parliament immediately marked him as one of the ablest men in public affairs. Mrs. Jameson, the observing traveller, noted him as being 'the cleverest member of the opposition side and the most eloquent'.

In the general elections of 1824, Dr. Rolph was returned as representative of the County of Middlesex. For the first time the Reformers were in the preponderance in the Legislative Assembly, but they soon found that control of the Assembly meant nothing in the absence of Executive Responsibility. The Legislative Council vetoed one bill after another, which the Assembly had passed, and the elective body was powerless to enforce its rule. However, as a result of this Parliament, a Reform Party was formed which would make its voice heard not only throughout Upper Canada, but in the Colonial Office in Great Britain, and which would eventually make the rule of the Family Compact intolerable.

Dr. Rolph was soon singled out from the ranks of this Reform Party. His eloquent and forceful presentation in the House of the Alien Question led the ultra-royalist ranks to brand him as a 'man with a vile democratic heart—one who should be sent out of the province'. Dent wrote of him:

He was then thirty-one years of age, and of a compact, well-built figure, inclining to portliness. His face was at once handsome and intellectual, and his presence carried with it a suggestion of undoubted power. He spoke comparatively seldom during his early Parliamentary sessions, but when he did speak it was always with effect. His diction was singularly luminous and expressive, and would have attracted attention in any public assembly in the world. There was a clear metallic ring in his voice which did full justice to the language employed, and there were few empty benches in the House when it was known that Rolph was to speak.³

Better trained than most of his associates, so well grounded in the law that his name was at one time put forward as Solicitor-General, Rolph was always a great strength to the Liberal cause. His legal training fitted him well for committee work. His position in one committee that had to do with discussing the

The Life and Times of the Hon. John Rolph, M.D. (1793–1870)

plans of the proposed King's College, brought him first into active conflict with the High Church, Tory champion, Bishop Strachan. The report of the Committee, largely the work of Rolph, could not fail to raise the undying opposition of the militant Archdeacon:

An university adapted to the character and circumstances of the people would be the means of inestimable benefits to this Province. But to be of real service, the principles upon which it is established must be in unison with the general sentiments of the people. It should be thrown open to all, and upon none who enter would any influence be exerted to attach them to a particular creed or church. It should be a source of intellectual and moral light and animation, from which the glorious irradiations of literature, and science may descend upon all with equal lustre and power. Such an institution would be a blessing to a country, its pride and glory. Most deeply, therefore, it is to be lamented that the principles of the charter are calculated to defeat its usefulness and to confine to a favoured few all its advantages.⁴

In the election of 1828, Rolph was again returned. Added to the ranks of reform was the colourful William Lyon Mackenzie, a man diametrically opposed to Rolph in temperament, character, education, and up-bringing. They were compelled to work together in the common cause of reform, but there could have been little personal attraction between them. Rolph, Bidwell, and Baldwin represented the moderate element of the Reform Party who sought reform by constitutional means, whereas Mackenzie, aptly named 'The Fire-brand', represented the radical element moving towards armed rebellion.

Rolph's ideal was Responsible Government. The speech from the throne delivered by Sir John Colborne, in January 1829, was replied to in an address founded on resolutions framed by Rolph and contained the strongest expression of a want of confidence in the advisers of the Lieutenant-Governor. An extract reads:

That we, His Majesty's most faithful commons, do humbly pray your Excellency against the injurious policy hitherto pursued by the provincial administration: and although at present we see your Excellency unhappily surrounded by the same advisers as have so deeply wounded and injured the best interests of the country, yet in the interval of any necessary change, we entertain an anxious belief, that under the auspices of your Excellency the administration of justice will rise above suspicion, the wishes and interests of the people be properly respected, the constitutional rights and independence of the legislature be held inviolable, the prerogative and patronage of His Most Gracious Majesty be exercised for the happiness of his people and the honour of his Crown, and the revenues of the colony be hereafter scarcely divided to the many and urgent objects of public improvement, after making provision for the public services upon the basis of that economy well suited to the exigencies of the country.⁵

In 1831 Rolph moved from Dundas to York. For several years he devoted his energies to the teaching and practice of medicine and remained out of public life. On 6 March 1834, the Legislature incorporated York as the City of Toronto and in the first municipal elections Dr. Rolph was elected an alderman for St. Patrick's ward. The procedure at that time was for the alderman and council to meet to elect a mayor from among their number. Dr. Rolph was selected as the most suitable to occupy this position, but at the last minute the Reformers chose to elect Mackenzie. Mackenzie had been shamefully treated in the Assembly

and had been maligned during his sojourn in the old country in the cause of reform. They felt that to elect him mayor would be a double victory for the reform cause. Rolph did not press his claim and realizing the impossibility of working with Mackenzie resigned from the city council.

In the election of 1834 both Rolph and Baldwin refused to stand although strongly urged to do so. They both felt that the ascendancy of Mackenzie was a great detriment to the reform cause. Mackenzie's actions resulted in a split within the ranks of the Reformers and alienated a large body of public opinion in favour of moderate reform.

