

R. M. Ballantyne

Personal Reminiscences in Book Making, and Some Short Stories

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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Incidents in Book Making— Introductory.

Book making is mixed up, more or less, with difficulties. It is sometimes disappointing; often amusing; occasionally lucrative; frequently expensive, and always interesting—at least to the maker.

Of course I do not refer to that sort of book making which is connected with the too prevalent and disgraceful practice of gambling, but to the making of literary books—especially story-books for the young.

For over eight-and-thirty years I have had the pleasure of making such books and of gathering the material for them in many and distant lands.

During that period a considerable number of the juvenile public have accepted me as one of their guides in the world of Fiction, and through many scenes in the wildest and most out-of-the-way regions of our wonderful world.

Surely, then, it is not presumptuous in me to suppose—at least to hope—that a rambling account of some of the curious incidents which have occurred, now and then, in connection with my book making, will interest the young people of the present day. Indeed I entertain a hope that some even of the old boys and girls who condescended to follow me in the days gone by may perchance derive some amusement, if not profit, from a perusal of these reminiscences.

The shadows of life are lengthening, and, for me, that night, "in which no man can work," may not be far off. Before it is too late, and while yet the flame of the lamp

burns with sufficient clearness, I would fain have a personal chat with those for whom, by God's blessing, I have been permitted to cater so long.

But fear not, dear reader, that I shall inflict on you a complete autobiography. It is only the great ones of the earth who are entitled to claim attention to the record of birth and parentage and school-days, etcetera. To trace my ancestry back through "the Conquerors" to Adam, would be presumptuous as well as impossible. Nevertheless, for the sake of aspirants to literary fame, it may be worth while to tell here how one of the rank and file of the moderately successful Brotherhood was led to Authorship as a profession and how he followed it out.

I say "led" advisedly, because I made no effort whatever to adopt this line of life, and never even dreamed of it as a possibility until I was over twenty-eight years of age.

Let me commence, then, by at once taking a header into the middle of that period when God—all unknown to, and unrecognised by, myself—was furnishing me with some of the material and weapons for the future battle of life.

One day my dear father was reading in the newspapers some account of the discoveries of Dease and Simpson in the neighbourhood of the famous North-west Passage. Looking at me over his spectacles with the perplexed air of a man who has an idle son of sixteen to start in the race of life, he said—

"How would you like to go into the service of the Hudson's Bay Company and discover the North-west Passage?"—or words to that effect.

"All right, father," said I—or something of that sort.

I was at that age, and in that frame of mind, which regards difficulties with consummate presumption and profound inexperience. If the discovery of the North-pole had been suggested, or the South-pole, or any other terrestrial pole that happened to exist at the time, I was quite ready to "rush in" where even a Franklin might "fear to tread!"

This incident was but a slight one, yet it was the little hinge on which turned my future career.

We had a relation—I won't say what, because distant relationships, especially if complicated, are utterly beyond my mental grasp—who was high up in the service of the Hudson's Bay Fur Company. Through Iain I became a clerk in the service with a salary of 20 pounds for the first year. Having been born without a silver spoon in my mouth, I regarded this as an adequate, though not a princely, provision.

In due time I found myself in the heart of that vast North American wilderness which is variously known as Rupert's Land, the Territories of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Great Nor'west, many hundreds of miles north of the outmost verge of Canadian civilisation.

I am not learned in the matter of statistics, but if a rough guess may be allowed, I should say that the population of some of the regions in which I and my few fellow-clerks vegetated might have been about fifty to the hundred square miles—with uninhabited regions around. Of course we had no libraries, magazines, or newspapers out there. Indeed we had almost no books at all, only a stray file or two of American newspapers, one of which made me

acquainted with some of the works of Dickens and of Lever. While in those northern wilds I also met—as with dear old friends—some stray copies of *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, and the *Penny Magazine*.

We had a mail twice in the year—once by the Hudson's Bay ship in summer, and once through the trackless wilderness by sledge and snow-shoe in winter. It will easily be understood that surroundings of such a nature did not suggest or encourage a literary career. My comrades and I spent the greater part of our time in fur-trading with the Red Indians; doing a little office-work, and in much canoeing, boating, fishing, shooting, wishing, and skylarking. It was a "jolly" life, no doubt, while it lasted, but not elevating!

