

THE PRIVATE SIDE OF A PUBLIC FAMILY: THE HENEKER ALBUM AND DIARY

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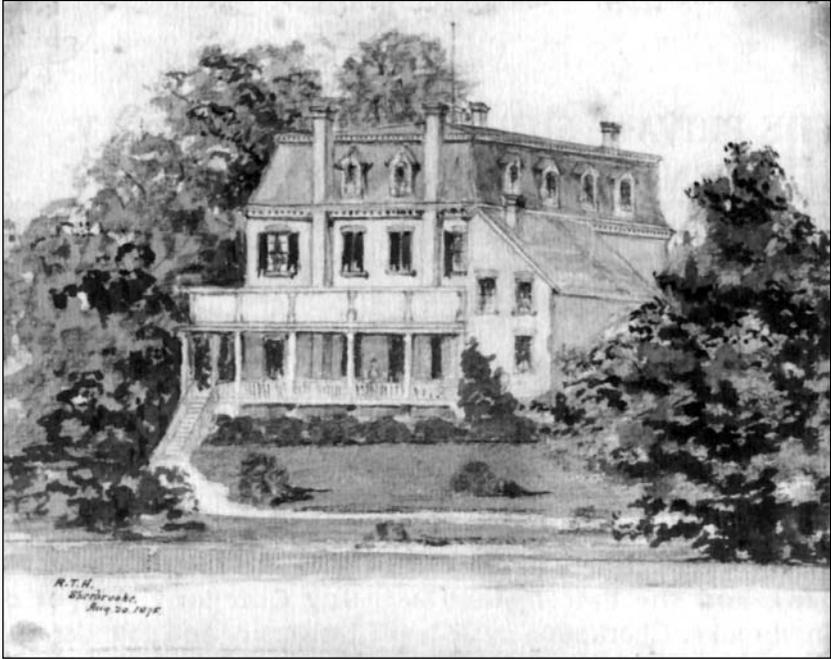
Documentary Art and Photography Division

National Archives of Canada

Richard William Heneker (1823–1912) does not need much introduction in the Eastern Townships.¹ A very important figure in the nineteenth century economic development of Sherbrooke, he combined his position as commissioner for the British American Land Company, from 1855 to 1902, with various business ventures. He was President of both the Eastern Township Bank and the Paton Manufacturing Company, Mayor of Sherbrooke, Chancellor of Bishop's University and founder and first president of the Sherbrooke Protestant Hospital. This paper, however, will look at his more private side using his diary in the Manuscript Division and the Heneker album in the Documentary Art and Photography Division of the National Archives of Canada.²

Heneker began to keep the diary when he embarked for Canada in April 1855 and recorded his impressions of the crossing, of his few days in New England, and of the first weeks in Sherbrooke. He mentioned names of several residents whom he visited, or had business dealings with which will be of interest to local historians. In the penultimate entry, on July 30, Heneker recorded making his first sketch, *A View of the Lowest Falls of the Magog from the Railway Bridge*. Although this particular sketch is not in the album, there are two watercolours of the Heneker residence which used to stand on Factory Street in Sherbrooke and several unidentified views, which upon closer study may turn out to be from the Townships.

The family album is 37.4 x 31cm covered in tooled red cloth and holds approximately 90 watercolours and drawings done by various members of the family dating from the 1850s to ca. 1890s. Because the sketches are not mounted in any obvious order, I assume that the album was assembled by a member of the family at some date using whatever family sketches were on hand. They depict landscapes from Quebec, Ontario, New England, Europe



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The old Heneker Homestead, Sherbrooke; Richard Tuson Heneker; August 20, 1875; watercolour over pencil on paper mounted on cardboard; accession no. 1988-299-90; negative no. C-133946

and Bermuda, likely done during holidays and excursions. The following family members did the sketches: Richard William Heneker, his wife Bessie Tuson (ca.1835–1915), their daughter Frances (1857–1905), their oldest son Richard Tuson (1858–1944) and his wife Alice Abbott (daughter of Sir John Caldwell Abbott) (1861–1945).³