In 1836, Rolph returned to public life and was elected a member for Norfolk. During this session he made several of his most famous speeches.

In 1837, Sir John Colborne was relieved of the office of Lieutenant-Governor and succeeded by Sir Francis Bond Head. He arrived in Canada with a copy of Mackenzie's Report on 'Grievances' for reference, and called to his Executive Council three leading reformers: John Dunn, Robert Baldwin, and John Rolph. The power of Rolph's influence at this time is illustrated by a remark of Sir Francis, 'The subtle persuasive eloquence of Dr. Rolph induced many to believe that from the moment he became a member of my executive council I was lost.' This was hailed as a triumph for the cause of moderate reform but in reality it had no such connotation. Sir Francis had no intention of recognizing the principle of ministerial responsibility and continued to rule without consulting his advisers. Finding their position untenable, on 4 March 1837, his councillors presented an address to the Lieutenant-Governor. His reply stated his conception of government—that he had recourse to their advice only when he desired it. As a result, after holding office only three weeks, the Executive Council resigned. The Toronto citizens made an Address to his Excellency claiming the rights and privileges of the British Constitution. His reply was imbued with an air of assumed superiority, which drew in return a sarcastic rejoinder framed by Dr. John Rolph and Father O'Grady of St. Pauls:

We thank your Excellency for replying to our address, principally from the industrial classes of the city, with as much attention as if it had proceeded from either branch of the legislature; and we are duly sensible in receiving your Excellency's reply, of your great condescension in endeavouring to express yourself in plainer and more humble language, presumed by your Excellency to be thereby brought down to the lower level of our plainer and more humble understanding. The deplorable neglect of our education by the maladministration of former governments, of the endowment of King's College University, and the many attempts of the representative chamber, baffled by the Crown-nominated legislative council, to apply three millions of acres of clergy reserves to the purpose of general education, may perhaps explain this lower level of our plainer and more humble understandings. It is because we have been thus maltreated, neglected and despised in our education and interests under the system of government which has hitherto prevailed that we are now driven to insist upon a change that cannot be for the worse.

We do not mean in our plain and homely statement, to be discourteous, by declaring our unalterable conviction that a nominal responsibility to Downing Street, which has failed of any good . . . cannot have any magic operation in your Excellency's administration.⁶

Dr. Rolph made another powerful speech during this session which in itself would have entitled him to a high place as a Parliamentary orator. A letter from Dr. Duncombe to Lord Glenelg, charging the Governor with crimes deserving of impeachment, was referred to a committee of the House of Assembly. A colonial governor deserving of impeachment can only be tried in England. This offered Rolph an opportunity for a serio-comic speech in the House which is referred to as the 'mock trial' or 'the arraignment of Sir Francis'.

We have already noted the Committee report presented by Dr. Rolph, challenging Bishop Strachan, and the propriety of Anglican domination in University councils. The prelate's two most cherished conceptions were the establishment of a University under Anglican domination and the maintaining of the Clergy Reserves for the exclusive use of the Anglican Church. Rolph's denunciation of Strachan and of the Anglican Church in the House of Assembly on 16 December 1836, was one of the most famous speeches ever made in the Canadian Parliament. To it is ascribed the steps which finally led to the deprivation of the Church of England of its three million cherished acres:

I consider there are three distinct views of propositions on this subject; first, to confine the reserves to the English Church to the exclusion of all others. Secondly, to divide them among a select number of churches. Thirdly, to apply them to general education. I shall separately consider these propositions, and I am happy the claims of the English church are vindicated by so able and eloquent an advocate as the learned solicitor-general . . . Contemplate the learned gentleman (to whom I give every meed of praise) in his elevated place as its champion, see him surrounded with all the clergy reserves and their rents and profits; confess the worth of bishops, archdeacons, priests and deacons in their extended diocese; multiply, if you please, the 57 rectories with their endowments and their exclusive ecclesiastical and spiritual rights and privileges; view about the learned gentleman in concentrated perspective all the wealth and glory of our provincial hierarchy, lately gilded too, with 70,000 pounds, a fractional product of a fraction of their vast estates, besides the most wealthy congregations yielding revenues unknown. Amidst all this ecclesiastical splendor and aggrandizement, the learned gentleman is approached with an humble request. He is prayed to recover his sight from the glare about him, and to condescendingly cast a glance into the surrounding distance. There he is shown numerous other churches formed of Christian groups about pious pastors, with no wealth but the Bible, and no distinction save the cross. Behold those fellow labourers in the vineyard;—will you be pleased Sir, out of your abundance, to share a portion of it among them?—Will you?—What is the answer—Not one jot. Our best feelings seem intuitively to enlist themselves against this answer. It seems equally to shock natural reason and Christian charity, and I envy not the casuist or the divine, who neither from the motions of the heart, nor the principles of reason, can perceive or understand the palpable selfishness and injustice of admitting one church to monopolize wealth and power to the exclusion of every other . . . splendid hierarchy, share your aggrandizement with your sister churches. This is the voice of reason, the language of the heart, and the philosophy of the Bible.⁷