We did not drink. Happily there was nothing alcoholic to be had out there for love or money. But we smoked, more or less consumedly, morning, noon, and night. Before breakfast the smoking began; after supper it went on; far into the night it continued. Some of us even went to sleep with the pipes in our mouths and dropped them on our pillows. Being of such an immature age, I laboured under the not uncommon delusion that to smoke looked manly, and therefore did my best to accommodate myself to my surroundings, but I failed signally, having been gifted with a blessed incapacity for tobacco-smoking. This afflicted me somewhat at the time, but ever since I have been unmistakably thankful.

But this is wandering. To return.

With a winter of eight months' duration and temperature sometimes at 50 below zero of Fahrenheit, little to do and nothing particular to think of, time occasionally hung heavy on our hands. With a view to lighten it a little, I began to write long and elaborate letters to a loving mother whom I had left behind me in Scotland. The fact that these letters could be despatched only twice in the year was immaterial. Whenever I felt a touch of home-sickness, and at frequent intervals, I got out my sheet of the largest-sized narrow-ruled imperial paper—I think it was called "imperial"—and entered into spiritual intercourse with "Home." To this long-letter writing I attribute whatever small amount of facility in composition I may have acquired. Yet not the faintest idea of story-writing crossed the clear sky of my unliterary imagination. I am not conscious of having had, at that time, a love for writing in any form—very much the reverse!

Of course I passed through a highly romantic period of life—most youths do so—and while in that condition I made a desperate attempt to tackle a poem. Most youths do that also! The first two lines ran thus:—

"Close by the shores of Hudson's Bay, Where Arctic winters—stern and grey—"

I must have gloated long over this couplet, for it was indelibly stamped upon my memory, and is as fresh to-day as when the lines were penned. This my first literary effort was carried to somewhere about the middle of the first canto. It stuck there—I am thankful to say—and, like the smoking, never went further.

Rupert's Land, at that time, was little known and very seldom visited by outsiders. During several years I wandered to and fro in it, meeting with a few savages, fewer white men—servants of the Company—and becoming

acquainted with modes of life and thought in what has been aptly styled "The Great Lone Land." Hearing so seldom from or of the outside world, things pertaining to it grew dim and shadowy, and began to lose interest. In these circumstances, if it had not been that I knew full well my mother's soul was ready to receive any amount of outpourings of which I was capable, I should have almost forgotten how to use the pen.

It was in circumstances such as I have described that I began my first book, but it was not a story-book, and I had no idea that it would ever become a printed book at all. It was merely a free-and-easy record of personal adventure and every-day life, written, like all else that I penned, solely for the uncritical eye of that long-suffering and too indulgent mother!

I had reached the advanced age of twenty-two at the time, and had been sent to take charge of an outpost, on the uninhabited northern shores of the gulf of Saint Lawrence, named Seven Islands. It was a dreary, desolate, little-known spot, at that time. The gulf, just opposite the establishment, was about fifty miles broad. The ships which passed up and down it were invisible, not only on account of distance, but because of seven islands at the mouth of the bay coming between them and the outpost. My next neighbour, in command of a similar post up the gulf, was, if I remember rightly, about seventy miles distant. The nearest house down the gulf was about eighty miles off, and behind us lay the virgin forests, with swamps, lakes, prairies, and mountains, stretching away without break right across the continent to the Pacific Ocean.

The outpost—which, in virtue of a ship's carronade and a flagstaff, was occasionally styled a "fort"—consisted of four wooden buildings. One of these—the largest, with a verandah—was the Residency. There was an offshoot in rear which served as a kitchen. The other houses were a store for goods wherewith to carry on trade with the Indians, a stable, and a workshop. The whole population of the establishment—indeed of the surrounding district—consisted of myself and one man—also a horse! The horse occupied the stable, I dwelt in the Residency, the rest of the population lived in the kitchen.

There were, indeed, other five men belonging to the establishment, but these did not affect its desolation, for they were away netting salmon at a river about twenty miles distant at the time I write of.

My "Friday"—who was a French-Canadian—being cook, as well as man-of-all-work, found a little occupation in attending to the duties of his office, but the unfortunate Governor had nothing whatever to do except await the arrival of Indians, who were not due at that time. The horse was a bad one, without a saddle, and in possession of a pronounced backbone. My "Friday" was not sociable. I had no books, no newspapers, no magazines or literature of any kind, no game to shoot, no boat wherewith to prosecute fishing in the bay, and no prospect of seeing any one to speak to for weeks, if not months, to come. But I had pen and ink, and, by great good fortune, was in possession of a blank paper book fully an inch thick.