Richard W. Heneker had not planned a career in business but had trained to become an architect under Sir Charles Barry and had been engaged in designing the Westminster Houses of Parliament just before coming to Canada.⁴ He had an architectural practice in London, and between 1846 and 1854 had exhibited at the Royal Academy in the architectural section.⁵ His pieces consisted of designs for industrial buildings, such as *Ipswich Railway Station and Corn Exchange in Newcastle-on-Tyne* and of drawings from an Italian tour: *View of the Giant's staircase, Palace of the Doge and Rezzonico Palace, Grand Canal*. Such a tour would have been a pre-requisite ending to studies in art and architecture. From later comments in the diary, it is obvious that Heneker retained a spe-

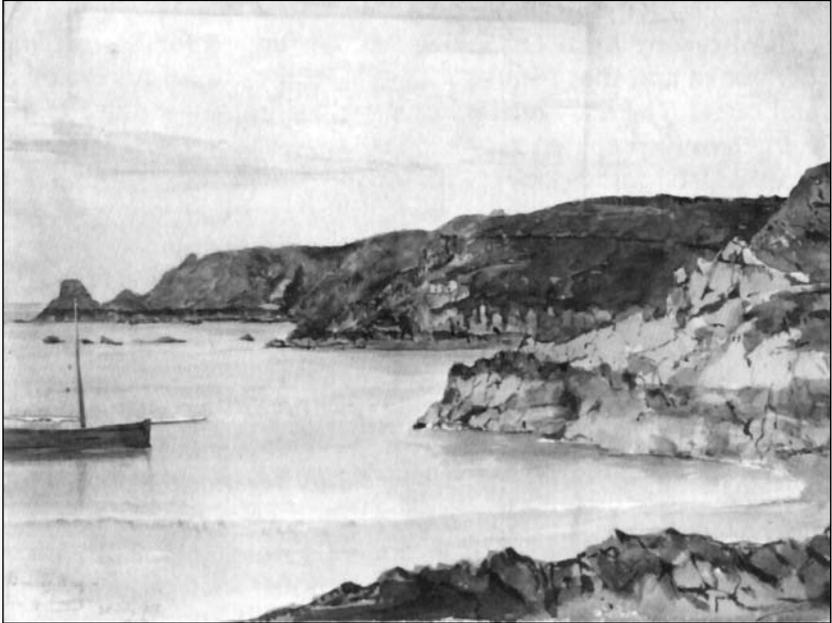
cial fondness for Italy and its classical past.

However, by April 1855, Heneker was bound for Boston and Sherbrooke and that seems to have been the end of his architectural career. The diary relates his continued interest in the arts. He had carefully prepared his visit to Boston by carrying letters of introduction, one to a man with artistic connections and one to a business man. The first was George Stillman Hillard, a lawyer and author. Heneker wasted no time. A few hours after docking in Boston, Hillard was already taking him around Boston to see some of the important architectural and historical sights. This included the Athenaeum, one of the oldest private libraries in North America with an interesting art collection. Early next day Heneker returned there to view the art exhibition. He made extensive notes on what he saw singling out two portraits by Gilbert Stuart — *George Washington* and *Martha Dandridge Custis Washington* — finding them “full of life and character.” These were the oil sketches which Stuart had done from life, and after which all the other portraits were done.⁶ Because of their unfinished state they are in sharp contrast with the more formal and less spontaneous portraits that Heneker would have had the opportunity to see elsewhere.

His reaction to the sculpture *Shipwrecked mother and child* by E.A. Brackett, which shows two dead figures, was as follows:

... a fine poetical production. The mother lying with her head thrown right back — the right arm lying powerless on the rock beside her, the left arm still lending support even in death to the infant beside her. The treatment most pure and full of feeling.⁷

This well-liked piece of Brackett's, with its eroticism hidden under the guise of a tragic narrative and maternal sentiment, was typical of nineteenth century sculpture. Heneker's reaction to the piece echoes the comments made by other people, showing how conversant he was with the current reading of such works.⁸ This type of narrative style, in which some anecdote or story is partially depicted, leaving the viewer to imagine both the beginning and the end of the story, was popular in mid-century England. Another piece he noted was by Thomas Crawford, entitled *Orpheus*, drawn from classical mythology with which Heneker was evidently familiar. Both the Brackett and Crawford pieces celebrate devotion, the first of mother to child, the second of husband to wife, and Heneker, who had had, in his own words “a depressing



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*Boulay Bay, Isle of Jersey, United Kingdom; Richard William Heneker;
July 28, 1887; watercolour over pencil with opaque white on paper;
accession no. 1988-299-83; negative no. C-134688*