The country was now hovering on the brink of armed rebellion. Rolph's part in the planning of the rebellion remains one of the enigmas of history. History had made Mackenzie the hero of the ill-fated insurrection and has branded Rolph a traitor to the cause of reform. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a detailed account of the insurrection and of the events leading up to the actual descent of the rebels upon Toronto. The slur cast upon Dr. Rolph's

Marian A. Patterson

name has been based mainly upon reports and papers written by Mackenzie. History has proven that Mackenzie falsified events and reports to involve others in blame for his own shortcomings. All of Rolph's actions show his unswerving desire for reform by constitutional means, and his reluctance to participate in armed rebellion. When constitutional methods seemed impossible he reluctantly acquiesced in Mackenzie's activities and supported him insofar as a bloodless revolution, a seizing of the chief officials and the establishment of a provisional government which he consented to head. His fate was that of so many who seek the middle course. To the very end he sought to avert bloodshed, appearing as the Government emissary bearing a Flag of Truce to the rebels camped on the outskirts of the city. After the failure of this mission, and Mackenzie's failure to follow immediately into Toronto as Rolph counselled, the rebellion collapsed, and he was advised to seek safety in the United States. The wisdom of this advice was soon evident from the notice which appeared in the press:

500 reward

PROCLAMATION

By His Excellency Sir Francis Bond Head, Baronet, Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, etc., etc.

Whereas, it appears that Doctor John Rolph, of Toronto, absconded hastily from his residence, on the breaking out of the insurrection.

And Whereas, from facts which have come to the knowledge of His Excellency . . . it appears that he has been concerned in the traitorous attempt, which has happily been defeated, to subvert the Government of his Province, the above reward of Five Hundred Pounds is hereby offered to anyone who will apprehend the said John Rolph and deliver him up to justice, in the City of Toronto.

December 11, 1837.⁸

Men of conservative views feel that Rolph was the victim of circumstances. Mackenzie was eager to involve others in shame and Sir Francis Head was equally eager to wreck the Reform Party. In a letter written by John Ryerson to Egerton Ryerson, 25 March 1838, he says:

Mr. Merrit, I am most creditably informed, says he saw Dr. Rolph on the other side after he left this and conversed with him fully relative to our affairs and he (Mr. Merrit) says that he as firmly believes in Dr. Rolph's innocence relative to the revolution affaire, as he believes in his own innocence and that Dr. R. would have returned and taken his seat in the Legislature had it not been for what Mr. M. calls the base proclamation of Sir F. against him and Mr. M. and many other sound conservative men believe that Sir F. offered the reward for Dr. Rolph's apprehension for no other purpose than to scandalize him and keep him away, out of the province.⁹

Rolph remained in exile in Rochester for five years. He showed little inclination to speak of the rebellion. At the request of Dr. Morrison and David Gibson, two reform colleagues, he prepared during his first year of residence in Rochester, a review of events in answer to the malevolent falsehoods being published by Mackenzie. It was never completed for publication, but was found in the form of a rough draft among his papers, together with a letter to David Gibson. This

The Life and Times of the Hon. John Rolph, M.D. (1793–1870)

stands an unanswerable indictment against Mackenzie. Rolph was a proudly silent man concerning personal matters and preferred to keep his own counsel. Not even the wife of his bosom shared his innermost thoughts.

After the general amnesty in 1843, Rolph returned to Toronto. He studiously avoided being drawn into any public discussion as to the part played by himself and others in 1837. For a time he shunned political life and devoted his energies to the teaching and practice of medicine, but he was at heart too ardent a politician to remain aloof for long. He was active in the formation of the Clear Grit Party, a new political group, and was its ruling spirit. In 1851 he re-entered Parliament, but his subsequent political career was somewhat anti-climactical. The Prime Minister, Hinks, recognized his abilities and also the fact that he would bring the government the support of the Clear Grit members in the House, and invited him to become a member of the administration. He served in the capacity of Minister of Crown Lands and later as Minister of Agriculture.

As we have said, he avoided any public discussion of the events of 1837. In 1852, however, W. H. Boulton, with entire irrelevance, taunted him across the floor of the House with having played the part of a traitor in the conduct of the Flag of Truce.

In the correspondence between Dr. Rolph and Dr. Aikins in the Academy of Medicine are letters in which Dr. Rolph asks Dr. Aikins to obtain information in an effort to correct the misstatements:

Dr. Rolph to Dr. Aikins: dated Quebec, Aug. 7, 1852.

. . . Speak confidentially to Dr. Morrison and proceed to have the misstatement as to what took place under the flag, corrected. If he feels disposed to approve of it, it is obvious that the very best testimony is the bearer of the Flag—who was Hugh Carmichael . . . the object would be to see Carmichael and to take from him such a statement as he feels to be true—I sent you an outline according to my distinct recollection. Perhaps Dr. Morrison may point to some further sources of which we can avail ourselves . . .