When, two or three years after, a printer-cousin, seeing the manuscript, offered to print it, and the well-known Blackwood, of Edinburgh, seeing the book, offered to publish it—and did publish it—my ambition was still so absolutely asleep that I did not again put pen to paper in *that* way for eight years thereafter, although I might have been encouraged thereto by the fact that this first book—named *Hudson's Bay*—besides being a commercial success, received favourable notice from the press.

It was not until the year 1854 that my literary path was opened up. At that time I was a partner in the late publishing firm of Thomas Constable and Company of Edinburgh. Happening one day to meet with the late William Nelson, publisher, I was asked by him how I should like the idea of taking to literature as a profession. My answer I forget. It must have been vague, for I had never thought of the subject at all.

"Well," said he, "what would you think of trying to write a story?"

Somewhat amused, I replied that I did not know what to think, but I would try if he wished me to do so.

"Do so," said he, "and go to work at once,"—or words to that effect.

I went to work at once, and wrote my first story, or work of fiction. It was published in 1855 under the name of *Snowflakes and Sunbeams; or, The Young Fur-traders*. Afterwards the first part of the title was dropped, and the book is now known as *The Young Fur-traders*. From that day to this I have lived by making story-books for young folk.

From what I have said it will be seen that I have never aimed at the achieving of this position, and I hope that it is not presumptuous in me to think—and to derive much comfort from the thought—that God led me into the particular path along which I have walked for so many years.

The scene of my first story was naturally laid in those backwoods with which I was familiar, and the story itself was founded on the adventures and experiences of my companions and myself. When a second book was required of me, I stuck to the same regions, but changed the locality. While casting about in my mind for a suitable subject, I happened to meet with an old, retired "Nor'wester" who had spent an adventurous life in Rupert's Land. Among other duties he had been sent to establish an outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company at Ungava Bay, one of the most dreary parts of a desolate region. On hearing what I wanted, he sat down and wrote a long narrative of his proceedings there, which he placed at my disposal, and thus furnished me with the foundation of *Ungava*, a tale of Eskimo-Land.

But now I had reached the end of my tether, and when a third story was wanted I was compelled to seek new fields of adventure in the books of travellers. Regarding the Southern seas as the most romantic part of the world—after the backwoods!—I mentally and spiritually plunged into those warm waters, and the dive resulted in *The Coral Island*.

It now began to be borne in upon me that there was something not quite satisfactory in describing, expatiating on, and energising in, regions which one has never seen. For one thing, it was needful to be always carefully on the watch to avoid falling into mistakes geographical, topographical, natural-historical, and otherwise.

For instance, despite the utmost care of which I was capable, while studying up for *The Coral Island*, I fell into a blunder through ignorance in regard to a familiar fruit. I was under the impression that cocoa-nuts grew on their trees in the same form as that in which they are usually presented to us in grocers' windows—namely, about the size of a large fist with three spots, suggestive of a monkey's face, at one end. Learning from trustworthy books that at a certain stage of development the nut contains a delicious beverage like lemonade, I sent one of my heroes up a tree for a nut, through the shell of which he bored a hole with a penknife and drank the "lemonade"! It was not till long after the story was published that my own brother—who had voyaged in Southern seas—wrote to draw my attention to the fact that the cocoa-nut is nearly as large as a man's head, and its outer husk over an inch thick, so that no ordinary penknife could bore to its interior! Of course I should have known this, and, perhaps, should be ashamed of my ignorance but, somehow, I'm not!

I admit that this was a slip, but such, and other slips, hardly justify the remark that some people have not hesitated to make, namely, that I have a tendency to draw the long bow. I feel almost sensitive on this point, for I have always laboured to be true to fact, and to nature, even in my wildest flights of fancy.

This reminds me of the remark made to myself once by a lady in reference to this same *Coral Island*. "There is one thing, Mr Ballantyne," she said, "which I really find it hard to believe. You make one of your three boys dive into a clear

pool, go to the bottom, and then, turning on his back, look up and wink and laugh at the other two."

"No, no, Peterkin did not 'laugh,'" said I remonstratively. "Well, then, you make him smile."

"Ah, that is true, but there is a vast difference between laughing and smiling under water. But is it not singular that you should doubt the only incident in the story which I personally verified? I happened to be in lodgings at the seaside while writing that story, and, after penning the passage you refer to, I went down to the shore, pulled off my clothes, dived to the bottom, turned on my back, and, looking up, I smiled and winked."

The lady laughed, but I have never been quite sure, from the tone of that laugh, whether it was a laugh of conviction or of unbelief. It is not improbable that my fair friend's mental constitution may have been somewhat similar to that of the old woman who declined to believe her sailor-grandson when he told her he had seen flying-fish, but at once recognised his veracity when he said he had seen the remains of Pharaoh's chariot-wheels on the shores of the Red Sea.