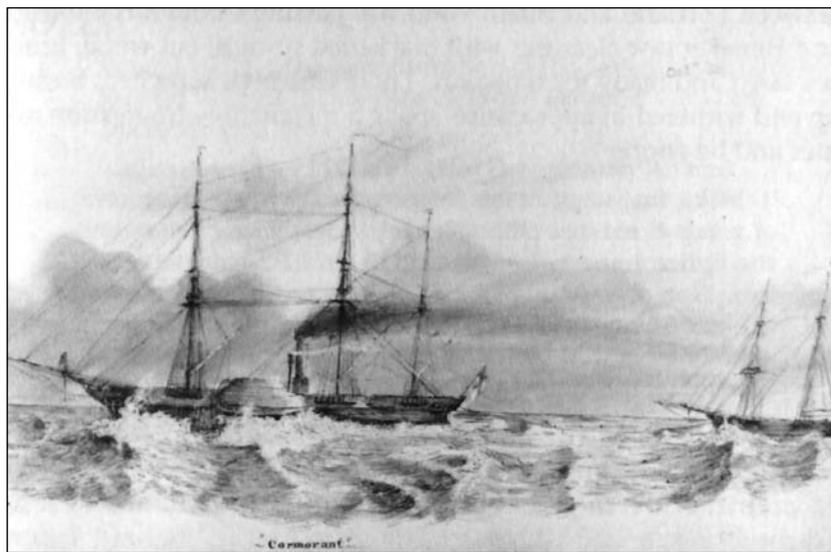
separation from home,” meaning from his fiancée Bessie Tuson and his family, must have felt particularly susceptible to the emotion depicted.

Heneker was obviously conversant with current styles of art and used to looking. Upon seeing a girl in a Shaker community he was visiting, he imagined her as a model for a Pre-Raphaelite painting which he fancifully titled “Damsel in the Kitchen.” He was also aware of the picturesque, that is seeing landscape and nature in terms of paintings. He described the St. Francis river as enchanting, another river as dashing, and the outlines of the surrounding hills as undulating. He noted however that the meaning of “beautiful country” in America was not an aesthetic judgment, but a practical one: good land for agriculture. When he climbed Owl’s Head in July he was reminded of the Scottish landscapes of the painter Thomas Miles Richardson with their sublime vastness and “everlasting forest.”

Having spent the morning looking at the exhibition at the Atheneum in Boston, Heneker switched to a literary afternoon. He had letters of introduction to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Cornelius Felton at Harvard. Felton, who would later become

President of Harvard, was a classics professor who shared Heneker's passion for Greek architecture so they got on "capitally."⁹ The visit with Longfellow, whom he called "a most conversational man" was also pleasant, although a little short because Heneker did not want to impose upon his host.¹⁰ Back in Boston, he called on a prominent Boston architect, George Snell, whom he had known in London, who showed him the architectural sights after a lunch of champagne and lobster. Heneker expressed a dislike for the obelisk on Bunker's Hill commemorating the United States' victory over England, finding it ugly. This comment may stem from his strong attachment to Britain and to things British, which reoccurs regularly in the diary.

He also enjoyed music. On his first evening in Boston, he went to the Boston Theatre to hear the English soprano Louisa Pyne in *Cinderella* (the English adaptation of Rossini's *La Cenerentola*) with the Quebec shipping magnate John Gilmour whom he met during dinner. He also made note of a musical evening in Sherbrooke where he was entertained by the Clark sisters at the home of a Mr. Henderson. Although there is no mention of his own playing, he did own a violin which he purchased through his music master in 1837, and which had supposedly belonged to the concert-master of the Drury Lane orchestra.



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Three-masted steamship "Cormorant"; Richard William Heneker; October 1850; black pen and ink wash over pencil on paper; accession no. 1988-299-29; negative no. C-133818

Another letter of introduction was to a mill agent in Lowell, Massachusetts. Perhaps he already had ideas for Sherbrooke because he paid strict attention to the figures and ideas of his guide, and made extensive notes. It may be interesting to find out how closely he followed the example of Lowell in establishing the Paton Manufacturing Company eleven years later. He reinforced his ideas about using waterpower for manufacturing by visiting a Shaker community in early June, about a month after arriving in Canada. He was so interested in this matter that this visit took precedent over his introductory rounds in the Townships. This is a good example of his putting the interests of the region before that of the land company, for which he would later be criticized.¹¹

The diary also reveals how much Heneker enjoyed nature. He walked a great deal, climbed both Pinnacle (where he had his first experience of the intensity of blackfly and mosquito bites) and Owl's Head, and he constantly compared the scenery to various parts of England and Wales, always noting the larger scale. On a business trip to New Hampshire his train was stopped for a while for repairs and despite the pouring rain he went into the woods in search of wild flowers, excited as a child might have been.