Dr. Rolph to Dr. Aikins: dated Quebec, Nov. 3, 1852.

You will receive a Quebec Gazette containing an article in which you will find embodied the document which you did me the good service to send me from Mr. Hugh Carmichael. Will you be so good as to send a copy to Mr. David Gibson and ask him whether it contains substantially the truth, distinguishing what took place before and after the flag of truce, and during it—I do not mean he should be asked for what he might not like to give, particulars before and after, but the general truth that the Truce was duly carried out on our part tho' not on the part of Sir F. Head.*

Dr. W. T. Aikens to Mrs. Rolph, dated 53 Queen St., Toronto, Nov. 20, 1852.

Since writing the above, Mr. David Gibson has called in . . . He had the Caroline Almanac in his pocket—states that he saw the Flag of Truce and the parties under and then connected with it, but was not within hearing distance—also that the greater part of the Almanac is false. If Dr. R. will be in Toronto he will meet him to communicate for publication or otherwise any and all the information in his possession. In the meantime he goes out to survey—will see and converse with George Boulton on his way, and I will then draw up a statement of what took place, so far as it fell within his knowledge, and forward the same to the Dr., who is to make any

* Academy of Medicine, Toronto. Manuscript Collection.

corrections, suggestions, or additions for the reconsideration of Gibson, who agreeing with the same, submits it to the Dr. for publication or otherwise. He wishes to have every item correct, so that Mackenzie with his 'microscopic eye' (and would add, lying tongue) can detect no flaw in it. He is not anxious to bring the matter out publicly, but at the same time has not the slightest aversion to it, inasmuch as Mackenzie has always since '37 falsified the Dr. himself and others; now indeed the time has come when, without revenge, in vindication of character, truth and patriotism, they may with propriety relieve themselves of the disagreeable aspersion so maliciously made.*

This is as far as Dr. Rolph carried any attempt to vindicate his role in the Rebellion.

Dr. Rolph again espoused the cause of the secularization of the clergy reserves. The debate hinged on the constitutional right of the Canadian Parliament to legislate on this subject. Dr. Rolph's speech envisaged the modern concept of the self-governing dominions within the commonwealth:

We once had the power, the recognized power of legislating upon Clergy Reserves, upon the funds arising from them and upon their bearing on the religion and churches of the country; and over any legislation connected with the subject. This power was intimately connected with the peace, welfare and good government of the country, for the attainment of which great ends our constitution had been bestowed upon us. This power had, however, been taken from us by the 3 and 4 Vict. ch. 78. And we, therefore, by the resolution before the house, seek for its repeal . . .

The smaller Canadian Parliament needs the political elements corresponding to those of the parent Parliament that we may keep as good political time in Quebec as Britons do in London, that we may safely determine our longitude in the sea of Canadian politics; that our pendulum may properly vibrate between the safe limits of civil and religious liberty. The birds of the air have nests, the princes of the earth have palaces, but the Lawgiver has bestowed upon both the very same physical laws . . . The air we breathe is as necessary for the moth as for the mammoth, for the insect as for the man and without an atmosphere of those vivifying elements of civil and religious liberties, in which the people of Great Britain exult and breathe and live, our little community cannot politically exist, or existing, must languish . . . We therefore, call upon the people of England, Ireland and Scotland in their United Parliament to heal the wound of our constitution—to remove the unjust and painful abridgment of our legislative functions, feel a natural pride in elevating instead of depressing us, in enlarging instead of contracting the political institutions of their fellow countrymen in Canada. Let us remind them by the very draft we now make upon them, that, however some superciliously regard us as a shrub, we bear a fruit not found on many a giant tree, but we have sprung from the roots of the rose, the shamrock and the thistle, that while we are proud of our origins, they may be well proud of the offshoots and that it behoves them freely to give us the elements necessary for our acclimation and luxuriant development in this American soil and under American sunshine.

Any attempt on the part of Great Britain to cripple our Legislature or fetter it in its domestic legislation is founded on an unwise policy. There is in infant nations as in infant individuals an aspiration to manhood . . . Great Britain cannot but see that we are thus rapidly growing in all the elements of national strength and therefore seek from her corresponding concessions of national attributes . . . To Englishmen we appeal to favour us in an advancement like their own—that we may grow like them not only in population, commerce, and wealth, but also in these political attributes which render them pre-eminent among the nations of the earth.¹⁰

The role of Rolph in bringing about the University Act of 1853 will be more appropriately dealt with in the section on his medical career. Mrs. Rolph in

* Academy of Medicine, Toronto. Manuscript Collection.