Recognising, then, the difficulties of my position, I formed the resolution always to visit—when possible—the scenes in which my stories were laid, converse with the people who, under modification, were to form the *dramatis personae* of the tales, and, generally, to obtain information in each case, as far as lay in my power, from the fountain-head.

Thus, when about to begin *The Lifeboat*, I went to Ramsgate, and, for some time, was hand and glove with Jarman, the heroic coxswain of the Ramsgate boat, a lion-

like as well as lion-hearted man, who rescued hundreds of lives from the fatal Goodwin Sands during his career. In like manner, when getting up information for The Lighthouse, I obtained permission from the Commissioners of Northern Lights to visit the Bell Rock Lighthouse, where I hobnobbed with the three keepers of that celebrated pillar-in-the-sea for three weeks, and read Stevenson's graphic account of the building of the structure in the library, or visitor's room, just under the lantern. I was absolutely a prisoner there during those three weeks, for boats seldom visited the rock, and it need scarcely be said that ships kept well out of our way. By good fortune there came on a pretty stiff gale at the time, and Stevenson's thrilling narrative was read to the tune of whistling winds and roaring seas, many of which sent the spray right up to the lantern and caused the building, more than once, to guiver to its foundation.

In order to do justice to *Fighting the Flames* I careered through the streets of London on fire-engines, clad in a peajacket and a black leather helmet of the Salvage Corps;—this, to enable me to pass the cordon of police without question—though not without recognition, as was made apparent to me on one occasion at a fire by a fireman whispering confidentially, "I know what *you* are, sir, you're a hamitoor!"

"Right you are," said I, and moved away in order to change the subject.

It was a glorious experience, by the way, this galloping on fire-engines through the crowded streets. It had in it much of the excitement of the chase—possibly that of war with the noble end in view of saving, instead of destroying, life! Such tearing along at headlong speed; such wild roaring of the firemen to clear the way; such frantic dashing aside of cabs, carts, 'buses, and pedestrians; such reckless courage on the part of the men, and volcanic spoutings on the part of the fires! But I must not linger. The memory of it is too enticing. *Deep Down* took me to Cornwall, where, over two hundred fathoms beneath the green turf, and more than half-a-mile out under the bed of the sea, I saw the sturdy miners at work winning copper and tin from the solid rock, and acquired some knowledge of their life, sufferings, and toils.

In the land of the Vikings I shot ptarmigan, caught salmon, and gathered material for *Erling the Bold*. A winter in Algiers made me familiar with the *Pirate City*. I enjoyed a fortnight with the hearty inhabitants of the Gull Lightship off the Goodwin Sands, from which resulted *The Floating Light*; and went to the Cape of Good Hope, and up into the interior of the Colony, to spy out the land and hold intercourse with *The Settler and the Savage*—although I am bound to confess that, with regard to the latter, I talked to him only with mine eyes. I also went afloat for a short time with the fishermen of the North Sea, in order to be able to do justice to *The Young Trawler*.

To arrive still closer at the truth, and to avoid errors, I have always endeavoured to submit my proof-sheets, when possible, to experts and men who knew the subject well. Thus, Captain Shaw, late Chief of the London Fire Brigade, kindly read the proofs of *Fighting the Flames*, and prevented my getting off the rails in matters of detail, and Sir Arthur

Blackwood, financial secretary to the General Post Office, obligingly did me the same favour in regard to *Post Haste*.

In conclusion, there are some things that I shrink from flaunting in the eyes of the public. Personal religion is one of these. Nevertheless, there are a few words which I feel constrained to write before closing this chapter.

During all the six years that I spent in Rupert's Land I was "without God." He was around me and within me, guarding me, bestowing upon me the physical and mental health by which alone I could fully enjoy a life in the wilderness, and furnishing me with much of the material that was to serve as my stock-in-trade during my subsequent career; yet—I confess it with shame—I did not recognise or think of, or care for, Him. It was not until after I had returned home that He opened my eyes to see myself a lost soul, and Jesus Christ—"God with us"—an all-sufficient Redeemer, able and willing to save me from sin, as He is to save all sinners—even the chief.

More than this I will not say. Less I could not say, without being unfaithful to my Creator.

Chapter Two.

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Life in the Bell Rock Lighthouse.

One of my most interesting experiences in hunting up materials for books was at the Bell Rock Lighthouse; interesting because of the novelty of the situation, the