Finally, although he was keenly interested in establishing new businesses, Heneker realized the price of progress. This is revealed by his reaction to the landscape on one occasion. His train between Portland and Island Pond was passing through the forest, and Heneker saw clearings with blackened stumps, cut wood, lumber sawn and ready for transport. These clearings, scorched, burnt-up and withered in appearance, made a melancholy impression on him and he wrote:

Man's first step towards improvement is in the destruction of many of nature's most splendid works. Since creation only the Indian, moose, bear and other wild animals have been here. Now the white man has taken possession and the fatal axe has commenced its deadly work while the Indian & the scarcely more wild brutes have fled the scene. It is enough to produce sentiments even in a lumberer.¹²

The sketches in the album are an interesting mixture. R.W. Heneker combined his eye for the picturesque with his old interest in architecture in his depictions from Old Orchard Beach, Scarboro Beach and Cushing's Island in Maine. Richard Tuson Heneker's watercolours consist of landscapes from a trip on the CPR into Ontario, of views of Ramsey Manor in St. Hugues, of the

Old Fort at Ste Anne de Beaupré, along with the wild scenery of the White Mountains in New Hampshire. There are several pencil drawings of various European sites which may have been done by Bessie Tuson (Mrs. R.W.) and a number of bright nature studies from Bermuda likely done by daughter Frances. Alice Abbott (Mrs. R.T) did pencil drawings of animals and some landscape water-colours. There are also two photographs from the William Notman Studio of *Fanny (Frances) Heneker* and *Richard Tuson Heneker* when they were children, handcoloured by J.A. Fraser. Such an album can be of interest to both the architectural and the art historian. Moreover the social historian may study it as the record of a nineteenth century family.

The National Archives Documentary Art collection houses a large number of albums which were a nineteenth century phenomenon connected to the proliferation of images due to the invention of wood-engraving, lithography and photography.¹³ These albums, frequently kept and assembled by middle- or upper-class women, were a kind of private curiosity cabinet in which images of all types could be kept. The Heneker album was unique in that the images were done by individual members of the family all of whom were proficient at drawing. Was this perhaps partially due to R.W. Heneker's architectural training?

NOTES

- 1 Ronald Rudin, "The Transformation of the Eastern Townships of Richard William Heneker, 1855–1902," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 19 (Fall 1984):32–49.
- 2 National Archives of Canada (NA) Documentary Art and Photography Division, Accession no. 1988-299 and 1989-445. The diary is in the Manuscript Division with the Dorothy Heneker papers MG 30 C 128 vol.5, hereafter referred to as Heneker Diary. In addition there are photographs of the Heneker family in the following collections: 1977-102, 1987-111, 1988-171 and 1988-299.
- 3 Some sketches are initialled. This allowed for other sketches to be attributed to the same artist on stylistic basis. In other cases I tried to match the handwriting on the sketches with letters and other documents.
- 4 William Wood ed., *The Storied Province of Quebec* (Toronto: Dominion Publishing Company Ltd., 1931), vol. IV p. 468.
- 5 Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts 1769–1904* (London: Henry Graves and Co. Ltd and George Bell and Sons, 1905), vol. 2.

- 6 The two portraits are now jointly owned by the National Portrait Gallery in Washington and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and they travel back and forth every three years.
- 7 NA, Heneker Diary, p.18.
- 8 Some contemporary comments are recorded in Robert F. Perkins and William J. Gavin III comp. & eds., *The Boston Atheneum Art Exhibition Index 1827–1874* (Boston: The Library of the Boston Atheneum, 1980), p. 283.
- 9 Heneker Diary, p. 23.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 11 Rudin, "Transformation".
- 12 Heneker Diary, p. 43.
- 13 Jim Burant, "The Visual World in the Victorian Age," *Archivaria*, 19 (Winter 1984–85):110–121.