The Life and Times of the Hon. John Rolph, M.D. (1793–1870)

letters to Dr. Aikins ever expressed her wish that the doctor would retire from political life and indeed Dr. Rolph himself was beginning to feel the strain. He was subjected to constant slurs and insulting remarks from Mackenzie. If he did not commit himself on an issue or was absent from the House, Mackenzie would call him 'The Artful Dodger' or would place at the bottom of his column on Assembly business, 'Rolph was just then INVISIBLE'. In a letter dated 'Quebec, Dec. 9, 1852', to Dr. Aikins he wrote

I assure you that political life is not half as agreeable and is even more laborious than professional life. From what you have said, tho' not experienced, you can judge how irksome and painful and embarrassing is the position of a public man even in a Canadian government.*

Rolph, however, was again elected to the fifth Parliament. He finally retired in 1854 and devoted the rest of his years to the teaching of medicine.

Medical Career

'Where Dr. Rolph was there was medicine taught' was the saying of his time.

From 1824 until the time of his retirement in 1879 Dr. Rolph was a power in the development of medical education in Upper Canada. Just as Dr. Rolph was a controversial figure in politics so he was a disturbing element in medical education. His political ideas and activities had ramifications and implications which affected the progress of medical education. About him centred most of the dissensions which disturbed the medical world. He was the most brilliant teacher of medicine yet he had about him an air which caused men to distrust him. Even in the organizations of his own creation we see rebellion on the part of his colleagues who accused him of promoting undercurrents which worked to his particular advantage.

Rolph, as we said before, practised medicine and law concurrently, in the township of Charlotteville. It was here that medical teaching began in Upper Canada, at St. Thomas in 1824. The most interesting document extant in connection with medicine in Upper Canada is Rolph's letter to Colonel Talbot in 1824 suggesting the opening of a medical school in the settlement.

Dr. Duncombe and myself are modestly recommended as the Teachers and lecturers:

My Dear Sir:

Everything that is great and useful should begin in Talbot Settlement under your auspices. It was proposed by Dr. Duncombe more than a year ago, to form an institution at the City of St. Thomas for the instruction of candidates in medicine and surgery. No school of that description has yet been formed in any part of the Province nor is the hospital at York ever likely under its sleepy patrons to become a source of public usefulness.

We propose to call it 'the Talbot Dispensatory'. The Honble. Col. Talbot to be its perpetual Patron with visitatorial Power.

Dr. Duncombe and myself will join our Libraries for the institution, which I am satisfied, will exceed very far any in this or sister Province. To it we will add other valuable works and periodical publications. To these I shall add the anatomical preparations, which were the work of my labor, when a pupil of Sir Astley Cooper's.

There will be about 12 pupils to begin with . . . †

* *Ibid.*

† *Ibid.* Photostat copy from the original.

Marian A. Patterson

The school had but a short existence, advertisements appearing for two years only in the daily press:

MEDICAL SCHOOL

St. Thomas

**IN THE TALBOT SETTLEMENT, AND UNDER THE IMMEDIATE
PATRONAGE OF THE HON. COLONEL TALBOT**

Notice is hereby given that a Medical School is opened at St. Thomas, in the Talbot Settlement, under the direction of CHARLES DUNCOMB, Esquire, Licentiate, and the immediate patronage of the Honourable Colonel Talbot, where the Education of young men for the profession of **MEDICINE AND SURGERY** will be carefully superintended, and every opportunity afforded them to become intimately acquainted with the structure and physiology of the human body.

Every student before admission is expected to have complete knowledge of the **LATIN** language, or to give satisfactory assurances of immediately acquiring it; for which purpose a **COMPETENT TEACHER** will be resident in the village.

CHARLES DUNCOMB

will give the **LECTURES ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MEDICINE**

JOHN ROLPH

is expected to give the first course of **LECTURES AND DEMONSTRATIONS** during the ensuing season, on the **ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY OF THE HUMAN BODY**.

St. Thomas, August 5, 1824.¹¹

Shortly after the collapse of this school Dr. Rolph moved to Dundas and continued to practise the two professions. His career in law, however, was drawing to a close. On the opening day of Trinity Term, 17 June 1828, Judge Willis alleged that the court could not legally sit in Term unless the full court, i.e. the Chief Justice and the two puisne Justices were present. This conviction, if sustained, would nullify much that had been done in the Court ever since its establishment in 1794. Judge Sherwood continued to sit alone and to hold court but gave no formal announcement of his opinion. Robert Baldwin, Simon Washburn, and John Rolph joined William Warren Baldwin in a request to the court, in the person of Justice Sherwood, for a written statement of his views. Sherwood declined to make a formal statement whereupon the Baldwins and Dr. Rolph threw off their gowns and refused to conduct business in a truncated court which they believed was illegally constituted. Dr. Rolph never returned. Feeling that the court would not legislate without prejudice to his clients he accepted no new cases. He gradually transferred his practice to his brother George and by 1832 devoted his energies entirely to the practice of medicine. In 1829, the daily press carried the following announcement: 'John Rolph, of the village of Dundas in Gore District, having complied with the provision of the statutes, was gazetted as a licentiate, July 10, 1829.' With his characteristic ability he soon rose to the top of this profession and in 1832 he was commissioned a member of the Medical Board. As early as 1836 he had students before the Board for licence.

In 1831 Rolph moved to York and there began teaching in an unofficial

way in his house at 40 Lot Street. As the students increased he began to use the barn at the back of his house. In the teaching of medicine Rolph had no superior and few equals. He had the whole field of medical literature at his fingertips and his graphic method of expression kindled the imagination of his students. He was greatly beloved by his students and when forced to flee to the United States in 1837 several followed him to Rochester, and studied under him there. In a letter dated 'Toronto Sept. 26, 1838', from Christopher Widmer he says 'There are no dissections going on now there or anywhere else. In you we have lost our Hunter!'

Immediately upon his return to Canada in 1843, he resumed medical teaching and formed a medical school which became famous. The advertisements in the daily press read:

Medical students who do not intend to enter the University will be as heretofore received by the subscriber, conducted through the usual course of medical studies with such additional assistance as may be most desirable and prepared for their diploma from the Medical Board.

Lot St. January 1, 1844.

The quality of medical instruction which the students received in this school, which became known under the name of its founder as the 'Rolph School', was unsurpassed anywhere in Canada, and the school was entirely self-supporting.

Dr. Geikie, one of his students, described it thus:

The late Dr. Joseph Workman, a man of great ability and an excellent and highly educated teacher, became, at Dr. Rolph's request, and continued for several years, his most energetic helper. The Medical School soon stood so high that its tickets were received everywhere, and its students were exceptionally successful in passing their examinations before the Medical Board. It may be interesting to recall here that when the number of students had increased so as to require more accommodation than an ordinary private house could furnish, the class-room first fitted up for them formed the end of a frame building in Dr. Rolph's yard. One part of this room had pine seats in it, ranged one above the other, while the table behind which Dr. Rolph and the other lecturers sat when they lectured was the vat in use for anatomical purposes. The rest of this room was provided with dissecting tables on trestles, and this constituted the dissecting room where a great deal of good dissection was done for a number of years. Only a thin wooden partition separated this medical college part of the building from the rest of it, in which were comfortably housed Dr. Rolph's horse and cow. So thin was this partition that while the medical students were drinking in their scientific knowledge as they listened to the lectures or were thinking or working at their dissections, the four-legged occupants of the very adjacent stalls, who cared little and thought less about anatomy, medicine, and surgery, could often be distinctly heard heartily enjoying their more substantial aliment.¹³

The School was incorporated as the Toronto School of Medicine by Act of the Legislature of 1851. As the number of students increased, the accommodation became inadequate and in the summer of 1850 Rolph, at his own expense, built a new brick building.

When Rolph returned to public life in 1851, he left the affairs of his school in the hands of his partner Dr. W. T. Aikins. Mrs. Rolph took an active part in the affairs of the school and indeed transacted with Dr. Aikins all the business of the partnership while Rolph sat in the fourth Parliament of the Province of Canada

in Quebec. There are a great many letters in the collection written by Mrs. Rolph to Dr. Aikins concerning the business. Housekeeping was made difficult by high prices and untrained servants. Her husband paid the rent and maintained the carriage and coachmen, but household expenses were met entirely by the money derived from Dr. Rolph's share of the receipts from the partnership practice in Toronto. 'Everything from Toronto is mine' was stated in one letter protesting a remittance to Dr. Rolph who did not turn it over to his wife. She was quite ready to arrange a contra account as is shown by her asking Aikins to have one debtor supply cloth and another to make an overcoat for Dr. Rolph.

Dr. Rolph was no longer the sole possessor of the field of medical education. In 1850 he had two schools in active competition to his own. In 1844 the Medical Faculty of King's College had been established. In 1849 it became the University of Toronto by the Baldwin Act, and its completely non-denominational character established. Each of the Professors was paid an annual salary from university funds. In 1850 another school was organized, 'The Upper Canada School of Medicine', which the following year became the Medical Faculty of Trinity University. Rivalry between the schools was keen. With Rolph's return to political life, as we have seen, he threw his energies into the challenge of Bishop Strachan and the Anglican claims respecting Clergy Reserves. Students of Canadian history know the length to which feeling between the Anglican and the so-called dissenting Churches went. No one ran counter to Bishop Strachan without precipitating an active feud. Strachan made much of the Trinity Medical Faculty and they were influential men. In a short time they acquired control of the Toronto General Hospital. Rolph's political activities and his record as a rebel had much to do with the anti-Rolph sentiment and had repercussions in the treatment given Rolph's students in the Hospital.

The proprietors are making arrangements to obviate the difficulties which the students of that school have experienced with reference to hospital practice. The machinations of the Professors of Trinity College have lately interfered very materially with the advantages of Hospital practice to the students of the Toronto School of Medicine, which should be shared in common with all medical schools.¹³

Rolph's students soon began to realize that they were 'so much dirt in the wards and corridors of the building'. Their treatment was such that they complained in the columns of the daily press and a public investigation was ordered. A great deal of unpleasantness was revealed and it resulted in the dismissal from the hospital of Drs. Wright and Aikins. An editorial in one of the papers hit upon the reasons for their dismissal.

And why do they now dismiss Drs. Aikins and Wright? Is it not because they belong to the rival Medical School?

Who can doubt it? There is very good reason to believe that the late examination was a mere trick to find excuses for turning out the medical men belonging to the Toronto School of Medicine . . .

A more infamous act of injustice to the Toronto Medical School it is impossible to conceive.

The Life and Times of the Hon. John Rolph, M.D. (1793–1870)

It has a considerable number of students, and though not so efficient as a School supported by the Province would be, it is to the full as good as that of Trinity College, and entitled to as much consideration. It is taught chiefly by native Canadians, men of talent and enterprise, who deserve the greatest credit for their exertions, and who, instead of being kept back, ought to be encouraged.

The affair is of a piece with the whole management of the present government. The Tory High Church institution gets the preference over all others, whether medicine or theology be taught. Everything must bend to the dominant sect.*

Further proof of the truth of this statement is that Aikins and Wright were reinstated at a future date when they ceased to be members of Rolph's school. Liberal opinion was on the side of Rolph. The editor, Mr. A. N. Striker, of the Cobourg *Sun* addressed the following letter to Dr. Aikins:

Sun Office,
Cobourg, August 17, 1855.

When the characters of members of the learned professions are impeached—when our Canadian institutions are made the subject of attack by a handful of high Church old country professional men I am sure I need make no apology for writing to you without the ceremony of an introduction.

I have seen much of the supercilious leering, the unpardonable insolence and despicable attempts on the part of certain old country medical practitioners to injure you, Dr. Rolph and the students of your school. In my opinion the time has arrived at which forbearance ceases to be a virtue. I think it is quite time that you and Dr. Rolph and the members of the profession who sympathize with you, men who are thoroughly Canadian in feeling should organize on the defensive and beard the lion in his den . . . The time has evidently arrived to bring these haughty disciples of Esculapius to their senses. . . . I should if I were you employ every indirect means, consistent with honour to show up the mal-practice and smother the pretensions of the clique now endeavouring to give you and the only really Canadian medical College in Canada no rest.†

again 30 August 1855:

Anything that I can do to place the institutions really Canadian on a proper basis—and everything, on the other hand that I can do to teach the rudiments of decency to the arrogant professional men from Europe who migrate to this country, and who aim to deprecate everything Canadian I will do with equal alacrity—'Canada for Canadians'.†

In 1853 Hinks's University Bill abolished the Faculties of Law and Medicine at the University. Rolph had supported him in this measure and gossip was quick to accuse Rolph of engineering this move in order that his school should have unopposed control of medical education in Upper Canada. An editorial in the Toronto *Daily Patriot* referred to him as the 'wily old chief, the oily old Doctor', and went on to condemn him:

Had we not long since called attention to some of the doings of this disinterested Patriot; had we not kept his iniquity constantly before the eye of our readers; had we not paraded his conduct before the public, as uniformly as a regiment of red coats are paraded before the eye of their commanding officer, the probability, if not the certainty, is that all his schemes at self-aggrandizement, would have been received as reform, and would have passed as readily

* Academy of Medicine, Toronto. Manuscript Collection. Unidentified newspaper clipping.

† Academy of Medicine, Toronto. Manuscript Collection.

Marian A. Patterson

through the public mind, as brass copper, when unobserved, passes into the pocket of an unsuspecting receiver.¹⁴

Rolph had boldly expressed himself on the University Question:

We have no hesitation in expressing our conviction that the University funds could be more effectively employed in the education of the youth of our country, by affording aid to a separate college than by sinking of the whole amount in the dead sea of one great university, which by its ample endowment, would be placed in a position of, at least financial superiority which would operate as a barrier against the salutary influence of the competition which other similar institutions would induce.¹⁵

A mammoth college with an undivided endowment would be a scourge to Canada or to any nation. Such centralization may suit despotic powers, but it is uncongenial to this fine country.¹⁶

However, before condemning Rolph of duplicity there is another side of the question which must be borne in mind. This legislation was following the example of the University of London, and was merely separating the teaching faculties from the faculties which exist for the granting of degrees. Law, Medicine, and Theology were no longer to be taught at the University although the authorities provided for the granting of a degree in these studies. A current popular view held at this time with regard to medical education was that

state institutions ought not to train men for the lucrative professions, law and medicine, at the public expense, but should leave this to be done by private enterprise, that is, the self-supporting institutions.

In condemning Rolph we must also notice that Rolph's influence in politics ceased in 1855 but the medical faculty of the University was not revived until 1887. There were efforts to repeal this Bill but a large body of public opinion supported it. The editor of the Cobourg *Sun* expressed this opinion, when he wrote:

Sun Office,
Cobourg, Thursday Night, 30th August, 1855.

With reference to the Globe's proposition regarding the Provincial University, I fear that centralization would not work well and that if munificent encouragement were given to the medical department of the university, that it would militate against filling the profession with able men, inasmuch as it would completely destroy all incentive on the part of the professors to honourable exertion. I conceive that to make a school of medicine thoroughly efficient it should depend to a large extent upon popularity in the country and a generous rivalry would do much to promote efficiency.*

Principal Nelles of Victoria College wrote to Dr. Rolph:

Victoria College, March 26, 1854.

I trust you are watching those harpies in Parliament. If they will revive the Medical Department in the University, try and have them bound to depend on their fees for support. This is the only fair way.†

* Academy of Medicine, Toronto. Miscellaneous letters, etc.

† Victoria University, Toronto. Archives.

The Life and Times of the Hon. John Rolph, M.D. (1793-1870)

In 1856 the medical faculty of Trinity, incensed at what they considered a domineering attitude on the part of Bishop Strachan, resigned and Rolph was left in sole possession of the field of medical education.

In 1854, by agreement with the Board of Victoria College, the school became the medical department of that university. Thus students who desired to do so could proceed to their degrees in medicine instead of taking only the licence of the Medical Board as heretofore. Soon after the amalgamation difficulties arose between the autocratic dean and his colleagues. Six of the incorporated body of seven carried their grievances before the Victoria College Board. The Board supported Dr. Rolph and as a result the six walked out in open rebellion on the opening day of term, 1856. A letter from Dr. Aikins to the Board read:

As we found the Dean was steadily making efforts to wean the allegiance of the students from us, it has been resolved to try our prospects by opening the Toronto School of Medicine, of which we are legally the Corporation.*

The tremendous vitality and ability of Dr. Rolph is again shown by the fact that during the two weeks in which he sought to fill the vacancies on his staff he lectured four and five times daily on all subjects on the curriculum and to the entire satisfaction of his students. The Secessionists being the majority of the incorporated body claimed the right to use the name Toronto School of Medicine and their claim was upheld in the courts. Henceforth The Victoria College Annual Announcement of the Medical Department carried the following:

MEDICAL DEPARTMENT

The Medical Department was lately, also styled 'The Toronto School of Medicine', which was founded by the Hon. Dr. Rolph, in 1843, incorporated in 1851, and constituted the Medical Department of the University of Victoria College in 1854. But this style was dropt in 1856; and the name now appertains to the Richmond Street School. This Department, however, is still commonly known as Rolph's School, by which name the 'Toronto School of Medicine' was also generally known, so long as Dr. Rolph was connected with it.

The Department continues to enjoy a prosperity, which has been increasing every year: and this practical guarantee of public confidence, is a matter which claims, and receives, a grateful acknowledgement.*

From his own loins, so to speak, had arisen a powerful group of men who, joined by the members of the disbanded University Faculty and Trinity College, each with a separate grudge, united to give him no peace.

The resulting animosity led to the closing of the Toronto General Hospital for one year, 1868, one of the saddest events in the history of medical education in Upper Canada, for it resulted in the loss of brilliant men such as Sir William Osler who were forced to seek training elsewhere. The depth to which hostility reached is shown by the publication of a scurrilous leaflet¹⁷ in 1871 by some member of the Toronto School.

A note of pathos enters into the last episode in Dr. Rolph's stormy career. At age seventy-seven, in failing health, he was yet reluctant to relinquish the

* *Ibid.*

Marian A. Patterson

reins of power. In 1870 the Victoria Board asked the veteran Dean to resign or to allow the appointment of a coadjutor dean. Rolph's answer to the Committee was in character:

I refuse to have a coadjutor; I refuse to resign; I want the resignation of Professor ———, as he is unfit for his position.

Later in the day, however, he saw the wisdom of their request and realizing that his time had come, he submitted his resignation. Shortly after he suffered a stroke and died on 19 October 1870. Victoria College recognized their loss and lectures were suspended for one week. An address of sympathy tendered to Mrs. Rolph by the medical students illustrates the esteem in which he was held:

By his removal you have lost a kind and devoted husband, we have been deprived of a great and faithful friend, and the profession to which we are aspiring of one of its ablest and most successful members.

The prosperity of Victoria College in the past, as well as its present proud and exalted position among similar institutions, is due, in a great degree, to the indefatigable energy, great ability, and untiring zeal of our late lamented Dean, whose name was almost synonymous with medical education.

Although we will no longer have him in our midst, to cheer and assist us on, yet he has left a name and an influence that will encourage and inspire us in the acquisition of our profession.¹⁸

With his resignation the medical faculty of Victoria steadily declined and in 1874–5, ceased to exist.

The earthly chapter in the history of Dr. Rolph had come to a close. He was a tremendous worker and believed in the dignity of work. He was a brilliant teacher, and a keen, but dictatorial administrator. He was a statesman of firm convictions. All his actions showed him to be a man of integrity and intellectual honesty. He stood with unswerving firmness in the defence of civil and religious liberties and championed the fight against autocracy and entrenched privilege in high places. His career teaches us the value of erudition and versatility in any one who aspires to achieve success in any profession.

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